

Costa Rica

May - December 2023

FACT SHEET

ACNUR / Austin Ramirez

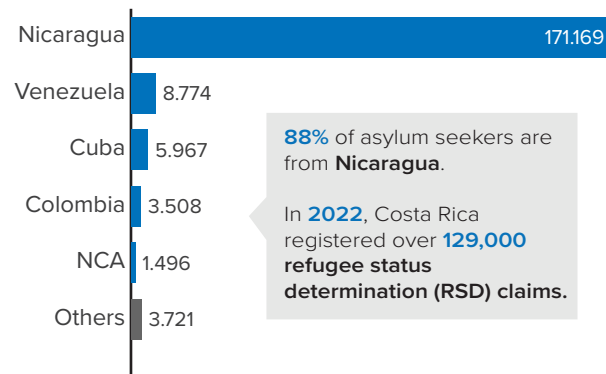
Costa Rica is a main destination country for people in need of international protection, mainly from Nicaragua. As of 2018, Costa Rica was the **first recipient of Nicaraguans** forced to flee, with over **300,000** asylum seekers. This increase in applications has put significant pressure on the asylum system and on essential services. **Costa Rica** has also become a **transit country for people in mixed movements**, particularly in 2023. Most of these people arrive in dire conditions **with urgent humanitarian and protection needs**.

UNHCR supports **Costa Rica** in improving the **asylum system** to ensure safe **access to the territory**, access to proper **documentation** and **work permits**, and prompt and fair decisions. **UNHCR** participates in the **response to mixed movements** in coordination with IOM and other UN agencies. In addition, **UNHCR** implements, together with IOM, the **Safe Mobility** initiative to provide **legal pathways** towards the United States and Spain. **UNHCR** collaborates with **development actors** to address the impact of hosting large numbers of refugees

PEOPLE FOR AND WITH WHOM WE WORK

Asylum seekers by country of origin

As of December 2023



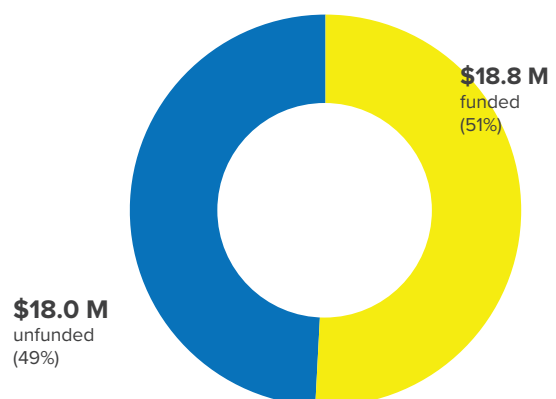
Note: NCA refers to North Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras)

More statistics available at UNHCR's [Refugee Data Finder](https://data.unhcr.org/).

FUNDING (AS OF 15 DECEMBER 2023)

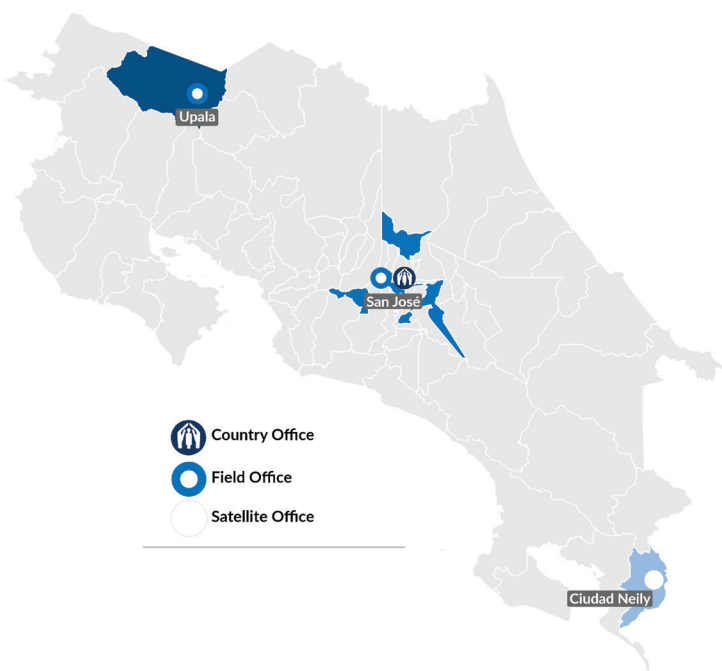
USD 36.8M

funding requirement for Costa Rica



Operational Context

- Since **2018**, more than **314,000 Nicaraguans** have fled their country to Costa Rica seeking international protection. This figure represents 88% of the country's total asylum applications and placed **Costa Rica as the third largest recipient of new asylum applications globally** in 2022.
- The increase in the number of applications has posed a challenge for Costa Rican authorities, **straining the current capacity to evaluate cases** and grant refugee status to those who require it, and **increasing the demand for services** related to rights such as health and education.
- As a result, the Costa Rican government has **increased its efforts** to make the **asylum system more efficient** and offer alternative regularization mechanisms. **UNHCR** has supported these efforts through **technical assistance and capacity building**.
- In December **2022** the **Decree 43810** came in to access the asylum system, which represented access barriers and, in some cases (e.g. ban on leaving the country), were unconstitutional. On the other hand, in March **2023**, through **Decree 43809**, a **Special Temporary Category** was created, aiming to provide an alternative regularization pathway for Cuban, Nicaraguan and Venezuelan persons, effective until 29 February 2024.
- The dimension of the mixed movements in transit through **Costa Rica heading to North America** has escalated in an important matter. In 2023, more than **456,000 people** entered the country through the Southern border and were assisted by the Migration Authority (DGME).
- **Most people in transit entering from Panama** just after crossing the perilous Darien region, **pay for buses** that take them directly to the Northern border with Nicaragua. **Many others stay temporarily at the Temporary Reception Station (EMI-SUR)** in the South border, a collective shelter coordinated by the Costa Rican authorities and supported by the United Nations and other humanitarian partners, where they receive basic humanitarian and medical assistance while waiting for remittances to continue their journey.
- Given the impacts of this situation, **UNHCR has expanded its capacity on the southern border**, through staff, case management and delivery of key assistance; also, is planning to have a more permanent presence.
- From June **2023**, **Costa Rica**, jointly with Colombia, Guatemala and Ecuador, joined the **Safe Mobility (SMO) initiative**, led by the US government and supported by **UNHCR and IOM**, in order to offer safe legal pathways for those heading towards North America. As a result, in August the **first SMO office was opened in Upala**, to provide guidance and assistance to refugees and migrants. In addition, both in the North region and in the Metro Area (GAM), campaigns have been developed to share this initiative with refugees.



UNHCR PRESENCE

Staff:

129 National staff

24 International staff

Offices:

1 Country Office at San José

2 Field Offices at Upala (North region) and San José (Metro Area)

1 Satellite office at Ciudad Neily (South Region)

Direct presence in 7 cantons/4 provinces through 9 implementing partners.

Priorities

Protection

UNHCR Costa Rica works to guarantee access to rights and enhance protection through a wide range of interventions and activities for asylum seekers, refugees and those at risk of statelessness. **UNHCR** works with the Government to promote **safe access to territory, non-refoulement**, effective **registration** and documentation, access to a fair and efficient **asylum system**, prevention of and response to **statelessness**, and access to basic rights and services. These activities also aim at strengthening **prevention and response to sexual and gender-based violence, child protection** and specific interventions for other vulnerable people.

Strengthening of the Asylum System

- Since **2018**, **UNHCR** and the Migration Authority (DGME) signed a **Memorandum of Understanding**, including commitments to **reach a fair, efficient, and quality asylum system**.
- UNHCR** technical support includes the hiring of staff and equipment to **support the Refugee Unit**, assistance to simplify the procedure, and the development of a **web application** to streamline all steps of the asylum process, in order to speed up the processing of some **194,600** pending asylum applications.
- UNHCR**, together with **IOM** have provided technical support to the authorities in the adoption of the **Special Temporary Category**, so that more people can benefit from the initiative.

People with specific needs

- UNHCR**, together with key entities such as the **National Council for People with Disabilities** and the **National Council for the Elderly**, coordinates actions to address the situation of **people with heightened vulnerabilities** which may entail specific protection needs.

Community-Based Protection

- Through two-way communication mechanisms, **UNHCR** promotes access for people for and with whom we work to **information on rights, national services, and programs by UNHCR** and its partners; while also obtaining information on **risks and protection needs** in the country and manages individual cases.

Legal assistance and counselling

- UNHCR** seeks to expand the capacity of displaced communities to **access justice through legal information and guidance**. **UNHCR** also provides legal assistance and representation, particularly on access to rights and on the refugee status determination (RSD) procedure. **UNHCR** also supports and counsels **persons at risk of statelessness**, including those who have recently been **arbitrarily deprived of their nationality** by Nicaragua.

Emergency preparedness and response

UNHCR, together with partners of the **United Nations Country Team (UNCT)**, has been extensively involved in reviewing and providing technical assistance and feedback to the Costa Rican government's "**Assistance Strategy for Mixed Migratory Flows**". This strategy encompasses the **contingency plan** led by the Migration Authority (DGME) to respond comprehensively to the situation of mixed movements at both borders, under four components: **identification** of persons upon arrival from Panama, **reception** at the Southern border, **transportation** and **reception** at the Northern border.



Livelihoods

UNHCR works to promote access to state programs and labor market opportunities for displaced persons such as refugees, asylum seekers and stateless persons. This is done by promoting **skill development to improve employability and entrepreneurship**, as well as promoting their profiles and capabilities in the public and private sectors, to ensure their **inclusion in Costa Rican economic life**.



Health

Even as **Costa Rica** offers free health services in emergencies, refugees and migrants have health needs, particularly for the treatment of serious or chronic diseases. In order to cover those who are most vulnerable, **since 2020, UNHCR supports the Costa Rican Social Security Fund (CCSS)** so that there are always **5,000 quotas** available for health insurance for refugees and asylum seekers.



Cash-based assistance

Due to their reception conditions, many refugees and asylum seekers face **significant gaps in meeting their basic needs**. Since **2019 UNHCR** has been developing a **multipurpose cash assistance program (MPCA)** under direct implementation, which allows people to decide how to use this grant to address their most urgent needs.



Registration

Whereas the **Government of Costa Rica** manages registration for refugee status determination, **UNHCR registers refugees and asylum seekers to support protection response**, manage individual cases, and to provide assistance and other programmatic responses.

Partnerships and coordination

UNHCR's main government counterparts in **Costa Rica** are the **Ministry of Foreign Affairs**, the **Ministry of the Interior** and the Migration Authority, this is, the **General Directorate of Migration and Foreigners (DGME)**. Other key entities for **UNHCR's** work are: The **Ministry of National Planning and Political Economy (MIDEPLAN)**, the **Mixed Institute of Social Assistance (IMAS)**, the **Ministry of Labor**, the **Costa Rican Social Security Fund (CCSS)** and the **National Child Trust Fund (PANI)**.

UNHCR works hand in hand with different actors of the **International Financial Institutions (IFI)** to **i) jointly quantify** the contributions of refugees and asylum seekers to the Costa Rican economy and society, **ii) identify** the challenges for their local integration in different areas, and **iii) share** results with the authorities to identify opportunities for joint work. The main IFIs with which **UNHCR** works in **Costa Rica** are the **World Bank (WB)**, the **International Monetary Fund (IMF)**, and the **Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)**.



- **UNHCR** supports the Government of Costa Rica to implement of its **Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework**, known locally as **MINARE**. Since **2021**, **UNHCR** serves as the Technical Secretariat of MINARE, currently in coordination with the OAS, providing support to the **National Technical Team (ETN)** and the **MINARE Executive Committee**, which is led by the Vice Minister of Government.
- The **MINARE** consists of a comprehensive approach, bringing together ministries and institutions that are directly involved in or support response to refugees and asylum seekers and facilitates coordination among these actors. Through **MINARE, Costa Rica** also contributes to the **Regional Integrated Framework for Protection and Solutions (MIRPS)**, which includes Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, Panama, and **Costa Rica**.
- In January **2022**, through **Executive Decree 43393**, the Government of **Costa Rica** formalized **MINARE**, consolidated as the **national inter-institutional platform for the discussion of international protection issues**, which guides Costa Rica's response to asylum seekers and refugees.
- Given the situation of **mixed movements** and its impact on the borders, particularly at the South, **UNHCR**, together with other agencies of the **United Nations Country Team (UNCT)**, keeps permanent dialogue with the **Migration Authority (DGME)** to join efforts to assist and protect population in transit. **UNHCR** also enhances cross-cutting aspects such as **needs assessment and analysis, communications**, among others.

UNHCR thanks the invaluable support of donors who have contributed to the **Costa Rica** operation, as well as those who have contributed to **UNHCR** programs through other funding modalities.



UNHCR Costa Rica is also grateful for the contributions of our global private donors: Australia / China / Germany / Italy / Japan / Republic of Korea / Spain / Sweden / United Kingdom / United States.

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