

F.O. UPALA, COSTA RICA

June 2019

The socio-political unrest in Nicaragua that began in April 2018 continues to drive population movement into Costa Rica. People enter through the two border crossings, but most through the many irregular points in the northern zone. Those who choose to settle in the northern area are predominantly farmers and families with limited income or formal education.

While the national legal framework allows asylum seekers to access social services such as education and healthcare, the rapid increase in asylum claims since early 2018 has overburdened capacities, causing delays, which increase their vulnerability. UNHCR has been present in the northern area of Costa Rica since the onset of the socio-political crisis in Nicaragua

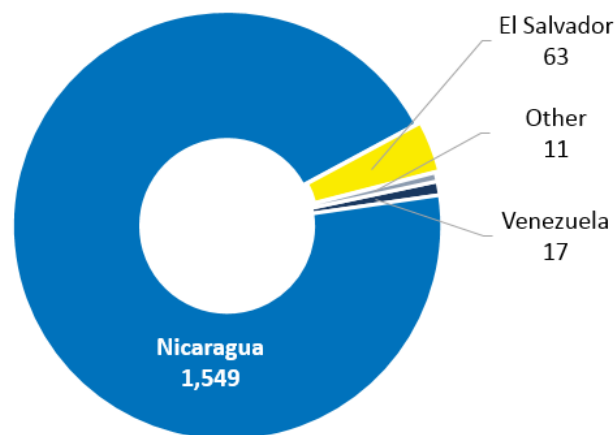
and inaugurated a Field Office in Upala in December 2018 to continue its focus on safeguarding the basic rights of refugees and asylum seekers through protection assistance, border monitoring, provision of basic needs to the most vulnerable, and activities that promote peaceful coexistence.

HIGHLIGHTS

1,640 asylum seekers registered by F.O. Upala as of 31 May.

Nicaragua:	1,549
Venezuela:	17
El Salvador:	63
Other PoC:	11

POPULATION REGISTERED BY NATIONALITY

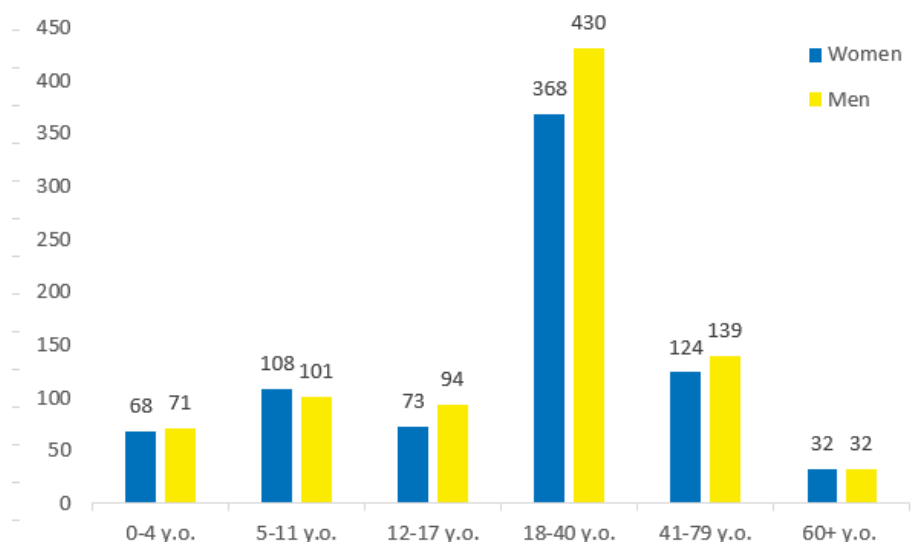


UNHCR PRESENCE

Staff:

9 National Staff
3 International Staff

POPULATION REGISTERED DISAGGREGATED BY SEX AND AGE



Main Activities

Border monitoring

UNHCR conducts information sessions and capacity building events with local authorities, migration officers, local social welfare institutions, community promoters, and groups of persons of concern (PoC) to reduce the risk of *refoulement*, raise awareness, and identify asylum seekers. UNHCR and partners also conduct regular visits to official and irregular entry points and takes direct action to prevent *refoulement* at the border.

Access to asylum

The number of crossing points along the northern border facilitate irregular entry into Costa Rica and heighten protection risks for asylum seekers who are not aware of RSD procedures nor of their rights and duties. Some have reported staying in hiding due to this lack of information. Those that choose to settle in the north, as opposed to heading toward the capital, San Jose, are primarily from rural areas, many lack formal education and have high levels of illiteracy.

To effectively respond to the situation, UNHCR reinforced its cooperation with and support to the Migration Authority by investing in human resources, office space, and equipment for the Refugee Unit, which opened in March 2019. This makes the RSD procedure more accessible to PoC residing in the north.

Since January, together with partners, 2,650 interventions were undertaken to provide advice and information on access to the RSD process, and to provide humanitarian assistance (food, hygiene, education, installation kits) to PoC facing extreme vulnerabilities.

HIAS, a UNHCR partner, provides legal assistance, orientation and representation for asylum seekers, and economic support to facilitate access to the RSD procedure.

Addressing specific protection needs

UNHCR established coordination and referral pathways, together with its partners and the Government for people with specific protection needs, such as SGBV survivors and unaccompanied minors. Capacity building to public and state institutions on protection, with a focus on specific needs, help ensure PoC are receiving tailored assistance.

Together with partner CENDEROS, emergency and high risk cases are provided shelter until they are able to transition into stable housing. Individual cases also receive follow-up to ensure access to services and guarantee immediate assistance. Work with the host communities focuses on strengthening their social fabric, preventing SGBV and promoting the local integration of PoC.

Cash-Based Intervention

To respond to the immediate needs of the most vulnerable asylum seeking families, UNHCR is providing a multipurpose, unconditional cash grant to 140 families in Los Chiles and Upala Cantons. Funded in part by ECHO, the objective of this grant is to help families meet their most basic needs, which surveyed participants noted were: food, shelter, hygiene and sanitation.

Peaceful coexistence

UNHCR promotes peaceful coexistence, supports host communities, and facilitates local integration of asylum seekers through improvement of local services. This includes delivery of school supplies, furniture, kits and electronic appliances to schools, public institutions, local authorities and NGOs.

In early 2019, UNHCR worked with local actors to tailor contingency plans for a mass influx of asylum seekers and invests in their self-reliance by supporting the development of community-based initiatives that integrate asylum seekers and the local population.

Working with Partners

- UNHCR participates as an observer in the Municipal Emergency Committee in Upala (CME) and in similar Cantonal Coordination Bodies (CCCI) in La Cruz and Los Chiles. Through the CME, UNHCR supported the development of a contingency plan for a mass influx of asylum seekers in Upala, which is due to be reviewed. Through the CCI, UNHCR works to ensure international protection standards are upheld.
- Together with HIAS and CENDEROS, UNHCR conducts technical workshops on international refugee law, legal procedures to access refuge in Costa Rica and SGBV prevention and response, targeting government institutions, migration authorities, law enforcement actors, host communities, local leaderships, and PoC.
- F.O. Upala collaborates at the local and regional level with state institutions such as the National Children's Protection Institute, the National Women's Institute, the National Council of People with Disabilities, and the National Institute for Social Welfare promoting information sharing, conducting capacity building activities, and strengthening an inter-institutional case management system for the northern area.
- UNHCR, with support from partner agencies, provided a variety of essential services. It includes quick identification of SGBV survivors and immediate response comprised of: a safe house managed by CENDEROS; case management for persons with specific needs and for unaccompanied or separated children, including best interest procedures, managed by the Case Management Working Group; mental health and psychosocial support for victims of violence and torture managed by CENDEROS; health services, in particular sexual and reproductive health and access to HIV treatment; and legal assistance and RSD accompaniment provided by HIAS.

Key Challenges

Access to the RSD procedure and documentation remains a challenge despite efforts made by UNHCR and its partners. Transportation costs, the remoteness of communities where asylum seekers are located, as well as scarce economic resources, limit asylum seekers' capacity to access the Refugee Unit and obtain documentation in a timely manner.

As work opportunities remain limited in the northern area, advocacy and engagement with both local employers and host communities is key. This is of particular importance to ensure that tensions between the asylum seekers and the host population do not increase.

Due to lack of access to formal employment, asylum seekers also face constraints in accessing public health insurance and health services. While the Government provides free health services for children, persons with HIV and pregnant women, access to health is limited and adults without insurance are only attended in case of medical emergencies, leaving those with chronic illnesses without proper attention and medication.

CONTACTS

César Leonardo Pineda Castro, Head of Field Office, Upala, Costa Rica
pinedaca@unhcr.org, Tel: +506 8496 6792

Arthur Volpon Neves, Associate Protection Officer, Upala, Costa Rica
nevesa@unhcr.org

Ana Maria Baracaldo, Associate Reporting Officer, Costa Rica,
baracala@unhcr.org, Tel: +506 7181 7608

LINKS

- UNHCR Website: <https://www.acnur.org/costa-rica>
- Twitter: [@ACNUR_CostaRica](https://twitter.com/ACNUR_CostaRica)