

Central America and Mexico

Situation Report – February 2019



Close to 1,900 Venezuelan refugees and migrants have received **direct emergency assistance** in Costa Rica, Mexico and Panama.

In Costa Rica and Panama partners seconded staff to migration and refugee authorities to **help reduce backlogs in processing**.

Information, counselling and legal assistance has been provided to close to 480 vulnerable Venezuelans in the subregion.

OPERATIONAL CONTEXT

- In **Mexico**, Venezuelans were the second largest nationality of people seeking asylum in 2018; during the same year, the National Migration Institute (INM) registered a 31% increase in requests from Venezuelan nationals to obtain a valid migratory status, in comparison to 2017 figures. In January and February 2019, the increase in claimants of Venezuelans compared to the same period of 2018 was 121% and Venezuelans now represent the third largest group in terms of asylum claims after Hondurans and Salvadorans.
- Responses from national institutions have been heterogeneous throughout the country; mapping of local actors and building local support networks in cities with high concentrations of Venezuelan population is an ongoing strategy to cope with occasionally discretionary responses by federal authorities. In 2019, advocacy activities at the central level will be a priority to harmonize practices.
- In **Panama**, according to the National Office for the Attention of Refugees' (ONPAR) statistics, an average of 50 applications per month of Venezuelan asylum seekers were received during the last months. This comes in addition to the existing backlog of cases received before (in 2018). Venezuelans are the second nationality of asylum seekers in Panama at the moment.
- Partners have also identified an increase in numbers of Haitian families entering through the Darien that are traveling with children born in Venezuela. However, these children are being officially registered by the National Borders Service (SENAFRONT) as Haitians, based on the nationality of their parents.
- The main priority continues to be the lack of formal documentation, both for migrants who seek to regularize their situation and those who have applied for international protection.
- In addition, there is an urgent need to identify alternative livelihood opportunities for migrants without formal documentation and people seeking international protection due, among others, to the impossibility of accessing formal employment. Since humanitarian assistance is limited, people are facing increasing difficulties to meet their basic needs.
- In **Costa Rica**, Venezuelans have continued arriving in the country through the airport in San Jose and the southern border, despite the increasing difficulties they face to regularize their situation. Refugee status continues to be recognized at a relatively low rate compared to other countries in the region; although staff has been seconded by IOM and UNHCR to the Migration Authority and the Refugee Unit to strengthen processing capacities.
- Partners in Costa Rica have been able to increasingly foster interest among the private sector to offer training and support for the socio-economic integration of Venezuelan refugees and migrants.

RESPONSE OVERVIEW AND FUNDING UPDATE

Area of Intervention 1: Direct Emergency Assistance

During February, partners in Costa Rica, Mexico and Panama continued delivering direct assistance to vulnerable Venezuelan refugees and migrants in the form of hygiene kits and food, as well as multi-purpose cash-based interventions (CBI). In Mexico for example, e-wallets were used to deliver food assistance to 235 people in Mexico City, Puebla, Querétaro and Quintana Roo. In Panama, during the delivery of hygiene kits, personalized psychosocial

assistance and sessions on grief management were offered to families by IOM, along with information regarding the services available for refugees and migrants, and the referral of cases to the relevant entities when necessary. Assistance continued to be offered at the Temporary Humanitarian Assistance Station in Panama's southern province where Venezuelan refugees and migrants are joined by flows from other nationalities. The Migrant Support Center (MSC) in Costa Rica has continued offering accommodation, food and guidance to migrants while UNHCR partners HIAS, RET and *Fundación Mujer* have established a permanent presence at the Refugee Unit in San José to offer information on humanitarian assistance and government programmes for Venezuelans.



A Venezuelan migrant in Cancun, Mexico, receives an e-wallet to purchase food at a local supermarket chain. Due to their migratory status, Venezuelans often face challenges in accessing formal jobs in order to cover basic expenses. E-wallets offer them a safe and effective way to purchase food and other basic items without having to manage cash.

IOM Mexico

Area of Intervention 2: Protection

Partners in the three countries provided information, counselling and legal assistance to Venezuelan families regarding mainly access to housing, health and education services, as well as asylum and regularization procedures. Information was shared through a series of sessions organized for families as well as printed materials distributed at different gathering points, and during delivery of direct assistance, as well as directly through partners' networks in each country.

In Panama, partners undertook monitoring missions to the Panamanian borders (Paso Canoas and Puerto Obaldia) to identify persons of concern, particularly of Venezuelan nationality, in order to provide legal assistance and/or referral to other partners. In the case of the southern border of Panama, Venezuelan nationals are joined by groups of Cubans and Haitians, as well as people from East African countries. In Mexico, Venezuelan nationals in need of international protection mostly arrive through international airports, where they face several obstacles to access the asylum procedure. Due to fear of being denied entrance to Mexico or detained, most Venezuelans enter Mexico as tourists without asking for asylum at airports. During the reporting period, partners provided legal guidance and informed Venezuelan asylum-seekers about their legal rights and the asylum procedure. Cases with special protection needs were identified, assisted and referred throughout the country, particularly in Aguascalientes, Cancún, Mexico City, Puebla, San Luis Potosi and Tijuana. In Costa Rica, the MSC and the 800-Venezuela hotline supports Venezuelans providing them with information related to immigration requirements, job permission, including potential regularization options based on valid laws and regulations; a referral mechanism has been established between the MSC and UNHCR's partner agencies, RET International and HIAS, for migrants who require asylum information.

Area of Intervention 3: Socio Economic and Cultural Integration

During the reporting period, partners invested considerable efforts in providing guidance and accompanying Venezuelan refugees and migrants in their search for job opportunities; support focused particularly on soft skills, including the drafting of curriculums and cover letters, as well as the development of business plans and basic training on food handling, computer skills, and customer service. Venezuelan entrepreneurs also received training on

accounting, marketing and the development of business models. In Costa Rica, Venezuelan migrants also received information through the MSC on how to access financial credit to set up a business. In Panama, IOM and the Fundación Activados also conducted an “Intelligent Migration” workshop for 39 Venezuelan migrants, which addressed effective ways to manage migratory grief and key aspects to consider for a successful integration in Panama.

In Panama, children, adolescents and young people are also being assisted in their pre-registration process to access the school system, through guidance regarding the academic processes and procedures (recognition, validation, apostille of academic documents), tutorials and validation of courses for higher education studies, and accompaniments to educational centers to obtain a place in a school.

In commemoration of the Friendship Day, a special act of gratitude for Panamanians was organized on February 14th where, in addition to Venezuelans, Salvadorians, Nicaraguans and Colombians participated; children, adults and teenagers went to different metro stations to give away a rose with a message to Panamanians, it said “To: my Panamanian friend; from: a refugee; I left behind my family and friends, now I have you”.

Information campaigns addressing xenophobia continued to be disseminated throughout Costa Rica, Mexico and Panama; in addition, partners developed campaigns against trafficking in persons, a crime which Venezuelans are often subject to, given their migratory status.

Area of Intervention 4: Strengthening the Capacity of Host Government

Partners in Costa Rica, Mexico and Panama continued supporting authorities of migration and asylum institutions to improve and expedite processing of immigration and refugee determination procedures. In Costa Rica, partners seconded over 50 additional professionals to the Refugee Unit, the Migration Administrative Tribunal and the Migration Authority. Training was also provided to social government institutions such as the National Council of People with Different Abilities (CONAPDIS) and the Institute on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (IAFA) to identify protection needs. Both institutions are currently working on attention protocols for persons in need of international protection.

Partners have so far supported the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR) with 39 contractors in key locations throughout the country. Support for additional 63 secondments to COMAR is underway and the selection processes are currently being finalized. Plans for additional office expansions are also being worked on. New COMAR field locations are to include Palenque in Southern Mexico and Monterrey and Tijuana in the North.

In Panama, additional staff was also seconded to ONPAR to process individual cases and support the reduction of the backlog. Specific training was delivered along with the Ministry of Education for the implementation of the Executive Decree 1225 which recognizes and validates academic degrees, certificates and credits obtained in national and foreign educational centers. In Metetí (Darién), near the southern border of Panama, a mapping of services was carried out and presented along with the SENNIAF (National Secretariat for Children Adolescents and Family) - ONPAR protocol on child protection to public officials from SENNIAF, the Public Ministry, SENAFRONT, Judicial entity and Ombudsman's Office.

COORDINATION

The working level coordination groups have kept meeting regularly and exchanging information to ensure a comprehensive and efficient approach. Monitoring mechanisms have been established and are currently being rolled out to improve reporting on activities and funding received. In each of the countries IOM, UNHCR and several of the response partners liaise closely with national migration institutions and refugee bodies to provide technical assistance and timely response when required. Particularly regarding socio economic and cultural integration, an increasing number of stakeholders from civil society and the private sector have been expressing interest in supporting efforts to integrate Venezuelan refugees and migrants and promote healthy discussions with host communities.

PLATFORM PARTNERS

Alianza VenCR | Fundación Mujer | Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society | ILO | IOM | Jesuit Refugee Service | Norwegian Refugee Council

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 | United States

| 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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