MCO PANAMA CATCH-UP

January-March 2026

In the first quarter of 2026, UNHCR MCO Panama operated amid evolving institutional contexts, new migration and asylum frameworks, and rising protection risks across the Caribbean and Central America. This update highlights key developments shaping protection responses, operational priorities, and opportunities in the Office's Area of Coverage.

National Offices
Panama
Dominican Republic
Haiti
Belize

Field Unit
Cuba

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

STRENGTHENING ASYLUM AND REGULARIZATION SYSTEMS ACROSS THE MCO

Belize advances asylum system digitalization through a Japan-funded project.
Trinidad and Tobago expands regularization frameworks enabling legal stay and work.

MANAGING PROTECTION RISKS AMID POLITICAL TRANSITIONS AND INSECURITY

Haiti enters a new transition phase as electoral preparations move forward, amid continued displacement and protection risks.

FROM THE FIELD: CONTEXT UPDATE AND UNHCR RESPONSE

BELIZE

The Government of Belize confirmed the completion of adjudications under the Amnesty Programme launched in 2022. With UNHCR's legal support, more than 700 asylum-seekers applied for permanent residence between 2022 and 2025, advancing access to durable solutions and strengthening the national protection framework.

Building on this progress, UNHCR supported efforts to further strengthen the asylum system through the launch of a Japan-funded digitalization project. The initiative improves case management, supports outreach and protection monitoring at key entry points, and contributes to legal framework review processes to enhance efficiency and data integrity. In parallel, UNHCR promoted inclusion through private sector engagement under the Belize Companies for Refugees initiative.

MCO PANAMA- CATCH-UP

CUBA

Cuba continues to face sustained energy shortages, blackouts, and limited availability of food, medicine, and fuel, affecting access to basic services and living conditions across the country. Power generation constraints left more than half of the population without electricity during peak demand periods, with some outages reaching 63 per cent in January and affecting two thirds of the country in March. In this context, on 13 March, President Díaz Canel acknowledged ongoing discussions with the United States focused on addressing longstanding bilateral differences through dialogue.

In parallel, UNHCR strengthened inter agency coordination for interventions and emergency preparedness, including participation in a lessons learned workshop with national authorities following the activation of the Anticipatory Action Framework in response to Hurricane Melissa. As part of this process, UNHCR contributed to the development of the UN Action Plan in Response to the Energy Contingency, supporting efforts to ensure continued assistance for refugees and asylum-seekers.

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

In February, severe rainfall and flooding affected vulnerable communities in the north-east and north-west, including areas hosting UNHCR-registered individuals. The Agency, WFP, and Civil Defense conducted a joint needs assessment to identify protection risks and inform response planning. Meanwhile, large-scale migration enforcement operations continued across border areas and urban centers, resulting in implications for vulnerable groups, mostly from Haiti.

HAITI

During the first quarter, escalating armed violence displaced approximately 50,000 people and raised risks of child recruitment, trafficking, and violence against women and girls. Haiti's Transitional Presidential Council stepped down, ending nearly two years of shared governance, while Prime Minister Alix Didier Fils Aimé remained in office as preparations continued for elections scheduled in August. On 23 February, authorities presented the National Pact, outlining commitments to security, reintegration of displaced persons, prevention of violence against women and girls, and access to documentation. In March, the Kenya led security mission began a phased withdrawal as the new UN supported force initiated its transition.

UNHCR engaged with the National Migration Office (ONM) to advance border protection monitoring in Belladère and Ouanaminthe. In addition, UNHCR is supporting its partner, the Organisation des Citoyens pour une Nouvelle Haïti (OCNH)'s activities to strengthen access to civil registration in the North-East departments. These activities are implemented by OCNH in coordination with local authorities, including through a Memorandum of Understanding between OCNH and the Civil Registry Office of Mont-Organisé. The agreement facilitates the issuance of birth certificates for individuals returned from the Dominican Republic and for residents of border communities, contributing to efforts to prevent statelessness.

MCO PANAMA- CATCH-UP

PANAMA

Between January and March, authorities recorded at least 577 people moving in reverse through Panama toward South America. In February, two boats carrying Venezuelan and Colombian nationals capsized off the Guna Yala coast, causing three deaths and multiple rescues, highlighting the risks linked to unregulated maritime routes. During this period, the National Migration Service issued Executive Decree No. 5 of 13 March, extending by one year the deadline for people in irregular situation, including asylum-seekers whose claims were not admitted, to apply for the Humanitarian Security Protection Permit, which grants temporary residence, work authorization, and a pathway to permanent residency.

UNHCR monitored protection risks and informed people in need of international protection, including indigenous communities, while supporting identity document renewal. To strengthen access to essential services, UNHCR donated a mobile psychosocial care unit to the Ministry of Health (MINSA) to expand mental health support in underserved areas. In recognition of refugee led community impact, Shirley Mosquera received the Ombudsperson Office's Outstanding Women Award following her nomination by UNHCR for her work combating violence against women and girls and supporting other refugees and asylum seekers through the community kitchen 'Mi Primera Cremita'.

CARIBBEAN

In December 2025, Trinidad and Tobago expanded the Migrant Registration Framework (MRF) to include all people in irregular situation, regardless of nationality. The MRF, an important complementary pathway, provides temporary legal authorization to live and work and issues an official registration card. The online registration phase, open from 26 January to 25 February, received 29,276 applications from more than 60 nationalities. By early March, authorities launched the second phase, with in-person interviews at four locations, including document verification, health screening, and background checks. UNHCR's partner, the Caribbean Centre for Human Rights (CCHR), maintained a presence at registration sites and provided translation, guidance, and legal assistance. UNHCR also supported safe identity management systems and documentation through a donation of technical equipment and training to facilitate access for refugees and asylum-seekers

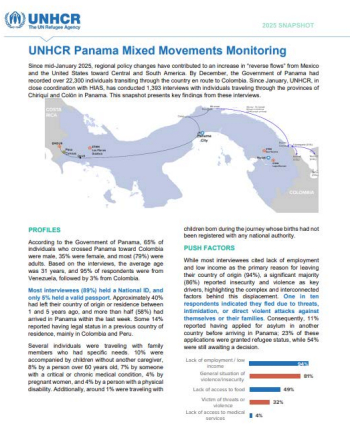
In the Caribbean, UNHCR is supporting governments through regional coordination with UN Country Teams, including through the UN Migration Network for the Caribbean and consultations under the Multi-Country Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (MSDCF) 2027–2031. Engagement focuses on strengthening asylum systems, supporting access to documentation and regularization pathways, and enhancing coordination in countries without a UNHCR presence.

MCO PANAMA- CATCH-UP

UNHCR ACNUR
La Agencia de la ONU para los Refugiados

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

MCO PANAMA: YEAR END REVIEW



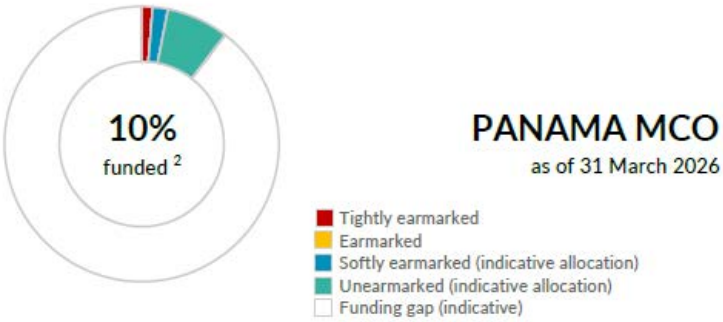
PANAMA: REVERSE FLOW MONITORING

PANAMA: SOCIO ECONOMIC PROFILES

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC: UNHCR

2026 FUNDING OVERVIEW

For 2026, UNHCR requires USD 66.8M to meet growing humanitarian needs.
Continued support from partners and donors is critical to sustain protection and inclusion efforts across the MCO Panama Area of Coverage. We welcome follow up discussions on funding priorities and opportunities to strengthen our collective response in 2026.



THANKS TO OUR DONORS

Australian Aid

Belgium partner in development

In partnership with Canada

Co-funded by European Union Humanitarian Aid

german humanitarian assistance
DEUTSCHE HUMANITÄRE HILFE

Irish Aid
An Roinn Gnóthaí Eachtracha
Department of Foreign Affairs

From the People of Japan

Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
Confederaziun svizra

Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation SDC

Also, we thank the contribution of our global national partner, España con ACNUR.

FOR MORE UPDATES VISIT THE DATA PORTAL BY CLICKING HERE

FOR MORE REPORTS ON FUNDING IN THE AMERICAS BY CLICKING HERE

For more information

Benedetta Pignatti, External Relations Officer at **pignattb@unhcr.org**

Andrea Tejera, Reporting Associate at **tejeraa@unhcr.org**

For media interviews: **panpamedia@unhcr.org**