

## OPERATIONAL CONTEXT

- According to the Mexican Refugee Commission COMAR, at the end of April, 2,440 Venezuelan refugees have applied for asylum in Mexico in 2019. After Honduran and Salvadoran asylum-seekers, Venezuelans represent the third largest group of claimants in 2019. When compared to the same period in 2018, Venezuelan asylum claims increased by 51% during the first four months of 2019.
- Mixed movements continue to enter Mexican territory mainly composed by Hondurans, Salvadorans and Guatemalans. Cubans and Haitians are recently joining these movements as well. These dynamics increase the burden on migration authorities, limiting their capacity to provide timely response to Venezuelans.
- The impossibility in Mexico to renew passports by Venezuelan nationals creates serious barriers to e.g. renew their migratory status, cash a cheque, open a bank account, etc.
- In Panama, during the first four months of the year, mixed movements continued through the Darien border. In 2019 only, a total of 7,724 persons have entered the country through the Darien jungle, according to official figures provided by the Panamanian authorities. This movement is facilitated by smugglers, and people come from a number of different countries in Africa (Cameroon, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, Congo and Angola) and South Asia (Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, India). These movements also include persons from Cuba, Haiti, Colombia and, to a lesser degree, Venezuela. In 2019, 24 persons of Venezuelan origin were registered by the authorities entering through Darien province; 7 of which formally requested asylum.
- The total number of Venezuelan asylum seekers in Panama (accumulative figures until April 2019) is 5,068.

## RESPONSE OVERVIEW AND FUNDING UPDATE

### Area of Intervention 1: Direct Emergency Assistance

- In April, UNHCR assisted 188 Venezuelan asylum-seekers in Mexico and a total of MXN 398,565 was granted in form of cash-based interventions. Up to 29 April 2019, a total of 584 Venezuelans have benefitted from Multi-Purpose Cash Grants (MPG) to meet their basic needs such as: food, household and domestic products, and a contribution towards housing and utility bills (168 in January, 80 in February and 148 in March, 188 in April).
- In Panama, NRC provided legal services (information, counseling and legal assistance) to 221 persons of Venezuelan nationality (104 Men / 117 Women), most of them asylum seekers. A total of 98 people have been supported with humanitarian assistance (multipurpose cash grants). A total of 181 families targeted by partner RET received emergency humanitarian assistance focused on food vouchers, medicine purchases, and housing support, of which 7% are from Venezuela. The Panamanian Red Cross supported a total of 79 Venezuelan asylum seekers and vulnerable refugees with multipurpose cash grants, to support them fulfilling their basic and immediate needs. 33 persons were supported with psycho-social assistance.
- NRC continues providing information services on the access to housing, health and education rights in Panama. NRC also continues to prioritize women with children and women with a disease that requires prolonged medical treatment with support. Partner RET held information days to facilitate access to information about rights, especially for refugees and asylum seekers. These talks provide guidance for access to RET services, state services, or services provided by other partners who are also responding to the situation. Between January and April, of the 127 people who attended the information days, 18% were from Venezuela. There was also permanent presence at the waiting room in ONPAR office in order to provide counselling and information about the existing humanitarian assistance and access to basic rights.

- Direct emergency assistance was provided to Venezuelans in identified vulnerable communities in Costa Rica. Both IOM and RET International provided this assistance in the form of 14 emergency kits including food and personal care items to reduce the vulnerability of these individuals.
- Regarding education, RET International and HIAS delivered basic training on rights and access to education to 55 Venezuelans. This instruction used a train-the-trainer approach to develop skills among the participants to further disseminate the information among other Venezuelans in their communities.
- A total of 70 migrants and asylum seekers have benefited from psychosocial assistance in Costa Rica. Two group days of psychosocial assistance have been organized, one of which was focused on serving the elderly.

### Area of Intervention 2: Protection

- In Mexico City, UNHCR's partner registered 89 new Venezuelan asylum-applicants in April (38 men, and 51 women, with an average age of 39 years). Eight asylum applicants from Venezuela were released from Mexico City detention centre to continue their procedures in liberty.
- IOM elaborated an information campaign called "Conectando Comunidades" (Connecting Communities) that is based on Venezuelans' information needs in Mexico. The campaign encompasses several themes like work permits, access to education, revalidate academic degrees, how to prevent trafficking in persons and what to do in case of being a victim, how to avoid migratory scams, services available to elderly migrants and refugees, discriminations and human rights violations among others. Throughout April, information was validated with UNHCR and relevant authorities at different levels. UNHCR joined the campaign that will be launched on May through social media platforms (first phase of dissemination).
- Partner HIAS provided 70 Venezuelan asylum seekers with information about the asylum process in Panama. This action is important due to the absence of government staff to support refugees with information about the expectations of the refugee process. RET has developed, together with the health authorities, the PIAPS programme (Comprehensive Programme of Psychosocial Assistance and Mental Health), which establishes coordination and communication mechanisms for referrals to vulnerable populations in need of care in these sectors. RET has been implementing PIAPS in conjunction with a few health centres for referral of cases, achieving a reduction in response time from eight months to approximately one month. PIAPS has already been presented to other humanitarian organizations for adoption and is awaiting official validation by the Ministry of Health for extended implementation.
- UNHCR has supported the Panamanian Ministry of Health with the aim to develop a response plan and psychosocial support and mental health care for persons most in need (including refugees and asylum seekers from Venezuela).
- Information on access to asylum and regular status was provided through informative sessions with Venezuelans and through hotlines. In Costa Rica, the 800-Venezuela and 800-Refugio hotlines have served more than 124 Venezuelans.
- In Costa Rica IOM, RET and partner Alianza VenCR provided informative sessions to Venezuelans with a total of 348 beneficiaries in April 2019. Participants received information on immigration requirements, refugee determination procedures, work permits, including potential regularization options based on valid laws and regulations. Migrants who need asylum information are referred to the UNHCR partners (RET International and HIAS).

### Area of Intervention 3: Socio Economic and Cultural Integration

- Since 2016, when Venezuelan asylum-seekers began to seek protection in Mexico in large numbers, some 1,255 Venezuelans initiated the asylum procedure in Quintana Roo. UNHCR's local integration profiling is targeting 855 refugees and 400 asylum-seekers. Between October 2018 and April 2019, UNHCR's Roving team carried out nine missions to Quintana Roo, registering and providing assistance and support for local integration to 805 persons (495 cases) representing 64% of the total persons of concern registered by the Mexican authorities. In April 2019, UNHCR's Roving Team provided assistance to 35 new asylum applicants in Quintana Roo, 30 in Cancun and 22 in Playa del Carmen.
- IOM carried out a field mission to several cities in Quintana Roo, including Chetumal, Tulum, Playa del Carmen and Cancun to verify services available to migrants and refugees with the purpose of elaborating a service map jointly with UNHCR.
- RET's model of comprehensive care for refugees and asylum seekers in Panama includes a process of training and provision to families to start a productive activity. As of April, 34 families have been trained and will be starting

their productive activity in the month of May. 17% of the trained people are from Venezuela. The Panamanian Red Cross supported 16 cases with livelihood initiatives (total of 42 beneficiaries). Also 11 cases were supported with vocational skill training, reaching a total of 38 beneficiaries.

- The "Talent Without Borders" Program (alliance between HIAS, UNHCR and ManPower Group) has started with a first generation integrated by refugees and Panamanians who received four training sessions and a certificate after course completion. The sessions covered topics such as how to be prepared at an interview, how to write a resume and communications skills; participants were also offered laptops to access online employment and training platforms such as Coursera. HIAS staff gave attention to 42 (24 women and 18 men) Venezuelans in the Employment Center. NRC conducted information sessions on the peaceful possession of property, especially on the lease of houses and rooms targeting Venezuelan asylum seekers and refugees as well as from other nationalities.
- RET is promoting the implementation of Executive Decree 1225 (October 2015) in Panama which establishes that the lack of documents does not impede access to the education system. In recent months, RET has provided direct training to 31 teachers and principals, and during April meetings were held with the Education Ministry to validate a curriculum so that teachers and principals are aware of and implement the decree. This will benefit all PoC in the country, among which those proceeding from Venezuela with international protection needs.
- The youth network supported by RET is made up of migrants, refugees, asylum-seekers and Panamanian host communities and aims to strengthen the leadership and capacity of action of young members as agents of social change in their host communities. In April, the group held a camp in which the group's advocacy objectives and key actions were defined, and started the development of a dictionary with words of the different countries (including Venezuela). Participants of the network continue with an active role in the #SomosLoMismo campaign.
- HIAS Panama in coordination with the Ministry of Education visited two schools to conduct awareness raising activities aimed at students and teachers to contribute to reducing discrimination against foreigners in the classrooms. Two hundred and fifty one students participated, including eight Venezuelan. The methodology, called "How it feels to be an adolescent refugee?", includes dynamics and activities to introduce concepts to participants and encourage students to express their opinions about refugees and migrants and what is the roll of children and adolescents against discrimination.
- In Costa Rica, IOM and RET, in alliance with Banco Popular provided training on entrepreneurship and microfinances to 104 migrants and asylum seekers contributing to early socio-economic integration. Additionally, partner Fundacion Mujer provided a five-session course on business model; five Venezuelan entrepreneurs completed the course and graduated from this model. In addition, Fundación Mujer delivered workshops for 56 Venezuelans on topics ranging from human rights, soft skills, legal empowerment and finances.

### Area of Intervention 4: Strengthening the Capacity of Host Government

- Under the Quality Assurance Initiative, UNHCR has stepped up technical and financial resources to the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance COMAR to improve the capacity and efficiency of the asylum procedure. So far, UNHCR has supported COMAR with the recruitment of 105 individual contractors to guarantee that a minimum staff was hired according to the operational needs. The additional staff supports COMAR in key locations, including in Mexico City, Tapachula, Tenosique, and Acayucan. UNHCR assists in office renovations, trainings, technical advice on registration and streamlining procedures and IT and other equipment.
- UNHCR donated seven new computers to ONPAR's registration room (Panama's refugee body). This additional equipment will expedite the reception of the claims of the hundreds asylum seekers that daily go to ONPAR's offices (including Venezuelans). Additionally, UNHCR is in the process of hiring four new attorneys to strengthen ONPAR staff in order to address the existing backlog. UNHCR is also working on a referral protocol for women with the National Women Institute and design capacity building sessions for their staff. UNHCR is finally helping ONPAR to strengthen their database in order to provide more accurate information and statistics on Persons of Concern.
- Capacity building sessions about the recently adopted protocol for the attention and referral of unaccompanied children and adolescents are still been carried out in coordination between the National children institute, UNICEF, UNHCR and RET.
- In Costa Rica, RET provided training to 30 migration officials at the Juan Santamaria International Airport as they are in responsible to grant access to the territory for Venezuelans; in addition, eight staff members of the Refugee Unit received training on the provision of gender and psychological first aid for asylum seekers.

## COORDINATION

UNHCR and IOM continue to 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 whole-of-government and whole-of-society response, contributes to avoiding duplication of efforts and improving coordination between key players, particularly the national refugee bodies and migration institutions, as well as other line ministries.

## 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

## CONTRIBUTIONS

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