FACTSHEET

COSTA RICA: Northern Region/ Upala Field Office

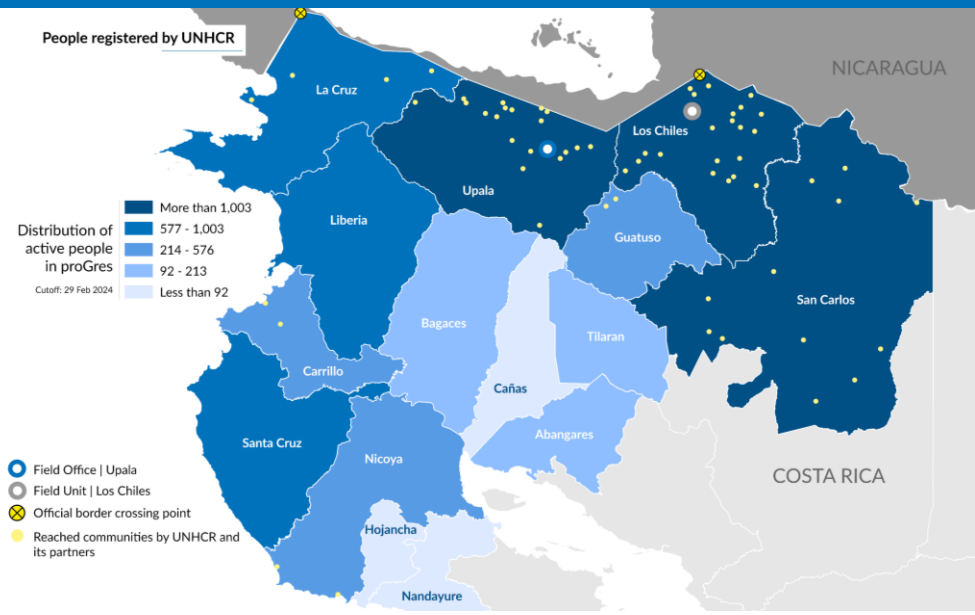
As of April 2024

UNHCR ACNUR
La Agencia de la ONU para los Refugiados

CONTEXT

Costa Rica's northern border with Nicaragua is **309 km long**. The population of the region, as is often the case in cross-border contexts, reflects the history of **integration and permanent coexistence between Nicaraguans and Costa Ricans.** This is also evident among the **institutional and community leaderships** that have shaped the social, economic and political vision of the Northern Region.

This history has resulted in the formation of **binational families of multiple generations**, including Nicaraguans and Costa Ricans by birth or those who have later acquired the nationality.



This also entails permanent circular movement along the Northern border. There are two main official border crossings: **Peñas Blancas** (west, canton La Cruz) and **Las Tablillas** (east, canton Los Chiles). In addition, there is an official crossing to Nicaragua through the Río Frío river in **Los Chiles** and a temporary post for the Ticofrut company during the orange harvest. At **least 24 irregular border crossings** used by refugees and migrants for different reasons have also been identified.

In April 2018, **the Northern Region was an entry point for more than 80,000 refugees** going to different parts of the country. Some of these people **remained in the Northern Region** from the beginning of their displacement, while others **made secondary movements to settle there**, especially those engaged in **rural labor.**

Given the **historical ties of the people on this border**, some refugees were able to turn to **support networks** to start their lives in Costa Rica. This continues to happen with a significant portion of the **recent and gradual arrivals that persist**. As of 2019, organizational processes of Nicaraguan refugees, such as the ***Movimiento Campesino***, have taken on a significant role in these support networks.

UNHCR works in **15 cantons in the northern Huetar and Chorotega regions**, including four cantons bordering Nicaragua: **La Cruz, Upala, Los Chiles** and **San Carlos**. These 15 cantons are home to approximately **803,500 people**[2], of which about **96,500 are foreign nationals (92%** of **Nicaraguan** nationality)[3], who have gradually entered the territory, especially since 2018, seeking international protection. Most of these people reside in **150** rural, dispersed and hard-to-reach **communities.** Some of them reside there permanently, while others reside there only seasonally in search of crop-related livelihoods. Other people reside in urban areas, mainly in Los Chiles and Upala.

Most asylum seekers face **challenges integrating** into the country. For example, many families are located within the wildlife corridor along the border, formally known as *Refugio de Vida Silvestre Corredor Fronterizo* and informally known as **"La Milla".** This is a special administrative area with limitations on land use and **access to goods and services,** which creates **insecurity on land tenancy**, which is not legally recognized, and poses a challenge for investment in the territory.

Not all people come from the North: the northern border region also serves **people in transit from South to North**. In 2023, according to the Migration Authority (DGME), **more than 457,000 people** transited through Costa Rica to North America; most of them left Costa Rica through **irregular crossings near the central district of Los Chiles**. The increase in the number of people in transit has put pressure on local authorities and has made evident the needs of the canton, which is home to **35,000 people** while being among the cantons with the highest level of poverty in the country according to the Ministry of National Planning and Economic Policy (MIDEPLAN).

Sources: 1 DGME – Statistics. 2 Population and Housing Estimates 2022, INEC. 3 National Household Survey (ENAHO), INEC 2022.

CONTACT: Vivian Nieme Limpias (niemelim@unhcr.org), Head of Field Office Upala
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UNHCR PRESENCE AND PRIORITIES

UNHCR has had a presence in Costa Rica since **1979** and has monitored the situation in the Northern Region through its partners. As of 2018, due to the **impacts of the socio-political crisis in Nicaragua, UNHCR established a permanent presence** in the territory to reinforce its actions. UNHCR **supports and assists authorities in the management of forced displacement** through activities including **border monitoring**, assistance regarding **safe access to the territory** for people in need of international protection, **prevention of *refoulement***, and assistance and **referral of cases** with specific protection needs to government institutions. It also **facilitates access to refugee status determination** procedures and offers **humanitarian assistance** to mixed movements.

In 2024, **UNHCR** extended its presence through a **Field Unit** in Los Chiles. In total, UNHCR has a permanent team of 19 **people** in the Northern Region.

UNHCR works with **local authorities and local representatives of the central government** such as the Professional Migration Police, the National Women's Institute (INAMU), the Joint Institute for Social Assistance (IMAS), Ministry of Health, Ombudsman's Office and the National Trustfund for Children (PANI); as well as with **humanitarian and protection partners** such as CENDEROS, Fundación Omar Dengo, HIAS, IOM, SJM, UNFPA, UNICEF and World Vision. In addition, UNHCR also works **hand in hand with refugee communities** living in or transiting through the Northern Region to learn first-hand about their needs and visions.

SPECIFIC NEEDS

Refugees

*Source: 19 **participatory assessments** conducted in 2023 with 340 **participants** (206 female and 134 male) in 43 **communities** in Los Chiles, San Carlos, Upala and La Cruz.*

The main challenge reported by refugees was **access to the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) process** due to **logistical and economic barriers**, in addition to barriers related to changes in the regulations. People who have started their process are **uncertain** about its progress due to the long time it takes to complete. In addition, some indigenous groups face language barriers, which even result in an increased risk of *refoulement*.

Those who have accessed documentation continue to face **barriers** to accessing health and social programs due to lack of knowledge about the access granted by refugee documentation, xenophobia and/or **insufficient capacity or saturation** of services. For example, there is limited access to prenatal care for pregnant women.

Reception conditions are hampered by economic (high cost of land) and climatic factors (risk of disasters). There are deficiencies in housing and water, sanitation and hygiene. In addition, **overcrowding** was identified, which creates protection risks.

Situations of gender-based violence were identified, as well as barriers to **access to information** for reporting, and **fear** of reporting. The caregiving responsibilities assumed by women make it difficult for them to **enter the labor market**, as well as their low educational level and the scarcity of employment offers.

In terms of education, families are forced to move constantly in search of agricultural livelihoods linked to crops, resulting in high **school dropout rates** among children and adolescents. There are also limitations in terms of infrastructure, available space (capacity) and educational quality.

In general, in the Northern Region, there are geographic access barriers to state early childhood care programs.

©: Austin Ramirez/UNHCR.

People in mixed movements

Source: Mixed Movement Monitoring (UNHCR-WFP, with support from HIAS). Jan-Apr 2024

346 travel groups surveyed

- 54% were female and 46% male
- 79% came from Venezuela, 13% from Colombia and 4% from Ecuador. 89% **are heading to the U.S.**
- 90% left their countries of origin due to **lack of employment or income**, 73% due to **fear of** violence/insecurity and 55% due to lack of **access to food**[4].

The **main needs** they reported were:

- 94% food
- 48% clothing/shoes
- 77% housing
- 19% medication

[4] *Respondents could select more than one reason for leaving; therefore, the results of the different reasons do not add up to 100%.*

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In Los Chiles, UNHCR monitors the situation of people in transit in need of international protection. ©: Austin Ramírez/UNHCR.

OUR RESPONSE

Local Integration

In 2024, UNHCR strengthened the **community-based approach in its livelihood activities**, through group and in-person training activities at the communities and complemented by the delivery of cash-based assistance. Thus, since 2023, **collective results in entrepreneurship** have been prioritized while **mitigating barriers to access and continuity** in such training, mainly those related to lack of economic or logistical access to transportation, and caregiving responsibilities - mainly for women.

To promote the economic empowerment of refugees and their host communities, UNHCR implemented the ***Mercaditos Locales*** **(Local Markets)** strategy, initially designed to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19, but which has achieved continuity thanks to its success in promoting local entrepreneurship. Also noteworthy is the community strengthening initiative "***Somos una Comunidad*****" (We are a Community)**, focused on sports and youth, and the ongoing support to the community-based organization ***Movimiento Campesino***, boards of directors of Los Chiles and Upala, to promote the economic autonomy and self-management of their livelihoods.

Starting in 2024, UNHCR is implementing, together with IOM and UNDP, a project in Upala and Los Chiles under the **United Nations Peacebuilding Fund** (PBF), and in coordination with national and local authorities. The project seeks **peaceful coexistence** and **healthy conflict resolution** and will last **2 years** with a budget of **USD 2M**.

Protection

In 2023, **154** **border protection monitoring missions** were carried out to identify, assist and refer people to services such as orientation on asylum procedures, medical assistance and response to gender-based violence. This presence, along with the **exchange of information with key actors**, also made possible to identify risks and prevent situations of *refoulement*. *In* addition, to improve **access of Miskitus indigenous refugees** to the Refugee Status Determination (**RSD**) process, community information channels were strengthened by radio and mobile loudspeakers, support was provided to authorities via legal partners, and referral mechanisms to the Refugee Unit were streamlined.

To strengthen **citizen participation and communities' exercise of rights**, UNHCR worked with the Ombudsman's Office and the Comptroller of Health Services so that **60** **community leaders** were provided with orientation on the use of **complaint mechanisms** in key areas such as health, children and women's rights; resulting in **at least 20 cases** being presented to these entities. Three workshops were also held for communities with a high proportion of **Miskitus indigenous people**.

To **promote access to rights** for refugees, UNHCR developed inter-agency workshops to inform **>610** **people** about rights including social security, education and justice, among others. **>430** **people** were referred for legal assistance and representation. In addition, information dissemination activities have been carried out through mobile loudspeakers, radio programs and the creation of audiovisual materials.

We visit communities to provide information and guidance on international protection and access to rights. ©: Natalia Díaz/UNHCR.

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Humanitarian Assistance

Since 2018, **UNHCR** has reinforced protection networks for refugees and promoted the **strengthening of multiple actors in emergency response** according to the most relevant scenarios in this specific context: climate disasters and the increase in mixed movements to North America.

- **With local authorities:** Technical assistance has been provided to establish information exchange and case management networks among local authorities, such as the **Mesa Interinstitucional de Los Chiles**. This is complemented by the delivery of hygiene and cleaning kits at the UNICEF Safe Space, as well as hydration items to assist people in mixed movements, mosquito nets for malaria prevention and items to strengthen the health care capacity of the hospital in Los Chiles.
- **With communities**: The community response network for refugees arriving or transiting through the country has been strengthened, including the **Integral Development Associations** (**ADI**) and the host community initiatives ***Casas Solidarias*** and ***Mano Amiga***. This includes deliveries of **hot served meals, shelter supplies** (sleeping, cooking and cleaning items), **hygiene and food kits**, and the delivery of **emergency preparedness kits** for three communities identified by the Municipal Emergency Committees as being at greater risk of disasters.

Delivery of food to Mano Amiga in 2023. ©: Natalia Díaz/UNHCR.

UNHCR appreciates the contributions of donor countries that contribute to Costa Rica and global programs with unearmarked funds:

As of 31 March 2024

UNHCR Costa Rica also appreciates the contributions of our private donors globally:

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