



Central America and Mexico

Recent developments

The number of refugees and asylum-seekers in Central America and Mexico remains low with a total of 6,325 registered refugees and 492 asylum-seekers recorded at March 2005. All countries in the region are signatories to the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol, have set up refugee status determination (RSD) procedures and most have also incorporated the expanded Cartagena refugee definition into their policy and/or practice. Mexico, in particular, has acquired significant experience in refugee matters as it responded to large-scale refugee flows generated by the Central American crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. At present, there are no large-scale refugee movements in the region. Refugees now arrive in small numbers individually or in family units, within massive mixed migratory flows from South to North. Governments in the region are improving legislative frameworks to protect refugees and are in the process of developing national RSD procedures appropriate to individual refugee arrivals within mixed migration flows. UNHCR is heavily involved in training and capacity-building activities to enable governments to strengthen procedural standards and apply the refugee definition appropriately within a complex migratory environment.

Belize
El Salvador
Guatemala
Honduras
Mexico
Nicaragua



The migratory context, and, in particular, the strong pressure faced by the countries in the region to deter irregular migration, has led to the introduction of migratory control mechanisms. These include strict admission requirements and the systematic interception, detention and expulsion of large groups of undocumented migrants. Since refugees arrive in small numbers within migratory flows, they tend to be negatively affected by these migratory control mechanisms. One of UNHCR's main priorities is to work constructively with governments in the region to ensure safeguards within the migratory environment in order to mitigate negative effects on the asylum system. At the same time, UNHCR continues to work with governments to find durable solutions, mainly through local integration, for a predominantly urban refugee population. Here, the main challenges are still unemployment and poverty, which inhibit the economic integration of refugees.

Strategic objectives

For Central America and Mexico, the protection strategy will be defined by the commitments made by the governments of the region under

the Mexico Declaration and Plan of Action, adopted in November 2004. The countries covered by the Regional Office in Mexico have expressed strong support and enthusiasm for the implementation of the Plan of Action, which will be one of the most positive and encouraging elements of UNHCR's working environment in 2006. UNHCR's strategy for Central America and Mexico focuses on strengthening national asylum systems through promoting reform of legislative frameworks, building the capacity of government asylum officials and migratory authorities, and monitoring the treatment of asylum-seekers within migratory flows. The local integration of refugees is also one of the principal objectives of the Regional Office, though given the prevailing economic situation, particularly in Central America, and UNHCR's limited resources, this is a challenge.

Under the Mexico Plan of Action, two special projects implemented in 2005 will have an impact on UNHCR's strategy and activities in 2006. The first project consists of an analysis of the work of the national eligibility committees in each country of the region, in order to identify existing practices and gaps, as well as to make recommendations regarding existing legislative frameworks, regional



Mexico: Summer workshop for children on education for peace, human rights and refugees at the Refugee Park.
UNHCR / M. Echandi

harmonization of eligibility procedures and to identify government resource and training needs. The second project aims to assess the composition, function and impact of the protection networks in each country, making recommendations to improve their cooperation with UNHCR. It also enhances the support that refugees, asylum-seekers and other persons of concern receive from NGOs, human rights groups, academia and other sectors of civil society. The results of the two projects will help the Office to develop a comprehensive strategy for strengthening eligibility committees and boosting the impact of regional protection networks.

The gender, age and diversity strategy, launched at the end of 2005, will be fully implemented in Mexico during 2006. Options will be explored for applying the strategy to meet the realities in other Central American countries where UNHCR does not have a presence and where the urban refugee population is small and dispersed. The Regional Office has already defined a gender- and age-sensitive approach as a priority. All training and capacity-building activities already include a gender and age component with a view to

strengthening the capacity of Government officials when working with different sectors of diverse refugee populations.

Operations

In **Mexico**, UNHCR's Regional Office will continue to build national capacities to protect asylum-seekers and refugees within broader migration movements, and ensure access to asylum procedures, by intensifying training activities targeted at migration and other government officials working along migratory routes. Together with implementing partners, the Office will continue to monitor visits to migratory detention centres and key points of entry frequently, particularly along Mexico's southern border where UNHCR maintains a field office in Tapachula. UNHCR's presence at this heavily transited border point on the migration route from South to North continues to be very important in order to facilitate access to the territory by asylum-seekers and to assist the Mexican Government in ensuring sustainability of the national asylum procedure.

The majority of the approximately 4,300 refugees and asylum-seekers in Mexico live in urban areas. Newly arriving refugees come from Latin American countries as well as other parts of the world (Central Asia, the Middle East and Africa). Local integration for urban refugees, through economic and social integration initiatives, is one of the main objectives for UNHCR and its partners and includes, for example, the promotion of language training, job training and micro-credit to refugees with entrepreneurial skills. Similarly, an employment-search project focused on larger Mexican companies has been started by one of UNHCR's partners and an agreement reached with the city government to allow refugees equal access to job banks. UNHCR will continue to facilitate the naturalization of refugees. The naturalization programme for long-staying rural indigenous Guatemalan refugees in the southern states of Mexico was concluded with the distribution of naturalization papers to the remaining 1,100 refugees in 2005.

In **Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras** and **Nicaragua**, where UNHCR no longer maintains a presence, the Office will continue to work through local implementing partners. They will provide legal guidance to asylum-seekers and newly recognized refugees and will assist with local integration (including permanent residence and naturalization). Within the framework of the Mexico Plan of Action, and building on the results of a study carried out by the Regional Office in Mexico, new training and network strengthening activities will be undertaken in each of the Central American countries. The legislative framework will be strengthened by providing technical and legal assistance and advocating for the passage of a new refugee law in Nicaragua and also in Honduras if the regulatory decree pertaining to its migration law is modified. UNHCR will also lobby for the approval of a regulatory decree on implementation of the national refugee law in El Salvador.

The Costa Rica-based **Regional Legal Unit** is a decentralized provider of technical services of the Americas Bureau. The Unit focuses on the reinforcement of the legal framework for the protection of persons of concern to UNHCR in the Americas and the strengthening of UNHCR's working relationship with the political and human rights organs of the Organization of

American States (OAS). It is instrumental in the implementation of the Mexico Plan of Action, particularly the Plan's protection component, e.g. doctrinal research, support for the reinforcement of national eligibility commissions, regional training and the strengthening of regional and national protection networks. It will continue to implement a capacity-building approach in the areas related to the use of human rights norms and standards to complement and strengthen refugee protection, training and dissemination of international refugee law, mainly through UNHCR's Spanish language website (www.acnur.org).

Public Information (PI) activities will continue to constitute an important element of the Regional Office's strategy, in particular to promote a greater understanding of the plight of refugees among the general public, academia, civil society and migration/border authorities. While these sectors tend to be heavily involved in migration issues, due to the regional context, there is less knowledge of or attention paid to refugee protection. As such, regional PI, external relations and dissemination activities will be aimed at raising awareness of the plight of refugees among the general public and targeted sectors involved in migration, as well as maintaining and strengthening support for UNHCR and its work in the region and in the world. Activities will be framed around two main objectives. The first objective is to increase awareness of refugee issues in key sectors and, in particular, to promote positive attitudes towards refugees of different cultural, linguistic, racial and religious backgrounds. The second objective is to implement dissemination activities that support and strengthen the implementation of the *Agenda for Protection* and the Mexico Plan of Action.

Budget (USD)	
Country	Annual Programme Budget
Mexico	1,580,088
Regional activities ¹	1,185,000
Total	2,765,088

¹ Includes legal assistance for new arrivals, regional promotion and consolidation of durable solutions in Central America, Cuba and Mexico, as well as promotion and dissemination of refugee law.