

Panama Multi-Country Office

Monthly Operational Update

Regional Context

As of 31 December 2023, some **114 million people** worldwide were forced to flee conflict, violence, and human rights violations. Thousands embarked on dangerous journeys across borders across countries part of UNHCR Multi-Country Office (MCO) in Panama, many looking for protection northwards.

Three boats tried to enter **Aruba's** territorial waters. One **capsized**, leading to the death of four people. Colombian officials later discovered another carrying nine passengers from Venezuela with no survivors.

In **Curacao**, the **Coast Guard** detained 34 Venezuelans attempting to enter irregularly. A two-year-old boy was among the group. In past months, the Public Prosecutor's Office warned of an increase in the trafficking of children between Venezuela and Curaçao.

The Inter-American Dialogue (IAD) reported that approximately **115,000 Nicaraguan citizens** have left the country this year for the United States and Costa Rica as main destinations. These movements have more than doubled in the last five years since the beginning of the socio-political crisis.

In **Trinidad and Tobago**, the Government deported more than **160 Venezuelans**, including 52 asylum-seekers. The Ministry of National Security stated that individuals not registered under the MRF are not entitled to work or enjoy the protection of the country's laws.

Following the border dispute between Venezuela and **Guyana**, the **International Court of Justice (ICJ)** unanimously stated that, pending a final ruling, the countries should refrain from taking any action that could modify the current situation in the disputed territory. Despite this, Venezuela held a **consultative Referendum**, fueling tensions over Essequibo; Guyana and Venezuela's presidents met in **Argyle, St. Vincent and the Grenadines**, and issued a joint declaration agreeing to refrain from using force against each other or escalating threats.

In **Suriname**, the Government recalled the country's ambassadors to Guyana and Venezuela to discuss the

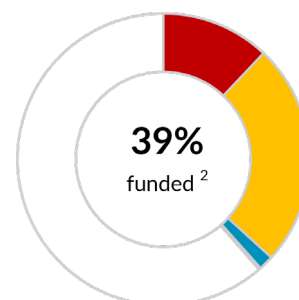


border dispute. The Minister of Foreign Affairs stated that Suriname favors solving conflicts through dialogue and praised the outcome of regional diplomacy efforts that facilitated Argyle's talks.

At the Global Refugee Forum, **Belize** pledged to lead the regional protection response for forcibly displaced people. The country committed to take over **the Pro-Tempore presidency of the MIRPS** in 2024.

In **Panama**, over **520,000 refugees and migrants** from more than 35 countries crossed the Darien jungle in 2023, surpassing the overall figures of the last 12 years combined and doubling 2022 record numbers. The Director of the National Migration Service (SNM) mentioned that in 2023, the Government repatriated more than 700 individuals and denied entry to nearly 10,000 people, particularly at Tocumen International Airport. So far, 10,000 people have applied to the Temporary Protection Permit granting a two-year temporary residency.

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



Regional funding Overview as of 15 December 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's Response Updates on Country Activities

In Suriname, UNHCR conducted a multi-functional field mission to Nickerie and Paramaribo to assess the protection needs of groups residing in these cities. The Agency carried out focus group discussions and registration exercises.



Coordination and Strengthening of Local and National Governments

- In **Panama**, UNHCR, HIAS and the Ministry of Women held the Strong Ties workshop in David. A total of 22 asylum-seekers and 6 people with protection needs hosted at the “Medalla Milagrosa” shelter participated.
- In **Trinidad and Tobago**, UNHCR met the Health and Wellness Division of the Tobago House of Assembly and presented a report on the protection needs of refugee GBV survivors. Participants attended a two-day workshop on Integration of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Gender-Based Violence Considerations in Emergency Shelters.



Health

- UNHCR, through *Foundation Salù pa Tur*, provided primary health services to 430 people in **Curacao**, including mental, sexual, and reproductive health services, for 735 consultations.
- In **Guyana**, UNHCR conducted a mission to Region 8 with the National Aids Programme Secretariat. Activities included on-site testing and distribution of hygiene kits to forcibly displaced groups.
- In **Aruba**, UNHCR and HIAS hosted several activities to raise awareness on sexual and reproductive health. They distributed over 1,000 flyers and 128 sexual and reproductive health kits.



Protection

- UNHCR in **Suriname** registered 47 people, enabling access essential services and documentation.
- In **Cuba**, UNHCR assisted the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) in interviewing 44 adult applicants of 37 cases as part of screening exercises for a resettlement initiative.
- In **Trinidad and Tobago**, UNHCR recognized 37 people as refugees and interviewed 16 people for resettlement. In 2023, the Agency assisted over 400 people departing from the country in 2023.
- UNHCR conducted a protection monitoring exercise in **Curacao** to assess the needs of refugees, asylum-seekers, and others needing international protection. The Agency completed 413 interviews, reaching 888 people.



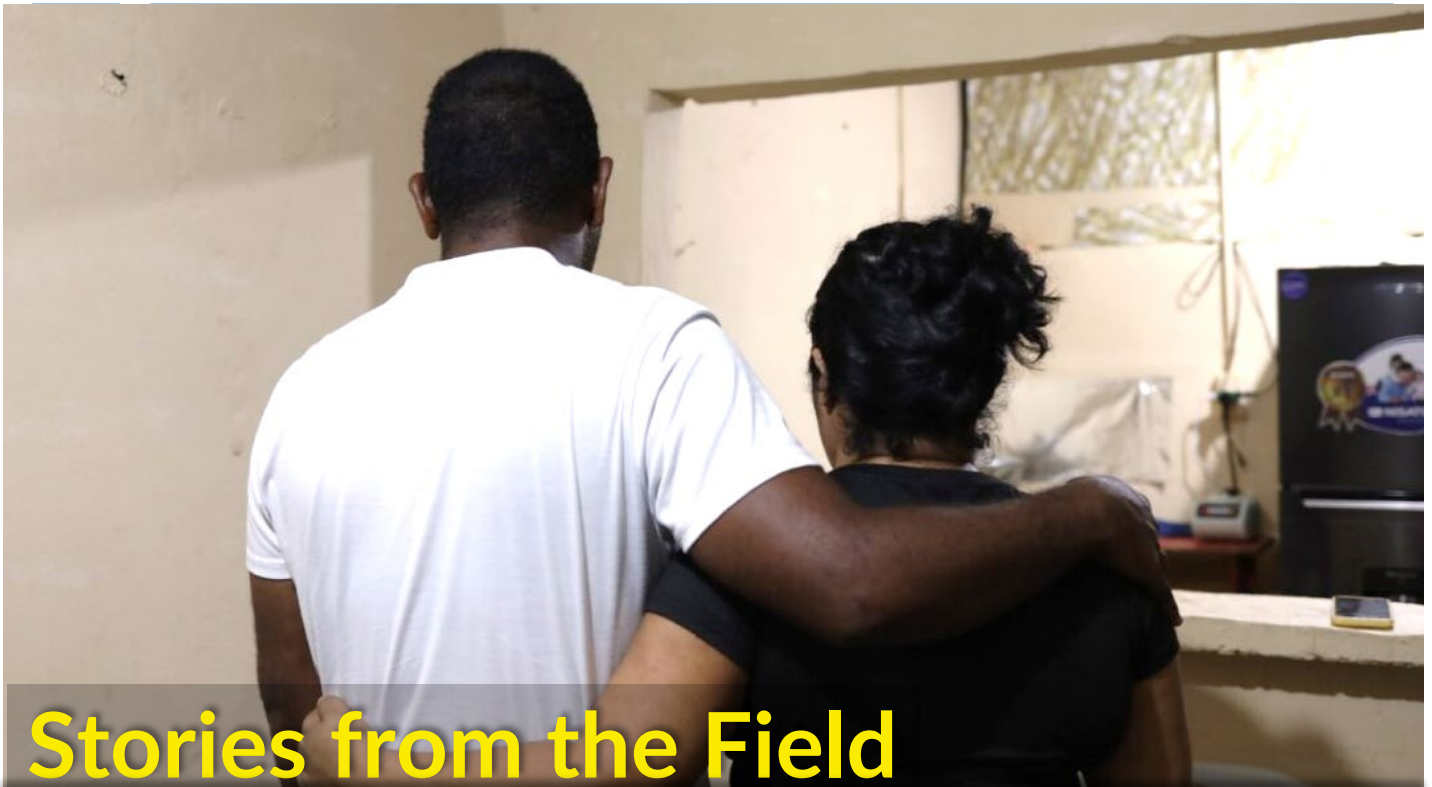
Humanitarian Assistance

- In **Cuba**, UNHCR gave cash-based assistance to 143 people to cover basic needs and supported 92 to cover rent.
- UNHCR donated household appliances for Hogar Medalla Milagrosa in **Panama**, including a stove, a washing machine, a microwave, and fans. In 2023, this organization provided shelter for 22 asylum-seekers.



Local Integration

- In **Guyana**, UNHCR donated sewing machines and materials to ten forcibly displaced individuals for their entrepreneurial businesses. The group called *Stitches of Hope Sewing* produces quality clothing while creating sustainable livelihoods for forcibly displaced communities.
- In **Belize**, UNHCR joined the Bella Vista High School to commemorate Human Rights Day. A total of 125 students participated in the events that included an art display depicting the 30 articles of the Human Rights Declaration.



Stories from the Field

Andrés and Lucía's Recipe for Resilience

Before crossing the Darien jungle, Andrés and Lucía* had never spent a night apart in the 10 years they had been together.

Life was quiet in their hometown, Táchira, at the border between Venezuela and Colombia, until suddenly, it turned dangerous. Armed groups threatened Andrés and Lucía's lives, asking for payoffs their family business could not cover. The situation became so dire that they were forced to flee.

Andrés would brave the jungle first, hoping that the bustling streets of Panama would turn into the haven they were looking for. Lucía soon followed and found herself trekking the jungle alone in search of safety.

Like many refugees and migrants before and after them, Andrés and Lucía experience the horrors of the jungle: incredibly muddy and steep hills, raging rivers and criminal groups.

The experience in the jungle was haunting. Nevertheless, Andrés and Lucía knew they wanted to seek asylum in Panama. UNHCR and its partners assisted the couple with their refugee application and provided much-needed psychosocial support, cash-based assistance, and entrepreneurship training.

In David, the second largest city in Panama, Andrés and Lucía are starting to thrive again. They sell delicious treats such as flan, *tequeños*, and frozen popsicles. Lucía oversees the kitchen, while Andrés manages the numbers. Despite the challenges, they continue to make a great team. They dream of leaving a mark in their new home: "I know that this [new business] is a process that has helped me grow and given me peace of mind. One of my goals is to provide a job opportunity to a Panamanian and help the local community here in David", Lucia shares.

**Names have been changed for protection reasons.*

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



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