

# BRAZIL OPERATION

## COVID-19 RESPONSE

MAY 2020



UNHCR staff deliver masks in shelter hosting indigenous Waraos in partnership with local authorities in Manaus, Amazonas.  
Photo: UNHCR/Sebastian Roa.

### OPERATIONAL CONTEXT

As of 31 May, Brazil had recorded 514,992 confirmed cases and 29,341 deaths from COVID-19 making it the country with the second highest number of cases globally and with the largest affects felt in Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Ceará, Pernambuco and Amazonas.

Borders are closed since mid-March due to the COVID-19 pandemic, including for individuals coming from Venezuela, with few irregular entries and exits of refugees and migrants reported. For individual already in the country, the validity of documentation providing legal stay was extended until the end of the emergency. Following the declaration of the State of Emergency by the Federal Government, state Governors have adopted a series of measures to prevent the spread of the virus, including cancellation of public events, closure of public institutions, business, schools and places of worship, among others. However, freedom of movement has been maintained throughout the country.

A large number of Venezuelan refugees and migrants are being severely affected by the current crisis and have lost their livelihoods, struggling to meet their most basic needs, including shelter and food. This situation also applies to the four thousand indigenous Venezuelans of different ethnicities (Warao, Eñepa, Pemón) whose health conditions were already extremely vulnerable and exacerbated by their current living conditions, leading to malnutrition, recurrent infections and respiratory diseases.

Venezuelan refugees and migrants continue to have access to national healthcare services and economic relief measures as part of the COVID-19 response. However, as the COVID-19 crisis advances, the public health system capacity to respond to the needs of the population is further strained, affecting not only people infected with the coronavirus, but also persons in need of other health services. The situations in Para and Amazonas are particularly critical.

In April, the Federal Government introduced a monthly emergency economic relief of 600 BRL (USD 120) for informal workers, regardless of their nationality, in order to alleviate the economic impact of the COVID-19 situation for up to 3 months, however significant challenges remain for many to access the benefit.

In order to assist possible confirmed COVID-19 cases, Operação Acolhida (OA) developed a contingency plan in partnership with UNHCR and other actors in Roraima and Amazonas, including the establishment of a field hospital in Boa Vista (Area of Protection and Care – APC), with the capacity to host up to 2,200 Venezuelans and host community members. Additional isolation facilities are also being established in the city of Manaus.

## KEY RISKS AND GAPS

**Community transmission:** Hundreds of Venezuelan refugees and migrants are living in informal settlements in dire situations, exposed to increased transmission risks because of inadequate WASH conditions. Moreover, refugees and migrants lack reliable information on COVID-19, its transmission, symptoms and effective ways to reduce exposure.

**Collapse in health systems:** The health systems in the Northern states of Amazonas and Para are particularly critical, with local authorities in both states declaring a collapse of public health and funeral systems. The states of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo are also facing challenges in the capacity of the health systems to respond.

**Socio-economic impact:** Due to social distancing and isolation measures, many Venezuelan refugees and migrants have had to stop their economic activities and lost their income source.

**Sex and gender-based violence (SGBV):** The prolonged and intense coexistence caused by social isolation, coupled with loss of livelihoods, can generate situations of restlessness, discomfort and increased stress, and consequently increases the incidences of gender-based violence for girls and women.

**Access to territory:** The Federal Police published guidelines extending the suspension of the issuance of passports, national identity for foreigners, both temporary and permanent (DPRNM and CRNM) on 23 May 2020. The issuance will remain suspended if the public health state of emergency continues. However, exceptional cases should be sent directly through e-mail to the Federal Police Department closest to the requesting person.

## UNHCR RESPONSE

### Strengthening and adapting shelter support and reinforcing local health responses



**Shelter:** On 11 May, UNHCR and new partner Fraternidade Sem Fronteiras inaugurated the Temporary Emergency Site *13 de Setembro*, one of the 13 informal settlements in Boa Vista with the aim of improving the basic living conditions of the population living on the site with the total capacity of 500. The opening makes up part of the *Operation Welcome* action plan to gradually deactivate all 13 informal sites in Boa Vista, moving very vulnerable persons to temporary shelter, while supporting others to identify private accommodation or participate in relocation. UNHCR furnished the site with 20 RHUs, 50 mattresses and solar lamps to support an initial population of 120 refugees and migrants.

In Belém, the new indigenous municipal shelter was opened on 5 May. The space will have the capacity to house 500 Venezuelan indigenous people who were living in overcrowded places and in inappropriate conditions. UNHCR provided technical support for site selection, planning and construction, promoting culturally appropriate housing solutions and offering raw material for the production of hammocks as well as RHUs, tarpaulins, kitchen utensils, hygiene kits and solar lamps.



On 8 May, UNHCR supported the Municipal Secretariat of Women Social Assistance and Citizenship of Manaus (SEMASC) in Manaus to carry out the last step in relocating the Venezuelan indigenous Warao population from the Alfredo Nascimento shelter to municipal spaces with better conditions. In total, 534 refugees and migrants who lived in the area were transferred. UNHCR provided mattresses, beds, hygiene and cleaning kits for the five new locations, and carried out informational awareness activities to combat COVID-19. Also in Manaus, UNHCR and our partner Instituto Mana delivered food items to five homes that house LGBTI refugee populations. The donation will support 48 people for one month.

Also in May, UNHCR published an [assessment of spontaneous settlements in Pacaraima](#) (in Portuguese). The information gathered in this assessment is informing the response of UNHCR in our on-going support to these communities in the context of COVID-19, including continued outreach and informational materials as well as the installation of handwashing stations and distribution of hygiene items. Data and information from the assessment has been shared among partners operating in Pacaraima since early March, including IOM, UNICEF, AVSI, World Vision and Pastoral do Migrante as well as with local health authorities.



UNHCR has delivered additional handwashing stations to 8 spontaneous settlements in Pacaraima. In a total, 464 PoCs living in the spontaneous settlements now have access to the handwashing stations.

### Promoting peaceful coexistence and integration



**Venezuelans and Brazilians producing masks together:** UNHCR is supporting a mask production initiative recently launched by the Roraima Secretariat of Labour and Social Welfare (SETRABES). Brazilian instructors will work with Venezuelan volunteers to produce up to 20,000 cloth masks to be delivered to Venezuelans and Brazilians in a vulnerable situation. This is a joint project between UNHCR, the government of Roraima through SETRABES and SJMR. In a similar initiative the Fraternidade (FFHI), UNHCR's partner organization, has organized a team of 14 volunteers whose objective is to sew more than 5,000 masks. The masks follow the guidelines of the World Health Organization and will be distributed among the shelter populations.

**Relocation strategy:** More than 40 cities will welcome refugees in the coming days as UNHCR supported the fitness for travel process (FFT) for 159 Venezuelans in the Jardim Floresta shelter in Boa Vista. The refugees and migrants were registered or had their records updated in proGres, underwent medical screenings and were screened to guarantee they have the official documents and medical certificates necessary for their arrival and integration in their destination city.



**Promoting access to rights:** Through its implementing partners FFHI, AVSI and Fraternidade Sem Fronteiras, UNHCR has provided support and guidance for 574 Venezuelans currently living in Boa Vista shelters to facilitate their access to the Emergency Basic Income Benefit offered by the Brazilian government. However, significant challenges remain for PoCs in accessing the benefit. Despite on-going advocacy UNHCR is still receiving reports of many persons of concern being erroneously turned away when collecting the benefit because they hold expired photo IDs. Barriers to application also remain including lack of access to internet and missing documentation (CPF number). As the payment of the

second instalment of the Federal Government's Emergency Basic Income benefit began in mid-May, UNHCR and its implementing partners in Roraima continued to support PoCs to access the benefit. So far, more than 800 Venezuelans refugees and migrants living in shelters were assisted, and an additional 564 Venezuelans from spontaneous occupations received informational materials produced by UNHCR in partnership with the Ministry of Citizenship and IOM.

### Ensuring the most vulnerable have access to basic items

**NFIs distribution:** On 26 May 2020, 234 indigenous Warao from the new shelter space received 56 hygiene kits donated by UNHCR to the municipality distributed by ADRA.

UNHCR Manaus delivered 270 diapers, 300 buckets, 100 solar lamps and 25 tarpaulins to the Municipal Secretariat of Social Assistance of Manaus (SEMASC) and Operation Welcome. These NFIs will be used to improve the hygiene and safety conditions in indigenous shelters and in the Support Space at the Bus Station (PRA). UNCHR also delivered 88 hygiene kits to its partner Instituto Mana, for distribution to PoCs with heightened protection needs. 328 mosquito nets were distributed among POCs in Pacaraima, in the Jaokoida indigenous shelter and the independent civil society shelter Abrigo Igreja, as the rainy season is beginning in the region.

UNHCR, in collaboration with UNICEF and the NGO Amazon Sustainable Foundation (FAS), distributed fabric masks to 431 indigenous Venezuelans Warao in shelters. FAS donated a total of 1,500 masks to Venezuelans in Manaus. Information sessions on adequate use and cleaning of masks were provided, as well as hygiene kits provided by UNICEF. In addition, Venezuelans sheltered in Boa Vista have produced 1,800 masks through a project implemented with shelter management partners AVSI and FFHI. Sewing machines and fabric were donated to the sheltered population, which will be used to produce reusable masks for distribution among the sheltered population in the city.



On 15 May UNHCR carried out the distribution of NFIs to 200 indigenous PoCs in Belém alongside a representative of the civil society, who provided food items. A total of 30 hammocks and 46 family hygiene kits were distributed in private houses of the metropolitan region of the city. A total of 46 families were benefited, out of which 5 families were part of the host community.

**Food distribution:** In order to address the heightened vulnerability of LGBTI PoCs within the COVID-19 emergency, UNHCR FO Manaus, together with its implementing partner Instituto Mana, delivered food items to 5 self-managed LGBTI houses and the Casa Miga LGBTI Shelter in partnership with the Sustainable Amazon Foundation (FAS). The donation will support 48 persons of concern for one month.

## Expanding the provision of life-saving cash assistance

**Cash-based assistance (CBI):** UNHCR continues to work with partners throughout Brazil to implement cash-based assistance to the most vulnerable persons of concern to UNHCR. The distribution of cash-based assistance has been adjusted for the COVID-19 context, with new remote beneficiary assessment procedures put in place to reduce the risk of infection during the delivery of this assistance. In May, UNHCR disbursed just over BRL 267,000 (approximately USD 50,000) in CBI transfers, bringing total CBI distributions in 2020 to over BRL 1.4 million (USD 260,000). In 2020, almost 900 families have been served so far, with 692 of them headed by women. In total, almost 2,700 people have already benefited from the program this year. However, UNHCR Brazil is operating with a CBI budget that covers only 24 per cent of initially assessed needs, while needs increase exponentially in the context of COVID-19.

## Scaling up and adapting strategies for Communication with Communities (CWC)



**CWC:** In Boa Vista, the second round of the CwC activities in spontaneous settlements was concluded, reaching 18 locations and approximately 2,600 refugees and migrants with information on prevention of COVID-19 and access to health and other basic services. UNHCR and IOM held an information session at the Bus Station (PRA) in Manaus about the current situation in Brazil regarding COVID-19, reaching over 30 PoCs. The session included information on health, hygiene and travel restrictions. UNHCR is mobilizing PoCs and the Armed Forces to enhance hygiene

practices in the sleeping spaces (overlays) near the Bus Station. In addition to this, 572 PoCs recently relocated to the temporary Municipal Indigenous Shelters received orientation on COVID-19 prevention measures and border closures.

**Gender and SGBV:** SGBV referral pathways have been updated and relaunched by UNHCR in coordination with UNFPA and UN Women to respond to GBV cases during the COVID-19 pandemic. The material was shared with partners and local authorities during the Sub-Working Group of Operação Acolhida on SGBV on 27 May. The updated referral pathway will come with the list of the services currently available with the objective is to both support partners and local authorities and strengthen the communication between actors. Two round tables with Warao women were coordinated by UNHCR to discuss the movie “Dauna” with 42 PoCs, debating traditional gender roles and how they have changed throughout the years and on the move from rural to urban areas. UNHCR, with the support of partners, distributed 50 posters with LGBTI+ safe space visibility and 5 cards with messages on protection during COVID-19 pandemic, both inside and outside of shelters. The objective is to engage partners in the promotion of LGBTI+ safe spaces and address specific protection concerns during the pandemic, disseminating information on how the emergency affects LGBTI+ access to basic services. The material was approved by R4V platform and developed by UNHCR in coordination with the UN Free and Equal campaign and the Brazilian Ministry of Women, Family, and Human Rights.

**Cultural approach:** A Warao community radio program “Dibunoko Yakera” was launched in Manaus earlier this month. The programme is run by the community and shares information about preventative measures and response to COVID-19 as well as entertainment and leisure content. At the end of May, it was expanded to Pacaraima in the indigenous shelter Janoko Yakera (in BV8) with the support of UNHCR, AVSI and FFHI. The community selected five PoCs to organize radio programming and music, and all the shelter members listened to the radio (180 PoCs). It will soon be extended to the Janokoida shelter also in Pacaraima.



UNHCR is working to adapt communication strategies with indigenous Warao communities to address continuing misunderstanding of the way the virus is spread and resistance to seeking treatment. Indigenous

shelter management partner FFHI carried out an anthropological assessment to assess the communities understanding of the disease in the framework of their cosmology and understand their preferences around the use of traditional treatments. There is an understanding among the community that lack of access to their traditional community healers puts ill community members at greater risk. UNHCR and partners are taking steps to incorporate traditional medicine in the response to COVID-19, through the inclusion of traditional healers in health committees in shelters. A round table with 90 Venezuelan indigenous Warao was conducted by UNHCR to continue the efforts to reduce and prevent COVID-19 cases in Pacaraima and the community responded positively to changes in the health committee, which now includes two nursing technicians and traditional shamans. The community assessed the committee as a successful means to monitor suspected COVID-19 cases alongside army doctors. In Manaus, UNHCR and partner Instituto Mana are implementing a community radio programme to participatively involve the community in sharing reliable information about COVID-19.

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