UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

FORCED DISPLACEMENT IN AND FROM EL SALVADOR, GUATEMALA AND HONDURAS

November 2023

Elisabet, 31, a Honduran refugee in Guatemala, embraces her children as they stand by the lake near their home. ©UNHCR/NicoloFilippoRosso

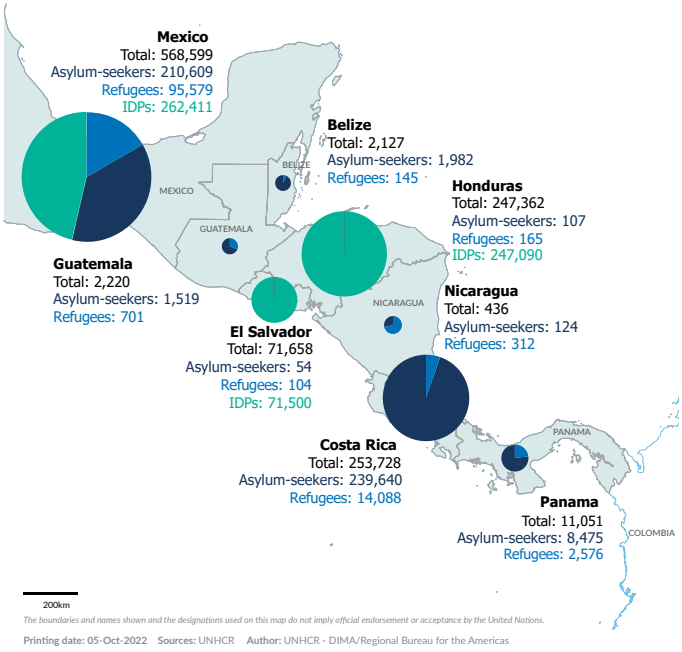
There are over **687,800** refugees and asylum-seekers from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras worldwide and **318,600** internally displaced people in El Salvador and Honduras.

Violence and crime, together with food insecurity and lack of opportunities, are the main drivers of forced displacement in and from these countries. **Climate change** is increasingly a factor driving **displacement.**

UNHCR works to boost the capacity of national asylum systems and to promote **integration of refugees** in host communities, while addressing the **needs of internally displaced people**. Opportunities for solutions to displacement are emerging in some countries.

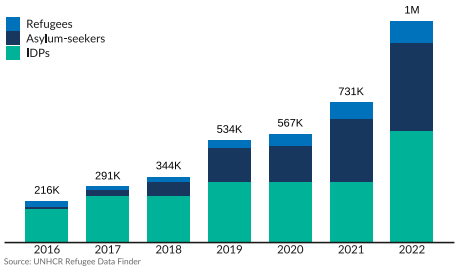
REFUGEES, ASYLUM-SEEKERS AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE

1,157,181 Refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced people in Central America and Mexico



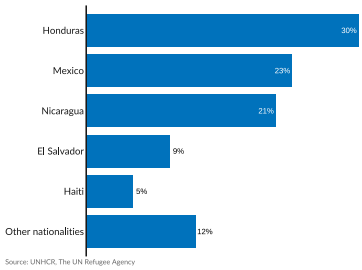
113,670 (10%) Refugees
462,510 (40%) Asylum-seekers
581,001 (50%) IDPs

Annual trends: Refugees, asylum-seekers and IDPs in Central America and Mexico



Source: UNHCR Refugee Data Finder

Main countries of origin for Refugees, Asylum-seekers and IDPs in Central America and Mexico

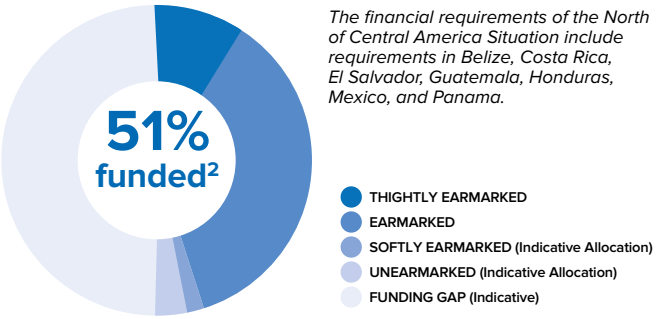


Source: UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency

FINANCIAL REQUIREMENTS
(AS OF 4 OCTOBER 2023)

US$ 247.7 M requested for **North of Central America Situation**

The financial requirements of the North of Central America Situation include requirements in Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Panama.



OPERATIONAL CONTEXT

A complex inter-relation between generalised violence, gang control (territorial control by gangs) and domestic abuse (gender-based violence, including forced unions), food insecurity, increasing poverty, and the effects of climate change drive forced displacement from **El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.**

People from countries in the north of Central America flee from violence and for a variety of other reasons. The United States of America remains the largest recipient of asylum applications worldwide with over 540,600 new claims lodged in the first half of 2023. In the United States, almost one in ten new applications were lodged by nationals of Honduras (3.9%), Guatemala (3.6%), and El Salvador (2.2%).

In the first nine months of 2023, there were nearly 113,000 new asylum claims in Mexico, over a third of them filed by nationals of Honduras (31,000), El Salvador (5,000) and Guatemala (4,600).

UNHCR works to support development of national asylum systems in the region, with a focus on improving digitalization processes, addressing backlogs, and strengthening staff capacity in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

Honduras is seeing ever increasing flows of people in mixed movements entering the country irregularly. As of 18 October 2023, the Honduran National Migration Institute (INM) registered 400,115 refugees and irregular migrants in transit, which represents more than double of the people that transited Honduras in 2022. Only in September 2023, the INM registered a historic record for a single month with 90,639 refugees and migrants in transit, an increase of 38 per cent in comparison to the previous month. In addition to supporting infrastructure at humanitarian spots, UNHCR delivers information through its Mobile Information System and trains different actors to strengthen institutions and capacity to respond.

In Guatemala, there is an emerging trend of persons engaged in mixed movements remaining for longer periods in the country, awaiting remittances, or engaging in informal labour practices to finance their onward journey north. The city of Esquipulas on the southern border as well as in the capital are the focus of UNHCR's operational response. The main services that UNHCR and its partners provide are information and guidance; protective services; shelter; primary and psychological health care; legal assistance; access to food, water, toilets, and internet connectivity.

In a context of increasingly complex and challenging human mobility in the region, **UNHCR and its partners are confronting major challenges** in their capacity to respond due to insufficient funding for their operations. According to the "**Critical Needs in the Americas**," only a third of UNHCR's financial needs in 2023 had been covered by the end of July – with donations received from individuals, the private sector and the international community. The report highlights the most critically underfunded operations, with persistent needs in El Salvador and Honduras, among others.

More than 247,000 people were internally displaced in Honduras because of violence between 2004 and 2018. The Law for the Prevention, Protection, and Assistance of Internally Displaced Persons was sanctioned on 20 March 2023 by the President of Honduras, Xiomara Castro, and came into force on 19 April. This legal framework is the result of a long advocacy process and constitutes a national milestone in the protection of the fundamental rights of thousands of Hondurans impacted by generalized violence. UNHCR published a joint press release with OHCHR, ICRC and NRC praising this historic decision by the President of Honduras

WORKING WITH PARTNERS

● UNHCR, together with the Organization of American States, serves as Technical Secretariat for the **Regional Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Framework (MIRPS)**, a regional application of the Global Compact on Refugees, comprised by Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Panama and its **Support Platform**. The Government of Panama holds the MIRPS Pro-tempore Presidency for 2023 and leads a Regional Plan that strengthens dialogue and cooperation to facilitate progress of the MIRPS National Action Plans. The United States of America is the Chair-in-Office of the MIRPS Support Platform and its Strategy focuses on highlighting the contributions of refugees and other displaced people bring to their communities, by facilitating the exchange of good practices for successful integration and other local solutions, with a particular emphasis on protection for the most vulnerable, including women and children. The MIRPS Annual Meeting and High-level segment for Expressions of Solidarity will take place in Panama City on 16 November 2023.

● UNHCR works with other UN agencies, NGOs, government institutions, and stakeholders within the framework of the **Humanitarian Response Plans (HRP)** in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. UNHCR's continuous advocacy and leading role in Protection, Camp Management and Camp Coordination, and Shelter Clusters and Sectors remains essential to assert a protection-centred response and coordinating efforts among relevant stakeholders, including national and local governments, international organizations, the civil society, root-based/community organizations, and displaced populations. Furthermore, UNHCR, through its leading role in the Protection Cluster, is increasing visibility to the needs of forced displaced people in the region with data and information to support evidence-based decision making.

● UNHCR works with **103 partners** in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, through 49 partnership agreements or through joint initiatives to promote self-reliance in the countries of asylum, and to enable the integration of refugees, internally displaced people, and other affected populations in host communities. Refugee-led organisations and networks provide life-saving assistance to forcibly displaced populations and host communities.

● Prioritisation of life-saving assistance goes hand in hand with efforts to find long-term solutions. To achieve that, UNHCR is fostering cooperation with a wide array of actors, such as **local authorities** and the **private sector**, that includes providing livelihood opportunities and promoting inclusion into national systems. In 2023, private donors from the United States of America, Canada, Mexico, and Denmark have contributed flexible funding to assist with addressing the most critical needs and priorities in the North of Central America Situation. In Honduras, as part of the efforts to provide durable solutions to people forced to flee, UNHCR works with the local government to recover housing, land and property that were dispossessed or abandoned due to violence and gang control and strengthens the capacity of the National Property Institute to support state-led solutions.

● **Development actors** also play a key role. UNHCR continues to strengthen strategic partnerships across the region with the World Bank, Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), Central American Development Bank (CABEI) and others to deepen cooperation in support of the inclusion of refugees, IDPs and stateless people in development programmes and to strengthen efforts to address the root causes of forced displacement. In practice this has meant supporting development partners in their own rigorous analysis to inform their operations on the impact of violence on at-risk communities as well as the occurrence of and service provision for gender-based violence across migratory routes in Central America.

● The adoption in June 2022 of the **Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection** highlighted the need for a better-coordinated and collaborative approach to address human mobility in the Americas. In June 2023, the United States of America, jointly with the governments of **Guatemala**, Colombia, and Costa Rica, announced the initial phase of the **Safe Mobility Offices**. This initiative, with the support of UNHCR and IOM, facilitates access for people on the move to protection and other regular pathways to the United States of America and other countries.

● UNHCR catalyses efforts to ensure forced displacement remains high on the agenda of the Central American Integration System, the Regional Conference on Migration, and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, among other regional processes.

In El Salvador, My First Job programme, a UNHCR and the Ministry of Labour joint initiative, promotes access to employment for youth forcibly displaced and at-risk of displacement. In 2022, 208 youth with no prior job experience signed a five-month apprenticeship contract with over 130 companies, and they were enrolled in the Salvadoran Social Security Institute (ISSS). Thirty-nine apprentices previously enrolled in the 'My First Job' programme were permanently hired by the companies. As part of the ongoing programme, 225 young people received employment support by the Ministry of Labour so far 2023, and 53 signed a work experience contract. By October 2023, 616 benefited from this programme since its inception.

In Honduras, UNHCR is working with authorities and the private sector to strengthen their capacities for socio-economic inclusion of forcibly displaced people or at risk of displacement. In this sense, UNHCR delivered training equipment to four technical-vocational and community training centres located either in host communities for people internally displaced or in areas at high risk of forced displacement to prevent it. In total, eight centres are benefitting from this type of support in 2023. In addition, UNHCR also supported these prioritised centres with revision of curricula for relevant courses and with an internship programme, which links graduates at risk of displacement with private sector to promote their labour inclusion. The internship program started in August, aiming to support 80 graduates in total.

PRIORITIES IN 2023

PROTECT

- **Safe and dignified reception conditions:** UNHCR works with States in and other stakeholders to enhance protection-sensitive entry systems, access to asylum and other protection-oriented arrangements, stabilize populations in host communities along mixed movement routes, while also expanding regular pathways for admission and international protection in destination countries. UNHCR strengthens reception conditions by supporting governments capacities at the reception centres and working closely with government officials at border points and points of entry to ensure they facilitate access to international protection.
- **National legal framework and public policies recognize and guarantee the rights of the people with and for whom UNHCR works:** UNHCR supports advances in regulatory frameworks including the implementation of laws affecting internally displaced people and advocacy for the approval of by-laws. The Office also seeks to increase partnerships and greater engagement from the Ombudspersons, Public Defenders, Lawyers and Bar associations, national Human Rights Institutions, and civil society to prevent and address refoulement and for the review of asylum, internal displacement and migration legislation and policies. UNHCR also aims at harmonizing procedures and ensuring compliance with refugee status determination procedural standards, increasing efficiency, fairness, and integrity, responding to the realities on the ground. Moreover, UNHCR supports and advocates for the rights of stateless people, so they are informed about and receive free specialized legal assistance related to the statelessness procedure and access to rights.

RESPOND

- **Direct humanitarian assistance to meet basic needs:** UNHCR supports local authorities and provides protection and humanitarian assistance to people on the move, including information, counselling, legal assistance, medical first aid, psychosocial support, and delivery of core relief items.
- **Providing access to shelter and safe space networks:** UNHCR develops interventions with partners to ensure individuals in need of protection access shelters. Moreover, through inter-agency coordination, the network of shelters and safe spaces throughout the countries and in the region is reinforced, including to protect children, prevent gender-based violence and support LGBTQI individuals.
- **Access to healthcare**: UNHCR supports the capacity of public health facilities to cope with the demands of the increased number of people with and for whom UNHCR and the host community. The Office also supports people at heightened need to access medical assistance and vaccinations.
- **Strengthen resilience and protection to the effects of climate change**: Implementation of initiatives related to climate risk mitigation, adaptation, and mounting operational responses to displacement related to climate change. Based on evidenced gathered in the field, UNHCR provides guidance to institutions and partners on the impact of climate and disasters in force displacement.

EMPOWER

- **Empowering communities and achieving gender equality:** UNHCR engages directly with communities through consultative processes and outreach volunteer networks on gender-based violence prevention, risk mitigation and response. UNHCR promotes the development and dissemination of protocols to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse (SEA). UNHCR supports small scale community initiatives that promote community engagement, community empowerment, and peaceful coexistence.
- **Include people with and for whom UNHCR works in national child protection and education systems**: Local child protection authorities, partners, civil society, and community-based organizations have reinforced capacities to prevent and address the needs and risks of displaced children in a coordinated manner. Authorities have enhanced their knowledge about the rights of the people UNHCR serves to receive an education. Refugee children have access to quality education and certification of studies. People UNHCR assists receive cash assistance for connectivity, transportation, and school supplies.

SOLVE

- **Livelihoods and economic inclusion:** UNHCR Livelihoods and economic inclusion: UNHCR supports alternative livelihoods initiatives and access to employment, including training on soft skills and job certification, seed capital and entrepreneurship. UNHCR provides local integration support for refugees and asylum-seekers including job placement, access to vocational training, and financial and legal aid for attaining permanent residence and naturalization. Furthermore, returnees with protection needs who wish to remain in country are provided with reintegration support via access to a range of livelihood programmes and take advantage of the opportunities that digital technologies offer to facilitate access to labour markets.
- **Promoting durable solutions:** UNHCR identifies and refers individuals and households at high risk in need of resettlement. Governments and non-governmental organization partners provide services to facilitate integration, such as cultural orientation, language, and vocational training, as well as programmes to promote access to education and employment. With the UNCT and government partners, UNHCR is actively exploring solutions to internal displacement in El Salvador.

CLIMATE ACTION

InIn Central America's so-called 'Dry Corridor', a stretch of increasingly parched mountainous farmland running from Guatemala to northern Costa Rica, climate risks include recurrent droughts, excessive rains, and severe flooding, all of which affect agricultural production in areas where people rely on farming to make a living. Two consecutive hurricanes battered the region in November 2020, affecting over 8 million people. Since then, climate events have regularly caused displacement in the region.

In October 2022, tropical storms (Hurricane Julia) had a devastating impact in parts of Central America, affecting displaced people and causing transit centres to exceed capacity. UNHCR operations from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala responded to these events with the delivery of emergency, shelter, hygiene, and biosafety kits among others. According to the Latin American and Caribbean edition of the **Climate Survey conducted by the European Investment Bank (EIB)**, 54 per cent of respondents believe they may have to relocate to another region or country due to climate change. Seventy per cent say that climate change is affecting their income or livelihood (75 per cent in El Salvador) and 91 per cent of respondents believe climate change impacts their everyday lives. In El Salvador, 93 per cent of respondents are in favour of stricter government measures obliging people to adopt climate-friendly behaviour.

Similarly, the impacts of **climate change** are becoming ever more severe in Honduras. Droughts caused by the El Nino phenomenon are being increasingly felt since the beginning of July 2023 in the Dry Corridor. Most people in this area that depend on subsistence agriculture for survival are running out of basic items for survival, mainly food. In addition, at least 3,000 children are in a critical **malnutrition situation** according to official data.

UNHCR is strengthening its operations to meet the humanitarian and protection needs exacerbated by the climate emergency, ranging from preparedness and response to disaster-related displacement to the implementation of environmentally friendly programmes that protect people and the environment, to enhancing the resilience of both displaced and host communities to climate shocks. More information **here**.

INNOVATION

In **Guatemala**, UNHCR has developed the design and construction of an evidence-based community intervention prioritisation tool that allows for a more objective, systematic, and reproducible prioritisation approach. The app enables building a composite index that indicates the severity of the situation in each territory of a country using operational data and national statistics. The online tool is easy to use in different contexts, settings, and operations, enabling UNHCR better to understand the situation of communities on the ground.

In **El Salvador**, there are ongoing efforts by UNHCR to develop a data analysis tool to improve insights arising from community activities, as participatory assessments. To that end, UNHCR engaged youth in a process that will boost their data science skills with a focus on force displacement.

In **Honduras**, UNHCR advocated for the inclusion of IDP criteria in the national census to be applied in the following year. The process is advancing in partnership with National Statistics Institute and will support the collection of data on internal displacement, in addition to strengthen evidence-based decision making in this area.

UNHCR's humanitarian response in the Americas is made possible thanks to the generous support of major donors who have contributed with unrestricted funding to UNHCR's global operations, and to donors who have generously contributed to operations responding to the North of Central America situation.

Thanks to all our donors in 2023 (as of 4 October):
Belgium | Canada | Denmark | European Union | France | Germany | Ireland | Luxembourg | Netherlands | Norway | Spain | Sweden | Switzerland | United Kingdom | United States of America | CERF| UN Joint Programmes | UN Peacebuilding Fund |

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