

Central America & Cuba

Bi-weekly Operational Update

Operations: Regional context

Central American countries has recorded 70,000 COVID-19 cases, with 1,007 new cases registered in one day in Panama and 800 in Guatemala on 25 June, despite early mitigation measures imposed across the region. The COVID-19 pandemic has worsened many challenges in Central America and for those in need of protection. In the countries of origin, gang violence, persecution, gender-based violence and human rights abuses have continued and, in some instances, worsened for particular demographic groups, including LGBTI people and women.

Due to the difficult economic situation in countries such as Costa Rica, where unemployment reached its highest ever recorded rate of 15.7% (February – April 2020), or Belize where GDP growth is expected to fall by -12% this year, asylum seekers and refugees are concerned about livelihoods, across the region. More widely, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the

Caribbean forecasts an average regional contraction of 5.3% in 2020. In Central America, the World Bank predicts a shrink by 3.6% of the economy this year. Remittances to the region, a vital lifeline for many, are expected to fall by 20% over the course of the year. This will inevitably compound ‘push’ factors and potentially impact the ability of countries to ensure the social and economic inclusion of forcibly displaced people.

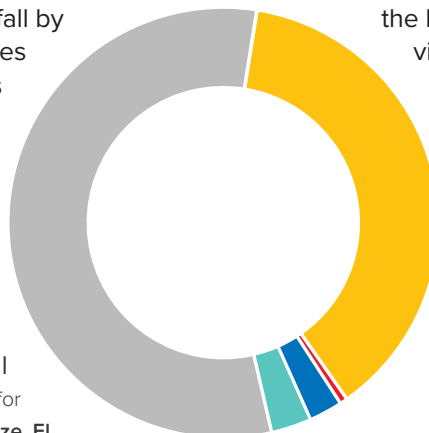
In this context, UNHCR continues to provide assistance to persons of concern, and to support governments of the region in the overall response to needs arisen from COVID-19, including through CBI, technical and material support. In addition, UNHCR and all partners involved in the MIRPS have supported the launch of the Spanish Presidency of the **MIRPS Support Platform** through a high-level virtual meeting on 29 June 2020. The meeting can be [watched here](#).

Regional funding overview as of 22 June 2020

127.2M

financial requirements for Central America for 2020 including requirements for the operations and activities in **Panama, Belize, El Salvador, Cuba, Nicaragua, Honduras, Costa Rica, and Guatemala.**

For further details consult reporting.unhcr.org



44% funded

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

Thematic updates

In commemoration of **World Refugee Day**, UNHCR and partners in the region carried out different virtual activities with the participation of refugees, asylum seekers IDPs, and government entities.

- In Belize, TV and radio shows were hosted, as well as a cooking show with a refugee.
- In El Salvador the team produced a [video](#) for social media, El [Diario de Hoy](#) and La [Prensa Gráfica](#), the two of the newspapers with largest national circulation, published stories, a [radio interview](#) with Radio YSUCA was held.
- In Guatemala, UNHCR coordinated a concert with Sara

Curruchich, an indigenous Maya Kaqchikel singer. A recording of the show is available on [UNHCR's Facebook](#) and has been played 9,400 times. Other materials include a [staff video](#) highlighting our stay and deliver response, a video highlighting the [interagency response](#) provided by the United Nations' agencies in Guatemala, and a [call for solidarity](#) by UNHCR Guatemala's Representative.

- In Panama, UNHCR and partner Enlaces featured [‘Sueños’ a contemporary dance performance](#) on forced displacement as the main event, sending messages on the plight of refugees.
- In Honduras, UNHCR coordinated a [hip hop, rap-orchestra presentation](#), currently registering over 3,700 views on Facebook and 308 likes.

Update on country activities

BELIZE

A community network from communities Bella Vista and San Isidro have been supported to assist asylum seekers in their applications for asylum at the Refugees Department.

GUATEMALA

21 CBI cards have been distributed (82 since CBI assistance began in early May)
96 RHUs, 200 foldable beds, 200 mattresses and 100 packs of diapers were donated to CONRED (Civil Protection)

CUBA

CBI has been provided to 153 refugees and asylum seekers.

NICARAGUA

Partner CEPAD has continued to provide assistance to refugees and asylum seekers via phone and email

EL SALVADOR

The Regional Safe Spaces Network has been reinforced to ensure protection measures for children and SGBV survivors through harmonized case management procedures. Access to information for communities with limited connectivity has been provided through SMS and loudspeakers

HONDURAS

100 water bottles, 100 personal protection equipment, toilet paper and rubber gloves were distributed to the Temporary Isolation Centre. 300 families received food kits in Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula. Hygiene kits and biosecurity equipment were provided to the National Migration Institute (INM) to support 255 people in transit stranded in Tegucigalpa and Choluteca

PANAMA

362 refugees and asylum seekers have been assisted
35 refugees and asylum seekers received psychosocial assistance

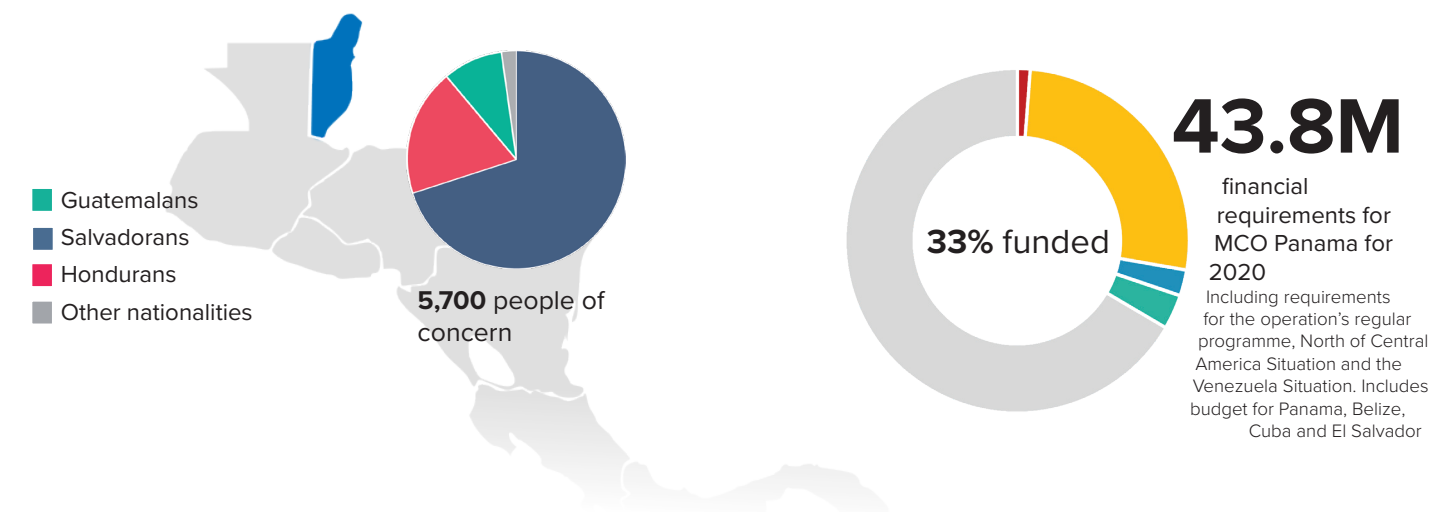
COSTA RICA

156 refugees and asylum seekers received prepaid cards for cash assistance purposes from 15-22 June



Check out testimonios.acnur.org to find out more about how displaced communities in the Americas are coping with the pandemic.

UNHCR Response in Belize



Context

Belize became a party to the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol in 1990. In 1991, both instruments adopted force of law in the country. Belize was confronted by the context of regional forced displacement from the early 1980s until the latter half of the 1990s, when over 35,000 persons fled civil conflict in neighbouring states and found refuge in this English-speaking former British colony in Central America. The influx of Central American refugees, which reached up to some 15% of the then resident population, changed the demographics of the country. During the early part of the 2010s a renewed influx began, due to the wide-spread violence by organized criminal groups. After re-establishing institutions governing the national asylum system, Belize joined the Regional Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Framework (MIRPS) in 2017 and developed its whole-of-society national action plan for protection and solutions (NAPPS).

As an upper-middle-income country with medium human development indicators, Belize is a small state with capacity limitations within its governance structure, external economic shocks and climate change-related pressures, increasingly facing challenges in human security, economic performance, unemployment and high levels of poverty and inequality. Although the health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been relatively low, the socioeconomic impact is considerable, particularly for refugees and asylum seekers.

Belize is host to persons with international protection needs, which now account for 1.4% of the country's population. While only 28 refugees have been formally recognized, over 2,200 registered asylum-seekers and an additional 3,400 other persons of concern remain with pending procedures. Since 2014, an average of 350-450 persons apply for asylum on an annual basis. The national Refugee Act does not provide a basis for formal employment of asylum seekers, and the prolonged timeframe of the refugee status determination process, hinders the local integration of asylum seekers, thus increasing vulnerability. This situation has been compounded by the COVID-19 related lockdown and has demanded a stronger response from UNHCR to meet protection needs.

UNHCR response and needs

As part of the MIRPS, UNHCR supports the Government of Belize in strengthening the capacities of all relevant Government authorities for the improvement of data collection and analysis system, and in delivering Standard Operating Procedures for the admission to territory and asylum procedures. With the support of civil society and other key actors, Belize has developed livelihood options for asylum seekers to facilitate access to the primary sectors of the economy.

More specifically, UNHCR works with the government to improve the efficiency of national refugee status determination procedures, and the technical capacities of the Refugees Department and its inter-sectoral Refugee Eligibility Committee. The processing of asylum claims was put on hold during the COVID-19 restrictions but has now been restarted. The agency continues to offer technical assistance to the Ministry of Immigration and law enforcement officials, in the consolidation and implementation of standard operating procedures for the identification and referral of arriving asylum-seekers. With partners, UNHCR has strengthened case management and accompaniment of persons of concern who are in need of legal advice and support; including psychosocial support to increase mental wellbeing.

In addition to providing asylum capacity support and strengthening services and adequate reception conditions, UNHCR, through one of its national partners, implements a time-bound humanitarian assistance intervention programme to address the needs of new-arriving asylum seekers in Belize, providing vouchers for basic food and non-food items as well as support with housing, primary education and healthcare costs. Since March 2020, the assistance scheme targets 300 households in need of international protection affected by COVID-19.

UNHCR is currently seeking additional funding to scale up the humanitarian assistance, both in terms of volume and coverage.

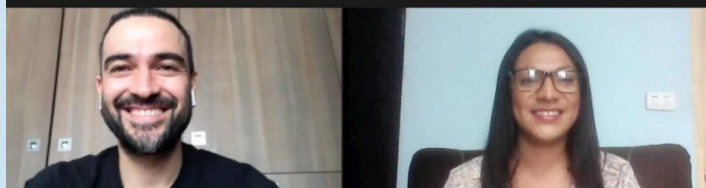
STORIES FROM THE FIELD

FOR PRIDE MONTH



San Salvador
El Salvador

For Salvadoran LGBTI people, “At the moment, it’s riskier than ever”



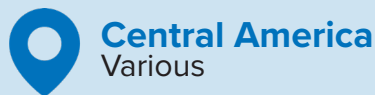
In Central America, the violent gangs that control many marginalized communities often single out lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people – extorting, threatening and sometimes even killing them. LGBTI people in the region often have no choice but to flee their homes in search of safety, many within their own country.

Grecia Villalobos is a Salvadoran trans woman who works for COMCAVIS TRANS, a UNHCR partner that helps protect the rights of LGBTI people. She met Mexican actor and UNHCR High Profile Supporter Alfonso Herrera last spring when he toured UNHCR’s operations in the small Central American country. He asked Grecia to chat with him by video last month about her work, the risks LGBTI people face in El Salvador and the effects COVID-19.



[Read the full story](#)

FOR WORLD REFUGEE DAY



Central America
Various

One percent of humanity has been displaced

An opEd by Regional Representative for Central America and Cuba

The figures that seek to gauge the situation of refugees and other people displaced by conflict, widespread violence, human rights violations or events that seriously disturb public order are alarming. In fact, UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, has never recorded such a high number.

Central America is not exempt of this reality.

Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua are among the ten countries of origin with the most people who applied for asylum worldwide in 2019. As in the rest of the world, many of the people who leave these countries seek protection in neighboring countries with the hope of someday being able to return home.



[Read the full article](#)



In the next issue, a focus on the operation in Honduras.

We thank the contributions of our donors

updated to 22 June 2020

UNHCR is grateful for the critical support provided by donors who have provided generous and timely support to the Coronavirus Emergency Situation globally, and countries in Central America, as well as those who have contributed to UNHCR programmes with unearmarked funding.



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UN COVID-19 MPTF

For more information, contact Gavin David White, Senior CRR Officer, at whitegd@unhcr.org