UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

"I left without knowing where I was going. I ran to save my life and avoid living through the same violence again."

Martha Estela

© UNHCR/Omar Ganchala

Ecuador

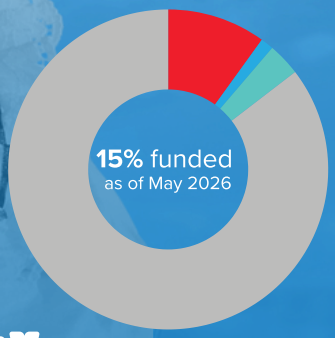
Operational Update
May 2026
No.5

Figures at a glance

Population figures

81,351 94% from neighbouring Colombia

Historical figure of refugees recognized by Ecuador [2]



65.1 M
required in 2026

- Tightly earmarked
- Earmarked
- Softly earmarked (indicative allocation)
- Unearmarked (indicative allocation)
- Funding gap (indicative)

For more information on funding, please visit:
reporting.unhcr.org/ecuador

Our 2026 response in figures

29,619 refugees and other displaced people supported and registered in proGres as of the end of May 2026

3,346 people supported with community - based protection services

4,052 people supported with collective emergency shelter

54 people assisted to cover their basic needs and protection

1,273 people received hygiene kits

3,343 people supported with mental health and psychosocial support

211 people linked with a decent employment opportunity

4,439 people received legal orientation & assistance

28 people provided with technical or skills certification

1. Historical figure registered by the government since 1978 to the end of May 2026.
2. UNHCR registers active refugee cases in ProGres. Figures to the end of May 2026

Operational context

Ecuador's operational context in May 2026 remained complex, shaped by insecurity, mobility restrictions, and infrastructure challenges, also impacting refugees and asylum seekers.

Security conditions continued to deteriorate, particularly in urban areas affected by organized crime. In response, the Government imposed mobility restrictions, including a curfew from 23:00 to 05:00 in multiple provinces and major cities between 3 and 18 May, including in Quito.

According to Ecuador´s country profile in IDMC, an estimated 316,000 people are internally displaced due to violence and insecurity, underscoring growing protection needs. Increased violent incidents in areas such as Orellana and Sucumbíos, further restricted mobility and hindered humanitarian access.

Economic pressures have also been intensified. Rising fuel prices are expected to scale up transport and food costs, potentially placing additional strain on displaced households, and could increase risks of negative coping strategies.

In Esmeraldas, prolonged power outages disrupted water systems, livelihoods, and humanitarian activities. Heavy rains and flooding in Putumayo canton caused river overflows, isolating communities and limiting access to services. Landslides and road disruptions toward Quito increased travel times, affecting asylum seekers needing to complete documentation. The Government declared a yellow alert under the 'El Niño Watch,' as forecasts indicate that conditions are likely to develop between May and July 2026 and may persist into early 2027.

Energy supply remains fragile despite short-term improvements in river flows. Disruptions affecting key infrastructure, including major hydroelectric plants, highlight structural vulnerabilities and reliance on hydropower. Authorities have warned of potential supply constraints later in 2026, particularly if electricity imports from Colombia are reduced, which could result in renewed outages affecting services, livelihoods, and humanitarian operations. These environmental and infrastructure-related factors could further constrain operations.

At the same time, northern cross-border dynamics continue to evolve. Trade tensions and policy adjustments between Ecuador and Colombia, together with economic uncertainty in border areas, may affect mobility patterns and access to services. In highly interconnected regions, these changes can influence movement, protection conditions, and livelihoods of refugees and other forcibly displaced populations.

Overall, the convergence of insecurity, economic hardship, and environmental shocks is increasing protection risks, reducing access to services, and heightening vulnerabilities, likely increasing demand for humanitarian assistance. In this context, UNHCR continues working with national and local authorities and partners to strengthen protection responses, support access to asylum and services, and adapt assistance to evolving needs.

Main populations forced to flee hosted by Ecuador and others of concern

Colombians

According to government data, 354 Colombians applied for asylum in Ecuador in May 2026 (1297 in 2026), representing a 38% increase compared to April 2026 and a 19% increase from May 2025. Ecuador continues to host one of the largest populations of Colombian refugees historically. In 2025, Colombians represented 40% of asylum seekers, a 33% decrease from the previous year. Temporary closures of official crossing points and stricter controls have reduced mobility and access to territory, potentially discouraging people with international protection needs from seeking asylum. Colombian households face significant protection needs, primarily related to unmet basic needs (30.6%), followed by lack of legal documentation (17.2%), limited access to services (12.2%), and children at risk of not attending school (7.9%), reflecting layered vulnerabilities affecting access to rights and essential services. Many report threats, persecution, intimidation, or direct violence, confirming that violence and armed conflict in Colombia remain key drivers of displacement. UNHCR projects an important number of asylums claims in 2026.

256 Colombians who have sought asylum in Ecuador in 2026

Main needs of Colombians in Ecuador:

56% access to housing

54% access to food

44% access to employment

Venezuelans

Venezuelans continue to represent the largest share of arrivals to Ecuador, while mobility trends remain relatively stable. In May 2026, an estimated 18,330 people entered the country, representing a slight increase of 1.0% compared to the previous month, with a daily average of approximately 591 arrivals. During the same period, an estimated 17,468 people departed Ecuador. As a result, the net migration balance stood at approximately 862 people who entered and remained in the country during the reporting period.

According to government data, 550 Venezuelans sought asylum in Ecuador in May 2026 (2,871in 2026), a 34% increase compared to the same month in 2025. Venezuelan asylum seekers currently represent 65% of all asylum applications processed in Ecuador in 2026, a trend that has been consistently observed since 2024, while the 2026 number accounts for 49% of the total registered in 2025. This reinforces both the continued need for support and the sustained interest in accessing international protection. Moreover, with no avenues for regularization, the asylum system has become increasingly relevant for those with international protection needs.

Population entry and exit figures have been compiled by the GTRMs in Ecuador's border areas with qualitative and quantitative information on mixed movement trends. These figures are not triangulated with neighboring countries.

440.450[2]
Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Ecuador

45% between 18 and 45 years old

25% have a higher education degree

Main needs[3]

55% access to food

67% access to housing or shelter

53% access to livelihoods or employment

2. According to data estimated by the Refugee and Migrant Working Group (GTRM, by its acronym in Spanish).
3. Fifth R4V Joint Needs Assessment. www.r4v.info

Ecuadorians

By mid- 2025, over 103,000 Ecuadorian asylum-seekers were pending a decision on their claims, while around 5,000 had been recognized as refugees – the majority in the United States, Spain, Mexico and Italy (followed by Perú and Canada). The Ombudspersons Office, with support from UNHCR and ECHO, launched a report on internal displacement in 2025 which estimates that over 315,000 Ecuadorians had been internally displaced between 2022 and 2024. See the executive summary here.

ACTIVITIES IN THE FIELD

DELIVERING PROTECTION

How UNHCR makes a difference:

Seeking asylum is a fundamental human right, and Ecuador has built one of the strongest asylum systems in the region to uphold it. UNHCR supports the Government by safeguarding access to territory and fair asylum procedures, providing legal and community-based protection, and translating international protection standards into real access to rights at the local level. Through its presence on the ground, technical expertise, data-driven analysis and coordination with national and local actors, UNHCR helps address immediate protection risks while strengthening sustainable protection systems, fostering social cohesion and enabling refugees and host communities to live safely, with dignity, and stability. **To learn more, check out protection fact sheet.**

CARCHI AND SUCUMBIOS

Bringing protection closer to the people in Carchi and Sucumbios

UNHCR, together with partners including ADRA–WFP, NRC, HIAS and FUDELA, conducted mobile protection brigades across Carchi and Sucumbios provinces to bring services closer to people. Activities took place in El Ángel (with ADRA–WFP), Bolívar (interagency GAD office), and San Gabriel (Montúfar), Coca (with AVSI) providing registration, asylum orientation, family reunification support, regularization advice, and protection referrals, including GBV and child protection. Complementary assistance such as kits and food support was also delivered, prioritizing vulnerable profiles. With ECHO's support, these efforts strengthen access to protection at the local level.

CARCHI

Strengthening women's networks in Carchi

In Tulcán, during sessions held on May 6 and May 20, UNHCR strengthened women's community networks through participatory spaces focused on preventing gender-based violence. Both sessions encouraged reflection on gender roles and stereotypes, as well as analysis of violence based on personal experiences. These activities fostered dialogue, trust, and shared understanding, strengthening collective awareness and community-based support mechanisms.

TULCÁN

Access to health through community services

In San Gabriel, FUDELA, ADRA–HOPE, and UNHCR undertook a mobile outreach exercise in Santa Clara, providing health services to forcibly displaced people and host communities. Support included medical care, medicines, hemoglobin tests, psychological and dental services, and guidance on self-care and mental health, strengthening access to essential rights and services through coordinated community action.

GUAYAQUIL AND TULCAN

Sports for protection continues to expand and consolidate at the national level

UNHCR and CDH launched a training process for sports coaches, strengthening protection spaces with institutional support. Moreover,ongoing activities at the national level, including golf-based sessions led by FUDELA in San Gabriel, continue to engage children in learning about their rights and developing life skills. With support from donors such as LIV Golf, these initiatives reinforce sport as a tool for protection, inclusion, and community resilience.

CARCHI

Access to justice and rights in Carchi

In Carchi province, UNHCR, through the Legal Working Group, undertook capacity building sessions strengthen access to justice and human rights together with the Public Defender's Office, Ombudsperson's Office, OHCHR, JRS and AVSI in Tulcán and Bolívar. Activities included capacity-building for JCPD, CCPD and shelter staff on human rights, protection pathways, intercultural approaches, and GBV prevention, enhancing coordinated institutional responses for people on the move. These efforts were made possible thanks to the support of ECHO.

GUAYAQUIL AND ESMERALDAS

Strengthening capacities of local protection systems and community networks

UNHCR strengthened capacities on international protection across local protection systems in Esmeraldas, particularly with authorities in Mataje and La Unión de Quinindé, and community networks, including the Community Defenders Network in Guayaquil. Through targeted trainings for public officials and local actors, interventions reinforced knowledge on access to asylum, human rights, and protection pathways. These actions enhanced the role of local and community actors in identifying and referring cases, contributing to more coordinated responses and improved access to rights.

PROMOTING DURABLE SOLUTIONS

Forcibly displaced people are part of the solution for Ecuador's development. UNHCR works with national and local systems to promote their social and economic integration, supporting regular documentation, access to formal employment, education, entrepreneurship, financial services and ensuring misinformation and xenophobia are addressed at all levels. Advocating for inclusive policies and partnering with businesses, training institutions and local actors, UNHCR helps refugees build sustainable livelihoods, fill labour gaps in key productive sectors, and contribute skills, taxes and innovation to the local economy. These solutions-oriented approaches strengthen social cohesion, reduce protection risks, and generate long-term benefits for both forcibly displaced people and host communities.

MANTA

Launching the fifth edition of the Inclusive Company Seal

The Inclusive Company Seal, an initiative developed under UNHCR's Companies with Refugees programme, promotes the recognition of inclusive practices in the private sector. In Manta, UNHCR launched the fifth edition of the initiative, bringing together private sector, business associations, and higher education institutions. Coordinated with the Manta Business Chamber, HIAS Ecuador, and Fundación Corazón de Crystal, the event featured discussions on business sustainability and inclusive workplaces, strengthening private sector engagement in inclusive employment opportunities.

LAGO AGRIO

Building employability skills through practical training

As part of efforts to strengthen socioeconomic inclusion, UNHCR supported a practical training process with private sector companies for the certification of participants as warehouse, inventory, and sales assistants. In Lago Agrio, 25 young people, including 15 refugees and 10 Ecuadorians, took part in the initiative, gaining hands-on experience and skills aligned with local labour market needs. The training fostered employability, strengthened links with the private sector, and promoted opportunities for inclusive workforce participation.

MANTA

Promoting inclusive business opportunities

UNHCR, in coordination with the Portoviejo Municipality, organized the "Compra con Propósito" business roundtable bringing together companies from the tourism and gastronomy sector to engage with entrepreneurs, including refugees and migrants from Manabí with certified products. The event facilitated networking and commercial linkages, promoting inclusion in local value chains and strengthening access to sustainable livelihoods.

Stories from the field

"Never abandon a foreigner, because no one knows the difficult journey they traveled to get here." -Martha Estela

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From Flight to Leadership: *a Journey of Resilience and Belonging*

Martha, 45, is originally from the rural community of Guan in Nariño, Colombia. Raised in an Indigenous community surrounded by family, nature, and strong traditions, her childhood was marked by both happiness and the constant presence of armed groups linked to Colombia's long-running conflict.

As violence intensified, Martha and her community faced fear, displacement, and the loss of fundamental rights. Leaving Colombia was one of the most difficult decisions of her life. "I left without knowing where I was going; I just ran to save my life and avoid living through the same violence again," she recalls. Forced to leave her family behind, she crossed into Ecuador through irregular routes, carrying uncertainty and fear about what awaited her.

Arriving alone in a country she barely knew, Martha struggled to rebuild her life. She faced exploitation in domestic work and had little knowledge of her rights. After years without contact, she was able to reconnect with her family, bringing her relief and renewed hope. Today, she lives in Ecuador with her husband and son and remains focused on building a peaceful future.

Through support from UNHCR and partner organizations, Martha accessed documentation assistance, entrepreneurship support, and vocational training.

"The courses changed my life because they showed me that I could generate my own income and build a future with dignity," she says. She now runs several small businesses, including the sale of mango products, ice cream, and baked goods.

Martha became one of the leaders behind Cabildo Kumbe, a binational Indigenous organization created by displaced Colombian families in Ecuador as a way to preserve their cultural identity, strengthen community ties, and foster understanding with host communities. The organization brought together Colombian and Ecuadorian authorities to promote cross-border integration and cooperation. Through collective effort, Cabildo Kumbe has supported nearly 30 families in achieving access to permanent housing while creating opportunities for cultural exchange, community participation, and social inclusion. For its members, it represents both a space to reclaim a sense of belonging, dignity, and collective progress. "Cabildo Kumbe was born so people could know who we are, where we come from, and understand that we are people who want to contribute, work, and live in peace," she explains.

Her message is simple: integration begins with empathy. Behind every displaced person is a story of loss, resilience, and the hope of starting again.

You can help us continue building a World of Possibilities for thousands of displaced people and their host communities in Ecuador. **Donate now.**

We thank the contributions of our donors

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UNHCR Ecuador is grateful for the support from private donors

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