

Central America & Cuba

Bi-weekly Operational Update

Operations: Regional context

Over 500,000 persons have been affected by tropical storms Cristobal and Amanda in the North of Central America. In [El Salvador](#), seven communities already affected by forced displacement and gang violence have also been impacted. Community leaders have expressed concern regarding damages to their homes, the loss of belongings and access to electricity. At least 36 spontaneous shelters have been erected as a consequence of the storm, that have yet to be registered. Urgent humanitarian needs include food, water, clothes and medical assistance. So far, 1,150 communities and 35,169 persons have been supported with humanitarian assistance by the Protection Cluster response, while 1.2 million persons have received information on the support available to cater to their needs. In the context of COVID-19, movement restrictions imposed to mitigate the spread of the pandemic have limited options to seek protection from persecution, and to generate income.

The combination of hurricane season and COVID-19 is exacerbating already dire

humanitarian needs. Governments across the region also fear an increase in dengue cases, which would place additional pressure on overwhelmed health systems. To improve the effectiveness of the response, UNHCR has contributed to national efforts by delivering supplies, health equipment and hygiene items, as well as through the provision and installation of refugee housing units as an solution to increase government capacity to provide Temporary (collective) Isolation Centres (CATs) and adequate reception facilities for those most in need.

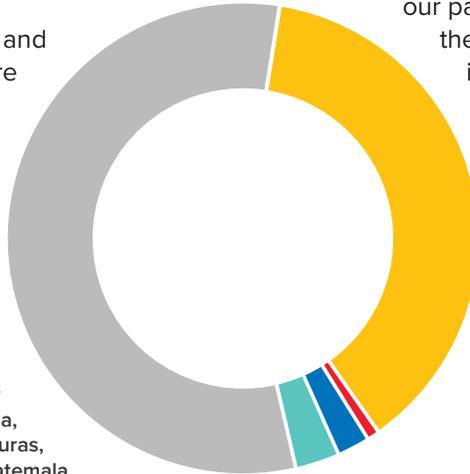
In Panama, the reestablishment of mobility restrictions after one week of relaxing COVID-19 measures has increased vulnerability among refugees and asylum seekers, the majority of whom are part of the informal economy. In Nicaragua, persons in need of international protection have been increasingly requesting economic support from our partner, especially women who had to close their small businesses or have no sources of income.

Regional funding overview as of 10 June 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



44% funded

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

Regional coordination

MIRPS

MIRPS countries have begun preparations for the second phase of the quantification process, inviting key stakeholders such as their respective Ministries of Planning and Finance to align the process within existing national planning processes. In the coming months, consultations and planning sessions will be carried out to identify areas to quantify, defining financial resource requirement to deliver services and implement activities related to their national action plans, which includes; amongst others, the inclusion of persons of concern into national health and education systems. The MIRPS Support Platform will hold its first official meeting on 17

June. Spain, as Chair of the Platform, is planning a high-level launch of its presidency at the end of the month, which will run for a period of one year from June 2020 to June 2021.

The **RedLac Group** issued a [snapshot report](#) concerning extortion as a factor prompting persons to flee within and across borders in the NCA and Mexico. It is also one of the main crimes that persons are subjected to during displacement, as well as after deportation to their countries of origin. As such, extortion transcends international borders as one of the main human rights violations against displaced persons and migrants.

Update on country activities

BELIZE

Asylum seekers taking English as a Second Language have resumed classes. A homework assistance programme is benefiting 120 students as an alternative learning method for children.

4,700 facemasks made by asylum seekers enrolled in sewing lessons were distributed in Bella Vista and Independence polyclinics.

GUATEMALA

In Petén, 27 families received CBI assistance.

Bulk beds, mattresses, and diapers were delivered to deportee shelters in Guatemala City.

12 RHUs are to be installed in coordination with the municipality of Jacaltenango to host persons awaiting COVID-19 test results.

CUBA

UNHCR distributed food and cleaning items donated by UN staff members to the 153 PoCs who have no other access to basic food items.

NICARAGUA

Partner CEPAD began teleworking aiding refugees and asylum seekers via phone and email.

PANAMA

Through partners, 1,000 persons received assistance and counseling on documentation, mobility restrictions, housing and rent support and mediation with landlords, including 183 women with virtual food vouchers.

UNHCR's partner HIAS provided 42 services in the areas of psychological first aid and psychosocial assistance.

Authorities received 48 RHUs for the Darien Province.

EL SALVADOR

2,400 hygiene kits were delivered to municipalities affected by the pandemic and the storm.

100 supermarket vouchers for food and hygiene products were delivered to the Directorate of Attention to Victims, to cater for the needs of deported persons with specific protection concerns.

HONDURAS

A referral system of deportees with protection needs has been established with the Permanent Committee of Contingencies (COPECO) and other authorities.

Biosecurity supplies, health equipment (thermometers) and hygiene supplies were delivered to the National Migration Institute (INM).

Partner Jóvenes Contra la Violencia is implementing the initiative "Volvamos a la mesa" to support the identification and solution of family and community problems/risks.

COSTA RICA

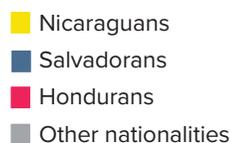
166 refugees and asylum seekers received prepaid cards for cash assistance purposes.

The HELP website received 11,849 visits during May, representing a 47% increase compared to the previous month.

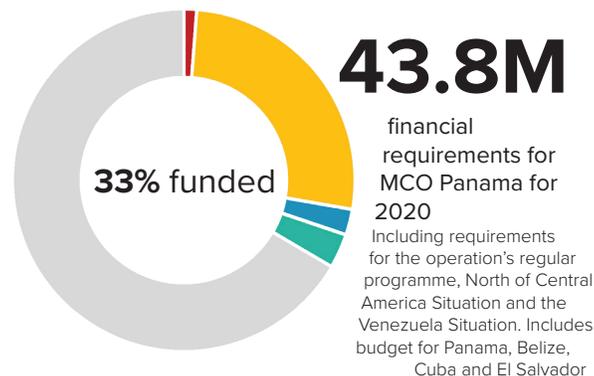


Check out testimonios.acnur.org to find out more about how displaced communities in the Americas are coping with the pandemic.

Multi-Situation Response: Panama



20,239 refugees and asylum seekers



Context

Panama is part of the 1951 Refugee Convention and its Protocol since 1977, as well as of the 1954 Statelessness Convention and its Protocol since 2011. In January 2018, the government modified the asylum system to reinforce international protection and, specifically, to incorporate the protection of children, taking into account their best interest. However, this new legislation does not include the expanded definition enshrined in the Cartagena Declaration and limits the possibility of obtaining temporary humanitarian permits. A decree approved in May 2019 enables asylum seekers admitted to procedure to obtain a work permit while their cases are pending review from the National Commission for the Protection of Refugees (CONARE). In 2017, Panama joined the Regional Comprehensive Protection and Solutions Framework (MIRPS), a pioneering application of the Global Compact on Refugees in the region.

Panama continues to be a destination for persons with international protection needs. To the end of 2019, 2,556 persons have been recognized as refugees, mostly from Colombia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Cuba, and others from the North of Central America. Statistics from the National Office for the Attention to Refugees (ONPAR) indicate that 28,366 asylum claims have been lodged between 2014 and June 2019. In recent years, a considerable increase in asylum claims has changed the profile of UNHCR's persons of concern. From April 2018 onwards, the main country of origin of asylum seekers is Nicaragua.

According to the World Bank, Panama is one of the fastest growing economies in the world, with an average annual growth rate of 4.6 percent over the last five years. As a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, however, poverty will increase, particularly in areas already underdeveloped, like rural communities mainly inhabited by indigenous persons and afrodescendants. Access to basic services is not universal and remains linked to factors such as geographic location, education levels, ethnicity and income levels of households.

Major employment areas like services and construction are likely to suffer, affecting UNHCR's persons of concern, who depend on the informal sector and have lost their ability to generate income.

UNHCR response and needs

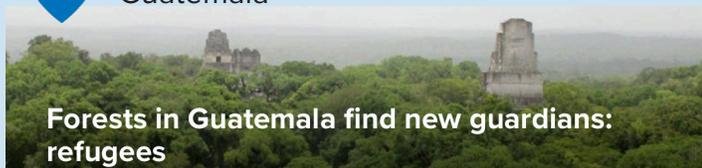
UNHCR works with the government to strengthen the asylum system and the capacity of ONPAR. This includes processing the over 17,000 pending claims, enhancing the presence of ONPAR in strategic and border locations, and the need to develop interinstitutional protocols to identify, assist and refer persons with international protection needs, in line with its MIRPS commitments. In this respect, UNHCR supported the development of a system to register and follow-up on asylum applications through QR codes embedded in asylum seeker certifications. This document helps reduce risks of migratory detention or deportation. UNHCR enhances protection monitoring in urban and border locations, and continuously advocates for the inclusion of persons of concern in the social programmes and training. For instance, thanks to the advocacy of UNHCR, partners and ONPAR, refugees and asylum seekers were included within the Panama Solidario Plan during the pandemic. UNHCR has also strengthened case management and accompaniment of persons of concern (legal and psychosocial) in alliance with partners. Since the establishment of COVID-19 mobility restrictions, economic activities are frozen, and persons of concern rely on humanitarian assistance and CBI provided by organizations. If more funds are available, the number of persons of concern assisted could be expanded. Additional CBI support is required to cater for increased needs among a rising number of asylum seekers.

The majority of asylum seekers do not have access to formal work and have limited access to services and other basic rights. Establishing interinstitutional partnerships with the private sector has been key to develop integration policies. Talent without Borders, an employability programme developed by UNHCR, ManpowerGroup and HIAS, helps refugees to strengthen their skills and promotes their access to the formal labour market. A total of 105 refugees and 42 Panamanians were certified through the programme,

With additional funds, UNHCR can enhance socio economic integration programmes which will be particularly critical in a post-pandemic situation. Monitoring, registration and targeting can also be enhanced to maximize assistance, while ensuring the most vulnerable are reached in a timely manner.

STORIES FROM THE FIELD

Petén Guatemala



Forests in Guatemala find new guardians: refugees

As rangers in some of Central America's most biodiverse national parks, refugees and asylum-seekers get a fresh start while protecting threatened plant and animal species.

Although his workday starts at sunrise, Josué does not need to set an alarm. The raucous shrieks and calls of the forest dawn chorus are more than enough to rouse the 19-year-old, a newly minted ranger now working in one of the most biodiverse spots on earth, Guatemala's El Mirador National Park.

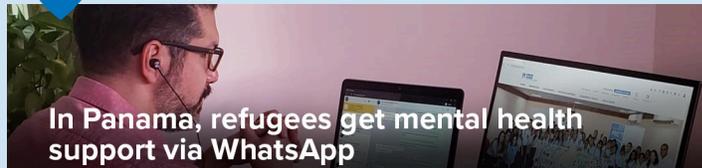
For Josué, an asylum-seeker who fled one of Honduras' most dangerous cities, the new job as a ranger is nothing short of a dream come true.

Josué is among nine asylum-seekers and refugees hired and trained to work as rangers in Guatemala's national park system. It includes tropical forests in the north-eastern Petén region that make up the largest protected area in Central America, and three UNESCO-recognized biosphere reserves, as well as spectacular Mayan ruins.



[Read the full story](#)

Panama City Panama



In Panama, refugees get mental health support via WhatsApp

The online service allows refugees and asylum seekers in Panama to get remote emotional support during the pandemic.

When Roberto Mendez spoke to Maria Fuentes* for the first time, he noticed how she spoke very quickly and jumped from topic to topic. For Mendez, a certified coach with over six years of experience providing psychological support in Panama City, these were clear signs that Maria was anxious and depressed.

During coronavirus, Maria - a Honduran asylum seeker who arrived in Panama in 2015 with her family - had more than one reason to be anxious. Since her arrival at her host country, Maria had started her own small business selling homemade Honduran food. But quarantine measures adopted by the Panamanian government to try and curb the spread of the virus left her without opportunities to keep working. Without income, Maria and her family were distressed.

That's when Maria sent a WhatsApp message to the emotional support service led by UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, since the start of the pandemic.



[Read the full story](#)



In the next issue, a focus on the operation in Belize.

We thank the contributions of our donors

updated to 10 June 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.



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UN COVID-19 MPTF