

CENTRAL AMERICA

Regional Overview

Belize • Costa Rica • El Salvador • Guatemala • Honduras • Mexico • Nicaragua



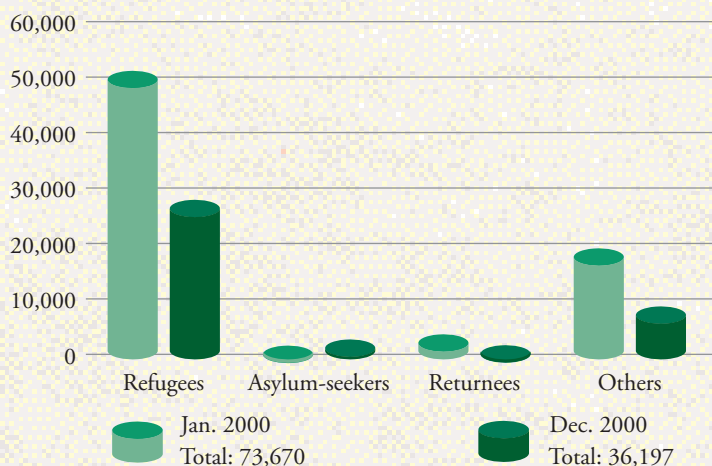
MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS

Asylum-seekers fleeing the Colombian conflict arrived in greater numbers throughout Central America. The country most affected was Costa Rica, which registered 1,456 Colombian asylum-seekers in 2000, compared to 88 the previous year. This situation put a considerable strain on the limited existing reception structures, resulting in long delays in asylum-claim hearings. In November, the Government deposited at UN Headquarters the instruments of ratification of the 1954 Convention on Stateless Persons. In Guatemala, despite an overall improvement of the human rights situation, the year 2000 was marked by political tension, economic fluctuations, demonstrations, land disputes and an increase in random violence. During the year, some 900 Guatemalans, who were previously refugees in Mexico, returned to Mexico and acquired residence status as immigrants.

CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS

There is continued concern in the region about the need for greater controls on migration, with the Regional Conference on Migration (Puebla Process) and its technical meetings serving to forge policy and co-ordinate activities. UNHCR continues to strongly advocate for the inclusion of asylum and refugee protection during

Persons of Concern to UNHCR



the drafting of regional policies and procedures. Acknowledging the importance of refugee protection to the management of migration, Puebla Process participants asked UNHCR to prepare a document outlining benchmarks to be incorporated into national asylum laws and procedures throughout Central America. This document, incorporating country by country overviews of the current state of refugee protection and the gaps between the benchmarks and realities, was presented at the fifth Regional Conference on Migration in May. In November, UNHCR and IOM, collaborating with a number of leading experts in the region, launched a pilot training seminar for government officials and NGO staff involved in migration control and refugee protection.

The change of government in Guatemala impeded progress on national legislation on refugee protection. Despite UNHCR's persistent advocacy, and despite the completion of a draft, it had by year's end still not passed into law. In the absence of such legislation in Guatemala, or indeed in El Salvador, Honduras or Nicaragua, UNHCR continues to conduct refugee status determination. The Office expects positive progress on legislation in all four countries in 2001.

PROGRESS TOWARDS SOLUTIONS

UNHCR continued to emphasise local integration as a lasting solution, and therefore facilitated the naturalisation of 2,591 persons and the provision of 5,106 legal residency documents in the region. Towards the end of the year, Guatemala confirmed that it would expedite naturalisation for long-staying Central American refugees, ensuring local integration for over 700 refugees in 2001. Parallel to the Office's efforts in naturalisation, discussions continue with various countries on implementing a Cessation Clause for El Salvadoran and Nicaraguan refugees.

As a part of its regional protection strategy, UNHCR translated into action its commitment to revitalise protection networks. Training and planning sessions were held for governmental and non-governmental members of national networks in all the Central American countries. A regional seminar in Guatemala in August forged links between national networks, and regional strategies were proposed for asylum, the exchange of country of origin information, and standardised assistance. Over 4,300 persons participated in some 50 training and public awareness events throughout the region. They represented civil servants, the police, the armed forces, churches, NGOs, universities and the scout movement.

OPERATIONS

Over the course of the year there was a substantial reduction in the refugee population, from over 35,000 to some 26,350 by year's end, attributable to naturalisation and efforts by the Costa Rican Government to update its statistics. In April, responsibility for supervising protection, assistance and public awareness activities in Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador was transferred to the Regional Office in Mexico. The refugee programme in Mexico, the largest in Central America, is covered under a separate country chapter.

In this final year of UNHCR's support to the migratory amnesty programme in Belize, 3,998 eligible Guatemalan, Salvadoran, Nicaraguan and Honduran families received permanent residence documents (target was 4,000). In addition, UNHCR supported the naturalisation of 1,589 refugees (original target was 1,500). UNHCR also continues to explore the reconvening of the Belizean eligibility committee after some years of inactivity. At year-end, a limited number of asylum-seekers were still awaiting the determination of their status and were still in receipt of limited assistance from UNHCR.

UNHCR modified its strategy in Costa Rica to address the evolving protection situation. Early in the year, the Government's focus shifted from a long-standing and relatively small refugee group to increased numbers of illegal migrants. The Government announced a new policy on refugees' right to work and disbanded the body formerly responsible for refugee policy. At the same time, an increasing number of asylum-seekers, mostly Colombians, began arriving. By the end of the year, 1,700 asylum claims had been filed, averaging 280 claims per month. UNHCR responded with increased support for the refugee department of the immigration authority, as well as for the national partner providing assistance for asylum-seekers and refugees in need. To reinforce asylum issues, UNHCR actively participated in and advised the Permanent Migration Forum, an advocacy group of NGOs and government representatives.

Working through its local partner, UNHCR in El Salvador stepped up the exchange of information with the Government on potential asylum-seekers. The partner monitored the country's pilot implementation of a voluntary repatriation programme for illegal migrants (checking on access to asylum and the correct application of procedures). Progress on the adoption of a new refugee law slowed, as the Government focused on revising its existing legislation.

UNHCR completed the final phase of its returnee reintegration strategy in **Guatemala** with the provision of targeted support for the last of the returnee communities and the implementation of 20 small-scale reconciliation projects such as a library, schools and community buildings for returnees and their neighbouring communities. A returnee women's organisation operating in 11 communities received capacity-building support through workshops on strategic planning, project formulation and management. An agreement was signed with the Land Negotiation Commission to ensure gen-

tion and assistance network, REPARA, was established in 2000, incorporating over 20 government and non-governmental agencies involved in refugee issues. The network received training from UNHCR and has since developed and started implementing a plan of action. UNHCR also continued providing limited assistance to newly recognised refugees and vulnerable individuals, including assistance towards the cost of education for refugee children. UNHCR's local partner expanded its efforts in the area of domestic violence and gender equity by reaching out to new groups of adolescent girls



der equity and women's participation in land negotiations and tenure. The Office also transferred a part of the micro-credit funds to its local partner to support the refugee population and the remaining funds to the European Union micro-credit programme to support returnee populations in areas of EU operation. At the same time, UNHCR continued its refugee protection and assistance efforts in Guatemala. A refugee protec-

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and elderly victims of violence. The number of women who participated in workshops on domestic violence and/or counselling was more than twice that for the previous year. Related workshops for men were also facilitated.

Despite the absence of refugee legislation in **Honduras**, the Government consistently implemented its ad hoc

procedure for determining refugee status. UNHCR's partner gained access to the Government's Migration Detention Centre; this has increased the partner's ability to provide legal counselling to asylum-seekers. The partner continues to provide short-term assistance in terms of food and lodging to new asylum-seekers and refugees in need, as well as legal assistance with applications for work permits.

The decision by Nicaragua's Migration and Aliens Directorate to allow UNHCR's local partner to participate in the process of refugee status determination is a

major step forward in collaboration between government and civil society in asylum procedures. The draft migration law for Nicaragua remains under consideration and its passage is expected in 2001. The section on refugees incorporates advice from UNHCR.

FUNDING

UNHCR's funding shortages and the amount of time that staff were forced to spend reformulating strategies and budgets had an adverse effect on activities throughout the region. Reduced travel budgets effectively cut down the frequency of personal contact between staff of the Regional Office in Mexico and local partners and networks in the region. Protection and public awareness training were particularly affected, with a reduction of training activities related to human rights, especially refugee rights and gender equity.



Voluntary Contributions - Restricted (USD)			
Donor	Earmarking ¹	Annual Programme Budget	
		Income	Contribution
Japan	Guatemala	20,000	20,000
	Mexico	550,000	550,000
Sweden	Central America	382,883	382,883
United States of America	Central America	1,200,000	1,200,000
<i>España con ACNUR (SPA)</i>	Guatemala	14,202	0
Total²		2,167,085	2,152,883

¹ For more information on the various earmarkings, please refer to the Donor Profiles.

² Total funds available for obligation in the region also included unearmarked voluntary contributions, broadly earmarked contributions, opening balances and adjustments.

Budget and Expenditure (USD)		
Country	Revised Budget	Expenditure
	Annual Programme Budget	
Costa Rica	677,053	666,091
Guatemala	402,594	348,558
Mexico	5,960,002	5,863,302
Regional Projects ¹	853,640	812,377
Bureau at Headquarters	505,383	492,812
Total	8,398,672	8,183,140

¹ Covers activities in Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Nicaragua.