UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

FORCED DISPLACEMENT IN AND FROM EL SALVADOR, GUATEMALA AND HONDURAS

January 2024

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

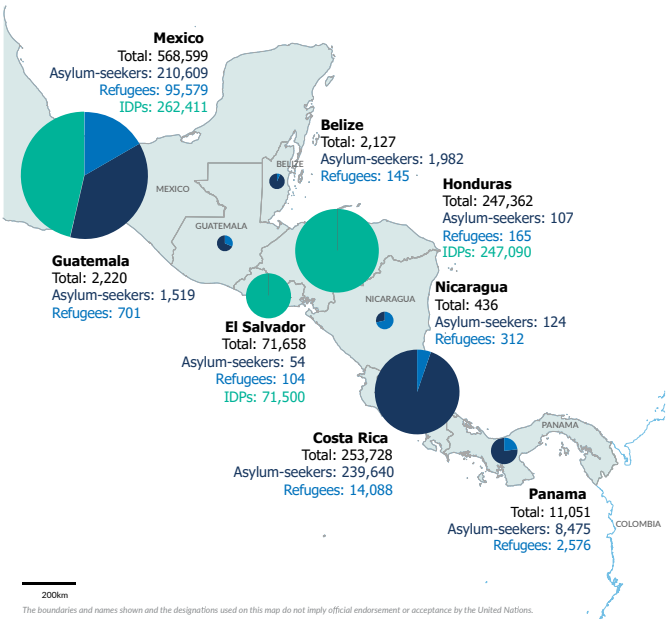
There are over **687,800** refugees and asylum-seekers from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras worldwide and at least **318,600** internally displaced people in El Salvador and Honduras.

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 humanitarian and protection **needs of displaced people, returnees and people in transit**. Opportunities for solutions to displacement are emerging in some countries.

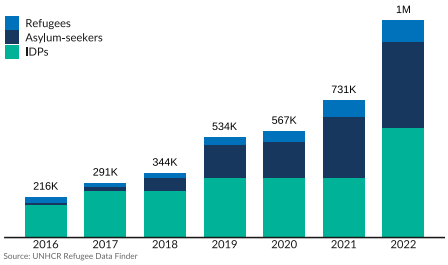
REFUGEES, ASYLUM-SEEKERS AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED PEOPLE

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

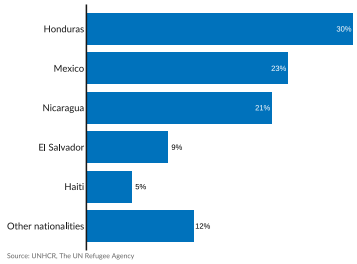


113,670 (10%) Refugees
462,510 (40%) Asylum-seekers
581,001 (50%) IDPs

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



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



FINANCIAL REQUIREMENTS IN 2024

US$ 252.3 M

Requested for **North of Central America Situation**

Note: 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 relationship among generalised violence, territorial control by gangs, gender-based violence (including forced unions), forced recruitment, food insecurity, increasing poverty, and the effects of climate change drives forced displacement from **El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.**

People from 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 2023.

In 2023, there were nearly 141,000 new asylum claims in Mexico, over a third of them filed by nationals of Honduras (41,935), El Salvador (6,117) and Guatemala (6,111).

UNHCR supports national asylum systems in the region, with a focus on improving access to fair and expeditious asylum procedures, strengthening staff capacity and digitalization in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

In addition to ongoing internal displacement and flight from Honduras, Honduras emerged as a critical transit country for mixed movements in 2023, with more than 545,000 individuals in transit registering with the National Institute of Migration (INM), an increase of 189% from 2022. Venezuelans, Cubans, Haitians, Ecuadorians, and Colombians were the main nationalities in transit. The first week of 2024 already saw a 55% surge in registrations after irregular entry compared to the same period in 2023. Finally, Honduras also receives returnees, many of whom have international protection needs and specific vulnerabilities. UNHCR works to support institutions, civil society, and communities to respond to the protection needs of these diverse forcibly displaced populations.

In Guatemala, there is an emerging trend of persons engaged in mixed movements from other countries 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.

El Salvador continues to experience high levels of human mobility. Historically, gang violence triggered displacement in and outside the country. However, since 2022 the security situation notably changed leading to a decline in violent crime and weakening gangs' territorial control. Despite a decline in crime, the root causes of gang violence and displacement remain mostly unaddressed. During 2023, the National Statistics Office included a displacement module on the annual Multi-Purpose Household Survey collecting information on the situation IDPs in the country. The information will enable UNHCR to better understand the situation of IDPs versus the general population and adjust interventions accordingly.

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.

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. Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, and Panama are members of the initiative which is supported by the MIRPS **Support Platform**. The Government of Panama held the MIRPS Pro-tempore Presidency in 2023 and led the Regional Plan to strengthen dialogue and cooperation to support MIRPS National Action Plans. The United States of America is the Chair-in-Office of the MIRPS Support Platform in 2024 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 24 January 2024.

- 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 ensure a protection-centred response and coordinated efforts among relevant stakeholders, including national and local governments, international organizations, the civil society, community organizations, and displaced populations. Furthermore, UNHCR, through its leading role in the Protection Cluster, is increasing visibility of the needs of forced displaced people in the region with data and analysis to support evidence-based decision making.

- UNHCR works with **103 partners** in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, 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 Honduras, as part of the efforts to provide durable solutions for 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. In 2023, private donors from the United States of America, Canada, Mexico, and Denmark contributed flexible funding to address the most critical needs and priorities in the North of Central America Situation.

- **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 analyse and address the root causes of forced displacement as an integral part of development projects.

- 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, with the governments of **Guatemala**, Colombia, and Costa Rica, announced the start of the **Safe Mobility Offices**. This initiative, with the support of UNHCR and IOM, facilitates access to protection and other regular pathways for people on the move to the United States of America and other countries.

- UNHCR ensures 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 2023, 378 people participated in the soft-skills workshop for the labour market and 141 youth with no prior job experience signed a five-month apprenticeship contract and were enrolled in the Salvadoran Social Security Institute (ISSS). By December 2023, 698 young people signed an employment contract and 1,207 received training since its inception in 2021.

In 2023, UNHCR Honduras launched an innovative livelihood program in collaboration with various organizations and 53 private sector companies to support the professional development of displaced youth through funded internships. This program targeted 92 youths who were displaced or at risk of displacement, offering them valuable internship opportunities in various sectors for three months, complemented by financial support and close monitoring. Notably, 49% of the participants secured employment post-internship, with others continuing their job search with support from the Secretariat of Labour and Social Security (SETRASS) and its ¡Si Empleo! platform. SETRASS has recognized the program as a significant contribution to the MIRPS framework and plans to expand it in 2024. The success of this pilot program lays a solid foundation for future expansion, aligning with UNHCR's commitment to enhancing the socio-economic inclusion of displaced individuals in Honduras.

PRIORITIES IN 2024

PROTECT

- **Safe and dignified reception conditions:** UNHCR works with governments and other stakeholders to enhance protection-sensitive entry systems, access to asylum and other protection-oriented arrangements. Furthermore, UNHCR seeks to 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 government capacities at 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 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 works 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 LGBTIQ+ individuals.
- **Access to healthcare**: UNHCR supports the capacity of public health facilities to meet increasing demands. The Office also supports people with heightened need to access medical assistance and vaccinations.
- **Strengthen resilience and protection to the effects of climate change**: UNHCR supports initiatives related to climate risk mitigation, adaptation, and 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 forced displacement.

EMPOWER

- **Empowering communities and achieving gender equality:** UNHCR engages directly with communities through consultative processes and 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 supports livelihood initiatives and access to employment, including soft skills training 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 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 displacement in El Salvador. For the first time, El Salvador granted citizenship to a small number of refugees. In Honduras, UNHCR's collaboration with 23 Technical and Vocational Education and Training centres and state institutions led to the renewal of curricula and training equipment, directly enhancing the employment rates of people forcibly displaced and those at-risk.

CLIMATE ACTION

In 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 tents, and 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) conducted in May 2023**, 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. In 2023, its effects exacerbated vulnerabilities, with floods affecting over 34,000 people and destroying more than 900 properties. Since July 2023 droughts caused by the El Nino phenomenon have an increasing impact in the Dry Corridor. Most people in this area that depend on subsistence agriculture for survival are running out of basic items, mainly food. 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.

In **El Salvador**, through an innovation project, UNHCR's team developed a cutting-edge AI tool designed to boost information analysis from community engagements, particularly participatory assessments. Through advanced language processing, the tool efficiently analyses extensive text, focusing on the needs and opinions of the communities UNHCR serves in a confidential mannert.

In **Honduras**, UNHCR advocated for the inclusion of IDP criteria in the national census to be applied in 2024. 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. A module on internal displacement was piloted in the National Household survey in 2023 and will continue in 2024.

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 15 December):
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