

SOUTH AMERICA

Regional Overview

NORTHERN SOUTH AMERICA

Panama • Suriname • Venezuela • Colombia • Ecuador • Guyana • Peru

MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS

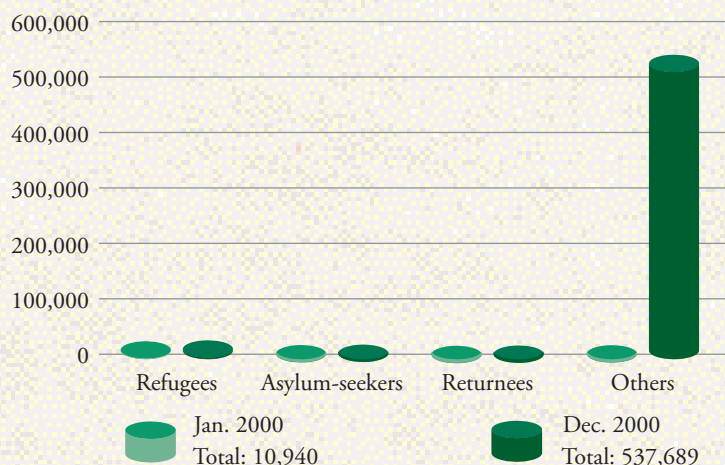
In Colombia the year 2000 was marked by difficulties in the peace dialogue and increased struggles for territorial control, with a profound effect on the civilian population. Expansion of the conflict was especially marked in the sensitive border areas adjacent to Ecuador, Panama and Venezuela. Periodic cross-border flows throughout the year are estimated to have accounted for at least 15,000 people. Official sources estimate that the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Colombia rose by 128,000 during the year. NGO assessments suggest an increase nearly three times higher. The main causes of displacement were generalised threats, combats and massacres carried out by illegal armed groups. Women and children accounted for 70 per cent of IDPs, and 30 per cent were ethnic minorities (Afro-Colombian and indigenous groups), although these minority groups only represent ten per cent of the Colombian population.



CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS

UNHCR's regional strategy for the Colombian situation continued to address protection and solutions for refugees and asylum-seekers, especially in Panama, Ecuador and Venezuela, as well as for IDPs in Colombia itself. Constraints on access to asylum were especially evident in Venezuela, where authori-

Persons of Concern to UNHCR



ties denied the presence of several groups of Colombian refugees and refused UNHCR access to them. More than 1,200 were reportedly returned to Colombia without granting them access to asylum procedures. In Panama, the temporary protection mechanism established in 1997 fell short of international standards and left Colombian refugees and asylum-seekers in a vulnerable situation. The challenge for Panama will be to revise the legal framework and promote access for Colombian asylum-seekers to the standard refugee protection mechanism. By contrast, Ecuador continued to uphold generous asylum policies towards Colombians and to co-operate closely with UNHCR on their behalf. In Ecuador, the emphasis should be on strengthening the already fairly effective protection framework and local capacity to respond to refugee influxes, now and in the future.

In Colombia, a landmark decision by the Constitutional Court recognised forced displacement as a social emergency, thus requiring that it receive priority in national spending programmes. The Court's decision had a galvanising effect on the legislative process: it clarified the Government's responsibilities towards IDPs, and in December amendments to the relevant law were adopted by decree.

PROGRESS TOWARDS SOLUTIONS

In Ecuador, UNHCR and the Ecuadorian and Colombian Governments signed a tripartite agreement on 22 November 2000 to promote lasting solutions for Colombian refugees. The first organised repatriation to Colombia took place in late December. In total, more than 1,600 refugees were assisted and documented. Panama granted full refugee status to 20 Colombian refugees in Darien, despite the existence of a decree whereby they would have been granted only Temporary Humanitarian Status. The voluntary repatriation of 212 Colombians from Darien was carried out jointly with the National Office for Refugees (ONPAR).

In Colombia, UNHCR focused its efforts later in the year on supporting solutions processes (i.e. local settlement, return and reintegration or resettlement) for IDPs whenever possible. Solutions were based on two courses of action: supporting national policy and compliance with international norms and standards to enhance security and access to basic socio-economic rights for IDPs; and initiating community based pilot projects to promote socio-economic stability for IDPs in the post-relief phase. With expertise provided by the Joint Technical Unit (JTU), a team of specialists partly

funded by UNHCR within the *Red de Solidaridad Social* (RSS), draft decrees were issued in late 2000 permitting free or low cost access by IDPs to housing, education, health care and land. UNHCR also supported a gender-sensitive initiative to examine the implications of non-possession of the *libreta militar* (military certification) affecting access to employment by IDP men.

At the regional level, UNHCR consolidated its presence and co-operation with partners. By the end of 2000, adequate staffing and resources were in place, both in Colombia and in countries of asylum, to respond to the protection needs of IDPs and asylum-seekers.

OPERATIONS

In Colombia, UNHCR further consolidated its presence, opening field offices in the three UNHCR priority regions. Two OCHA co-ordination officers were recruited to support UNHCR's lead role within the UN system on IDP issues, while co-ordination was strengthened with other agencies such as ECHO and ICRC. Invaluable support was provided by the UN Field Security Co-ordination Officer (UNSECOORD) who carried out regular missions to UNHCR field offices. During the year, UNHCR implemented activities in the five components of the UNHCR Operational Plan, as follows:

Overall Institutional Framework: Through the RSS/JTU, UNHCR continued to support key policy changes benefiting IDPs. In early 2000, the RSS/JTU began to install and train users on the national registration system, modified according to UNHCR standards. This system is vital to ensure IDP access to state-provided assistance. While several technical problems remain to be resolved, 134,000 IDPs were registered in 2000, five times more than during the previous year.

Prevention: Regular missions to high-risk areas were carried out with State institutions such as the RSS and the Office of the National Ombudsman, to emphasise national responsibility in the prevention of forced displacement. In collaboration with ICRC and OHCHR, UNHCR conducted a training programme for 45 military and police officers in order to deepen their understanding of national IDP legislation, their own role in the prevention of forced displacement, and the protection of IDPs, and UNHCR's role and mandate in Colombia. UNHCR also enhanced border monitoring to analyse cross-border trends, through regular field visits and seminars with national NGO partners.

Emergency Response: Although UNHCR was not directly involved in the provision of relief to IDPs, the Office lent its expertise to an improved national response, including

longer-term planning during the emergency phase. Decentralisation through national NGOs contributed to an overall improvement in the provision of IDP assistance in 2000. In eight major cities, integrated Units for Attention and Orientation (UAO) were established, comprising all national entities involved in meeting IDP needs. The UAOs assisted some 17,000 IDP families in 2000. UNHCR also gave advice to municipal committees in high-risk areas on the preparation of contingency plans for potential mass displacement.

Solutions: To enhance protection and self-reliance, UNHCR provided expertise and co-financing of solutions processes in the form of community-based pilot initiatives for 17,000 IDPs in Uraba and Magdalena Medio.



Given the special vulnerability of IDP women to poverty and sexual exploitation, women heads of household were particularly targeted for support, thus strengthening their leadership skills. In co-operation with the Ministry of Education, UNHCR also supported curriculum development tailored to the special needs of IDP children in selected rural schools.

Advocacy and Dissemination: Activities were carried out country-wide to increase awareness of the plight of IDPs and inform the public about UNHCR's role and mandate. Several workshops were held for national journal-

ists; the Office participated in a radio programme on forced displacement; and a series of 50th Anniversary promotional events were held.

UNHCR gave priority in **Ecuador** to enhancing its presence at the Colombian border. The creation of a liaison office in Quito was followed by the opening of a field office in the border province of Sucumbios (Lago Agrio). The total number of refugees in Ecuador rose from 314 in 1999 to 1,602 by the end of 2000. More than 12,000 Colombians crossed the border into Sucumbios, the majority of whom returned voluntarily to Colombia without seeking protection in Ecuador. A contingency plan for potential mass influx was prepared in collaboration with the Government and the Catholic Church. Reception facilities were established to shelter up to 2,700 people. The Catholic Church provided food rations for more than 1,290 needy refugees (49 per cent female and 25 per cent female-headed households) during the year. UNHCR, through local partners and government entities, provided health assistance and access to education for all Colombian asylum-seekers and refugees.

In **Panama**, UNHCR assisted a total of 1,316 refugees (49 per cent female) with basic emergency supplies including food packages and shelter. Access to education and health was also guaranteed through the Catholic Church and relevant ministries. UNHCR conducted workshops and training activities on improving health and living conditions for more than 1,500 refugees, including affected local populations. To reduce dependency on food assistance, crop pro-

duction and fishery projects were established in two refugee areas, directly benefiting 140 persons.

By submitting draft legislation in **Venezuela**, UNHCR successfully stimulated debate on the eventual adoption of a refugee law. Training activities on refugee protection were conducted with universities, the Catholic Church, local authorities and the military in the key refugee receiving states of Zulia and Tachira, increasing awareness of refugee matters. After some initial delays, a UNHCR field presence at the Colombian border town of San Cristobal became fully operational.

SOUTHERN SOUTH AMERICA

Argentina • Bolivia • Brazil • Chile • Paraguay • Uruguay

MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS

The overall political situation in the region was relatively stable, the only exceptions being Paraguay and Bolivia. In Paraguay, an attempted *coup d'état* caused major disruptions and public disorder. In Bolivia, political unrest erupted in violent protests by peasant groups and public sector workers. At the same time, the region suffered widespread economic recession. In Argentina, the new government faced serious economic and social upheaval, accompanied by a dramatic increase in poverty levels. In Brazil, social tensions intensified, despite far-reaching economic and fiscal reforms.

During the year, 2,439 refugees received assistance and counselling from UNHCR, out of a total of 5,933 refugees in the region. The refugee population is largely urban, originating mainly from Latin America and Africa, with smaller groups from Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Almost half are single young men (17 to 35 years), with women representing only a third of the adult population. The number of new arrivals in 2000 totalled 1,546, an increase of 16 per cent over the previous year. For lack of national legislation or refugee status determination structures, UNHCR has had to remain directly involved in refugee status determination in most countries.

CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS

UNHCR's main goal in 2000 was to build constituencies in the region and progressively hand over responsibility for refugee protection and local integration to national societies. However, recent changes of government in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay have delayed the process of consolidating refugee protection and assistance mechanisms. Most countries in the region are still unable to assume full responsibility for refugee issues. In addition, increased migratory movements in the region, none resulting in a humanitarian crisis of significant proportions, have tended to reinforce the perception of governments that refugee issues must continue to await their turn behind a substantial list of other priorities.

A major challenge for UNHCR has been to transform the three largest countries in the region, Argentina, Brazil and Chile, into active partners both as donors and as resettlement countries. The modesty of regional

sources of funding (owing to the general economic crisis) has made the task all the harder.

PROGRESS TOWARDS SOLUTIONS

The adoption in November 2000 of the Declaration of Rio de Janeiro, at the meeting of the six countries of the *Mercado Común del Cono Sur* (MERCOSUR) regional trading block, was a landmark as it affirmed the importance of the 1951 Convention and the need for regional harmonisation of refugee laws. In early 2000 UNHCR began to develop the text of a "model law" to promote this issue. In Argentina, Bolivia and Chile, current legislation and procedures need to be revised, while in Paraguay and Uruguay only ad hoc procedures for refugee status determination exist.

To consolidate durable solutions for refugees, new partnerships were forged with civil society and the private sector. Implementing partners in Argentina and Brazil now cover 40-45 per cent of refugee assistance needs in health, education, vocational training and counselling. However, UNHCR still provided limited assistance to new arrivals and vulnerable persons, particularly in the pre-recognition stage, as national partners had only extremely limited funding of their own. In Bolivia, Chile and Uruguay, UNHCR revised assistance criteria and changed implementing partners in a gradual phasing out of material assistance in favour of self-reliance.

In 2000, *Argentina con ACNUR* (ARCA) became an important national partner in Argentina by identifying its first group of private sector donors and by playing a key advocacy and public awareness role for UNHCR. Media campaigns were highly successful, yielding press, radio and television publicity worth USD 1.15 million.

OPERATIONS

In **Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay**, progress was made during the year to strengthen national societies in support of refugee protection. In Brazil, the consolidation of the national committee for refugees, CONARE (Comisión Nacional de Refugiados), serves as an example of successful collaboration between government and civil society to promote refugee issues. CONARE played a leading role in the adoption of the Declaration of Rio de Janeiro by MERCOSUR countries.

Partnerships with key institutions in the region continued in 2000. UNHCR collaborated with the National Bar Association in São Paulo, which hosted a refugee law conference and promoted a refugee law clinic at a local university. A PARinAC meeting held in Rio de Janeiro in September affirmed NGO support of UNHCR's regional efforts and co-ordination mechanisms. Through agreements between UNHCR and state institutions or local partners, most refugees were included in public and non-governmental social programmes. Negotiations were reopened with the Government of Brazil to implement a national resettlement programme.

UNHCR presented a model refugee law in both Paraguay and Uruguay (where UNHCR is solely responsible for refugee status determination) and received very positive feedback.

In **Argentina**, UNHCR had to renew commitments with newly elected governmental counterparts in the midst of a severe economic recession. The growing backlog of asylum claims was the object of increasing concern during the year. Recognising that housing problems often hinder refugees' efforts to integrate locally, a local NGO in Argentina helped refugees in 11 communities, half of them women, to obtain land, construct homes and settle into their new lives. In this joint effort, the NGO covered two-thirds of the project cost, with UNHCR providing the remainder.

In **Bolivia**, the inadequacy of procedures for the issuance of identity documents and work permits severely limited refugees' employment chances.

After the conclusion in June 2000 of a successful pilot resettlement project in **Chile**, UNHCR re-negotiated an



agreement with the Chilean Government to consider candidates from anywhere in the world, not just the former Yugoslavia. Chile's resettlement programme with UNHCR is the first in Latin America.

In all countries, efforts were redoubled to foster the local integration of refugees and to increase their self-sufficiency.

FUNDING

Despite increases in the number of asylum-seekers in Southern South America, budgets were reduced by almost 15 per cent in 2000, severely hampering UNHCR's support for local integration, even during the critical reception phase. Government and national partners regularly

expressed their fears about the hardships these measures imposed on refugees. UNHCR was often unable to commit matching funds required to attract additional support from national institutions.

Donor support did enable full funding of the IDP component of the Colombia programme in 2000, but in general the pace and continuity of programme operations suffered from liquidity problems and the frequent revision of priorities (driven by financial constraints). Contingency planning and emergency response needs in Ecuador and Panama were assured through budgetary reallocations, but at the expense of other regional programmes in Southern South and Central America.

Voluntary Contributions - Restricted (USD)			
Donor	Earmarking ¹	Annual Programme Budget	
		Income	Contribution
Canada	South America	310,345	310,345
Japan	Colombia	400,000	400,000
Norway	Colombia	220,290	220,290
Spain	South America	51,986	51,986
	Colombia	140,687	140,687
Sweden	South America	202,702	202,702
	Colombia	405,405	405,405
Switzerland	Colombia	381,720	381,720
	Ecuador	189,727	189,727
United Kingdom	Colombia	80,645	80,645
United States of America	South America	1,710,000	1,710,000
<i>España con ACNUR (SPA)</i>	Colombia	160,407	313,720
Total²		4,253,914	4,407,227

¹"South America" includes "Northern South America" and "Southern South America".

²For more information on the various earmarkings, please refer to the Donor Profiles.

³Total 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	
Northern South America		
Colombia	2,371,800	2,316,364
Ecuador	214,097	181,004
Venezuela	1,417,383	1,338,874
Regional Projects	1,925,770	1,830,530
Southern South America		
Argentina	1,357,630	1,339,770
Regional Projects	2,068,160	1,957,500
Regional Bureau at Headquarters	598,935	558,530
Total South America	9,953,775	9,522,572