

Central America & Cuba

Bi-weekly Operational Update

Operations: **Regional context**

Impacted by two main forced displacement situations, Central America hosts nearly 444,000 people who have been forced to flee either within or outside their country's borders. 73% are internally displaced within El Salvador and Honduras, accounting for roughly 320,000 people who have fled chronic gang violence and insecurity. While the majority of people from the North of Central America who have crossed borders have sought protection in Mexico, the USA and Europe, nearly 10 thousand people from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala have sought asylum in Belize, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Panama. An additional several hundred thousand are deportees, which includes people with protection needs. In addition, some 116,000 people have fled the social and political crisis in Nicaragua, the vast majority to neighbouring Costa Rica where asylum claims have increased exponentially over the past two years.

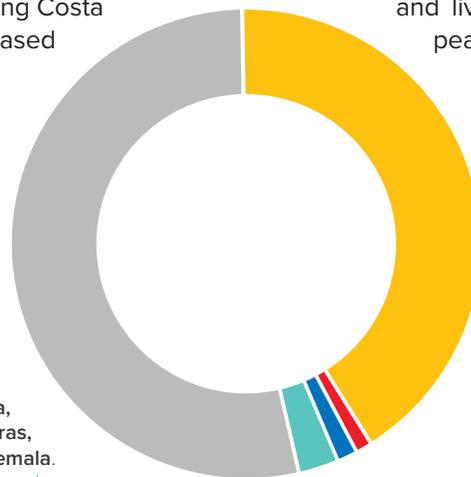
With an increasing trend of people forcibly displaced in the region exerting pressure on national protection and asylum systems, UNHCR has expanded its presence and operational capacity in Central America to support states in their response to forced displacement. UNHCR works with over 70 partners in the region and supports states in the implementation of their national plans under the Regional Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Framework (MIRPS), which seeks to bridge the gap between humanitarian and development actions in support of durable solutions. With programmes across the region, UNHCR undertakes several strategic activities to ensure safe reception and admission of people forced to flee, provide safe spaces and shelters, engage community leaderships, facilitate durable solutions and livelihoods, and foster an environment of peaceful coexistence.

Regional funding overview as of 21 May 2020

116.7M

financial requirements for Central America for 2020 including requirements for the operations and activities in **Panama, Belize, El Salvador, Cuba, Nicaragua, Honduras, Costa Rica, and Guatemala.**

For further details consult reporting.unhcr.org



46% funded

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

Thematic updates

COVID19

To avoid a new wave of infections, governments in the region maintain social distancing measures and the use of face masks is mandatory in some countries. Likewise, curfews remain although quarantine schedules are becoming less rigid. The region risks is in danger of depleting essential hygiene items and food due to restrictions in the free movement of goods.

LGBTI

Costa Rica became the first county in Central America to legally recognize same-sex marriage. LGTBI people in Central America are targets of violence and persecution, particularly in the NCA where gangs either attempt to force them into criminal activities or threaten their lives because of who they are. It has been witnessed that their status has contributed to limitations in access humanitarian aid, health care, and

economic opportunities during the pandemic. In Honduras and El Salvador, community leaders have reported to UNHCR that among the LGTBI population, those most at risk are trans women who are exposed to risks of contagion and violence, with limited income options for basic subsistence and medications other than sex work.

MIRPS

The OAS Permanent Council approved the establishment of a **voluntary fund for the MIRPS**, which provides a mechanism for the mobilization of resources to help implement national action plans in each of the seven participating countries. The fund will be able to capture contributions from OAS Member and Observer States, UN Member States, international organizations, general public, and national and international private or public entities.

Update on country activities

BELIZE

142 refugees and asylum seekers have been provided with humanitarian assistance.
1,000 facemasks are being distributed to staff and PoCs.
UNHCR supported the Refugees Department with an infrastructure that complies with social distancing measures.

GUATEMALA

UNHCR delivered the first 27 CBI cards to Petén.
UNHCR provided training on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Network (MHPSS) to partners in charge of providing psychosocial support.
48 of 96 Refugee Housing Units arrived in the country to support the government's response to COVID19.

CUBA

UNHCR distributed individual documents issued by the Havana provincial government to 153 PoC currently lacking legal status to allow their access to shops and markets where non-rationed food and hygiene articles are sold.

NICARAGUA

UNHCR's partner continues providing food, housing and health support to refugees and asylum seekers during the pandemic.

EL SALVADOR

UNHCR delivered aid packages to the Government of El Salvador to support forcibly displaced persons and deportees with protection needs, including 2,000 food packages, 1300 hygiene and 500 feminine hygiene kits.

PANAMA

Through partner HIAS, UNHCR donated children food, hygiene supplies, clothing and educational games to the Migrant Reception Centre in Chiriqui Province, where currently sheltering 540 persons.
Through UNHCR partners, legal assistance is provided with mediations in cases of eviction risks.

HONDURAS

UNHCR delivered PPEs to 50 LGBTI community leaders in San Pedro Sula who monitor the human rights situation, and to 6 community medical clinics to strengthen medical and social service delivery.

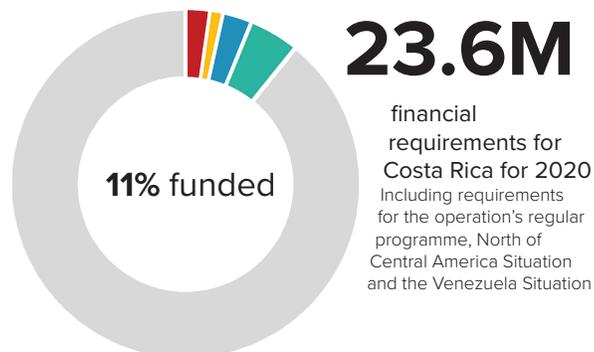
COSTA RICA

UNHCR has assisted 1,119 households living in highly vulnerable situations, and 298 families at high risk of infection or with urgent needs due to the pandemic.
UNHCR distributed 1,600 hygiene kits to help asylum seekers comply with the sanitary recommendations.



Check out testimonios.acnur.org to find out more about how displaced communities in the Americas are coping with the pandemic.

Nicaragua Situation: Costa Rica



Context

Costa Rica's commitment to the protection and integration of asylum seekers and refugees was hailed during the Global Refugee Forum in December 2019, where the country served as one of five co-convening states, and urged other states in the region to further their support to forcibly displaced persons. Costa Rica's government responds to the needs of refugees and asylum seekers through MINARE, the whole-of-society national action plan under the Regional Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Framework (MIRPS).

As an upper-middle-income country with high human development indicators, Costa Rica became the first country in Central America to join the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). At the same time, the country faces important challenges in terms of human security, unemployment, poverty and inequality; all of which have been aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

As of May 2020, Costa Rica hosts over 108,700 asylum seekers and refugees, roughly 2.2% of the country's population. Registering a steady surge in asylum claims since 2014, Costa Rica experienced the largest increase after Nicaragua's socio-political crisis in April 2018. Since then, more than 85,000 Nicaraguans have sought asylum in Costa Rica.

This sudden increase has strained Costa Rica's asylum system resulting in significant delays, between 9-12 months to lodge a claim, obtain documentation and work permits. This hinders the local integration of asylum seekers, who are unable to access the labour market and basic services, increasing their vulnerability. The situation has been compounded by the COVID-19 response and lockdown.

UNHCR response and needs

UNHCR works with the government to ensure that refugee status determination procedures currently put on hold, are completed in line with national and international law. At the same time, UNHCR continues to offer assistance to the Migration Authority with additional staff, office space and technical support.

The government increased border controls in response to the COVID19 situation in Nicaragua. UNHCR provides transportation to migration officials to border points when

people in need of international protection are identified. UNHCR provides accommodation near the Peñas Blancas border for recently arrived asylum seekers to complete the 14-day mandatory quarantine. Additional funding is necessary to provide additional facilities along the northern border and at least one in the South.

UNHCR, implements a cash-based intervention programme to address the needs of Nicaraguan asylum seekers in Costa Rica, considered the most effective way to deliver humanitarian assistance in an upper-middle-income country. The assistance is multipurpose and unconditional allowing households to prioritize their own needs and contribute to local economies. Funds are transferred to debit cards on a monthly basis during three months. The programme has also been adapted to assist refugees affected by COVID-19. Since mid-March, UNHCR has assisted 1,119 households living in highly vulnerable situations with multipurpose CBI, and 298 families at high risk of infection or with urgent needs. However, these actions have been insufficient to reach the total households identified as in need. UNHCR is currently seeking for additional funding to scale up this CBI programme.

In December 2019, UNHCR signed an agreement with Costa Rica's Social Security entity to provide medical insurance to 6,000 persons of concern with medical conditions. During the pandemic, UNHCR adapted the eligibility criteria to also include persons at high risk, such as the elderly. UNHCR completed the screening of the 6,000 persons on 22 May and identified an additional 700 households with people aged 60 and above in need of the medical insurance. The operation aims to enroll an additional 1,000 people in the CCSS, which has an estimated total cost of USD\$375,000.

Additional resources will help UNHCR in Costa Rica to broaden in-kind assistance of food and non-food items. In May, UNHCR distributed 651 food kits and 1,600 hygiene kits to help refugees and asylum seekers comply with sanitary recommendations, since mid-March. UNHCR is working closely with the private sector to advocate for the inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers within post-COVID19 recovery plans including employment, corporate social responsibility schemes and to procure services or products from refugee-owned businesses. Through partner Fundación Mujer, UNHCR continues to provide support to people of concern through capacity development to increase employability of asylum seekers and refugees.

Other updates

In case you missed it



UNHCR held a discussion with IOM, MSF-Spain and a gender researcher, moderated by journalist Oscar Martinez, on the **impact of COVID19 over forcibly displaced people and migrants in Central America**. The discussion was hosted by Casa de America and can be accessed [here](#).

Our latest story: 60-year-old Nicaraguan couple build a new life in exile during the coronavirus

A year and a half after fleeing Nicaragua, Label and Santos had managed to establish a small business in Panama. But since the coronavirus forced everyone into lockdown, the couple have relied on the crops they grow in their backyard. [Read the full story](#).



Visit our operational data portal



In the next issue, a focus on the operation in Panama.

We thank the contributions of our donors

updated to 21 May 2020

UNHCR is grateful for the critical support provided by donors who have provided generous and timely support to the Coronavirus Emergency Situation globally, and countries in Central America, as well as those who have contributed to UNHCR programmes with unearmarked funding.



For more information, contact Gavin David White, Senior CRR Officer, at whiteg@unhcr.org