

Central America & Cuba

Bi-weekly Operational Update

Operations: Regional context

The number of people infected with COVID-19 in the region exceeded 300,000 in the past month, with an increase in new suspected and positive cases in rural departments and municipalities in Nicaragua, where indigenous communities live, including the Miskito communities Wiwilí and Bocay, and in the Coco River area. In Honduras, concern over response capacity is growing in Islas de la Bahía, Gracias a Dios, Santa Bárbara, Choluteca, Valle and El Paraíso. In Guatemala, half of the municipalities are in red alert, including in areas of UNHCR presence in Guatemala City, Esquipulas (Chiquimula), Puerto Barrios (Izabal), Ayutla (San Marcos), and Flores (Petén). In El Salvador, MSF has become the sole medical service provider in gang-dominated communities where the public health system is limited, and where medical personnel fear clashes between gangs or between gangs and security forces.

Violence and insecurity continue in the North of Central America. Increasing levels of violence, insecurity and massacres have impacted people across Honduras. So far in the year 2020, official data reports 2,020 violent deaths, while NGOs report a total of 24 massacres until August, 92% of which took place since the quarantine started in March. In Guatemala, however the decrease in the homicide rate (from 23.3 in 2019 to 16.6 in the first six months in 2020 per 100,000 inhabitants), activities by gangs and other organized crime groups are reportedly increasing since the COVID traffic light system was put in place. Also, in El Salvador, civil society organizations report the human rights situation has worsened during 2020, for example regarding violence against women and crimes over the internet.

Violence against minority groups, including indigenous and afrodescentant communities has been reported across the region. In Guatemala, several violent events have reportedly forced 40 indigenous families off their land after an armed group set fire to several of their residences, according to the information provided by a land rights group. In Honduras, the Afro-Indigenous Garífuna community continues to demand the safe return of five of its leaders who were kidnapped over a month ago.

Members of the LGBTI community are also vulnerable to increased violence. To 31 July, Honduras registered 16 murders of LGBTI people. In El Salvador, members of the LGBTI community continue to report discrimination and lack of effective access to basic services, thus heightening their vulnerability to internal forced displacement and extortion. Costa Rica has become a destination country for Central American LGBTI refugees and asylum seekers fleeing violence and persecution from NCA.

On the other hand, more than three quarters of Nicaraguan refugees and asylum seekers in Costa Rica are going hungry, eating only once or twice a day as a result of the socio-economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a survey. There is concern that these conditions, also worsening in other Nicaraguan refugee-hosting countries, could drive returns in adverse conditions.

In collaboration with local authorities in Guatemala, Panama, and Honduras, UNHCR has installed RHUs in municipalities mostly affected by the pandemic to support testing and quarantine efforts. UNHCR and partners held a capacity-building sessions to ensure successful referral and registration of cases, including psychological self-care sessions. Efforts are being made to reinforce protection networks for teachers at risk of displacement and build capacity among national authorities to provide assistance to new cases, including cases of forced displacement, recruitment, extortion, death threats and SGBV. And UNHCR continues to deliver cash assistance to highly vulnerable people.

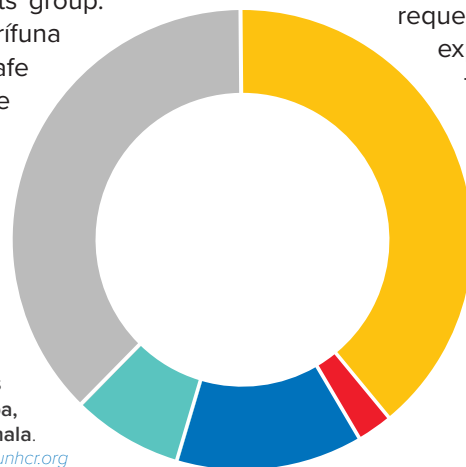
The MIRPS national technical teams undertook a review to identify current needs in strengthening their national asylum systems with the support of the UNHCR-OAS Technical Secretariat. MIRPS countries have identified specific areas in need of bilateral cooperation which are presented to MIRPS Support Platform Presidency. The most common request among the countries was the exchange of experiences on the integration of technology for RSD, which is particularly relevant in the COVID-19 context, when offices provide their services via internet and helplines.

Regional funding overview as of 1 September 2020

127.2M

financial requirements for Central America for 2020 including requirements for the operations and activities in **Panama, Belize, El Salvador, Cuba, Nicaragua, Honduras, Costa Rica, and Guatemala.**

For further details consult reporting.unhcr.org



66% funded

- Tightly earmarked
- Earmarked
- Softly earmarked (indicative allocation)
- Unearmarked (indicative allocation)
- Funding gap (indicative)

Update on country activities

GUATEMALA

One RHU was installed at the Health Centre in Santo Tomás de Castilla, the municipality mostly affected by the pandemic in Izabal, to be used by the Ministry of Health to undertake COVID-19 tests.

92 refugees and asylum seeker successfully accessed their CBI assistance through the bank service.

175 hygiene kits were provided to a women's clinics located in border towns of Morales.

BELIZE

Partner HRCB is broadcasting messages in order to keep the people of concern informed during the state of emergency.

CUBA

For the first time, refugees and asylum seekers were included within the Cooperation Framework signed between the government and the United Nations.

UNHCR is coordinating with the Cuban Red Cross to assist people of concern with specific health needs.

EL SALVADOR

10 community leaders finalized a local workplan for the identification of IDPs in the communities of Los Jobos, Los Horcones, Amate Norte and San Francisco Javier, located in Usulután department.

177 members of the clergy and church volunteers, representatives of national protection institutions and community leaders and local authorities participated in workshops focused on strengthening the identification and referrals of cases of forced displacement.

HONDURAS

434 family humanitarian assistance kits were distributed, which will benefit 2,170 vulnerable people with specific needs identified in high-risk communities of the Rivera Hernández sector in San Pedro Sula.

200 children and youth at risk of recruitment and violence have begun engaging in the "Community Art" pilot community-based protection project, participating in four artistic workshop modules (folkloric dance, drama, plastic arts, and break dance).

COSTA RICA

45 food kits, 23 cleaning kits were provided to 24 families; and 13 CCSS health insurance cards were delivered.

117 refugees and asylum seekers received prepaid cards for cash assistance purposes through mail service.

145 persons attended the core training which includes a soft skills, legal empowerment and financial education component.

PANAMA

A participatory assessment was conducted with children and adolescents on safe spaces, education and

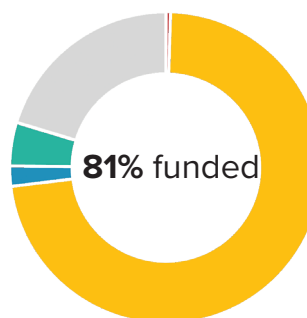
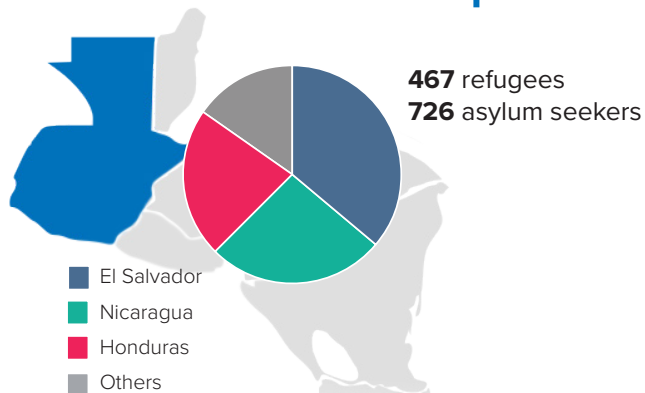
COVID-19.

41 new persons have joined the digital alphabetization programme and 30 persons have been referred to the new version of Talento sin Fronteras (labour insertion programme).



Check out testimonios.acnur.org to find out more about how displaced communities in the Americas are coping with the pandemic.

UNHCR Response in Guatemala



34.6M

financial requirements for Guatemala in 2020
Including requirements for the Coronavirus Emergency, New Or Additional Activities and the North of Central America Situation.

Context

Guatemala is a country of origin, return, transit, and asylum. As a country of origin, violence in Guatemala has pushed some 190,000 people to flee, including 22,774 Guatemalan recognized refugees worldwide and an additional 167,371 asylum-seekers to the end of 2019¹. Guatemala remains one of countries in Latin America and the Caribbean with the highest rate of femicide per women in 2018 (2.0), according to ECLAC. Four women disappear every day, according to the National Institute of Forensic Sciences and the Public Ministry Women's Observatory.

68,421 people transiting through Guatemala received assistance through the Safe Spaces Network in 2019, and over 4,000 children benefited from direct interventions through humanitarian, legal and psychosocial support. From January to July 2020, 21,545 persons were assisted by the Network, even though movement restrictions in the region are still in place due to the pandemic.

Recent analyses suggest a growing trend of people fleeing violence and persecution who choose Guatemala as a country of asylum. By the end of July, 1,193² refugees and asylum-seekers have been registered by the authorities, while UNHCR and partners continue efforts to identify and provide assistance, during the lockdowns.

A study on the livelihoods situation of refugees and asylum-seekers in Guatemala carried out in 2018 showed that 93% of them work in the informal sector and the average monthly income was GTQ 2,000.00 (around US\$250). This unstable and unpredictable income generating situation was stricken by the pandemic, with the majority of asylum-seekers and refugees now facing loss of livelihoods and poverty.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated challenges for people in need of international protection who are more at risk of persecution, stigma, gender-based violence, and becoming victims of trafficking.

UNHCR response and needs

UNHCR supports the Guatemalan government in the fulfilment of their MIRPS commitments, including improving their asylum procedure, registration, and ensuring access to education and work for asylum-seekers and refugees.

UNHCR provides scholarships for children of concern in order to facilitate access to education. Since May 2020, UNHCR initiated its cash-based intervention programme for families to cover their basic needs. UNHCR supports the capacity of the Ombudsperson Office to conduct legal analysis, to promote effective monitoring of access to rights, to implement legal actions where appropriate, and to ensure access to the territory and the asylum system.

UNHCR strengthens temporary shelters for persons of concern within the safe space network and builds or rehabilitates additional shelters to provide differentiated assistance to women, children, adolescents and LGBTI persons, while identifying protection needs and providing counselling. Activities to increase protection and assistance services to women with protection needs are carried out, while facilitating referrals of cases involving survivors of SGBV to safe spaces.

During COVID-19 pandemic, UNHCR has maintained its presence and increased humanitarian assistance to reduce the spread of the virus among people on the move and within the host communities. Soaps have been distributed at strategic locations, while providing information to prevent COVID-19 transmission. UNHCR also donated and assisted the installation of temporary shelters to provide safe and dignified spaces in order to carry out medical examinations to refugees, migrants, returnees and other groups.

Funding for 2021 will strengthen community protection, and improve reception conditions improved. Sensitization campaigns will be prioritized to improve integration processes in the host communities and access to internet will be facilitated at local transit shelters, border points, and transport stations. In anticipation of further influx once restrictions are lifted, UNHCR required additional funding to guarantee availability of emergency kits, to respond to the needs of persons with specific protection needs and the most vulnerable among the displaced population.

1 ANNEX TABLE 2: Refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees (refugees and IDPs), stateless persons, others of concern to UNHCR and Venezuelans displaced abroad, by origin. UNHCR Global Trends 2019: <https://www.unhcr.org/statistics/unhcrstats/5ee200e37/unhcr-global-trends-2019.html>

2 Includes pending cases, asylum-seekers and refugees.

STORIES FROM THE FIELD



Tegucigalpa
Honduras



Personal tragedy drives Honduran social worker's fight against gang violence

Gangs prey upon vulnerable youths. But a man whose family was devastated by these criminal organizations is drawing on his past to provide youths with an alternative.

For Santiago Ávila, the fight against the powerful street gangs that terrorize communities throughout his native Honduras is deeply personal. He was 19 when his 16-year-old brother Mauricio was kidnapped, tortured and murdered by violent criminal gangs known as maras.

But the tragedy did not end there. Mauricio's killing triggered a series of other traumatic consequences that rippled out over many years, forcing the family to move from house to house in search of safety and, eventually, obliging Santiago and his mother to flee the country for their lives. "In one week, everything changed," recalled Santiago, now age 32. "My family has still not gotten over it."

Even so, Santiago has spent years trying to transform his family's misfortune into something positive for his community. As the director of Jóvenes Contra la Violencia, or Youth Against Violence, he has helped turn a nascent not-for-profit community organization into one of the most important forces fighting gangs in Honduras.



To learn more about Jóvenes contra la Violencia visit [our site](#)



In the next issue, a focus on the operation in Cuba

We thank the contributions of our donors

updated to 1 September 2020

UNHCR is grateful for the critical support provided by donors who have provided generous and timely support to the Coronavirus Emergency Situation globally, and countries in Central America, as well as those who have contributed to UNHCR programmes with unearmarked funding.



UN COVID-19 MPTF

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