

Nicaragua Situation

January - June 2020

Globally there are over **102,000** Nicaraguans who have sought international protection by the end of 2019, **85%** of whom remain in Central America and Mexico.

In Nicaragua, the number of people infected by COVID-19 continues to increase, with organizations both local and international expressing concern over the spread of the virus.

COVID-19 threatens to overwhelm limited public health systems in the region, border closures and restrictive measures have increased vulnerabilities of Nicaraguan persons of concern.

KEY POPULATION FIGURES (end of 2019)



Miskita asylum seekers

Human rights defenders described the murder of six indigenous people in Tuahka territories in the Rosita municipality at northern Nicaragua during the month of March, as a result of land conflicts. Indigenous communities have made complaints about the use of violence by people commonly referred to as "settlers" who seek to take possession of the lands where indigenous communities live. The Government has issued statements against illegal land grabbing by settlers, but no effective action has been taken. The number of Miskita asylum seekers, an indigenous ethnic group many of whom are of mixed African-Native American ancestry, from Nicaragua is increasing so UNHCR is working with translators to provide Miskita versions of health prevention information and access to refugee status determination processes.

Overview

The number of persons infected with COVID-19 in Nicaragua continues to increase quickly and WHO has warned about the dire effect of the lack of prevention and control strategies in the country. In Honduras, Nicaraguan asylum seekers are using new irregular routes to exit their country as the increased military presence in the border has hindered access to territory through commonly known routes. To mitigate the spread of the coronavirus, Costa Rica closed its borders and asylum claims by Nicaraguans dropped dramatically (from a monthly average of over 4,000 to just over 20 in April and May). When mobility restrictions are lifted and borders open once again, we are every likely to see a surge in Nicaraguans fleeing the country.

As a consequence of the continued mobility restrictions, there are limited economic activities in all the countries of asylum for Nicaraguans in the Central American region, leaving persons of concern unable to generate income, becoming more dependent on humanitarian assistance. Nicaraguan nationals have also experienced problems with obtaining identification documents and the impact on mental health has worsened due to COVID-19. Such circumstances have left many to consider returns to Nicaragua despite the dangerous conditions. In this context, various countries in Central America have opened humanitarian corridors for stranded Nicaraguans wanting to return to their country.

Reduced financial support limits the capacity to increase assistance in the region, especially in Costa Rica, where the funding level remained at 40% by early July 2020, and hinders UNHCR's ability to prepare for a further influx in the coming months.



Almost 3,000 Nicaraguan asylum seekers have reportedly withdrawn their asylum claim and returned to Nicaragua due to economic hardships encountered in Costa Rica, putting these individuals in a high risk of protection. © ACNUR/Daniel Dreifuss

UNHCR Response and Strategy

UNHCR strives to help enhance the capacity of refugee-receiving countries to provide access to fair and efficient refugee status determination procedures and promote the local integration of refugees and asylum-seekers in their host countries and help them to use their skills or learn new ones. UNHCR also invests in efforts to curb xenophobia and promote peaceful coexistence among the displaced and their hosts.

Main Activities

These activities span the seven countries most affected, apart from Nicaragua, namely Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Panama and Mexico:



Safe reception and admission

In Costa Rica, within the Quality Assurance Initiative, UNHCR is working on an updated overview diagnostic of the Refugee Status Determination system. Between January and June 2020, 7,173 asylum seekers from Nicaragua registered with UNHCR Costa Rica for support and assistance: serious medical conditions, disabilities, women at risk, and legal and physical protection needs have been identified as main concerns. In Panama, UNHCR continues to provide Country of Origin Information to Eligibility officers, by sharing updated information about the situation in Nicaragua.



Health

In December 2019, UNHCR signed an agreement with Costa Rica's Social Security entity to provide medical insurance to 6,000 persons of concern with medical conditions. During the pandemic, UNHCR adapted the eligibility criteria to also include persons at high risk, such as the elderly. UNHCR completed the screening of the 6,000 persons on 22 May (69% of whom are Nicaraguans) and identified an additional 700 households with people aged 60 and above in need of the medical insurance. In Costa Rica, UNHCR also distributed hygiene kits to help asylum seekers comply with the sanitary recommendations, including through LGBTI organizations and NGOs. UNHCR delivered 20 hygiene kits, including clinical masks and gloves, to Nicaraguans stranded in el Amatillo, at the border between El Salvador and Honduras. In Panama, 112 refugees and asylum seekers, mostly from Nicaragua, received psychosocial assistance in June.



Providing safe spaces and shelter

In Mexico, between January and April, 75 Nicaraguans were released from migratory detention stations, under the alternatives to detention (ATD) programme. 26 Nicaraguans benefited from the labour relocation programme until 16 March, when the programme was suspended due to the COVID-19 emergency. In Costa Rica, UNHCR provides shelter near the border crossing of Peñas Blancas as a quarantine station for recently arrived asylum seekers. In Panama, 53 families have received support through rent payments and around 20 families received support through eviction-mediation with the landlords.



Food Security and Nutrition

In Honduras, UNHCR coordinates with the National Migration Institute to provide emergency assistance to Nicaraguan persons of Concern. In March, UNHCR coordinated the delivery of food kits to 11 families living in the border town in Trojes and in April, UNHCR prioritized the coordination to deliver food kits to 30 persons in 16 families living in the border town of San Marcos. In Panama, through the *Solidario Plan* and in coordination with the Pastoral of Human Mobility, 308 Nicaraguans received a food bag during the month of April. In Costa Rica, 651 families were identified for food kits distribution out of which 537 in May, 186 food kits were distributed through partners at the northern border.



Humanitarian Cash-Based Assistance

In Mexico, between January and June 403 Nicaraguans benefitted from Multi-Purpose Cash Grants (MPGs). 208 received MPGs to meet their basic needs of food, household and domestic products, and a contribution towards housing and utility bills, while 195 received sectoral top-ups addressing some protection-related risks (including contingency top-up for COVID19). In Costa Rica, UNHCR implements a cash-based intervention programme to address the needs of Nicaraguan asylum seekers. Since mid-March, UNHCR has assisted 969 households living in highly vulnerable situations with multipurpose CBI, and 252 families at high risk of infection or with urgent needs. In Panama, UNHCR's partner Panamanian Red Cross reported an 150% increase of the assistance requests between 15 and 26 June in comparison to previous weeks, assisting 697 persons, mainly Nicaraguans. UNHCR's partner in Nicaragua continues providing a broad support to the population of interest, affording the most urgent and basic needs (food, housing, health and payments related to education).



Durable solutions and livelihoods

UNHCR is working closely with the private sector to advocate for the inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers within post-COVID19 recovery plans including employment, corporate social responsibility schemes and to procure services or products from refugee-owned businesses. In Mexico, between January and April, 150 Nicaraguans benefitted from the Local Integration Programs. In Costa Rica, through partner Fundación Mujer, UNHCR provides support to people of concern through capacity development to increase employability of asylum seekers and refugees. UNHCR's partner in Nicaragua, in order to strengthen self-sustainability and economic independence, has supported family entrepreneurship businesses.

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