

Central America and Mexico

Operational Update | July 2021

Regional context

Human trafficking in **Central America** is mainly contained within the continent, both in terms of origin and destination, according to the [UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2020](#), recently published. Women and girls account for 79 percent of the victims in the region, in particular for sexual exploitation. In **El Salvador**, children deprived of parental care, adolescent girls, and LGBTQI+ persons, especially transgender persons, are at higher risk of human trafficking. In **Costa Rica**, women and girls from Nicaragua and other Central America countries, children and LGBTQI+ persons, have been identified as victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation.

People smuggling is also affecting refugees and asylum seekers in mixed movements in Central America. In July, **Guatemalan** police rescued in total 292 Haitians, including several children, who were locked in a small house without food or water. Also, border agents in **Honduras** arrested 32 nationals who were irregularly transporting 149 Nicaraguans through the country. Well-organized smuggling and trafficking networks operate throughout the region increasing protection risks for people on the move and humanitarian actors providing assistance.

Social protests in **Cuba** and **Guatemala** took place over several days. Hundreds of protesters were arrested in Cuba, amid food shortages and the increase of COVID-19 cases. In Guatemala the protests were sparked by the dismissal of the head of the Special Prosecutor's Office Against Impunity. In **Nicaragua**, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights [condemned](#) the multiple complaints of arbitrary detentions, both against defenders of human rights and political opposition. In **El Salvador**, the new phase of the Territorial Control Plan was launched and will double the number of military personnel to 40,000 in neighborhoods and communities at risk due to gang presence.

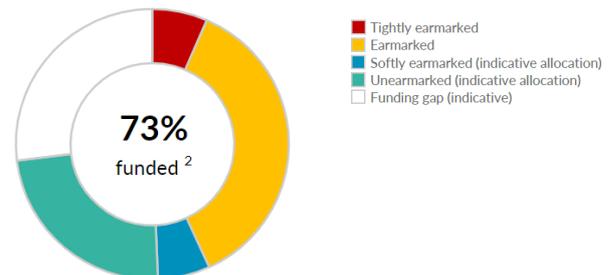
The US launched its Strategy for Addressing the Root Causes of Migration in Central America which seeks to address structural challenges to mitigate the drivers of forced displacement in the region. In **Mexico**, 64,378 people have applied for asylum so far this year reaching high record numbers, according to COMAR at the end of July. Honduras was the first nationality of applicants, followed by Haiti and Cuba.

More than 15,000 persons on the move were stranded at the border between **Colombia** and **Panama**, most of them Haitians. A record 46,500 people in mixed movements bound for North America [have entered Panama](#) this year through the Darien Gap. According to Panamanian authorities, there is a daily average inflow of up to 1,200 persons.

FUNDING (as of 24 August)

USD 174.7 M

requested for **North of Central America** situation in 2021



DON'T MISS...



UNHCR, HUMANA People to People, and representatives of the Medical Officer in Charge of Bella Vista Poly Clinic, talk about the new waiting room that was donated to the Bella Vista polyclinic. **Belize** is home for 5,800 refugees and asylum seekers who arrive seeking protection, mostly from nearby countries such as El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. The Independence and Bella Vista polyclinics and the San Juan health post serve the needs of 25,000 people, including people who have been forced to flee violence and persecution.

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- [READ](#) the press release: [UNHCR donates medical equipment for response to COVID-19 in southern Belize](#)

(MIRPS) COMPREHENSIVE REGIONAL PROTECTION AND SOLUTIONS FRAMEWORK

- The **MIRPS Working Group on Internal Displacement has supported its members** (El Salvador, Honduras, and Mexico) to identify better ways to take evidence-based decisions on interventions, such as the Emergency Humanitarian Assistance Mechanism (MAHE) in Honduras, the pilot program for gender-based violence survivors by the National Institute of Social Development in Mexico, and the support in temporary shelters in El Salvador.
- The **MIRPS Working Group on Labour Market Access and Vocational Training** endorses economic integration of displaced populations through a series of recommendations which include the access by Member States to the Buenos Aires Regional Convention for the recognition of diplomas, the creation of alliances with the private sector to open job opportunities, among others. The Group was accompanied by a panel of experts from UNDP, ILO, UNESCO and UNHCR.
- Nine municipalities in Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras and Panama participated in the **MIRPS Working Group on Local Governance**. Some municipalities, such as Esquipulas in Guatemala and San Pedro Sula in Honduras, are fostering strong alliances with NGOs and UN agencies to provide specialized services on protection, education, health and social protection. A toolkit for the incorporation of forced displacement in Local planning has been developed between UNHCR and UNDP. The Working Group will present a proposal for the implementation of the toolkit in 2021-2022.
- During the 81st Standing Committee meeting of UNHCR's Executive Committee, Spain, as the chair of the MIRPS Support Platform, and UNHCR organized the event *Regional Solidarity with Displaced Populations and Host Communities: The Three Support Platforms* on July 6th. The objective of the event was to look at commonalities shared by the platform and address its challenges.
 - **VIDEO:** [event of the three Support Platforms](#)

The event marked the end of the Spanish term as chair of the Platform. Canada took up the leadership of the Platform for the next 12 months and announced that empowerment and protection of women and girls on the move will be the prioritized theme during its leadership.

COORDINATION WITH LOCAL & NATIONAL GOVERNMENT / STRENGTHENING INSTITUTIONS

- In **Belize**, UNHCR trained Refugee Department staff on country-of-origin information to strengthen key elements of the asylum process, as well as make it more evidence-based and efficient.

- In **El Salvador**, UNHCR opened the first Support Space for protection and assistance to IDPs and persons at risk of displacement in coordination with implementing partners and authorities.
- The National Registry of Persons (RENAP) created a special Personal Identity Document for asylum seekers and refugees in **Guatemala**, with UNHCR support.
- Ombudsmen from Colombia, Ecuador, **Panama** and **Costa Rica** participated in a field mission to the border between Colombia and Panama with UNHCR's support to discuss legal issues affecting people in mixed movements. The ombudsmen agreed, among other measures, to advocate for the promotion of humanitarian corridors to overcome protection risks in the most dangerous areas.
- COMAR and UNHCR, together with 19 NGOs and UN agencies in Tapachula (**Mexico**), coordinated the response to the sudden increase in arrivals in mid-July -specially of Haitian nationals- through protection monitoring and profiling, health and sanitation, shelter, COMAR pre-registration, peaceful coexistence activities, and psychological support.
 - **READ** the [press release: Attention to refugees and asylum seekers is strengthened in Tapachula](#)

PROTECTION (INCL. CBP AND SGBV)

- The first internally displaced persons committee created in **El Salvador** currently made up of 15 IDPs began a weekly technical training program in principles of protection and protection monitoring.
- In **Honduras**, a workshop on forced displacement was addressed to 20 members of the National Federation of Organizations of Persons with Disabilities of Honduras (FENOPDIH) to achieve a better understanding of forced displacement and improve inclusion and accessibility for persons with disabilities.
 - **READ** the [study on challenges and resources for people with disabilities in human mobility](#).

CHILD PROTECTION

- A memorandum of understanding was signed between UNHCR and the Department of Youth Services to allow children asylum seekers in **Belize** to access youth services offered by the government, including protection services against sexual exploitation, gender-based violence, and abuse.
- UNHCR Tapachula (**Mexico**) delivered WiFi access kits donated by the NetHope and Cisco COVID-19 Response Project to the shelter Ejército de Salvación. The project provides free WiFi access and dedicated bandwidth for one year allowing children to access remote education.

INTER-AGENCY COORDINATION

- In **El Salvador, Honduras** and **Guatemala** UNHCR led the protection clusters on the development of Humanitarian Response Plans. In the three countries, UNHCR presented 5 projects to ensure the protection of refugees, asylum seekers and IDPs focusing on community engagement and strengthening, provision of humanitarian assistance, access to temporary shelter and strengthening of asylum systems and IDP governance.
- In **Panama**, the UN Resident Coordinator and the Ministry of Security signed a Memorandum of Understanding that outlines UN agencies' support to the government in complementing their response to mixed movements and transit communities in Darien and Chiriqui provinces.

DELIVERY OF HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE & CASH

- In **Costa Rica**, UNHCR provided assistance to Guatuso municipality after heavy floods and followed up on the situation of people of concern residing in the area. A total of 2,124 beneficiaries received cash assistance, including 674 new recipients in July.
- In **Guatemala**, UNHCR donated hygiene and office items to the Indigenous Women Defenders' Office, Ak'Yuam (shelter for gender-based violence survivors, including refugee women) and Asociación Alcanzando Estrellas (a community organization providing protection services to children at risk). A total of 910 beneficiaries from 346 households received cash assistance in July.
- In **Mexico**, UNHCR is supporting more than 100 shelters across the country with Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) kits and hygiene products. During

the reporting period, UNHCR supported shelters in Tijuana, San Luis Rio Colorado and Caborca. 12,115 new beneficiaries have received cash assistance.

- Cash assistance for food, rent, hygiene items, and baby products was provided to 167 households (totalling 451 individuals) in **Panama**.

DURABLE SOLUTIONS & LIVELIHOODS

- In **Costa Rica**, UNHCR provides technical support to develop the Refugee and Asylum-Seeker Inclusion Guidelines for the National Employment System to ensure that specific needs of the population of concern are considered in efforts to promote decent work.
- In **El Salvador**, 20 businesses highlight the economic benefits of inclusive and diverse workplaces to foster the economic inclusion of LGBTIQ+ persons of concern.
- In **Honduras**, the first Certificate Programme on Internal Displacement was launched to strengthen capacities of 40 community leaders such as women, youth and LGBTI+ groups, as well as local authorities, to promote favourable protection environments in their communities.
- As of 31 July, 3,753 refugees were relocated from southern to central and northern **Mexico** as part of the local integration program. UNHCR Monterrey facilitated 2 virtual sensitization workshops for over 200 personnel from OXXO retailer to address –through roleplay- their specific integration challenges to promote an inclusive workplace for refugees.
- In **Panama**, 30 refugees, asylum-seekers and members of host community completed their Talento sin Fronteras employability programme. In the last workshop they finetuned their job search strategy and gained knowledge of local organizations currently hiring and online job search platforms.

The importance of flexible funding for UNHCR's situations

Flexible financial support allows UNHCR to place funds anywhere within a given situation, in line with the office's priorities, from where people in need are forced to flee, to where they find refuge. Flexible funding needs to be timely for UNHCR to plan in the most efficient manner, allocating to priorities first.

UNHCR's humanitarian response in **Central America and Mexico** is made possible thanks to the generous support of major donors who have contributed unrestricted funding to UNHCR's global operations, and to donors who have generously contributed directly to **UNHCR Americas operations**.

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CENTRAL AMERICA and MEXICO
PERSONS OF CONCERN as of End 2020

