

Central America and Mexico

Situation Report – January 2019



Close to 1,200 Venezuelan refugees and migrants have received **direct emergency assistance** in Costa Rica, Mexico and Panama.

Two campaigns - **Países Hermanos** and **#SomosLoMismo** – have been launched to combat xenophobia and promote peaceful coexistence.

Legal support has been provided to over 300 newly-arrived and most vulnerable Venezuelans in the three targeted countries of the subregion.

OPERATIONAL CONTEXT

- In **Mexico**, the new administration showed encouraging first steps in improving the response to migration and forced displacement. In December, it announced its new migration policy (*Política Migratoria del Gobierno de México 2018-2024*) to be based on human rights and collaboration towards development with the countries of the North of Central America (NCA), committing to improve Mexico's asylum and migratory regime, including the respective lead agencies the Mexican Commission of Assistance to Refugees (COMAR) and the National Migration Institute (INM).
- In the absence of an effective passport renewal mechanism, 29% of the Venezuelans interviewed under the Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM) exercise will have no official identification document by the end of 2019 (total number of people interviewed was 1,964). Not having a valid passport will be a barrier to carry out any migratory administrative procedure and it will significantly limit access to basic services and fundamental rights.
- A major challenge as well as opportunity is that many Venezuelan refugees, asylum seekers and migrants live in urban areas, spread across the country. Thus, identification and targeting poses a challenge. At the same time, the urban context offers opportunities, including access to services, work place integration and other aspects of local integration, available also for migrants, asylum seekers and refugees from Venezuela.
- The mapping of local actors and the building of local support networks in cities with an important Venezuelan population must be prioritized to further strengthen responses by federal authorities. Advocacy activities at the central level will be a priority to harmonize practices. An additional operational challenge is the absence of partners' presence in Quintana Roo (with Cancún Airport being a major entry point), where mobile teams have to conduct regular missions to reach Venezuelans in need of international protection in this part of the country.
- In **Panama**, during the second half of 2018, a significant decrease in the number of Venezuelan asylum seekers was noted compared to the same period of 2017, and a similar trend has been observed in January 2019 with only 49 asylum-seekers received. This is due to different factors, including the restrictive measures applied by the Panamanian government (visa requirement, reduction in time for tourists' stays and sanctions to foreigners with no valid work permit). On the other hand, the Government has also initiated an extraordinary regularization process for Venezuelans in the country, for which approximately 37,000 Venezuelans applied.
- The National Immigration Service (SNM) granted legal stay to 23,510 Venezuelans in 2018, a record number in comparison with previous years. During January 2019, an additional 2,947 persons were granted legal stay.
- SNM statistics also indicate that, in 2018, the government blocked the entry of 296 Venezuelans. The SNM informed that 250 did not comply with the immigration requisites to enter (proof of economic solvency, return ticket or deteriorated/expired passport) and 46 were denied entry due to criminal records or security reasons. A total of 3,474 Venezuelans were voluntarily repatriated (86%), deported (10%) or expelled (4%).
- The gradual entry of Venezuelans through the Darien gap (Panama's border province with Colombia) is being reported specifically around Puerto Obaldia (12 persons during the month of January). This population is arriving in unfavorable health conditions, dehydrated, without food and with many insect bites. Almost all are entering without documentation.
- An interagency characterization exercise on the situation of Venezuelans in Panama, which started last year, is being finalized. The first results of the exercise were shared with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the National Office for the Attention of Refugees (ONPAR). UNHCR and IOM suggested the creation of an interinstitutional working group with key government entities to jointly analyze the main results and key priorities to be addressed.

- In **Costa Rica**, it is estimated that a large number of Venezuelans are not regularized. An irregular status exposes migrants to exploitation and increases their vulnerability.
- Partners in the response currently focus on data collection and dissemination, capacity building and coordination, direct assistance and socio-economic integration, as well as effective access to the territory, prevention of refoulement, access to Refugee Status Determination procedures and early identification and referral of vulnerable cases.
- A Migrant Support Center was recently created by IOM, through which Venezuelan migrants can request guidance and information in order to regularize their migration status, access to the labour and educational markets, health services and psychosocial assistance. A toll-free number (800-Venezuela) was also launched to provide direct assistance to highly vulnerable Venezuelan migrants. Those in need of international protection can receive free information at UNHCR's Call Centre and help website and mail.

RESPONSE OVERVIEW AND FUNDING UPDATE

Area of Intervention 1: Direct Emergency Assistance

In Costa Rica, Mexico and Panama, assistance was provided to Venezuelan refugees and migrants in vulnerable situations to cover their basic needs. This included multi-purpose cash grants and/or food vouchers, support for housing expenses, transportation expenses, medical attention, and the delivery of food and non-food items as well as hygiene and baby kits. Partners also supported the most vulnerable through psycho-social attention. Beneficiaries were also referred to government-run services when possible. Refurbishment of shelter facilities have taken place as well. Between December 2018 and January 2019, these activities have directly reached over 800 Venezuelans in Panama, close to 200 in Mexico and – in addition to the almost 1,200 whom benefited from the Migrant Support Center since May 2018 – over 150 in Costa Rica. In all three countries, most of the assistance was delivered in the main cities where Venezuelan refugees and migrants are concentrated, sometimes with the support of Venezuelan community organizations. However, some of the interventions focused on more remote areas, where new arrivals are often highly vulnerable, like it was the case at the Temporary Humanitarian Assistance Station in Peñita, Darien province, Panama.

Partners in all three countries also teamed up in order to guarantee and facilitate the beneficiaries' access to information about rights, goods and services. This was done with a particular focus on age, gender, and specific vulnerabilities, with partners making constant efforts to tailor the services offered based on the needs expressed by the Venezuelan refugees and migrants through different types of surveys and participatory assessments. Almost 2,000 potential beneficiaries were for example recently interviewed in Mexico, highlighting health assistance as one of the areas with the highest needs (first priority for women, and second on the list for men).



Héctor, a 69 year old Venezuelan asylum-seeker, lives in Panama City with his wife Paula, 67, since early 2017. The couple has been renting a bedroom and barely make it to the end of the month. As asylum-seekers they do not have a right to work in the country.

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Area of Intervention 2: Protection

In the three countries of the subregion, the partners involved in the response have been promoting access to territory, to asylum and to migratory regularization. In January legal support, through information, counselling or legal assistance, has been provided to 154 Venezuelan asylum seekers in Mexico and to 138 in Panama. Partners have also supported the identification and referral of cases with specific protection needs. Cases of child protection, elderly claimants and survivors of SGBV and have been referred to specialized services and/or temporary shelters. Partners maintain regular presence at the government's refugee offices in order to provide information and guidance to persons with international protection needs on the asylum process. Information material has also been developed and disseminated, some of which focused specifically on the needs of Venezuelan refugees and migrants. An online information campaign in Mexico, known as *El Jaguar*, has received an unprecedented number of hits in January 2019, of which 7% came from within Venezuela. Hotline (phone) support was available to Venezuelans, providing them with information related either to immigration requirements, including potential regularization options, or to the asylum process.

A few cases of *refoulement* have been reported, mainly at airports (three in Mexico). Border monitoring visits were undertaken to monitor possible population movements of Venezuelans, namely in Panama at the border with Costa Rica (*Paso Canoas*).

Area of Intervention 3: Socio Economic and Cultural Integration

In January, RMRP partners have also made efforts to promote social cohesion, peaceful coexistence and non-discrimination in host communities, with a specific focus on youth. This was done at the local level, mostly in cities, through meetings and workshops with members of the communities and in schools with a high presence of Venezuelan nationals, and at the national or regional level, through massive campaigns (*Paises hermanos* in Costa Rica, *#SomosLoMismo* in Panama) addressing xenophobic breakouts against refugees and migrants in general, and Venezuelan nationals in particular. These campaigns had a significant impact in social media, with some videos - portraying life stories of refugees and migrants and their contribution to the local economy and culture - being viewed 150,000 times and receiving more than 2,000 reactions and comments. In Panama, the visit of the Pope for the World Youth Days towards the end of the month was also used by partners as an opportunity to give echo to messages of tolerance and peaceful coexistence.

Another area of focus was on decent work and livelihoods for the Venezuelan refugee and migrant population. Through various programmes carried out in close partnership with private sector entities, partners were able to support a limited number of Venezuelan nationals' self-reliance in some way. In Panama, nine Venezuelan refugees - asylum seekers are not allowed to be formally employed in Panama - learned about employment skills and received cultural employment orientation, while three Venezuelan families were supported in their training process and preparation of a business plan to start up their income-generating activity. In Costa Rica, during the reporting period, 61 Venezuelan asylum seekers were assisted through a local partner that currently has agreements with 100 local enterprises and six private training centers all over the country. Beneficiaries received individual work profiling assessments and were immediately included in the work exchange programme, which totals 405 Venezuelans; eight Venezuelan entrepreneurs also received seed capital for their business and four started a training programme. In Mexico, a survey recently revealed that 68% of the Venezuelans interviewed have come to Mexico with academic degrees above high school level and that most of them are in the age range between 20 and 45 years old. As a consequence, partners in the country are very much focused on developing strategies towards social-economic integration. A total of nine Venezuelan asylum-seekers received cash support for school fees and one for university fees; two Venezuelan asylum-seekers received cash grants for vocational and professional trainings and job-matching programmes; and 22 Venezuelan asylum-seekers received cash for other types of integration support beyond education and workplace integration. Also, 45 initiatives of Venezuelan women entrepreneurs were supported through a Christmas Bazar where they were able to promote and sell their products.

Finally, to promote access to basic rights, particularly education, health and dignified housing for refugees and migrants, partners in Panama held sessions on the peaceful possession of property, especially on the lease of houses. Venezuelan children/adolescents were supported in the pre-registration process for accessing the school system, as guidance was provided regarding the academic processes in Panama. In Costa Rica, a project was implemented with the International Center for the Human Rights of Migrants to promote the health of Venezuelan migrants through recreational, sport and artistic activities. A joint work plan with the Ministry of Education was also designed to inform Education Centers about migrant students' access to the education system.



Venezuelan family of five restarts their life in Panama City. Javier and Maria Eugenia are selling desserts like “arroz con leche” and “jello” to support their small family. They were supported through a UNHCR-funded Seed Money programme that helps asylum seekers with livelihood opportunities.

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Area of Intervention 4: Strengthening the Capacity of Host Government

The main objectives of the partners involved under this area of intervention are to strengthen the capacities of national migration and asylum institutions for the registration, regularization, documentation and identification of protection needs. In Mexico for example, where discretionary responses by federal authorities have been identified, partners carry out advocacy activities to harmonize institutional practices that are in line with the federal legal framework, while highlighting the specific characteristics of Venezuelan migrants (e.g. lack of apostille on birth certificates, barriers to renew their passport, etc.). In Panama, partners continue to strengthen the refugee body's capacity to address the existing backlog of cases (mainly Venezuelans), namely through the recruitment in January of four new lawyers to support the body in processing individual cases and the provision of technical equipment. In Costa Rica, partners did the same by renting new premises for the Refugee Unit in San Jose and by supporting the governmental efforts to decentralize in order to reach out to those who are not in the capital city. Additionally, 45 adjudicators were hired in San Jose and Upala to increase the processing capacity of asylum claims and, since September 2018, seven lawyers and six office workers have joined the Migration Department. Likewise, meetings have been established with the judges of the Immigration Court to deal with legal issues that may affect Venezuelan migrants.

In Panama, in order to enhance the capacity of government institutions for the identification and assistance of specific protection needs, partners keep government counterparts updated about the situation in Venezuela by providing information about the displacement and protection trends. During the reporting period, various workshops and briefings targeting governmental staff were held about international protection. Training was also provided to 61 staff members of the Ministry of Education on access to education for refugees and asylum seekers. Similarly, in Costa Rica, the National Child Protection Institute and the Migration Authority have been strengthened to ensure early identification of and response to children-at-risk, including unaccompanied minors. Finally, the points of entry, exit

and residence of Venezuelan migrants in Costa Rica have been determined thanks to continuous monitoring and the DTM exercise, with specific vulnerabilities and the services required having been identified. This accurate information and data analysis is useful to support decision making and to share with government institutions.

In order to strengthen analysis and information sharing capacities at the national level, discussions were held with the three government dependencies related with Vital Statistics in Panama, on how to best register and keep track of births and deaths of foreign individuals, especially Venezuelans. As a consequence of these sessions, the respective entities are making adjustments in their formats to anchor specific data that will allow them to report these cases. The three institutions are the Ministry of Health, Civil Registry (*Registro Civil del Tribunal Electoral*) and the National Institute of Statistics. In Costa Rica, weekly meetings are organized with the Venezuelan association in Costa Rica (Alianza VenCr), as well as monthly meetings with the Migration Authority, to share relevant information and to discuss issues that may affect refugee and migrants from Venezuela currently living in Costa Rica.

COORDINATION

Given the mixed nature of the movements and the complexity of the situation, UNHCR and IOM coordinate the relief and resilience efforts with relevant government entities, other agencies inside and outside the UN system, civil society, faith-based organizations, the private sector and others. This collaboration aims at a whole-of-government and whole-of-society response, achieved in line with the Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework (MIRPS) and based on the countries' commitments towards the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact on Migration. Particularly relevant to support the governments' responses are the work of the national refugee bodies and migration institutions; however, the response also stretches across line ministries, to facilitate local integration and solutions for Venezuelan refugees and migrants, including access to education, social services, health and others.

Regular meetings of the working-level coordination groups have been set up in order to monitor the implementation of the Plan and avoid duplication of efforts. In all three countries concerned, discussions are ongoing in order to proceed with the creation of national platforms.

CONTRIBUTIONS

Partners in the response are very grateful for the financial support provided by donors, contributing to their activities with un-earmarked and earmarked funds.

Colombia | Denmark | European Union | Germany | Netherlands | Norway | Republic of Korea | Switzerland | United Kingdom

PLATFORM PARTNERS

Alianza VenCR | Fundación Mujer | Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society | ILO | IOM | Jesuit Refugee Service | Norwegian Refugee Council | RET International | Sin Fronteras IAP | UNESCO | UNDP | UNFPA | Unicef | UNHCR | Universidad de Costa Rica (UCR) - Facultad de Derecho | UNODC | World Vision International

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