

# FO Upala-Costa Rica

The North of Costa Rica borders Nicaragua across **309 kilometers**. There are two official border points: Peñas Blancas to the West, and Tabillas to the East. UNHCR has identified over **20 irregular entry points** both in maritime and terrestrial areas. Asylum seekers and refugees live in approximately **150 communities along the border**. Since 2018, UNHCR consolidated its presence on the northern border of Costa Rica with a field office in Upala. Currently, the Field Office of Upala and implementing partners have presence in five border cantons: **Upala, La Cruz, Los Chiles, Guatuso and San Carlos**.



## Field Office Staff:

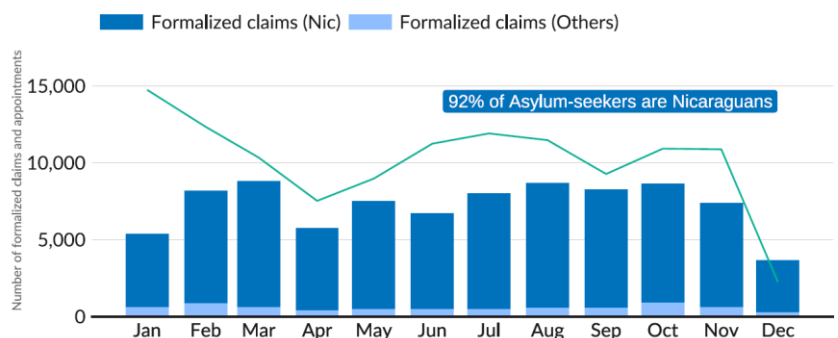
**13 National Staff**  
**1 International Staff**  
**60% Female**  
**40% Male**

## Operational Context:

In 2022, **121,846** new appointments for asylum have been registered. **Over 92%** are Nicaraguans.

The majority of the **224,208** of people we serve coming from Nicaragua, have entered through the north. A portion usually travels to the Great Metropolitan Area (GAM) for employment with a brief stop in the north. Many return to the north to settle because of difficulties in the GAM (a) obtaining a job, (b) accessing a home, (c) cannot afford living costs. Others settle in the north due to family networks. The north also receives seasonal movements for farming in the area. Due to this context, data collection on the people UNHCR serves living in the north is a challenge. Additionally, Costa Rica experienced an increase in the numbers of mixed movements, specifically Venezuelans arriving from Panama. Most Venezuelans entered irregularly because of the current visa restriction, and they try to make their way north as quickly as possible. But due to the New Migration Changes introduced in October 2022 by the United States of America, hundreds of Venezuelans were stranded in Costa Rica with very urgent needs and little resources, many in the small communities in the North.

**87,000 formalized claims and more than 122,000 new appointments in 2022**  
New asylum claims and appointments by month



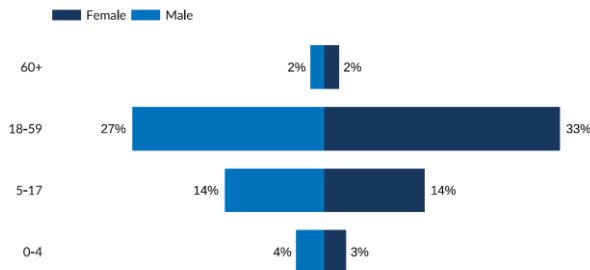
Source: Migration authorities to December 2022  
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## Profiles:

According to UNHCR'S registration system (proGres V4.0) as of December, 2022, the Office has registered **12,073** people in need of international protection in the north of Costa Rica.

### Population distribution by age and gender

**Who are our 12,000 persons we serve registered in the North? | Age and Gender 2022**  
 Distribution of persons we serve registered in proGres by age and gender (December 2022)



Note: figures do not add up to 100 per cent due to rounding  
 Source: Primes Dataport  
 © UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency

### Population by legal status

**Who are our 12,000 persons we serve registered in the North? | Legal Status 2022**  
 Distribution of persons of concerns registered in proGres by legal status (December 2022)



Source: Primes  
 © UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency

## Protection needs:

### THE PEOPLE UNHCR SERVES

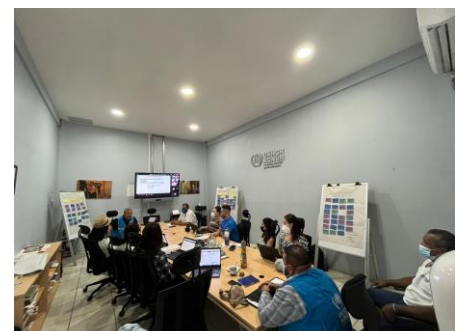
- Low income and/or lack of employment opportunities.
- Limited access to refugee status determination procedure specifically for persons at heightened risk and children due to limited transportation services, technological difficulties, and limited literacy.
- No access to reliable internet connection that allows access to updated information.
- Effective access to health due to discrimination and xenophobia.
- Limited livelihoods and access to basic needs, in particular single parents.
- Increased risk of gender-based violence.
- Lack of childcare centers that could enable women to enter the labour market

### HOST COMMUNITY

- Infrastructures in poor conditions (educational institutions, streets, houses).
- Restricted access to basic services such as electricity, internet, drinking water, and transportation.
- Low levels of education.
- High levels of gender-based violence and teen pregnancy.
- Social insecurity.
- Subsistence farming.
- Poverty and inequalities.

## Main Activities

UNHCR's operation in Upala focuses its work under 3 key lines of action: **(1)** Protection including access to territory, RSD procedures and access to basic rights, **(2)** Humanitarian Assistance including Emergency response **(3)** Local integration and peaceful coexistence, implemented through continuous border and protection monitoring and workshops, community outreach and assistance to government for emergency and humanitarian efforts.



## Border monitoring

FO Upala has performed over **170** monitoring missions to identify the trends of movements at border points; the profiles of people entering the country; and the reasons for leaving their countries of origin. During these regular visits to official and irregular entry points, UNHCR and partners take direct action to prevent refoulement.

## Access to asylum

In 2022, UNHCR has put in place a communication strategy for effective access to information related to RSD procedures, people we serve, rights and obligations. FO Upala conducted over **7** capacity building events benefitting more than 100 officers of local authorities and institutions from La Cruz, San Carlos, Upala and Los Chiles. Over **300** legal orientations to guarantee access to services were provided, and staff assisted more than **600** asylum-seekers in the RSD process.

## Addressing specific protection needs



In partnership with the local governments of Los Chiles and Upala, UNHCR developed a pocket guide with the institutional referral pathways and program and services available for persons we serve as well as a gender-based violence referral routes for the local gender-based violence prevention networks. Together with partner agencies **RET** and **CENDEROS**, emergency and high-risk cases receive shelter and psychosocial support until they can transition into stable housing. Regarding access to health, UNHCR has financed access to the Costa Rican Social Security medical insurance to **918** people we serve in the north with serious health conditions and situations of extreme economic vulnerability and in response to COVID-19, improvements were made to the

EBAIS of Pavón de Los Chiles, in addition, a donation was made to the Tilarán Health Area of assembleable awnings and A/C equipment for the designation of an area for care of people and application of vaccines.

## Cash Assistance and Livelihoods

To respond to the immediate needs of asylum seekers in the most vulnerable situations, UNHCR provides a multipurpose, unconditional cash grant. In the northern region, there were **418** family groups, and **1,174** individual beneficiaries of cash assistance. In terms of livelihoods, UNHCR works with local institutions, private sector and its implementing partner Fundación Mujer to promote trainings and economic inclusion for over **400** individuals in the North.

## Emergency preparedness

UNHCR enhanced its participation in the Emergency Committee (CME) in Upala, la Cruz, los Chiles, Guatuso and San Carlos and its presence in the Interinstitutional Coordination Committees (CCCI) of these cantons. UNHCR has provided support to local institutions to strengthen their response capacity in the face of emergency situations caused by natural disasters. Overall, UNHCR has distributed **9,500** Core Relief Items, **70** mosquito nets, **1,010** Jerry Cans, **650** mattresses, **4,609** soaps, and **428** blankets; UNHCR made **improvements to 7 community centers** so that the structures can meet the standards to function as temporary shelter in case of emergencies due to natural disasters or massive flow of persons; and donated **22 megaphones** and **54 emergency preparedness kits** to Community Emergency Committees of the cantons of Upala, La Cruz and Los Chiles to establish a community early warning system strategy. Additionally, in response to the increased arrival of the mixed movement population and to address their most immediate basic needs, UNHCR distributed additional **5,400** core relief items benefitting approximately 2,700 refugees and asylum-seekers and host communities.

## Community-Based Protection (CBP)

In coordination with municipalities of Upala and Los Chiles, UNHCR implements the sports integration project “We are a community” to promote the participation and protection of people of concern minors through local integration and peaceful coexistence in 13 communities, which include a network of community sport coaches and participation of asylum seekers and refugees in community sports and recreational committees. UNHCR also supports an outreach network of 37 asylum-seekers and refugees community representatives with capacity-building sessions on child protection, gender-based violence referral pathways along with local institutions and the office of the Ombudsman, which allows them to continue supporting UNHCR and their communities with orientation, identification and referral of new-arrivals and persons at heightened risk.



## Working with Partners

Upala collaborates at the local and regional level in the Huetar Norte and Chorotega Regions with public state institutions such as the National Children’s Protection Institute, the National Women’s Institute, the National Council of People with Disabilities, and the National Institute for Social Welfare promoting information sharing, conducting capacity building activities, and strengthening an inter-institutional case management system, to facilitate people of concern’s access to services and basic rights.

This year, based on the advocacy carried out by UNHCR, inter-institutional coordination working groups were set up with authorities in the cantons of Los Chiles and La Cruz to improve assistance for the people UNHCR serves. UNHCR also provides technical assistance in these tables and in those installed by the authorities in San Carlos and Upala. All four working groups of authorities allow inter-institutional coordination, awareness raising, training of authorities and coordination of strategies to assist host communities and people we serve. It also became an institutional mechanism of referral/assistance of cases of people of concern and population in mixed movements.



UNHCR relies on its four partner agencies in the North, RET, HIAS, Defense of Children International (DNI) and Fundacion Mujer (FM) to implement a range of projects which aim at providing legal aid and assistance, ensuring child protection; addressing GBV situations providing psychological support, and promoting livelihood and socio-economic inclusion of people of concern to become resilient and achieve self-reliance.

UNHCR also collaborates with civil society such as DINADECO (National Directorate for Community Development) and CONAMAJ (National Commission for the Improvement of the Administration of Justice) through more than 90 judicial facilitators in the 5 cantons that are key actors in identifying and referring people of concern in need of international protection in the communities.

UNHCR is grateful for the support provided by donors contributing to this operation.



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**CONTACTS:** Vivian Nieme Limpias, Head of Field Office, Upala, Costa Rica, [niemelim@unhcr.org](mailto:niemelim@unhcr.org),

Tel: +506 2503 1950, Cell: +506 6038 6712

[www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org)