

Panama Multi-Country Office

Monthly Operational Update

Regional Context

In May, countries under the **UNHCR Multi-Country Office in Panama** have experienced social unrest and complex political situations, which have exacerbated the vulnerabilities of refugees, asylum-seekers, and others in need of international protection.

In **Aruba** and **Curaçao**, the gradual reopening of the borders continues. Closed since February 2019, the sea borders reopened with the first cargo ships from Venezuela, while flights between Curacao and Venezuela also resumed. In **Curaçao**, a political party proposed an amendment to the Constitution that would prohibit same-sex couples from marrying, raising concerns of several LGBTQI+ organizations.

In **Trinidad and Tobago**, the Minister of National Security stated that some 70,000 Venezuelans now reside in the country, surpassing the 16,000 people whom authorities registered to live and work in 2019. He mentioned that there has been an alleged rise in antisocial behaviour from this group. Human rights organizations have criticised the Minister's statement calling it discriminatory.

In **Belize**, following criticism from some political groups about the government's new immigration measures, the Minister of Human Development, Families, and Indigenous People's Affairs stated that a significant number of Haitians arriving in the country are believed to be victims of human trafficking, and the imposition of a visa requirement is an attempt to combat this crime.

The **Cuban Observatory of Conflicts** reported 392 protests in May, a 107 per cent increase from the number of manifestations registered during the same month last year. According to the Observatory, the protests challenged the state on issues such as repression, hunger, the healthcare system, and the diminishing credibility of the country's leaders.

In **Nicaragua**, the non-profit organization Blue and White Monitoring (**Monitoreo Azul y Blanco**) identified over 150 acts of repression against opponents of Ortega-Murillo's regime during May. These include detentions, threats, raids, travel restrictions, judiciary



processes, and police patrols throughout the country's Departments and the Caribbean Coast.

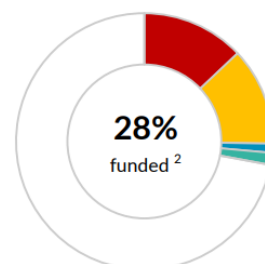
In **Suriname**, approximately 500 indigenous people protested for the recognition of their collective land rights. The protest follows an event in the Para District, where 15 men set fire to a Forest Management and Production Control (SBB) checkpoint to denounce land concessions within their territory.

In **Guyana**, a fire broke out at the female dormitory in **Mahdia Secondary School** in Region 8, a mining community near Brazil's border. The fire killed 19 children and adolescents, most of them indigenous girls aged 12 to 18 from remote villages. The incident is the deadliest fire in Guyana's history, surpassing the 2016 fire at Georgetown prison where 17 inmates died.

In **Panama**, the Director of the National Border Service (SENAFRONT), stated that in 2022-2023, 192 people were detained for crimes against refugees and migrants and 19 people have been sentenced. SENAFRONT has conducted over 20 tactical operations, rescuing more than 850 people who were victims of human trafficking.

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

Regional funding Overview as of 1 June 2023



\$55.4 million

UNHCR's financial requirements 2023¹

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

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

² The percentage funded is indicative.



© UNHCR/ Andre Restrepo

UNHCR's Response

Updates on Country Activities

In Aruba, UNHCR is conducting a data collection exercise to assess the needs of refugees, asylum-seekers, and others in need of international protection. As of May, the Agency has assessed the needs of over 700 people, with the aim to improve the provision of humanitarian services.



Coordination and Strengthening of Local and National Governments

- In **Panama**, UNHCR met with 25 officials from eight different ministries to discuss the actions that will be included in the national strategy of the Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework (MIRPS).
- In **Trinidad and Tobago**, UNHCR facilitated two workshops on international protection for 62 members of the Trinidad & Tobago Police Service.
- In **Belize**, UNHCR and OHCHR trained 15 officials of the Belize Police Department on refugee law and human rights-based approaches in law enforcement. During the workshop, participants discussed the challenges of the asylum process and arbitrary detention or arrests.



Health

- In **Curaçao**, UNHCR, through *Foundation Salù pa Tur*, provided primary health services to 544 people, including mental, sexual, and reproductive health services, for a total of 1,182 consultations.
- In **Guyana**, UNHCR and Guyana Sex Work Coalition (GSWC) supported 191 women with information sessions on GBV, HIV, and STIs prevention.



Protection

- In **Panama**, since the launch of its social media campaign "*Confía en el Tucán*" (*Trust the Toucan*), UNHCR released 54 digital publications, reaching 35,885 visualizations on TikTok and Facebook, with 7,121 engagements.
- In **Belize**, UNHCR led an information session for 105 students at La Inmaculada primary school in Orange Walk, Northern Belize, and provided information on the Agency's mandate and activities in the country.
- In **Suriname**, UNHCR inaugurated its new office and registered 40 people, enabling them to access essential services and documentation.
- In **Trinidad and Tobago**, UNHCR registered 1,259 people, recognized 26 people as refugees, and provided UNHCR's cards to a total of 418 individuals.



Humanitarian Assistance

- In **Cuba**, UNHCR provided cash-based assistance to 71 people to cover rent and basic needs.
- In **Guyana**, UNHCR distributed 41 mosquito nets, 17 solar lamps, 13 jerry cans, 25 food baskets, 2 baby kits, and 23 hygiene kits to forcibly displaced people in Regions 1, 2, and 4.



Livelihoods and Local Integration

- In **Belize**, UNHCR, through partner HUMANA, held a graduation ceremony for 16 asylum-seekers and refugees who completed 21 sessions of the jewellery course that started in February 2023.
- In **Panama**, UNHCR launched the second edition of the Youth Mentoring and Leadership Programme. A total of 17 students from the Brader School and 10 refugees and asylum-seekers will be participating.
- In **Trinidad and Tobago**, UNHCR participated in the Archdiocese Ministry for Migrants and Refugees (AMMR)'s Community Aid and Relief Day, and conducted focus group discussions, interviews, counselling sessions, and screenings of the *Challengers* Film.



Stories from the Field

© UNHCR/ Viola Eleonora Bruttomesso

Hope comes in all flavors: Jorge's ice brings colors to Bella Vista

Jorge arrives in his cart, pushing hard on the pedals of his bicycle. He comes from the Bella Vista school where he was selling children (and adults) his famous flavoured ice. A real boon to cool down during the hottest days in Belize.

When he with his family arrived from El Salvador, fleeing violence and insecurity, Jorge worked in all sorts of jobs, including construction and farming, despite not having much experience. "Once I made a mistake and damaged the crops, but the landlord noticed that I was good at selling, so he asked me to sell his products instead". Jorge started selling vegetables door-to-door. "I sold tomatoes, cabbages, and sweet peppers in Cayo District and Valle de la Paz". The business was good, so in 2021 Jorge decided to try selling in Bella Vista and Santa Cruz and spent almost a year travelling back and forth. Later, he and his family moved to Bella Vista, but sales were low due to the high competency of other vendors.

As an alternative, he decided to sell shaved ice and found that he had a talent for it. "I learned how to make my own syrups by watching videos on the Internet: strawberry, pineapple, grape, and lemon, among others. I prepare them on Sunday which is the only day off I have". On Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, you'll find Jorge in front of the schools in Bella Vista with his cool ice ready to be tasted. The rest of the days he keeps selling vegetables. "The first days of the week I sell ice, while through the end of it I sell veggies as families buys them to prepare their weekend meals" he says.

Despite the challenges he lived through, Jorge is grateful for this new beginning. "We have left most of my relatives behind, but I really like the opportunities this country has given me. Belize is a safe place that allows me to work. I'm so thankful my children have been able to integrate and go to school". He and his family applied for the Government's Amnesty Programme, and if he is granted the residency, he will be able to work in a company or formalize his business. "I dream of the day when we will be able to see our family and friends again, and Belize is a place where I hope we can make that dream come true".

**All names have been changed to protect the asylum-seeker confidentiality.*

UNHCR's Multi-Country Office in Panama thanks the contributions from our direct and unearmarked donors in 2023, including private donors in Australia



For more information | Philippa Candler, Representative at candler@unhcr.org | Viola Eleonora Bruttomesso, Associate Communications Officer at bruttome@unhcr.org
 For media interviews | panpamedia@unhcr.org | Follow us on Twitter | [acnurpanama](https://twitter.com/acnurpanama) | Follow us on Facebook | UNHCR Caribbean