

# NORTHERN TRIANGLE OF CENTRAL AMERICA SITUATION

December 2016



## HIGHLIGHTS

**137,600**

Refugees and asylum-seekers from the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA) until June 30.

**174,000**

IDPs in Honduras (2014 profiling exercise). A similar profiling exercise is taking place in El Salvador to assess the magnitude and patterns of displacement.

**99,522**

Deportations of NTCA citizens from the USA and Mexico in first half of 2016 (Jan-Jun). It is estimated that there are some 400,000 migrants in transit crossing Guatemala into Mexico.

## CONTEXT INFORMATION

- UNHCR’s Regional Office in Panama is implementing the Regional Protection and Solutions Strategy for the NTCA situation in close collaboration with country offices, state entities and partners.
- The Regional Office oversees UNHCR’s operations in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, as well protection activities in Panama, Nicaragua and Cuba.
- The NTCA strategy also encompasses activities in the United States of America, Mexico, Belize and Costa Rica, with permanent coordination being ensured between respective country offices.

**Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA) Situation:**  
UNHCR Presence, as of November 2016



- Central America is suffering a wave of violence stemming from organized criminal groups, including record high homicide rates, sexual violence, disappearances, forced recruitment into gangs, and extortion. Violence affects a diverse range of people including children, women, as well as LGBTI persons. Insecurity is also compelling an increasing number of persons to flee their homes and to seek international protection,

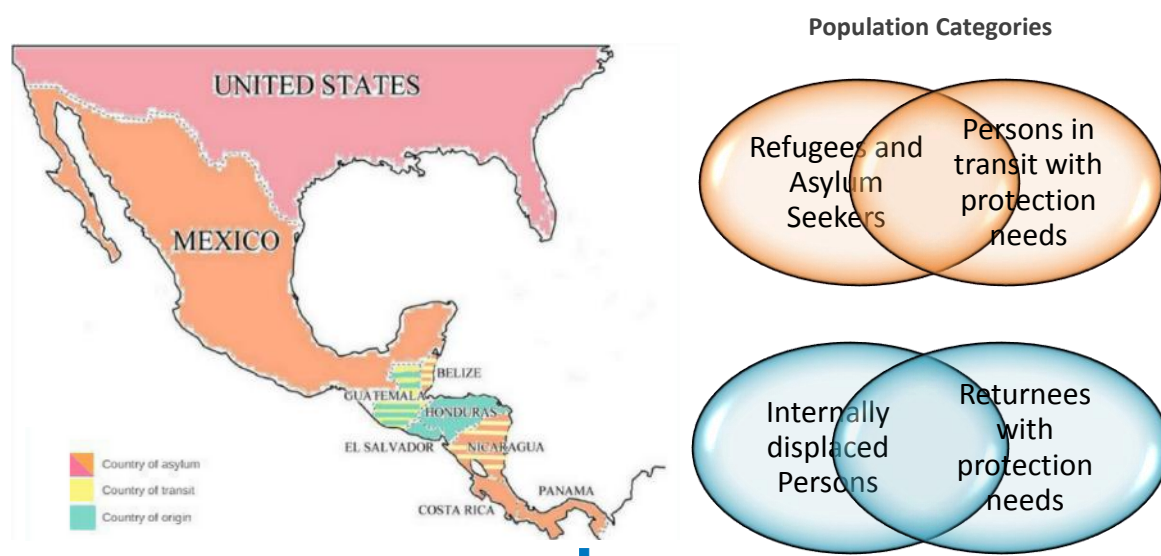
NTCA SITUATION

particularly in bordering and nearby countries. The United States of America, Belize, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama and El Salvador are all affected, either as countries of origin, transit or destination, and in some cases, in a combination of these.

- After the migrant crisis peaked in 2014, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras adopted the “Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle” aimed at boosting security and economic development in the region. Comparing with prior years, 2016 saw a significant increase of US assistance for the region (US\$ 750 million). Despite such an investment, in 2016 there was another migration surge, particularly of unaccompanied children, reaching the levels of the 2014 migration crisis. This resurgence is also caused by the worsening security situation in the NTCA countries.
- Significant outflows from these three NTCA countries are occurring for a complex set of reasons. UNHCR considers that many of these persons would qualify as refugees. Traditionally, NTCA citizens seeking international protection request refugee status in the U.S. and Canada. A significant increase has however been observed in the number of asylum-seekers from the NTCA in countries of the region, particularly Mexico (151% increase between January and October 2016, compared to the same period in 2015) and Costa Rica, but also, although to a lesser extent, Belize, Nicaragua and Panama.
- In response to the protection crisis, UNHCR developed a multi-year Protection and Solutions Strategy (2016 – 2018) within the framework of the 2014 Brazil Declaration and Plan of Action.

## REGIONAL APPROACH

- Enhancing regional cooperation and partnerships to implement responsibility-sharing arrangements is an essential component of the strategy. The Regional Protection and Solutions Strategy for the NTCA situation covers the following operations, targeting specific population groups:



## Main Strategic Objectives

- Strengthening legal/policy frameworks (countries of origin and asylum)
- Developing protection networks (safe spaces)
- Minimum reception standards and fair/efficient asylum systems
- Protection of children and other persons with specific needs
- Increased awareness and visibility of protection needs
- Promote solutions, including enhanced legal pathways and local integration

## Responsibility sharing, cooperation and complementarity

- In a spirit of shared responsibility and complementary action that the governments in the region came together to strengthen the protection of people forcibly displaced by violence in the NTCA and signed the **San Jose Action Statement in July 2016**, acknowledging the need for stronger protection of asylum seekers, refugees and internally displaced people. Together with representatives of UN agencies and international institutions including the Inter-American Development Bank, the World Bank, national human rights institutions, national and regional NGOs, civil society and academia, they pledged concrete responses to address the many protection needs arising from this forced displacement crisis.
- Such cooperation is fully aligned with the **New York Declaration**, and its Annex 1 which calls for a Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) based on shared responsibilities between a wide range of stakeholders including local and national authorities, humanitarian and development actors, the private sector and civil society. Our efforts must now be centered on building and following on such cooperative and joint approaches.
- Responses must be designed which cause complementary effects in all the countries in the region: recognition rates in a country of destination are enhanced by good COI being generated in countries of origin, and by effective monitoring and protection networks in countries of transit. Fostering cooperation between countries of origin, transit and destination through a Protection Transfer Arrangement brings together protection and solution measures, cutting out dangerous smuggling networks. All countries are affected, and all countries must work together at the solution.

## MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS

### *Operational capacity*

- Following the increase in displacement, a supplementary appeal was issued in June 2016, outlining UNHCR's protection and solutions interventions in the region in favor of POC in the NTCA. Additional resources received had an impact in areas of child protection, community-based protection, monitoring and protection networks, strengthening of reception centres, protection responses for cases at risk, and the reinforcement of human rights entities (ombudsperson) in NTCA.
- UNHCR's staffing structure and presence in areas of the region were also strengthened. Currently, we have three national offices in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, as well as two recently established field offices in San Pedro Sula (municipality heavily affected by forced displacement in Honduras) and Petén (border area Guatemala/Mexico, one of the main transit areas in the country).
- UNHCR's field offices in the Mexican border states of Chiapas and Tabasco have been reinforced and field presence established in southern Veracruz to focus on identification and assistance to asylum-seekers, and in the northern state of Coahuila to promote local integration.
- In line with the San Jose Action Statement, which acknowledged the need for stronger protection intervention in the region, alliances with partners were strengthened and a total of 30 agreements were established during the year for protection interventions in NTCA.

### *Protection in countries of origin (NTCA)*

- In Honduras, the Government continues to be supported with technical assistance to develop legal frameworks and public policies for the protection and assistance of IDPs, while, at the same time and in alliance with the civil society, protection networks are being established and will further be enhanced in 2017.
- In El Salvador, in line with Plan El Salvador Seguro (PESS), cooperation is centered on strengthening State responses in protection and assistance to displaced victims of violence, as well as support for the establishment of reception standards for deportees, the implementation of protocols for the identification of deportees with protection needs of, and their referral to protection alternatives.

- In Guatemala, the monitoring and protection network and, and temporary shelters used by the displaced, deported or persons in transit will continue to be supported in order to enhance safe spaces along the main migration route. This includes the provision of services, such as legal and psychosocial support and child friendly spaces in strategic areas of the country.
- In all three countries, child protection initiatives and programmes targeting internally displaced, deportees with specific protection needs (e.g. single-headed households, unaccompanied minors and separated children, LGBTI, etc.) are prioritized, together with community-based protection initiatives.
- Internal displacement in the NTCA reached a higher profile in 2015 and 2016 through the publication of the UNHCR supported profiling exercise conducted in Honduras, as well as the visit of the Special Rapporteur on IDPs, whose recommendations helped to increase visibility. In 2016, the Government of El Salvador has also requested UNHCR's support to conduct a profiling exercise similar to the one carried out in Honduras. In Guatemala, the former Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs agreed on UNHCR supporting an academic study on the different forms of displacement in the country. This is expected to have a positive impact on the visibility of the protection situation.



*Children of Peace project - Villanueva, Guatemala 2016*

- Other protection responses in countries of origin include the establishment of the PTA (Protection Transfer Arrangement) programme, currently piloted in El Salvador and foreseen to be expanded to other NTCA countries in 2017. This programme supports humanitarian evacuation of heightened-risk cases to a third country and, further on, resettlement to United States according to specific profiles agreed upon. In addition, a few high-risk cases are channeled directly to the country of destination through in-country processing.

#### ***Safe spaces for people on the move (Mexico, Guatemala)***

- In countries of transit, UNHCR is supporting Protection and Monitoring Networks (safe spaces) to register, document and refer cases of people in transit that need international protection. This includes psychosocial and legal orientation of persons in need of international protection. In Mexico, 15 shelters have carried out or are in the process of carrying out, infrastructure improvements thanks to UNHCR's support, so to meet the increasing demand in long-term shelters for asylum-seekers who await a resolution of their asylum application, which can take up to 3 months. New shelter capacity is being created for a total of 725 new spaces, including 155 spaces for families, 46 spaces for LGBTI, 92 spaces for women with children, and 60 new spaces for unaccompanied and separated children.

#### ***Protection and solutions in countries of asylum (mainly in Mexico, Costa Rica and Panama)***

- In countries of destination, UNHCR is working with asylum seekers and refugees, implementing identification and referral mechanisms, adequate reception arrangements and alternatives to detention. In Mexico, considering that decisions to release asylum-seekers remain ad hoc (since July 495 asylum-seekers have been released from detention to UNHCR supported shelters), UNHCR is currently advocating for the adoption of a permanent public policy on ATD. This policy could be built on initial pilots and a continuous government position favorable to ATD, with the coordinated effort of migration officials, the Commission for Refugee Aid (COMAR) and civil society shelters supported by UNHCR. Only in 2016, 2,480 asylum seekers were housed in 8 shelters supported by UNHCR in the States of Tabasco, Chiapas and Mexico City. In Costa Rica, a shelter for NCTA vulnerable SGBV survivors has been established, which will become operational in 2017. As of 30 November 2016, Costa Rica received a total number of 4,146 asylum applications, of which 1,505 were from the NTCA (1,366 from El Salvador, 132 from Honduras, and seven from Guatemala). This represents a significant increase of 69.30% when compared with the total number of 889 applications from the NTCA during 2015, and of 287% when compared with the total number of applications received from that area in 2014. The increasing trend is expected to be in the rise in 2017. In Mexico, according to numbers



provided by COMAR, as of 30 October 2016, the total number of asylum seekers has reached 6,898 (93% from the NTCA), the highest number in asylum applications recorded since the 1980s, with a recognition rate of 64% and an increase of 229% in the number of recognised refugees and of those who receive complementary protection, compared to 2015. Based on the average monthly increase of 9.5% in asylum applications since January 2015, UNHCR projects that the total number of asylum applications in 2017 could reach 22,000.

- UNHCR is providing support to Governments (Mexico, Costa Rica Panama) in the implementation of the Quality Asylum Programme (QAI), aimed at enhancing the quality of status determination procedures and strengthening the capacity of national refugee institutions. Within QAI framework, UNHCR Costa Rica carried out a series of country of origin information visits to El Salvador and Honduras, which impacted in an increase of recognition rates for NTCA applications from 24% in 2015 to 40% in 2016. UNHCR Mexico has signed a bilateral agreement with the *Secretaría de Gobernación* (MoI) in September 2016 to support COMAR in building up its staffing, open offices in two additional locations (beyond the existing 3 offices) and train newly hired staff. This effort is expected to expand access to asylum, alleviate and facilitate adjudication and documentation processes under the responsibility of COMAR. In addition to the QAI, a quadripartite mechanism has been established among UNHCR, Canada (the IRB and IRCC) and the US (DHS/CIS Asylum Division) to support COMAR (Mexico). This mechanism has a new joint plan of action (2016-2017), which aims to foster regional cooperation and strengthen the Mexican asylum system.
- Countries (Costa Rica, Mexico and Panama) are also working to achieve durable solutions - particularly local integration of refugees - through specific public policies and livelihoods programming. In Costa Rica, UNHCR signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Presidency to ensure equal access to governmental social and development programmes for PoC, particularly those vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers from the NTCA countries. In 2016, 252 PoC from the NTCA countries benefitted from UNHCR Living Integration corporate social responsibility programme, 51 of which have successfully been employed, 205 were trained, and 106 validated their high school diplomas before the MoE. Additionally, 119 families from NTCA countries have benefitted from the Graduation Model livelihood project. In Mexico, UNHCR is working with authorities to identify federal, state and municipal social programmes, which can also serve to integrate refugees. The Office is also reaching out to the private sector to take advantage of opportunities for refugees to join the formal labour market, in particular in the industrial cities of central and northern Mexico. As a result of these initiatives and the improved reception conditions outlines above, the percentage of asylum claimants in Mexico who abandon their claims has dropped by one third since 2014 (to 25%).

## MAIN CHALLENGES

- In spite of advocacy efforts, forced displacement remains a very sensitive issue in the region. Data collection and profiling are key to better understand displacement patterns and promote protection-related interventions.
- The lack of legal and institutional frameworks on internal displacement constitutes a major challenge for the effective protection of PoCs hampering the development of specific policies and programmes and the allocation of resources by States.
- Data collection and identification of deportees with protection needs requires strengthening in NTCA countries, as well as the development of effective referral mechanisms for individuals with protection needs.
- In countries of asylum, the capacity of refugee bodies needs to be further strengthened, particularly in border areas.
- The establishment of a significant number of new partnerships requires intensive capacity-building efforts, which in turn slow down the implementation of projects and activities.

## FUNDING REQUIREMENTS

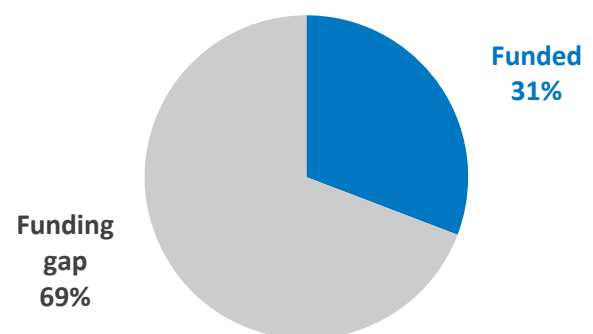
- Through a comprehensive needs assessment, the necessary funding for operations in the NTCA Situation to implement its planned activities is over 23 million USD. Funding levels for this situation remain extremely low (31% in 2016) although humanitarian needs are expected to continue and rise in 2017.

Examples of unmet needs in case of a funding shortfall include:

- Develop frameworks (legal, institutional) and programs for the protection of internally displaced persons and others affected by violence in the NTCA, particularly in El Salvador and Guatemala
- Community-based interventions to mitigate risks of displacement or forced recruitment;
- Child protection activities, prevention of sexual and gender-based violence and forced recruitment, in particular in border regions, in alliance with migrant shelters in the region;
- Psychosocial support targeting communities affected by violence;
- Interventions in indigenous communities affected by forced displacement, in particular in Honduras (Mosquitia) on the Nicaraguan border;
- Increased border monitoring and expansion of the monitoring and protection network in Guatemala and Mexico, as well as enhancement of safe spaces and information on asylum along the main migration routes;
- Strengthening of the PTA (Costa Rica) with cases from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala;
- Enhance access to RSD procedures, and ensure fair and efficient asylum systems (e.g. through the Quality Assurance Initiative)
- Develop alternatives to detention, arrangements for reception conditions for asylum seekers and refugees (Mexico)
- Promote local integration opportunities (including residence permits, rights to work for asylum seekers, naturalization, access to local services and access to micro credit or banking services for refugees and asylum seekers) in asylum countries in the region.
- Strengthen UNHCR’s protection capacity in the field, particularly in border areas (Mexico, Guatemala) and communities affected by violence (Honduras).

## NTCA Situation – 2016 funding

USD 23.7 million requested



UNHCR/Sebastian Rich 2016 - The UNHCR funded LA 72 shelter in southern Mexico.