



# **COUNTRY OPERATIONS PLAN**

## **OVERVIEW**

**Country: Mexico (covering Belize, Cuba, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua)**

**Planning Year: 2006**

## OVERVIEW

### 1. Protection and socio-economic operational environment

The protection environment in 2006 will be framed by the commitments made by the Mexican and Central American governments under the *Mexico Declaration and Plan of Action to Strengthen the International Protection of Refugees in Latin America*, adopted by the Latin American countries in November 2004. The *Declaration* represents a renewed political commitment by the Latin American states to uphold high regional protection standards, while the *Plan of Action* identifies a series of concrete activities and initiatives to be adopted to strengthen the regional protection regime and reinvigorate the search for durable solutions. The countries covered by the Regional Office, particularly Mexico, have expressed strong support and enthusiasm for the implementation of the Plan of Action. This element constitutes one of the most positive factors in UNHCR's working environment for 2006.

Increasing poverty, high unemployment and insecurity are some of the social and economic characteristics of the countries covered by the Regional Office, in particular the Central American countries (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Belize). Mexico, a member of the OECD with a strong economy, is also affected by a high rate of unemployment and a widening of the gap between rich and poor. In 2004, unemployment continued to rise despite an economic growth rate of 4%, higher than previous years<sup>1</sup>. Crime and insecurity continue to affect Mexico and Central America. In Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador and the southern part of Mexico, the proliferation of youth gangs known as “*maras*” engaging in delinquency and criminality in urban areas is of increasing public concern and has adversely affected the governability of some of the Central American countries. Strong new “zero tolerance” policies have been adopted, including new anti-gang laws and policing measures, to combat gang violence.

All these countries are sources of irregular migration towards the United States and Canada, and remittances from abroad have become a main source of foreign exchange<sup>2</sup>. Mexico is simultaneously a source of economic migrants, a country of destination for Central American migrants, and a country of transit for massive mixed migratory movements towards the North. Due to its geographic location, Mexico is subject to strong pressures from the United States and to a lesser extent, from Canada, to deter illegal migration through its territory. Migratory control measures applied by Mexico and Central America include strict admission requirements, especially for “restricted” nationalities, and the interception, detention and expulsion of undocumented migrants.

This environment presents particular challenges to UNHCR's work. Since asylum-seekers arrive in the countries covered by the Regional Office within mixed migration flows of undocumented migrants and, since migration control measures are applied indiscriminately against undocumented migrants, such measures have a negative implication on asylum in general. Furthermore, despite UNHCR's positive relationship with government counterparts, refugee issues continue to figure low on national agendas which are dominated by more

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Human Development Index, the wealthiest 20% of the population earn 59% of the national income, while the poorest 2% only earn 3%. In Mexico, 26% of the population lives on less than \$2 dollars a day. Honduras is one of the poorest countries in Latin America. According to official figures, 53% of the Honduran population lives below the poverty line, and 27% are illiterate. In Guatemala, 80% of the population lives below the poverty line, while in El Salvador 48% are below the poverty line and in Nicaragua 47%.

<sup>2</sup> In 2004, Mexico received US\$ 16,600 million in remittances mainly from the U.S., while Honduras received US\$1,200 million, Guatemala US\$2,603 million, and Nicaragua up to US\$700 million. In the case of Nicaragua, 70% of all remittances came from the U.S. while 27% came from Costa Rica.

urgent problems such as extreme poverty, rising levels of crime and insecurity, impunity and corruption. Improvements in this prevailing situation are not foreseen during 2006.

Despite these negative factors, the Regional Office has made significant progress in achieving its objectives. The fact that the number of refugees arriving in the region from within and outside Latin America is relatively small, together with the fact that all the countries covered (except Cuba) are parties to the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol and have acquired experience in refugee matters (especially during the Central American crisis of the 1980s and 1990s) are positive factors. The long-standing commitment of Mexico and the Central American countries to the institution of asylum, which has a long history in Latin America, and the respect that UNHCR as an institution enjoys in the region, are additional positive factors.

In particular, the Mexican Government's assumption of responsibility for refugee status determination in March 2002, and the expansion of the role and mandate of the Mexican Commission to Assist Refugees (becoming the Secretariat for the RSD procedure), opened a window of opportunity to pursue full implementation of the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol, instruments which were ratified by Mexico in the year 2000. The current Government's commitment to human rights and interest in ensuring implementation of international treaties has contributed to UNHCR's successful pursuit of its objectives to support the Mexican Government in creating and strengthening the national RSD procedure and in building national capacity to protect and assist refugees and asylum-seekers of diverse nationalities, including persons from outside the continent. The Mexican presidential and congressional elections scheduled for 2006 introduce an element of uncertainty as to the attitude of the next government towards human rights and refugees. Although the democratic system will be maintained, the handover of leadership to a new government will entail changes in UNHCR's counterparts as well as changes in government officials at all levels, which will require a new effort to promote UNHCR's objectives and win the support and confidence of the new authorities.

## **2. Operational goals and potential for durable solutions**

Given an environment with both negative and positive factors as described above, UNHCR's strategy for Mexico and Central America focuses on strengthening national asylum systems through promoting reform of legislative frameworks, building capacity of government asylum officials and migratory authorities, and monitoring the treatment of asylum-seekers within mixed migratory flows. Ensuring local integration of refugees is also one of the principal objectives of the Regional Office. The Regional Office's main goals for Cuba, which is not party to the international refugee instruments, are to continue promoting the accession to the 1967 Protocol by strengthening a relationship of cooperation and confidence with the Government regarding the protection of asylum-seekers and refugees arriving in Cuba, and to facilitate durable solutions through resettlement. For 2006, the total caseload in Mexico and the Central American countries covered by this Regional Office is estimated at over 5,000 refugees, all of urban background. In Mexico and Central America, the refugee population comprises 4,787 persons, while in Cuba, the refugee population is 795 persons.

The Regional Office's objectives and strategies for achieving them are inherently linked to the goals of the Agenda for Protection, as well as to the *Mexico Plan of Action*. Under the *Mexico Plan of Action*, in 2005 the Regional Office will implement two special projects, which will have an impact on activities and strategy for 2006. The first project consists of a diagnostic evaluation of the functioning of the national eligibility committees in each country of the region, in order to identify existing practices and gaps, as well as to make

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recommendations regarding existing legislative frameworks, regional 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 the cooperation between UNHCR and the networks, and enhance the support that UNHCR's beneficiaries receive from NGOs, human rights groups, academia and other sectors of civil society. The results of these two projects will help the Office develop, in 2006, a comprehensive strategy for strengthening eligibility committees and enhancing the impact of regional protection networks.

The functions carried out by Field Office Tapachula on Mexico's southern border are important for the realization of UNHCR's strategic objectives in the region. UNHCR's presence at this, the most heavily transited border point on the migration route from South to North, where an estimated 300,000 undocumented persons cross annually, continues to be very important in order to facilitate access to the territory by asylum-seekers and to ensure sustainability of the asylum procedure in Mexico.

Raising awareness of refugee issues and obtaining support for UNHCR and our Mandate through public information, dissemination and external relations activities is also a main goal of the Regional Office.

The Regional Office is planning to ensure the protection needs of refugee women and children and to promote gender equality as a policy priority through:

- the inclusion within all training and capacity-building activities of issues relating to protection of women and children asylum-seekers and refugees and, in particular, strengthening the capacity of government officials dealing with refugee issues to appropriately handle asylum claims lodged by women, consistent with UNHCR guidelines;
- building the capacity of eligibility bodies and other national institutions to respond to situations of sexual and gender-based violence identified within the asylum-seeking and refugee population; in particular, strengthening capacity of national asylum officers to appropriately interpret the refugee definition in claims related to membership of a particular social group, particularly within the context of domestic violence;
- intensifying efforts in Mexico, together with the Mexican Refugee Commission, to reach a cooperative agreement with Desarrollo Integral de la Familia and/or other institutions for the care and protection of unaccompanied minors, establishing clear and well-functioning procedures to identify and assist unaccompanied minors seeking asylum;
- implementing all-staff training on gender; and
- ensuring the inclusion of refugee women in the micro-credit scheme in Mexico at the target level of 50%.

Finally, through a Joint Strategic Planning, the Regional Office will continue to lead a process of interactive participation and consultation with our implementing partners to promote and co-ordinate teamwork, synergy and a shared vision in addressing refugee needs and durable solutions in an urban setting. The Office will continue to encourage partners to cover some services with their own resources, and will continue to give attention to developing the knowledge and skills of Government counterparts in the delivery of protection, RSD, strengthening and streamlining procedures, managing refugee statistics, addressing refugee security issues, attending to the special needs of women and children, and managing refugee affairs in general.