UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

"I am the echo of many voices that want to be heard. I am part of a collective struggle for fairer, greener, safer spaces".

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Ecuador

Operational Update

January 2026

No.1

Figures at a glance

Population figures

81,351

94% from neighbouring Colombia

Historical figure of refugees recognized by Ecuador[1]

67,976

refugees with active cases registered on UNHCR's database[2]

65.1 M

required in 2026

- Tightly earmarked
- Earmarked
- Softly earmarked (indicative allocation)
- Unearmarked (indicative allocation)
- Funding gap (indicative)

For more information on funding, please visit:
reporting.unhcr.org/ecuador

Our response in 2026

In 2026, UNHCR Ecuador will focus on providing protection and securing solutions for forcibly displaced people, ensuring their rights, safety, and long-term inclusion.

PROTECTION

UNHCR will strengthen access to territory, documentation, and asylum procedures that meet international standards. Community networks and local institutions will be supported to prevent violence, promote safer environments, and ensure legal and physical protection. Efforts will prioritize children, adolescents, survivors of violence, and people facing heightened risks. Technical assistance will help national and local authorities expand specialized protection services and response mechanisms.

SOLUTIONS

UNHCR will promote inclusion by supporting access to livelihoods, education, public services, and social protection systems. Initiatives will foster self-reliance through employment, entrepreneurship, and vocational training, with special attention to youth and women. Programming will reduce secondary displacement by meeting basic needs and strengthening household stability.

1. Historical figure registered by the government since 1978 to the end of January 2026.
2. UNHCR registers active refugee cases in ProGres. Figures to the end of January 2026

Operational context

Ecuador began the year with closed land borders, affecting mobility of people and commerce. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs explained that the decision was taken for "reasons of national security," while confirming that the international crossings at Rumichaca International Bridge (with Colombia) and Huaquillas Border Crossing (with Peru) will remain open with vigilance. Local authorities have reinforced security operations along the highway and in urban centers, and further border closures and restrictions have generated growing tensions among local communities, particularly in the border parishes, increasing the risks of smuggling and the use of irregular paths

Ecuador continues to host large refugee and migrant populations from Venezuela and Colombia, with 9,718 asylum claims registered in 2025 (60% Venezuelan, 40% Colombian). Venezuelan asylum claims are rising in early 2026, reflecting broader regional displacement amid a volatile political environment. Colombian asylum claims remain linked to violence and armed conflict in the country of origin. These trends highlight sustained demand for international protection and the growing importance of Ecuador's asylum system amid evolving mixed movements and funding constraints.

In parallel to these developments, security in Lago Agrio deteriorated amid intensified military and police operations targeting organized crime, illicit economies, and illegal armed groups. Despite the ongoing state of emergency, targeted violent killings near the bus terminal and nightlife areas heightened insecurity perceptions among refugees, migrants, and host communities. This rise in violence has also been visible in other refugee-hosting areas, including in Manabí, Guayas, and Esmeraldas, where violent crimes have affected the entire population.

Simultaneously, bilateral tensions have continued to rise. Ecuador imposed a 30% tariff on Colombian imports, citing insufficient border security and cooperation against organized crime. Colombia reciprocated with tariffs, reliance. Restrictions on key Ecuadorian exports, and the suspension of electricity exports, prompting Ecuador to raise oil transit fees for Colombian crude. These measures have disrupted border commerce, transport services, and informal labour markets, while businesses and citizens report rising prices, higher logistics costs, and increased risks of smuggling.

Following the formalization of the Safe Third Country Agreement between United States and Ecuador, UNHCR is supporting the latter to ensure that all procedures adhere to international protection standards and are carried out safely and humanely. Ecuador has already received the first flights, and individuals are currently receiving assistance and protection in the country according to their specific protection needs.

Ecuador continues to be prone to natural and man-made disasters. In the coastal north, the Government of Ecuador, through the Emergency Operations Committee, declared a yellow alert in Esmeraldas due to the beginning of the winter season as a preventive measure. The measures include activating working groups, as well as a monitoring team, developing sectoral action plans, and disseminating information to the population about care and prevention actions related to the rain. Moreover, a fire at the oil refinery generated a dense black cloud, and soot mixed with rainfall formed an oily residue that reached the sea and the Teaone River. No official air or water quality assessments were conducted, despite information collected by UNHCR from affected communities reporting contaminated rainwater and health symptoms, including skin rashes, headaches, stomach pain, and respiratory problems.

Heavy rains have also been reported in the Amazonian region, as well as the northern parts of the Central Highlands, affecting entire families.

In this context, UNHCR continues to work side by side with the Government of Ecuador, local governments, civil society and community-based organizations to provide a comprehensive protection and solutions response to the needs of all populations. Aiming to strengthen local services and systems, UNHCR will strive to reinforce access to international protection, basic services as well as socioeconomic inclusion opportunities, to ensure people forced to flee can find stability and achieve sustainable self-reliance.

Main populations forced to flee hosted by Ecuador and others of concern

Colombians

According to government data, 198 Colombians sought asylum in Ecuador in January 2026, an approximate 50% decrease compared to the same period in 2025. 38% of people registered this month were children and adolescents. Ecuador continues to host a large refugee population, mainly from Colombia. In 2025, Colombians represented 40% of asylum seekers, a 33% decrease from the previous year, likely linked to reduced registration capacity following humanitarian funding cuts. Colombian households continue face barriers to meeting basic needs, particularly housing (84%) and education, with lack of financial resources the main reason for not attending school (97%). Many report threats, persecution, intimidation, or direct violence, confirming that violence and armed conflict in Colombia remain key drivers of displacement. UNHCR projects an important number of asylums claims in 2026.

198 Colombians who have sought asylum in Ecuador in 2026

Main needs of Colombians in Ecuador

84% access to basic needs

97% access to education

31% access to employment

Venezuelans

Venezuelans continue to lead in numbers of arrivals in Ecuador although with smaller numbers, 17.581 people entered the country in January 2026 (10 % less than the previous month), with a daily entry average of 586 Venezuelans. 17384 people left the country, a 4.3% decrease as compared to the previous month, leaving a balance of 197 people who entered and remained in the country during the reporting period (84% less than the previous month).

According to government data, 573 Venezuelans sought asylum in Ecuador in January 2026. a 46% increase compared to the same month in 2025, 34% of people were children and adolescents. The current number of Venezuelan asylum seekers accounts for 60% of the total in 2025. Since 2022, Venezuela has accounted for approximately 45–50% of the asylum claims processed in Ecuador. This underscores both the continued need for support and the sustained interest in accessing international protection. Moreover, with the conclusion of the second phase of the regularization process, the asylum system has become increasingly relevant for those with protection needs.

Population entry and exit figures have been compiled by the GTRMs in Ecuador's border areas (Tulcán, Lago Agrio, and Huaquillas) with qualitative and quantitative information on mixed movement trends. These figures are not triangulated with neighboring countries.

440.450 Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Ecuador[2]

45% estimated to be between 18 and 45 years old

25% estimated to have a higher education degree

Main needs[3]

55% access to food

67% access to housing or shelter

53% access to livelihoods or employment

Ecuadorians

By end of 2025, over 103,000 Ecuadorian asylum-seekers were pending a decision on their claims, while around 5,000 had been recognized as refugees – the majority in the United States, Spain, Mexico and Italy (followed by Perú and Canada). The Ombudspersons Office, with support from UNHCR and ECHO, launched a report on internal displacement in 2025 which estimates that over 315,000 Ecuadorians had been internally displaced between 2022 and 2024. See the executive summary here.

HUMANITARIANS AT WORK

I've spent over ten years working in humanitarian work, and it has become one of the most meaningful parts of my life. One moment that still inspires me happened in 2022, when an earthquake struck Esmeraldas. Refugee and local families were forced to leave their homes, yet in the middle of that hardship, I witnessed something extraordinary: a group of women leaders, part of a community protection programme, spontaneously organized a communal pot and a minga. With food, care, and collective effort, they transformed pain into solidarity. That day reminded me that communities are the heart of protection, and the reason I continue this work.

Read the full story

ACTIVITIES IN THE FIELD

DELIVERING PROTECTION

How UNHCR makes a difference:

Seeking asylum is a fundamental human right, and Ecuador has built one of the strongest asylum systems in the region to uphold it. UNHCR supports the Government by safeguarding access to territory and fair asylum procedures, providing legal and community-based protection, and translating international protection standards into real access to rights at the local level. Through its presence on the ground, technical expertise, data-driven analysis and coordination with national and local actors, UNHCR helps address immediate protection risks while strengthening sustainable protection systems, fostering social cohesion and enabling refugees and host communities to live safely, with dignity, and stability. **To learn more, check out protection fact sheet.**

2. According to data estimated by the Refugee and Migrant Working Group (GTRM, by its acronym in Spanish).
3. Fifth R4V Joint Needs Assessment. www.r4v.info

TULCAN

Immediate protection for newly arrived families

UNHCR, together with HIAS, ADRA, WFP and FUDELA, conducted a mission to support recently arrived Colombian and Venezuelan families in Montúfar canton. The team registered 6 families (15 people), including single women, single mothers, survivors of violence, and children and adolescents at risk. Guidance was provided on accessing healthcare, education, housing and food, and coordination was arranged with the San Vicente de Paul community kitchen. Referrals were also made to NRC and the Public Defender's Office for documentation procedures. Thanks to our donors, these families receive protection from the moment they arrive and can begin rebuilding their lives in Ecuador.

ESMERALDAS

Providing guidance for safety and stability

In San Lorenzo, UNHCR held an information session for people who have been recently displaced, offering essential guidance to support their protection and integration process. Twenty-five Colombian and Venezuelan adults received clear information on access to education, healthcare, documentation, asylum, humanitarian assistance, local integration, and livelihoods. This early support helps families make informed decisions and begin building safer and more stable futures in Ecuador thanks to the support our donors provide.

LAGO AGRIO

Protection tools for women rebuilding their lives

In Lago Agrio, UNHCR and the Public Defender's Office, held an awareness workshop on Migration Police checks and voluntary departure processes. The session targeted women survivors ofviolence and provided practical tools to help them navigate these situations safely. The activity was organised with the Federation of Women of Sucumbíos at the Cuidarte Safe Space for Women and Girls, bringing together 38 participants. Thanks to our donors, more survivors can access protection and empowerment opportunities to rebuild their lives in safer environments.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

MANTA

Growing wellbeing and community in San Eloy

In San Eloy, at the Isabel Muentes community center, UNHCR carried out an horticulture-based self-care activity with the women's group. Made possible through the support of both public and private donors, the initiative facilitated a meaningful space to strengthen community integration and offer a safe environment for survivors of violence. Through planting, sharing, and working together, the women found moments of calm, mutual support, and emotional restoration. A total of 20 women took part in this activity.

LAGO AGRIO

New space opening opportunities for young people

Led by UNHCR and the Prefectura de Sucumbios, and supported by the Republic of Japan, La Maloca de los Panas was inaugurated in Lago Agrio as a safe community space where children and youth can learn, create, and connect. The center offers educational, artistic, and recreational activities that build skills, foster social cohesion, and provide positive free-time alternatives. Its opening represents an important step toward expanding opportunities and supporting young people in protective and empowering environments.

TULCAN

Empowering young agents of change in Tulcán

In Tulcán, UNHCR held an information and reflection session with children and adolescents from Unidad Educativa Gran Colombia to promote violence prevention. In a separate activity, UNHCR organized a community film forum with students and mothers, creating a safe space for dialogue and collective learning. Together, these initiatives strengthened children's ability to see themselves as agents of change in their community. All activities were made possible thanks to the support of LIV Golf.

GUAYAQUIL

Support networks that strengthen and empower women

In Guayaquil, UNHCR and CDH held a gathering of the Women's Community Self-Care Circles, bringing together participants from seven communities, many of them refugee women, to share experiences, build solidarity, and present projects shaped through resilience and peer support. Thanks to the generosity of our donors, more women can access safe environments where they feel supported, empowered, and equipped to build strong, thriving communities and futures.

SAN LORENZO

A Golf activity sparks curiosity and strengthens community ties

In San Lorenzo, UNHCR, together with partner FEPP and the community-based organisations Recuperando Raíces, ASVEMH and Jóvenes Construyendo Futuro, created a handmade mini-golf setup that introduced women, youth, and children from host and forcibly displaced communities to the sport for the first time. In an interactive and inclusive setting, participants explored the rules, practiced together, and strengthened bonds of solidarity and peer support. The activity sparked curiosity, encouraged new skills, and reaffirmed the commitment to building safe spaces where women, young people, and children can learn, grow, and thrive thanks to the support of our donor LIVGolf.

PROMOTING DURABLE SOLUTIONS

Forcibly displaced people are part of the solution for Ecuador's development. UNHCR works with national and local systems to promote their social and economic integration, supporting regular documentation, access to formal employment, education, entrepreneurship, financial services and ensuring misinformation and xenophobia are addressed at all levels. Advocating for inclusive policies and partnering with businesses, training institutions and local actors, UNHCR helps refugees build sustainable livelihoods, fill labour gaps in key productive sectors, and contribute skills, taxes and innovation to the local economy. These solutions-oriented approaches strengthen social cohesion, reduce protection risks, and generate long-term benefits for both forcibly displaced people and host communities.

MANTA

Advancing wellbeing and inclusion in Manta

UNHCR, with the support of the Cámara Empresarial de Manta and HIAS Ecuador, held a session for the private sector on self-care, burnout prevention, psychological first aid, sustainability, and environmental care. The activity strengthened capacities and promoted wellbeing practices among local business actors. This joint effort contributes to more inclusive and supportive work environments. All of this was possible thanks to the support of UNHCR donors.

LAGO AGRIO

Strengthening entrepreneurship in Francisco de Orellana

UNHCR, with the support of the GADM de Francisco de Orellana and the academic sector through Escuela Superior Politécnica de Chimborazo, concluded the Entrepreneurship School and vocational workshops at the Aprende Emprendedor centre. A total of 53 participants, both Ecuadorians and forcibly displaced people, successfully completed their training. The initiative strengthens livelihoods and promotes economic self-reliance within the community.

CARCHI

Boosting community initiatives that protect and grow

In Carchi, the Provincial Government provided seed funding to 16 community-based organizations working on environmental conservation and local tourism, bringing together refugees and host communities. UNHCR supported the process through technical review and participation on the selection panel, reinforcing cooperation with provincial authorities. This financial support enables each organization to advance sustainable, community-led initiatives that create new opportunities for the families and neighborhoods they serve.

Stories from the field

""Walking through its streets is learning to live with the love for the community, the frustration over injustice, and the urgent need to do something to change it."
-Yeriko

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Sowing the future:
building community action in northern Ecuador

Yeriko describes himself as the echo of many voices that want to be heard. "I am part of a collective struggle for fairer, greener, safer spaces," he says.

For him, Esmeraldas—the province where he grew up on Ecuador's northern border with Colombia—is a joyful and diverse land, but also one marked by exclusion and fear. In recent years, rising violence and extreme climate events have created urgent humanitarian needs. Yeriko explains that walking through its streets "means living with the community's love, the frustration over injustice, and the urgent need to change it."

Yeriko studies Chemical Engineering, is an environmental activist in Jóvenes Protectores del Planeta, a community initiative supported by UNHCR and FEPP. For him, being an activist "is not idealism; it is a way to survive and to protect life." Through his community work, he teaches children and young people about sustainability and climate change. With few resources but strong determination, they join mingas, promote urban and school gardens, and recover ecological spaces in local neighborhoods. "They are small actions," he says, "but transformative."

His vocation has personal roots. He grew up in rural areas where he witnessed the effects of pollution firsthand.

"We have the refinery here; it pollutes us, and people are not aware of it," he recalls. That experience pushed him to demand environmental compensation and better living conditions, thinking not only of today, but of the generations to come.

Another core part of his work is defending the rights of LGBTIQ+ people, and strengthening local networks. Those who work with him describe him as "proactive, a natural ally, and someone who always acts selflessly."

Esmeraldas has welcomed thousands of refugees, mostly from Colombia, and for Yeriko the commitment is just as clear: helping them feel part of the community. "They are also part of Esmeraldas," he says. He confronts discriminatory comments, promotes empathy, and shares information to foster coexistence.

Amid rising violence, Yeriko listens to his community and hopes to promote workshops and protection initiatives. He believes that "anything we do, no matter how small it seems, can change a person's life."

"My community has given me so much, and now it is my turn to give something back," he says—because protecting, including, and empowering is not just a message, but a daily practice. And in Esmeraldas, that practice creates hope.

You can help us continue building a World of Possibilities for thousands of displaced people and their host communities in Ecuador. **Donate now.**

We thank the contributions of our donors

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UNHCR Ecuador is grateful for the support from private donors

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