

# Panama Multi-Country Office

## Monthly Operational Update

### Regional Context

In February 2023, some countries under **UNHCR Multi-Country Office (MCO) in Panama**, such as Panama and Nicaragua faced further challenges involving refugees, asylum-seekers, and people in mixed movements.

In **Panama**, a bus that departed from Darien crashed near the Temporary Migratory Reception Centre (ETRM) Los Planes de Gualaca in Chiriquí. Authorities confirmed that 42 people died, making this the most tragic accident in Panama's history. In the following ten days, another bus leaving Darien caught fire in Veraguas, with no injuries reported. The Government temporarily halted bus transfers and ordered the inspection of all vehicles. As a result, both ETRMs surpassed their capacity, registering security incidents, poor sanitary conditions, and food shortages until transfers were reinstated. These events followed a [report](#) prepared by the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants denouncing precarious conditions in the ETRMs in Panama.

In **Nicaragua**, after the release and exile to the United States of 222 political prisoners declared by judicial authorities as traitors to the homeland, Nicaragua's National Assembly approved an emergency reform to the Constitution allowing for citizenship to be stripped arbitrarily, running contrary to Nicaragua's obligations under international and regional human rights law. On 16 February, the Nicaraguan government stripped another 94 perceived dissidents of their nationality and ordered the seizing of all their properties.

In **Suriname**, thousands of people gathered to protest the high fuel and living costs, corruption, weak currency, and the Government's decision to eliminate national subsidies as a move to comply with the International Monetary Fund's requirements. Incidents escalated at the National Assembly, resulting in some 20 people injured, over 140 individuals detained, and damage to private property.

In **Aruba and Curacao**, authorities announced reopening the sea borders with Venezuela, ending a four-year border closure between the countries. The Venezuelan Foreign Affairs Minister confirmed the announcement



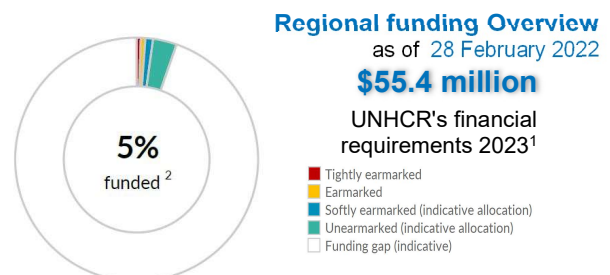
after several meetings were held to discuss the plans for a gradual reopening.

In **Trinidad and Tobago**, the Government met with Venezuelan officials to start negotiating the development of the Dragon natural gas field and the subsequent production and sale of gas products.

**Cuba and Guyana** announced their contribution to support the rescue and relief efforts in Türkiye and Syria after a 7.8 earthquake on 6 February, killing tens of thousands in both countries. On 12 February, 32 Cuban health professionals arrived at the Necip Fazil Sehir Hospital in Türkiye, and on 15 February, **Guyana's** President announced a contribution of US\$100,000.

In **Belize**, the Government extended the Amnesty exercise registration period until 31 March 2023, providing additional time to those eligible for the program who could not apply. According to official Government figures, over 11,800 people applied to the Amnesty since the end of February.

**MCO Panama requires USD 55.4M to continue assisting and securing solutions** in the subregion.



<sup>1</sup> Financial requirement for the Panama MCO in 2023 including requirements for the operations and activities in **Aruba, Belize, Cuba, Curacao, Guyana, Nicaragua, Panama, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago**.

<sup>2</sup> The percentage funded is indicative.



## UNHCR's Response Updates on Country Activities

*As of 28 February 2023, UNHCR in Guyana has supported 87 Children, adolescents, parents, and caregivers with individual protection services.*



### Coordination and Strengthening of Local and National Governments

- In **Panama**, UNHCR conducted a workshop with the National Office for the Attention of Refugees (ONPAR), the Ombudsman's Office, partners, asylum-seekers, and refugees, to validate and calibrate the current scorecard values, a digital tool used to assess vulnerabilities. A total of 33 people took part in the workshop.



### Sexual and Reproductive Health

- In **Guyana**, UNHCR and partners Guyana Sex Work Coalition and HIAS conducted a mission to Mahdia in Region 8 and reached 44 Venezuelan women with information sessions on GBV, HIV, STIs, and psychological first aid. The Agency also distributed hygiene kits.
- In **Trinidad and Tobago**, UNHCR, with Family Planning Association (FPATT), distributed 10,000 condoms during an event organized by the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force.



### Education

- In **Belize**, UNHCR led an information session for 11 students at the University of Belize on the Agency's mandate and the Amnesty exercise, to organize a network of student volunteers and additional workshops for academia.
- In **Aruba**, UNHCR met with the University of Aruba, which requested the Agency's presence as a guest participant in a refugee and migration master course. UNHCR will also be developing a summer course on human rights.



### Protection

- In **Trinidad and Tobago**, UNHCR with FPATT and Rape Crisis Society (RCS) reached over 350 people with information sessions on GBV prevention and response.
- In **Belize**, UNHCR, partner Human Rights Commission of Belize (HRCB), and IOM participated in three Amnesty Mobile Clinics held at Trio Village in the Toledo District and supported over 400 individuals.
- In **Suriname**, UNHCR registered and provided documentation to 43 people enabling them to access essential services.
- In **Panama**, UNHCR reached out to over 100 refugees and migrants through its monthly protection monitoring exercise in Darien.



### Humanitarian Assistance

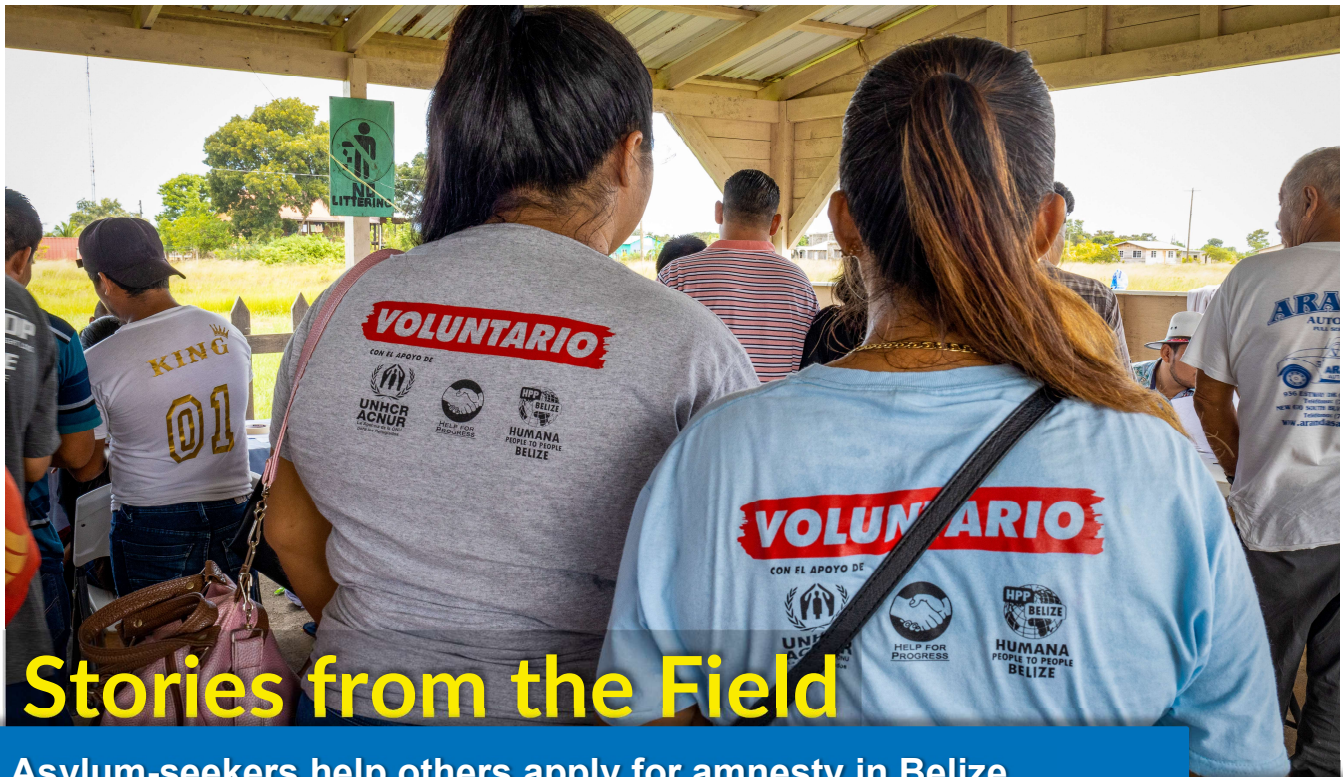
- In **Curacao**, UNHCR, through *Foundation Salù pa Tur*, provided primary health services to 473 people, including mental, sexual, and reproductive health services, totalizing 912 consultations.
- In **Cuba**, UNHCR provided cash-based assistance to 78 people in 43 households for rent and basic needs.



### Livelihoods and Local Integration

- In **Belize**, UNHCR partner HUMANA conducted a livelihood session for 15 women, training them in jewelry production.
- In **Panama**, UNHCR, through partner *Fundación Espacio Creativo* (FEC), provided 115 children and adolescents with dance, art, and technical skills for innovation classes through the program *Veranito Enlaces* held during summer. The Agency also met with representatives of the local private school "Colegio de Panama" to introduce them to the Youth Mentoring and Leadership Program, expected to start in July 2023.





# Stories from the Field

## Asylum-seekers help others apply for amnesty in Belize

“When I first heard about the Amnesty exercise, I ran to HUMANA’s resource centre to see if it was true and how I could help others apply for this opportunity,” recalls Luz\*.

At the end of 2021, the Government of Belize announced an Amnesty Program that included asylum-seekers, allowing them a path to permanent residency.

Luz and her 18-year-old daughter came to Belize two years ago in search of a new opportunity and a home after suffering the tragic loss of Luz’s son, who was murdered as a result of gang violence in Honduras. After finding some stability in Belize, Luz and her daughter Ada\* joined *Manos Unidas*, a volunteer group led by UNHCR partner HUMANA People to People that helps asylum-seekers in the community.

“I’ve helped many people understand their right to asylum and taken them to the Refugees Department to register,” explains Luz. “Now, I’m sharing information on how they can apply for amnesty.” Luz and Ada have volunteered at every amnesty support event held by UNHCR and HUMANA. “It feels good to be able to help others, especially because I remember coming to Belize and not understanding English” recalls Ada, Luz’s daughter. “Now, I’ve filled out applications for hundreds of asylum seekers in English.”

Ada could also fill out her family’s application forms and submit them late last year. UNHCR and its partners support over 4,000 asylum-seekers who qualify for the Government of Belize’s amnesty, which closes on March 31st, 2023.

“I am so grateful for the help I have received from UNHCR and HUMANA. Even if I am granted permanent residence, I will always be here to serve others,” says Luz.

\*These names have been changed.

UNHCR’s Multi-Country Office in Panama thanks the contributions from our direct and unearmarked donors as well as those from private donors in 2023:

