

Central America & Cuba

Bi-weekly Operational Update

Operations: **Regional context**

The number of new COVID-19 confirmed infections in the region reached 80,000 in September, with Costa Rica having the highest number (26,660). Since the beginning of the pandemic, Panama has exceeded 110,000 positive COVID-19 cases, and Guatemala has the highest number of deaths in the region (3,246). In addition, the rainy season is raising alarms on the potential increase in malaria, dengue, and leptospirosis cases, which will add to the existing COVID-19 outbreak and hit the already strained national health systems. In Nicaragua, indigenous communities report lack of information on COVID-19 in their language, absence of health personnel, and lack of facilities and medical supplies including masks.

Violence and persecution at the hands of gangs continues to affect northern Central America. In El Salvador, at least 18 families were forcibly displaced during lockdown, according to data from humanitarian organizations. In Honduras, civil society highlighted the increased protection risks for the LGBTI+ community, especially youth, who are not able to leave their homes when facing abuse by their families, due mobility restrictions. In Guatemala, extortions are on the rise, and the Ministry of Interior and the Centre of National Economic Studies expect them to exceed those reported in 2019. 80% of extortion calls are made from within maximum security prisons, according to the National Civil Police.

As COVID-19 restrictions are progressively lifting across the region, cross-border movements from northern Central America are rising. Large groups of people from Honduras have convened and headed north at the end of September, and further such movements are likely in the near future. On the other hand, schools and universities are resuming the academic year interrupted due to COVID-19. Closure of schools has deprived many refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced girls and boys not only of education, but also of basic social and psychological support, child protection services, and, for many, access to school feeding programs.

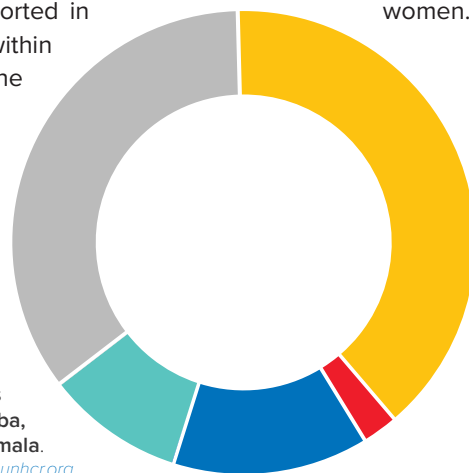
UNHCR and partners continue to provide assistance to persons of concern, and to advance on community-based interventions to ensure continuity of humanitarian access in prioritized high-risk communities affected by the increasing levels of violence in northern Central America. UNHCR, through partners, also promotes initiatives that analyse the impact of COVID-19 in women and LGBTI+ community. Programmes to improve the identification and referral of SGBV cases have been reinforced and alliances have been achieved with local authorities and public entities to advance on the protection of children and women.

Regional funding overview as of 29 September 2020

127.1M

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



65% funded

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

Major events and updates

El Salvador, as the MIRPS Pro Tempore Presidency, and Spain, the MIRPS Support Platform Pro Tempore Presidency, co-chaired a high-level side event during the 75th Session of the UN General Assembly. Among the commitments made to the MIRPS during the meeting, were pledges to strengthen asylum capacity (Spain), resettlement programmes (Canada) and development interventions (the European Union). The Inter-American Development Bank and the United States both reconfirmed their support to protection and solutions within the MIRPS States. Canada also expressed interest in holding the next presidency of the MIRPS Support Platform when Spain's tenure ends by mid-2021. [See more.](#)

UNHCR and the Government of El Salvador [signed an Accord de Siege](#) that will facilitate the presence of UNHCR in the country. The event took place at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in El Salvador on 16 September and had the participation of the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Alexandra Hill and the Head of National Office of UNHCR, Elisa Carlaccini. During the event, UNHCR recognized the efforts of the Government of El Salvador and offered support to carry out a new profiling study to assess the level of internal displacement in the country. The official figures available to date reflect that 71,500 persons were internally displaced between 2006 and 2016. [See more.](#)

Update on country activities

GUATEMALA

Partner Pastoral de Movilidad Humana (PMH), inaugurated a shelter for refugees and asylum-seekers located in Guatemala City with capacity of up to 30 persons.

22 child friendly spaces were set up in partner offices and government institutions in Guatemala City, Esquipulas, Jutiapa, Puerto Barrios, San Benito, and Tecun Uman.

The Procumovil in Huehuetenango continued to tour different municipalities, and coordinated with relevant authorities the identification and referral of persons in need of international protection.

BELIZE

Three newly elected Community Based Protection Network, CBPN, volunteers received training in Valley of Peace, Cayo District, including the Standard Operations Procedure, of the CBPN, asylum process, referral pathways, and introduction to UNHCR's partners. To date, 19 persons are part of the CBPN volunteers.

Refugees and asylum seekers continue to attend virtual courses on sewing, pastry and English, offered by or through partners, currently benefitting 43 persons.

CUBA

UNHCR distributed two months of CBI to persons of concern without a regular status and who rely on UNHCR's assistance for their subsistence.

EL SALVADOR

The program "Familia Activa" was launched to strengthen 8 different communities in San Miguel to improve community integration of IDPs.

30 public schools are being remodeled as part of the project "Models of protection networks and durable solutions for deported persons with protection needs, internally displaced persons and persons at risk of displacement" in coordination with the Ministry of Education.

1,030 kits were delivered to the Ministry of Culture for distribution to indigenous persons affected by COVID-19 emergency.

HONDURAS

A referral pathway was developed by UNHCR and partners to assist children in the framework of the COVID19 and online family integration interventions.

2,948 NFIs (500 hygiene kits and 2,448 Unilever soaps) were distributed in 7 communities at risk in Tegucigalpa, assisting approximately 3,000 people.

COSTA RICA

308 refugees and asylum seekers participated in different online courses to increase their skillset and employability, including soft skills, business-related technical training and short courses on marketing or customer service.

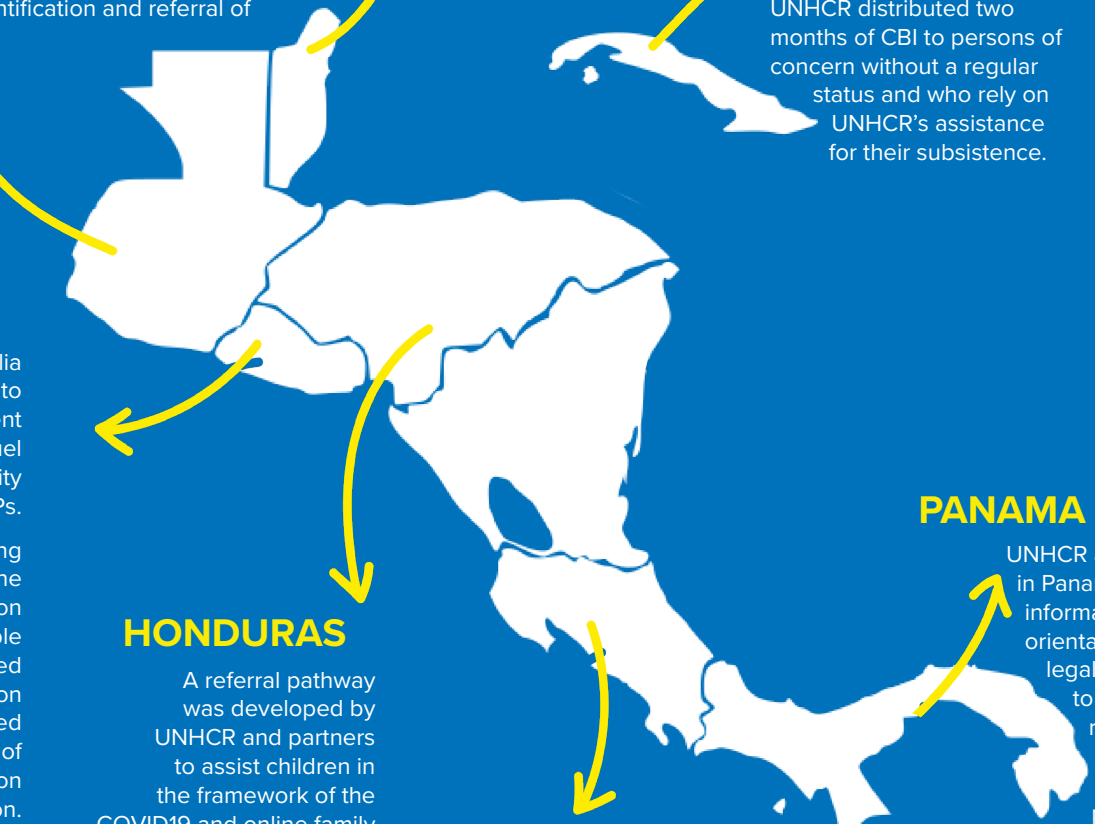
An on-line platform for capacity development is being developed within Accenture's global CSR initiative called "Skills to Succeed" to bridge the digital gap for vulnerable groups.

PANAMA

UNHCR and partners in Panama provided information, orientation and legal assistance to 399 people, rent payment benefiting 228 persons, psychosocial assistance to 15 persons.

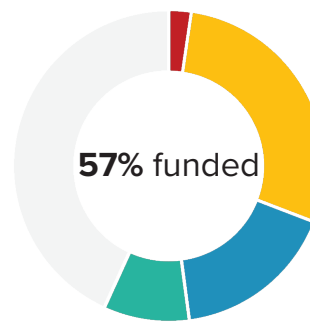
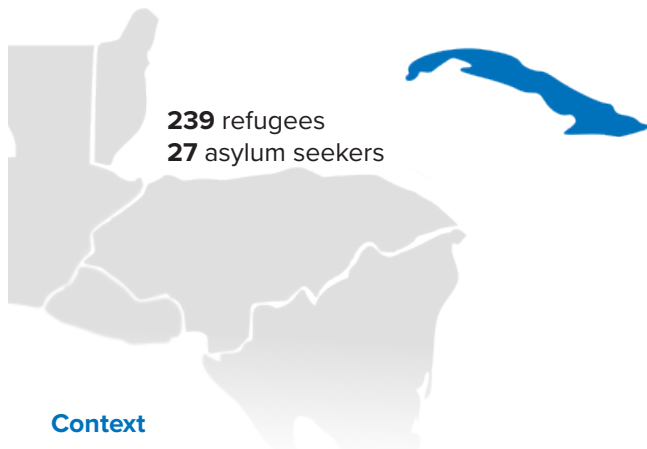
13 new persons have joined the digital alphabetization program and 35 children participated in virtual lessons about Panamanian history and culture, an activity that aims to facilitate their local integration.

39 women asylum seekers and refugees from Colombia, Nicaragua and Venezuela between the ages of 20 and 60 participated in an online workshop to socialize the protection route for SGBV incidents.



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

UNHCR Response in Cuba



43.7M

financial requirements for MCO Panama in 2020
Including requirements for the operation's regular programme in Panama, Cuba, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Belize, Coronavirus Emergency, New Or Additional Activities, North of Central America Situation and the Venezuela Situation.

Context

Cuba has not ratified the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees, nor its 1967 Protocol nor is it party to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons nor the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. In light of this, and at the request of the Cuban Government, UNHCR undertakes mandate refugee status determination to enable access international protection in the country.

Cuba's policy towards refugees consists of observing the non-refoulement principle and offering only de facto temporary protection to refugees, without prospects of local integration or permission to work. For many of the persons of concern, the only solution may be resettlement. However, national authorities have adopted measures to grant refugees access to the free public health and education systems, and allows for the acquisition of permanent resident status if close family ties with Cuban citizens exist.

Since 2017, the number of new asylum claims have been decreasing, coming down from an annual average of some 150 between 2015 and 2016, to just 32 in 2019. This number decreased to five during the first six months of 2020, as a result of border closures and movement restrictions caused by the pandemic. As of 30 June 2020, Cuba hosts 239 refugees from 12 nationalities and 27 asylum-seekers from 6 nationalities, pending status determination.

Of the total refugees, 106 (including 17 women) are young adult students attending university on government scholarships, with a satisfactory level of State protection although limited to the duration of their studies. 100 of these students came from Sahrawi refugee camps in Algeria, where their families remain.

Due to the pandemic, the economy is being deeply impacted, affecting availability of basic supplies to the local population and to refugees and asylum-seekers alike. In this situation, the government agreed to grant refugees and asylum seekers who lack a legal status in the country access to the ration system to receive basic quotas of first need food and non-food items. COVID-19 restrictions are also affecting coordination to follow-up on people of concern with specific health needs, particularly as a result of shortage of staff of the concerned organization, its duties in support of the public health system, and participating in pandemic-related actions.

UNHCR response and needs

UNHCR receives and decides on applications for international protection. UNHCR also intervenes with Cuban institutions to guarantee the highest possible protection standards available for each person of concern according to national law and policy, and assists refugees recognized under its mandate to access the most suitable durable solution according to their specific situation.

UNHCR continues to seek resettlement or complementary pathways for recognized refugees who lack a legal status in Cuba after arriving with tourist visas, and also for overseas students who become sur place refugees while studying in Cuba. Although UNHCR's efforts are focused on maintaining or increasing the percentage of people of concern submitted for resettlement, yet more quotas are needed. Regular resettlement and complementary pathway opportunities will allow refugees to start rebuilding their lives sooner. Advocacy with the Government also continues in the hopes of opening some opportunities for local integration.

UNHCR guarantees basic protection in safety and dignity for people of concern who lack a legal status by providing assistance for accommodation and subsistence during their stay in Cuba, as they lack the right to engage in income-generating activities.

Additional resources would allow UNHCR to enhance assistance provided to persons of concern, for them to effectively cover their basic needs. With additional resources, UNHCR would also be able to provide financial support for the voluntary return of refugee students upon graduation when possible, allowing the refugees to safely return to their families and communities in order to contribute to improving their well-being with the professional knowledge they acquired during their years of study in Cuba.

STORIES FROM THE FIELD



In Cuba, refugee med students help in the battle against COVID-19



To learn more about these three inspirational young refugee women, visit [our site](#).

Three young women from Western Sahara are among dozens of med students going door-to-door to raise awareness among the Cuban population on the measures to prevent COVID-19.

Before leaving their homes and heading off under the tropical Caribbean heat, three young women accommodate their facemasks over the veil that they use to cover their hair.

Despite not having their medical degrees yet, Suadu Zein Beljeir, Umajutha Jatri Sidahmed y Maglaha Jatri Aduh - three refugees from Western Sahara who received scholarships to study medicine in Cuba - are already helping out in a campaign to curb the spread of the virus in the Island.

The Cuban government had called upon med students, including refugees, to help in prevention and response. With the guidance of their teachers, Suadu, Umajutha y Maglaha go house to house to check-up on the health of the residents and provide advice on hygiene and social distancing.

“This is very important,” said Suadu of 23 years, who studies in Las Tunas. “Studying medicine we learn that prevention is better than curing, so these hygiene and control measures are necessary now more than ever.”



In the next issue, a focus on the Nicaragua Situation

We thank the contributions of our donors

updated to 29 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 unarmarked funding.



UN COVID-19 MPTF

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