



CENTRAL AMERICA AND MEXICO

UNHCR OPERATIONAL UPDATE

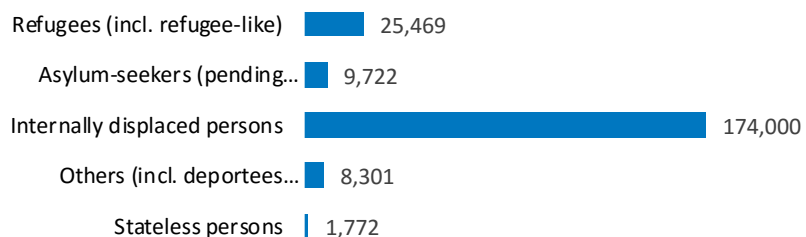
31 August 2016

HIGHLIGHTS

- The high-level roundtable on the plight of people fleeing growing violence in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras held in San José, Costa Rica, on 6-7 July concluded with the issuing of the San Jose Action Statement, a series of commitments from countries in response to the protection situation in Central America.
- UNHCR and the Government of Honduras signed the *Accord de siège* on 21 June, which formally allows UNHCR to engage in its work in Honduras. UNHCR is strengthening its office in Tegucigalpa and opening a new office in San Pedro Sula.
- UNHCR is also strengthening its operations in Guatemala and has recently opened a new office in Peten. The Protection and Monitoring Network has substantially increased its capacity to identify persons with protection needs. As Chair of the UNCT's Migration Task Force, UNHCR is also contributing to ensure that the new Migration Code incorporates international refugee law principles and standards.
- In El Salvador, UNHCR is working with the Ombudsman office and partners to set up mechanisms for the identification and referral of high risk protection cases, as well as in the design and implementation of an internal displacement profiling exercise.
- Thirty partnership agreements were signed to develop protection mechanisms and provide support to the Population of concern in the region.
- Inter-Agency cooperation was strengthened. In Honduras, the Protection Working Group (PWG) is working in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula with the participation of 7 UN Agencies and 13 INGOs. PWGs were also established in Guatemala and El Salvador. Within the framework of undg-lac, the Regional PWG was re-activated to articulate regional initiatives and support UNCTs in the NTCA.
- The Mexican Congress approved a reform of the Constitution, guaranteeing the right to seek and obtain asylum as set out in the American Convention on Human Rights.
- UNHCR's expanded its presence in Mexico by establishing an office in Saltillo to promote local integration, and in Acayucan to focus on the dissemination of information on access to asylum and on the improvement of reception conditions.
- COMAR and the Mexican Migration Institute released approximately 280 asylum-seekers, mostly women and children, from a number of migration detention centres. UNHCR liaised with civil society shelters to ensure spaces were available and that follow-up was provided, including psychological counselling and legal aid.
- New stateless status determination regulations were enacted in Costa Rica as defined in the 2010 Migration Act (Law 8764).
- In response to hurricane Earl passed through Belize on 4 August, UNHCR, through its partner, assisted affected families with humanitarian aid.

Population of concern

A total of **224,160** people of concern in Mexico and Central America by end-June 2016¹



¹ The number of internally displaced persons reported is an estimate of displaced in 20 municipalities of Honduras between 2004-2014 according to a Government-led profiling study supported by UNHCR.

KEY FIGURES

31,072

New asylum applications from the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA) citizens in North and Central America countries in 2016 (Jan-Jun).

99,522

Deportations of NTCA citizens from the USA and Mexico in 2016 (Jan-Jun).

565%

Increase in asylum applications in Belize, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama from NTCA citizens in 2016 (Jan-Jun) compared to the same period in 2015.

166%

Increase in asylum applications in Mexico from NTCA citizens in 2016 (Jan-Jun) compared to the same period in 2015.

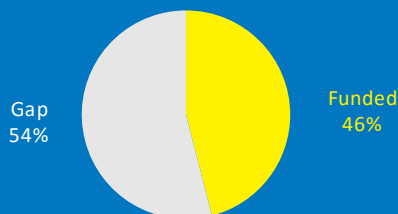
3,937

Persons of concern housed in eight shelters supported by UNHCR in 2016 (Jan-Jun) in the States of Tabasco, Chiapas and Mexico City.

FUNDING

USD 18.1 Million

Requested for the NTCA Situation



PRIORITIES

- Strengthen asylum and international protection systems in countries of asylum and transit.
- Reinforce the protection of internally displaced persons.
- Strengthen the protection of unaccompanied children in line with best interest principles and practices.

UPDATE ON ACHIEVEMENTS

San Jose Action Statement

UNHCR welcomed the San Jose Action Statement released on 4 August where nine countries from North and Central America vowed to work together to strengthen the protection of refugees fleeing Central America, a positive sign ahead of UN and US summits to be held in New York in September on refugees and migrants. “It is vital and immensely gratifying to see the countries of the Americas coming together in a regional approach to devise humane, collaborative solutions for people in desperate need of life-saving help,” said UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi.



In the joint [statement](#), the governments of Belize, Canada, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama and the United States acknowledged the need for stronger protection of asylum seekers, refugees and internally displaced people in the region. The statement, an outcome of an unprecedented gathering of concerned governments organized by UNHCR and the Organization of American States (OAS) in Costa Rica, noted that the swelling flow of refugees and other migrants in the region was due to a variety of factors. It also stressed the importance of timely identification and documentation of people in need of protection, of unhindered access to fair and efficient procedures for protection, of finding alternatives to detention for asylum seekers and of ensuring their access to legal aid.

The San Jose meeting was also attended by four countries of South America as well as representatives of UN agencies and international institutions including the Inter-American Development Bank, the World Bank, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), national human rights institutions, national and regional NGOs, civil society and academia. In an individual declaration accompanying the San Jose Action Statement, Costa Rica said it was committed to addressing, with the help of UNHCR and “as a matter of urgency,” the backlog in asylum applications and supporting the local integration of refugees. In its accompanying declaration, Mexico said it was committed to building refugee protection capacity while the United States said it would work with UNHCR to expand its Refugee Admissions Program in order to help vulnerable people fleeing the Northern Triangle countries. Honduras acknowledged the problem of forced displacement within and across its own borders, pledging to allocate the resources needed to expand protection and emergency assistance for persons displaced by violence including through new laws, emergency shelters and public awareness-raising efforts.

Northern Triangle of Central America

Latest developments

- UNHCR field offices are being established in Petén, Guatemala, and in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, in order to reinforce border monitoring, legal orientation and protection networks.
- With additional resources, offices entered in strategic alliances and agreements with new partners and reinforced the capacity of the existing ones. This requires an intensive and ongoing process of capacity building. So far some 14 new agreements were signed. This has ensured an increase in operational activities, jointly with partners, in the areas of child protection, community-based protection, protection networks and border monitoring, strengthening of reception centres, protection responses for cases at heightened risks (through the Protection Transfer Arrangement), as well as the reinforcement of national human rights entities (ombudsman offices) in the three countries.
- The Protection Transfer Arrangement (PTA) is undergoing its initial pilot phase in El Salvador. Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for the PTA process were developed and a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between UNHCR and the Government of Costa Rica was signed.
- A total of 12 cases were identified and fully documented for the PTA process, and six cases were cleared by the United States to continue their process with IOM in El Salvador. The first cases could potentially be transferred to Costa Rica at the end of September. The PTA will gradually be expanded to other NTCA countries, starting with a few cases in Honduras in 2016.

Needs and challenges

- The growing demand for collaboration with UNHCR from the various actors in the NTCA countries, as well as new cooperation programmes such as the PTA, have highlighted the need for additional resources.

Achievements by sector

Protection

HONDURAS

Achievements and impact

- In the first semester of 2016, UNHCR signed 12 new agreements with partners for UNHCR's technical support in the improvement of local capacities including emergency psychosocial response, the establishment of reference mechanisms for high-risk cases, as well as the design and adjustment of protection mechanisms at the community-level. UNHCR will be able to monitor, impact and support communities in 10 departments.
- In order to improve technical capacity and effective protection response UNHCR activated two Protection Working Groups, one in Tegucigalpa and one in San Pedro Sula with the participation of 7 UN Agencies and 13 INGO. The terms of reference, strategic objectives and a work plan for 2016 and 2017 have been developed within the Global Protection Cluster strategic objectives. To strengthen UNHCR's capability to protect affected communities in the most violent municipalities a new office was opened in the municipality of San Pedro Sula, department of Cortés.

Identified needs and gaps

- Due to the lack of a legal framework on forced displacement and of an entity responsible for the protection of IDPs, protection needs are severe and remain undocumented. Communities and individuals forced to leave are not recognized by local authorities or provided with any kind of support, not even for basic needs such as food, shelter or clothing. Military operations, in the absence of an integrated approach, have increased the vulnerability of communities affected by the presence of criminal organizations.
- UNHCR, together with World Vision, is currently conducting a participatory assessment in two municipalities in the department of Yoro to better understand and document remaining gaps. A similar exercise was documented with Save the Children in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula to identify gaps and define a response strategy.
- The asylum space has been reduced in the past two years and deportation figures from the United States and Mexico have doubled. Despite UNHCR's efforts, in coordination with the Government and NGOs, to establish guidelines for the identification of persons with protection needs upon arrival, the absence of sufficient and effective protection mechanisms remains a major problem. Permanent movements within national boundaries increase the difficulty to monitor the situation and identify effective protection alternatives.



Teenage girls have been forced to quit school because of threats by gang members in San Pedro Sula, Honduras. © UNHCR/Tito Herrera

EL SALVADOR

Achievements and impact

- In the first semester of 2016, UNHCR signed agreements with four implementing partners (Save the Children, World Vision, Cristosal and IDHUCA) that will positively impact the protection strategy for deported Salvadorians with protection needs and for other forcibly displaced people.
- UNHCR continued providing technical support to the Directorate for Victims' Assistance of the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, which is leading the design of an internal displacement profiling exercise in the country. After a roadmap was agreed upon, planning activities in the first semester of 2016 focused on: i) drafting a concept note and terms of reference (ToRs) for the implementation of the exercise; ii) initiating discussions with the National Statistical Office of El Salvador (DIGESTYC), who confirmed its interest in supporting the quantitative components of the exercise; iii) launching a call for expressions of interest from implementing partners that could lead the qualitative components; iv) compiling and analyzing secondary data sources; and v) confirming the support from the Joint IDP Profiling Service (JIPS) for the implementation of the exercise.
- UNHCR is working with partners that provide legal assistance, orientation and psychosocial support, as well as with the national Ombudsman Office (PDDH), to set up identification and protection mechanisms, particularly for high-risk cases.
- UNHCR provided general trainings on child protection and children's rights to some 172 staff from Government and partner organizations. Eight working sessions for the revision of the National Refugee Law were held; some 29 Government, partner and UNHCR staff were trained on SGBV prevention and response; seven refugees obtained their naturalization and five refugees renovated their IDs. Moreover, seven training sessions on Refugee Status Determination were conducted for the implementing

partner Caritas and one SOP was developed for the management of asylum-seeker cases and approved by the national commission for refugee status determination CODER with UNHCR's assistance.

- In order to provide an interagency response to the phenomenon of internal displacement due to violence by transnational organized crime and gangs (maras), as well as other situations of violence, UNHCR proposed the establishment of a Protection Group led by UNHCR. The TORs were drafted by UNHCR and were shared with various actors who provided concrete recommendations. UNHCR had a dialogue with a variety of civil society and institutional actors in the country, as well as with members of the affected population in San Salvador, Usulután and Santa Ana.

Identified needs and gaps

- In partnership with local authorities and the civil society, UNHCR needs to continue working at the operational level with reception centres (for land and air at the airport) and all actors of the national protection system in order to document and develop data collection mechanisms of deportees with protection needs. Relations with key partners and stakeholders such as the Ombudsman Office (PDDH) and the Central American University's Human Rights Institute (IDHUCA) are key for UNHCR's work in the country.
- The UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of IDPs carried out a working visit to El Salvador. The Special Rapporteur held a meeting with a high-level Government delegation including the Minister of Justice and Public Security, the Minister of Governorship and Local Development, the National Police Director, the Human Rights Director from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs with the aim of discussing current challenges with regard to IDP protection and assistance in the country. The Special Rapporteur also met with the Ombudsperson, as well as with representatives of the Civil Society Roundtable on Forced Displacement caused by Generalized Violence and Organized Crime and representatives of a number of UN agencies. UNHCR provided logistical support as well as substantial insight regarding internal displacement in the country.
- As part of the joint action plan between UNHCR and the Governments of Canada, Mexico and United States on capacity-building in Mexico, a five-day fact-finding mission to El Salvador was undertaken to analyze and corroborate country of origin information (COI). Participants included COI experts from the Canadian Immigration Refugee Board and the US Citizenship and Immigration Services, the Mexican Refugee Commission (COMAR), representatives of the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs and UNHCR staff from Mexico City and San Salvador. Eighteen meetings were carried out with Government authorities and civil society organizations.

GUATEMALA

Achievements and impact

- UNHCR continued strengthening the capacities of Government institutions on child protection and international protection in the first semester of 2016.
- Seven workshops on identifying protection needs were delivered to the National Police, the Welfare Secretariat, the Attorney General's Office, the Judicial Body, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as to the managers of shelters in charge of receiving deported children.
- UNHCR participated in a Commission for the Refugee Status Determination meeting, where 13 people were recognized as refugees, and provided individual counselling to 15 people who contacted the Office.
- UNHCR and the Rafael Landívar University met in order to establish final agreements regarding an academic study about different forms of displacement (*Estudio diagnóstico sobre desplazamiento interno en Guatemala*) to be conducted by the university in coordination with relevant authorities. The agreement was signed in July and the main objective of the study is to better estimate the extent of internal displacement in Guatemala during the last five years; to identify different types of movement, their causes, their geographical dispersion and their impact on the population.
- UNHCR conducted a border monitoring mission to Frontera Corozal (Mexico) and La Técnica (Guatemala), one of the key border crossings used by migrants. On the Guatemalan side, the mission team visited the mobile outreach units installed by ICRC, confirming that between 250 and 300 Central American migrants are crossing daily into Mexico; of which approximately 10 to 15 unaccompanied minors. The rainy season makes the border crossing especially dangerous. UNHCR will follow up on the strengthening of the border protection and monitoring network in coordination with its counterpart in Petén. The mission



A family that fled street gangs in El Salvador seeks asylum in Guatemala. Since a truce broke down in 2014 between the Salvadoran Government and the "maras," as the street gangs are known, violence has exploded, driving the national murder rate up to 104 per 100,000 people – the highest since the country's bloody civil war came to an end in 1992.
UNHCR/Daniele Volpe

concluded that UNHCR’s direct presence in the area is critical and essential. Different options to reinforce UNHCR’s operational presence are now being discussed with partners.

- UNHCR met with the Office of the Resident Coordinator, UNICEF, OHCHR and OCHA to discuss UNHCR’s proposal to set up a Protection Group in the country. All participants agreed on its establishment and on the need to include international NGOs and the Ombudsman’s Office. In the frame of the Protection Group, the first interagency mission to the border in the department of Petén was in May.
- LAMBDA, Save the Children, World Vision and Refugio de la Niñez will implement project partnership agreements with UNHCR in Guatemala in 2016. The new partners were trained on the basic principles of international protection, as well as UNHCR’s age, gender and diversity policy.

Identified needs and gaps

- UNHCR needs to provide support and guide its partner, the NGO *Pastoral de Movilidad Humana*, in the opening of the transit centre in Petén, as well as to define how to establish a coordination and experience-sharing network among all the transit centres in Guatemala and Mexico. Technical expertise to the Petén Human Mobility Steering Group should also be provided.
- Collaboration with the Red Cross needs to be strengthened. The organization is providing basic humanitarian assistance to migrants and refugees at key points while collecting valuable information.
- UNHCR will continue to support volunteers from the protection monitoring network at the borders and to build their capacities of identification of persons with specific needs.

MEXICO

Achievements and impact

- The Ministers of Interior and of Social Development signed a collaboration agreement to allow refugees to benefit from existing social programmes addressed to Mexican population living in poverty or vulnerable conditions.
- UNHCR’s presence was established in Saltillo, Coahuila State, to promote local integration, and in Acayucan, Veracruz State, to focus on the dissemination of information on access to asylum and on the improvement of reception conditions.
- UNHCR increased the number of legal aid staff in shelters up to 16, under an agreement with the NGO Asylum Access in Chiapas and Tabasco States. A legal clinic at the *Universidad Iberoamericana* was established with UNHCR’s support. An agreement was reached with the *Defensoría Pública* in Villahermosa to support appeals following denied asylum claims in Tabasco State. Some 797 persons of concern benefitted from legal aid in the reporting period. By the end of August, UNHCR was supporting 18 lawyers to provide legal aid at eight shelters in six cities.
- According to COMAR, out of the 58 asylum-seeking unaccompanied children registered until April, some 40 were identified in detention and 37 were transferred to the Family Welfare Agency (DIF) or privately administered shelters, continuing their asylum procedures free from detention. With the support of UNHCR, since February 2016, COMAR conducted nine missions to Tenosique, Tabasco, personally interviewing a total of 219 asylum-seekers.
- UNHCR took part in eight distance-learning webinars organized by COMAR for some 398 immigration and DIF officials across the country, who are implementing a protocol (SOPs) jointly developed by COMAR, UNHCR and UNICEF for the identification of asylum-seeking Unaccompanied and Separated Children.
- UNHCR increased the use of videos, posters and banners in detention centres, shelters, and other strategic locations to inform people of their right to seek asylum.
- From February to August, COMAR and the Mexican Migration Institute (INM) released approximately 280 asylum-seekers from the migration detention centres in Tapachula and Palenque (Chiapas State), Tenosique and Villahermosa (Tabasco State), and Mexico City. Most of the released asylum-seekers are families headed by women with children. UNHCR liaised with civil society shelters to ensure spaces were available and that follow-up was provided, including psychological counselling and legal aid.
- As part of the strengthening of partnerships with organizations providing legal aid to asylum-seekers, UNHCR supported the establishment of a legal clinic with the *Universidad Iberoamericana* in Mexico City, the first of its kind in Mexico that will work



UNHCR staff in Mexico provide information and advice to people fleeing violence in Central America. UNHCR also provides food and mattresses at this shelter for people on the move in Southern Mexico. UNHCR/Laura Padoan

closely with a country-wide network of refugee lawyers and other legal practitioners working in shelters and with civil society agencies. Other new legal aid initiatives included expanded legal aid in Tapachula through the Belén shelter and the Center for the Attention of Migrants and Refugees where lawyers provide pro bono legal services to asylum-seekers, to increase the access of people in need of international protection to the asylum system and improve the quality of asylum claims.

Monitoring missions

- UNHCR expanded its capacity to visit migration detention centres in Mexico, for the first time visiting 12 detention centres located in northern and central Mexico, establishing direct contact with migration officials and reinforcing measures to inform individuals of their right to claim asylum in Mexico. In the first semester of the year, through some 173 monitoring visits to detention centres, UNHCR maintained contact with some 785 persons in detention, mostly from the NTCA. As of August 2016, UNHCR had also carried out a total of 29 monitoring visits to migration detentions centres in other parts of the country, including Mexico City's detention center (*Las Agujas*), as well as visits to detention centres in the states of Sonora, Baja California, Chihuahua, Tamaulipas, Nuevo Leon, San Luis Potosí, Querétaro, Hidalgo, Tlaxcala, Puebla, and Jalisco.
- UNHCR carried out eight border monitoring visits in Chiapas State (Ciudad Hidalgo, Talismán, Ciudad Cuahtémoc, Frontera Corozal) and five border monitoring visits in Tabasco State (El Pedregal and El Ceibo). Thirty monitoring visits were made to the migration detention centre in Tapachula and some 50 monitoring visits to the migration detention centres of Tenosique, Villahermosa and Palenque. Nine missions were also undertaken to monitor the work of shelters in Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Veracruz. An exploration mission was undertaken at the Central Corridor of Chiapas State, to monitor new routes used by migrants and asylum seekers.

COSTA RICA

Achievements and impacts

- The Quality Asylum Initiative (QAI) continues bearing positive results with 26 per cent recognition rate (35 per cent for persons from the NTCA) and fairer decisions, including three refugee recognitions based on LGBTI-related grounds of persecution during the reporting period.
- A series of MoUs were signed to address effective access of refugees and asylum-seekers to justice, including with the Judiciary and the National Commission on Access to Justice for Migrants and Refugees, the Office of the Ombudsperson, and La Salle University. As a result, over 150 judges and judiciary personnel nationwide were trained on refugee and statelessness issues. Negotiations with the Bar Association are underway to facilitate pro-bono work for refugees.
- In order to eradicate the risk of statelessness among indigenous populations and children born in Costa Rica to Panamanian and Nicaraguan parents, UNHCR has continued to support the Government of Costa Rica's efforts to address the lack of birth registration by expanding their joint work plan for the verification of nationality, late birth registration and effective access to documentation. Within this context, awareness campaigns were conducted among the Ngöbe community.
- The Multi-Functional Team for SGBV/HIV, which is chaired by UNHCR and comprises key governmental and civil society stakeholders, is fully operational. The NGO CENDEROS has recently been selected to establish a shelter for female SGBV survivors and their children, as well as LGBTI individuals, from the NTCA.
- Negotiations at Presidential level have taken place to establish Protection Transit Arrangements (PTA) for NTCA refugees at heightened risk. The first transfers are scheduled to take place in September.



"I never had an ID card", says Nazario who was born in Costa Rica. "Now that I have one, things are a bit different. We feel we belong to this country, with equal rights." The indigenous Ngöbe Bugle people live a cross border life in their ancestral territories straddling Costa Rica and Panama. UNHCR helps them in accessing documentation. UNHCR/Lucas Iturriza

PANAMA

- Panama witnesses complex migration movements, mainly coming from Brazil, and composed of mostly Haitians. The Government has allowed this movement through its territory for the moment, and has provided basic humanitarian assistance. Following the visit of the President to the border with Colombia, a new shelter for 1,000 persons has been set up in Peñitas, which adds up to the shelter for 150 persons in Metetí and the one for 200 persons in Nicanor. The Government is providing shelter for approximately 1,500 persons coming mainly from Haiti, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Pakistan, among other nationalities.

Achievements and impacts

- In terms of livelihoods, UNHCR supported its governmental counterpart to ensure refugees' access to banking services. A local micro-credit institution, Microserfin, recently signed a MoU with UNHCR and the Red Cross to establish a smaller interest rate programme for refugees, aiming to enhance refugees' business projects.
- In light of the governmental local integration strategy, UNHCR and its partners followed up on a proposal paper between the Ministry of Interior and the Mayor's Office of Panama City, which aims to allow asylum-seekers to work as street vendors, an occupation reserved for nationals according to the current Panamanian laws.
- UNHCR continued to provide technical support to the NGOs RET International and HIAS regarding the survey that aims to clarify the approximate number of persons in a refugee-like situation in Panama. The survey is an important tool for the identification of those in need of international protection as well as for their referral by providing information on the national asylum system.
- In terms of border monitoring, UNHCR and its governmental counterpart, the National Office for the Attention of refugees (ONPAR), conducted a joint mission to assess the respect of the principle of *non-refoulement* with regards to the recent measure adopted by the Government of Panama to close its border with the Republic of Colombia due to the rising number of irregular migrants.

Identified needs and gaps

- Border police and migration authorities, including the international airport police, need stronger systems for the identification and referral of asylum-seekers to the national refugee office, ONPAR. As part of the QAI recommendations, UNHCR has been working on two protocols for the identification and referral of cases between ONPAR, on the one hand, and the border police and the Immigration Office, on the other.
- Delays in the processing of asylum claims are steadily growing, due to case management problems at ONPAR, as well as resource issues in the face of increasing demands. This requires the strengthening of ONPAR both at central level, for the resolution of asylum requests, as well as at entry points for the reception of new asylum requests.
- Pursuing strong livelihoods opportunities remains a challenge for asylum-seekers and refugees. The absence of a provisional work permit for asylum-seekers jeopardizes their security and self-reliance while waiting two or three years for a final decision on their asylum claim. Also, refugees must wait long periods for the renewal of their work permits, thus negatively affecting their job search and employment stability.
- Police and Immigrations officers are not always familiar with refugee documentation, therefore increasing the risk of provisional detentions. In light of this situation, a new certificate is in place since July 2016 upon the submission of an asylum application. UNHCR and partners will monitor the effectiveness of the new certificate for asylum-seekers.
- Very high figures of asylum claims were reported by the governmental counterpart during the first half of the year, thus stressing the need to enhance the reception conditions and case management process. The increase of asylum-seekers also becomes a challenge in terms of assistance (food and accommodation).
- As for education, follow-up actions towards ensuring the access for refugee children and adolescents to national scholarship programmes such as the Beca Universal (universal scholarship) are being analyzed. UNHCR's partners are currently evaluating the different legal procedures linked to this benefit in order to assess the possibilities for the inclusion of refugees.

BELIZE

Latest developments

- Since the Government suspended UNHCR's registration and Refugee Status Determination operation in May 2016, the Refugee Eligibility Committee (REC) did not meet until 14 July, when members of the REC became aware of the fact that the Government of Belize had begun enforcing the 14-day application deadline for all asylum-seekers, as set in the Belize Refugee Act in its Section 8. The REC expressed concern over the applicability of the 14-day deadline and, as a result, declined to consider any asylum applications submitted to them at their July 14 meeting, until the Minister of Immigration clarifies its position. In an initiative led by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, members of the REC formed a drafting committee to create a legal memorandum that will ask the Government to clarify their position with regard to the 14-day deadline. UNHCR made substantial contributions to the creation of the said document. Currently the memorandum is in draft form and has not yet been filtered through the Director of the Refugee



Asylum-seekers lives devastated by Hurricane Earl in Belize. From his hammock, six-year-old Edgar gazes out of the window of his family's thatched-roof hut at the mess left behind by the hurricane. UNHCR/Brooke Del Greco

Department (who is also the Chair of the REC), nor has it been submitted to the Cabinet for consideration. Meanwhile, the REC is not reviewing or recommending any asylum applications.

- On 4 August, hurricane Earl passed through Belize with winds at 75mph, disproportionately affecting persons living in extreme poverty or in extremely vulnerable conditions. UNHCR and its partner Help for Progress carried out assessment visits in various communities relevant to UNHCR's mandate in areas surrounding Belmopan. UNHCR noted that affected families lack basic provisions, shelter, beds and proper sanitation. In collaboration with UNDP, UNHCR requested emergency humanitarian assistance to support their populations of concern through this crisis. OCHA responded with a grant of 25,000\$ to aid in the sustenance and recovery of distressed refugee families in Belize. By the end of August, UNHCR plans to distribute supplies among the refugee settlements as they continue to observe and report on the status of post-Earl recuperation. Humanitarian supplies will be delivered to 70 large and vulnerable families affected by the hurricane and located in the settlements of Ar menia and Valley of Peace.

Needs and challenges

- In Belize, the population of concern to UNHCR is estimated to be about 3,000 individuals, although the Office is currently not carrying out registration. This is an estimate based on projections done in the first months of 2016. Most of the population of concern is composed by numerous families and women heads of households with children. In Belize, there are refugee communities in rural areas, mostly involved in agricultural work, and living in conditions of extreme poverty. A participatory assessment is in the process of being designed and implemented in the following months by UNHCR, with the participation of the Government and relevant NGOs.
- Given the serious resource constraints in the country and the considerable burden that Belize is already facing, financial support is urgently needed to sustain the political will, strengthen the capacity of the asylum system (to avoid significant backlogs but also as a preventive measure considering risks of infiltration of former gang members or other persons that could pose a security threat), as well as strengthen the “absorption” capacity of the host communities and the generosity of the Belizean society more widely.
- Currently, asylum-seekers are not receiving work permits. UNHCR will engage in a dialogue with the Government advocating for the regularization of asylum-seekers' working conditions, as this is a primary necessity for the population of concern in Belize. The lack of authorization also called the attention of several NGOs from El Salvador, which advocate for labour rights.
- UNHCR does not have regular access to the prison in the country. The Government of Belize considers irregular status in its territory a criminal offence; therefore many detainees are in fact asylum-seekers. Since 2015, UNHCR conducted two ad hoc visits to the local prison and several detainees were assessed to be people of concerns. UNHCR will have to formalize a procedure which, primarily, prevents the detention of migrants and asylum-seekers, and that foresees the possibility for detainees to submit applications for refugee status from detention, establishing UNHCR access to persons of concern in prison.

NICARAGUA

Latest developments

- UNHCR continued to work with its partner CEPAD in providing basic reception conditions and humanitarian assistance to refugees and asylum-seekers. The number of new arrivals has been constantly increasing since 2013. As per available resources, priority was given to supporting the most vulnerable cases and for a limited period of time. Also, UNHCR continued to lobby for the reactivation of the refugee commission, as well as of the issuance of documentation to asylum-seekers as was discussed with government authorities during the latest visit to the country.

Education

Achievements and impact

HONDURAS

- In light of the increased level of risk for children and adolescents in Honduras, the protection working group, led by UNHCR, is producing a document on risks in the education environment and the impact of forced displacement. Key interviews as well as focus groups will be conducted in October and November and a document with strategic recommendations will be presented to governmental entities, international community and donors.

EL SALVADOR

- The proposal “Enhance rights of the child, protection and access to education for children and adolescents displaced in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador”, was finalized and shared with the EU delegation in Honduras.

PANAMA

- In light of the Executive Decree that allows refugees to have access to education, the *Comisión Nacional de Convalidación y Reválida* gathered for the very first time since the law came into force in October 2015. This special Commission will lead the process for the elaboration of an internal standard operating procedure to define the criteria and steps to ensure the implementation of the Executive Decree.

Durable Solutions

Achievements and impact

COSTA RICA

- In 2016, some 131 persons of concern (including a total of 62 persons from the NTCA) and 42 women from the host community of Desamparados were selected as participants of the “Graduation Model”, which aims at bringing people out of poverty and pursuing their local integration. This livelihoods programme takes a comprehensive approach, including social assistance, psycho-social support, support for the creation of self-employment opportunities, training and access to microcredit, as well as promoting savings habits.
- “Living Integration” is a corporate social responsibility scheme, created from a public-private partnership between UNHCR, the Migration Authority, the Chamber of Commerce of Costa Rica, the Business Association for Development, and the NGO ACAI. The aim of the programme is for companies to develop actions that promote equal access of refugees to the labour market. From January until July 2016, some 254 persons of concern were registered in the programme, some 137 people were trained on employability soft-skills and 110 on technical skills, and 62 (27 persons from the NTCA) were hired by partner companies.
- In the framework of the MoU with the Ministry of Education, in 2016, a total of 117 persons of concern have validated their high-school diploma through a facilitated mechanism where no legal documents from the country of origin are required.
- Regarding the legal integration component of the protection and solutions strategy, UNHCR offered legal advice on the permanent residence and citizenship procedure to some 96 individuals, out of which 31 started the naturalization process, and 11 requested a change of migratory status to permanent residence.
- The office expanded the information mechanisms to persons of concern using new technologies: the online platform for refugees (ayuda.acnur.org) has reached over 3,200 individual users; UNHCR and the Public University TEC jointly launched an App (ACNUR CR); and in partnership with the Migration Authority, some 10 digital informative stands were installed in border crossing points and strategic institutions.



MEXICO

- With the support of the municipality of Saltillo, Coahuila State (northern Mexico), UNHCR started a pilot programme to promote the local integration of six refugee families. A total of 23 people — 11 adults, 5 men y 6 women (including two single heads of household), 12 children and 1 adolescent — were relocated from Tenosique, Tapachula and Mexico City to benefit from this programme. All the adults were inserted in the labour market with social security, and 11 children received scholarships from a private school (Colegio de México), which includes tuition fees, books and uniforms (at no cost to UNHCR). All families will have access to medical attention at the General Hospital and dental services. The city of Saltillo has agreed to receive up to 10 people a month during the pilot programme (August-December).

Shelter and NFIs

Achievements and impact

MEXICO

- To improve reception conditions for asylum-seekers and refugees, UNHCR started several infrastructure projects to respond to the increasing arrivals. Projects include the construction of a shelter exclusively for asylum-seekers in Frontera Comalapa (Chiapas State) to lodge some 68 persons; the extension of a dormitory for women with children in Palenque (Chiapas State) with a total capacity of 50 persons; the improvement of a public gym in Tenosique (Tabasco State); and the construction of a new shelter for 106 persons in Guadalajara (Jalisco State). These projects will add to the increased capacity created in the past 12 months: at Jesús el Buen Pastor shelter (for 48 people), Tres Ángeles shelter (for 54 people), and at a hotel used as shelter for 109 persons in Tapachula; through the LGBTI module for 14 persons and the extension of a dormitory for women and children

(for an additional 50 persons) in La 72 shelter in Tenosique; and through the construction of dormitories for asylum-seeking families and UASC in Hermanos en el Camino shelter in Ixtepec (Oaxaca State), with an additional capacity for 36 people.

- In order to respond to increased arrivals in Palenque, Chiapas State, UNHCR has promoted comprehensive solutions to strengthen the capacity of the J'tatic Samuel Ruiz shelter. These include access to legal assistance, emergency humanitarian assistance and programmes covering the basic needs of asylum-seekers during their procedure. The number of people accessing the asylum procedure increased with 70 per cent in 2016. UNHCR strengthened the reception capacities of the shelter by 50 per cent to address the needs of asylum-seekers who stay for longer periods. UNHCR incorporated a comprehensive and multidimensional approach to the actions implemented, reducing the most pressing risks faced by people of concern, and improving the conditions to have access to their rights as refugees.
- The growing numbers of asylum-seekers have also impacted the humanitarian assistance programme. In Tapachula, the number of persons receiving humanitarian assistance from UNHCR during the first semester was six times higher (1,064 persons) than the assistance provided over the same period in 2015 (288 persons). In Mexico City, UNHCR's partner Casa Refugiados registered a 211 per cent increase in the number of cases receiving humanitarian assistance in comparison with the first semester of 2015. UNHCR's interventions to support and strengthen the capacities of the civil society shelters also included an increased presence and more frequent monitoring, as well as the provision of humanitarian assistance to asylum-seekers, which has an impact on preventing the withdrawal of asylum applications.

HONDURAS

- In order to strengthen protection mechanisms and alternatives, UNHCR is working to improve a shelter for women at risk or victims of sexual violence and the reception conditions for irregular migrants and asylum seekers.
- In response to forced displacement during the emergency phase, UNHCR worked with key partners such as Casa Alianza, the Scalabrinians Sisters, Caritas and NRC in 10 parishes.
- Together with Save the Children and Children International, UNHCR will be improving 9 community centers in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula with a special focus on high risk areas.

Working in partnership

Northern Triangle of Central America

Latest developments

- In the three offices of the NTCA countries, as well as at the regional level, interagency protection working groups were set up or reinforced. All of them count with ToRs and have been officially approved by the UNCT. Regular meetings are scheduled to analyze the situation, discuss protection concerns, and look for complementary support through interagency coordination and response mechanisms. There were two interagency missions to the Guatemala-Mexico border.
- The so-called Cuban migrant crisis, which has now turned into the extra continental migrant crisis, was creating regional tensions and straining normal cooperation dynamics. SICA suffered the impact of this strain in regional cooperation. On the positive side, the United States announced the expansion of the US Refugee Admission Program to help vulnerable families from the NTCA countries, as well as moving forward with the analysis of a number of cases in the Protection Transfer Arrangement which can now be operationalized, with Costa Rica acting as the temporary host country.
- In Costa Rica, UNHCR started implementing the multi-year, multi-partner comprehensive protection and solutions strategy in alliance with the Government, local embassies, international organizations, civil society organizations, universities and the private sector.

Needs and challenges

- In the context of complex regional dynamics, UNHCR's joint work plan with the SICA secretariat was revised, including the aspects related to the development of an Observatory on Human Rights for Forced Displacement in Central America, as called for in the Brazil Plan of Action.
- Staff from UNHCR offices in Guatemala and El Salvador participated in an IOM workshop aimed at validating the data collection tool for their Displacement Tracking Matrix project in each country. The workshop was attended by representatives of government institutions as well as WFP, FLACSO, CONAMIGUA, UNFPA and various universities. The main concern highlighted by most participants was related to estimates about migration flows (including internal displacement) from key informants in the different municipalities, who are unlikely to know or manage this type of information. In Guatemala, and in light of the study on internal displacement that the Landivar University is conducting in 2016 with UNHCR's support, UNHCR-IOM-Landivar University agreed to meet in order to guarantee that both initiatives will complement each other.

- UNHCR met with technical counterparts from IOM to discuss activities on data gathering related to deportees and IDPs in the region. IOM shared an update regarding the new project for the NTCA funded by USAID (2016-17). The main component of this project will be the implementation of the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) in the NTCA region, collecting data on migration/displacement flows in most of the municipalities of the three countries through key informant interviews. The goal is to produce regular reports based on data collected, including population estimates for different migration flows at the municipal level (internal and external migration and displacement, including returns). The other main component of the project focuses on the integration of information/data systems for deportees in support of national authorities. UNHCR is following-up the developments around this topic to ensure an appropriate identification of protection needs is accounted for in the design of the systems.
- UNHCR worked on strengthening of protection networks at the Guatemala-Mexico border area, and most specifically in the municipality of Suchiate, Ciudad Hidalgo. In May, a new Assistance Center for Migrants and Refugees was inaugurated. With funds from IOM and support from UNHCR, the Centre is located in Motozintla, Chiapas, 25 km from the Niquivil border point. The Centre is contributing to the dissemination of information on the right to seek asylum and the referral of cases to the asylum system.

External relations

PANAMA

- In Panama, the National Office for the Attention of Refugees (ONPAR), HIAS, RET and UNHCR conducted two awareness-raising sessions at public schools with high records of refugee population. The sessions aimed at helping high school students understand the reasons why refugees flee their homes, the challenges faced with local integration and to help end discrimination and xenophobia among students. The activities were part of a project carried out by ONPAR with the support of civil society to end discrimination and help local integration of refugee children and adolescent in Panama.

MEXICO

- Within the framework of the celebration of national Children's Day, UNHCR launched the digital awareness-raising campaign #RefugeeChildren (#NiñezRefugiada) to explain the reasons behind the exodus of unaccompanied and separated children from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. The materials of the campaign are available at www.acnur.org/ninezrefugiada. The campaign was financed by ECHO's Children of Peace project.
- With the aim of promoting a peaceful coexistence between young asylum-seekers/refugees and the local youth of Tenosique, UNHCR and La 72 shelter organized the painting of a mural. This activity was a first step and an opportunity to create a sense of solidarity and build bonds between young refugees and the local community. The mural was unveiled in a public event in the central plaza of Tenosique, with artistic performances of refugees and Mexicans. Both events were attended by hundreds of persons, including representatives of government institutions, non-governmental organizations, civil society, and refugees.
- A training session for journalists on international protection was carried out in Villahermosa, the capital of Tabasco State, with the attendance of 25 participants from 16 different media outlets. The training aimed to raise the awareness and understanding of the public regarding the plight of refugees in Tabasco, a state that has seen a significant increase in the presence of asylum-seekers and refugees.

COSTA RICA

- Following the MoU that UNHCR signed with the University of La Salle, the first 72-hour post-graduate programme on International Refugee Law was completed during the first quarter of 2016, with an attendance of 24 participants. The programme is aimed at government officials, members of the judiciary, and civil society members working in migration and refugee-related matters. Given its success, a second cohort is planned for the second semester.
- UNHCR and the Costa Rican Supreme Electoral Tribunal/Registry Office participated in a bi-national meeting that was organized by the Panamanian Electoral Tribunal within the framework of their bilateral agreements. The meeting was an opportunity to introduce the 'Chiriticos' Project to the electoral tribunal magistrates. It was presented as a regional model that could be replicated with their Colombian counterparts to address the lack of birth registration in the Darien region. Also, a joint work plan establishing two bi-national registration and documentation brigades in Costa Rica, one in Sixaola during the first semester, and a second one in the region of Los Santos in late July, was formulated. During the Sixaola bi-national exercise, both Costa Rican and Panamanian registry officers reached out to some 2,675 Ngöbe Buglé individuals and assisted them with their registration/documentation needs (document rectifications, double nationality filing procedures, etc.).

FINANCIAL INFORMATION

In June 2016, UNHCR released a supplementary budget appeal for the situation in the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA), which reflects needs and activities in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Belize, Costa Rica and Mexico, as well as the coordination activities carried out by UNHCR’s regional office in Panama. UNHCR’s total financial requirements for the NTCA situation currently amount to USD 23.7 million. UNHCR is very grateful for the financial support provided by donors, particularly those who have contributed to its activities with unearmarked or broadly earmarked funds, as well as for those who have already contributed to the NTCA situation. The additional requirements for the situation, as presented in the appeal (USD 18.1 million), are currently funded at 46 per cent.

Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA) Situation:

Key Population Figures and Trends in North and Central America



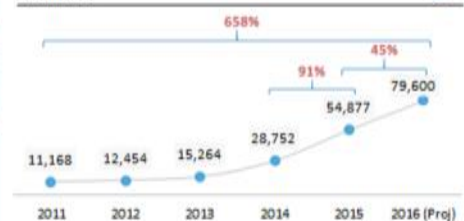
Regional Overview of Population of Concern from NTCA in 2015 and Projections for 2016*



Population of Concern from NTCA Countries*

Refugees + asylum seekers (pending) (cumulative)	108,262	end-2015
	146,000	end-2016 (proj.)
IDPs in Honduras (Government estimate for 20 municipalities)	174,000	2004-2014
	190,000	2004-2016 (proj.)
Returned population from USA & MEX to NTCA (mix-migration)	234,561	2015
	234,000	2016 (proj.)

New Annual Asylum Applications from NTCA Countries*



Annual Returns from USA and MEX to NTCA Countries*



* 2016 figures correspond to UNHCR projections. For refugees / asylum seekers, the estimates are based on new asylum claims observed during the first months of 2016. For IDPs in Honduras, the increase is based on average annual number of IDPs between 2004-14. For returned population, 2016 figures are assumed to be the same as in 2015, given the observed trends in returns from USA (increasing) and from Mexico (decreasing) during the first months of 2016.

Contacts:

Angela Flórez, Public Information/External Relations Associate for Central America, florez@unhcr.org, Tel: +507 317 1713, Cell +507 6930 0655
 Mariana Echandi, Communications/Public Information Associate for Mexico, echandi@unhcr.org, Tel: +52 55 5083 1713, Cell +52 1 55 1916 2805
 Catia Lopes, UNHCR External Relations Officer, Regional Bureau for the Americas, lopes@unhcr.org, Tel.: +41 (0)2 27397204

Links: www.acnur.org

Twitter @ACNURamericas – Facebook: ACNURamericas

Recent PI stories:

- <http://www.acnur.org/noticias/noticia/acnur-y-gobierno-de-honduras-firman-acuerdo-de-sede/>
- <http://www.acnur.org/noticias/noticia/la-odisea-por-la-vida-adolescentes-y-familias-hondurenas-siguen-huyendo-de-la-violencia/>
- <http://www.acnur.org/noticias/noticia/huyendo-de-la-persecucion-y-la-violencia-por-pertener-a-la-comunidad-lgbt/>