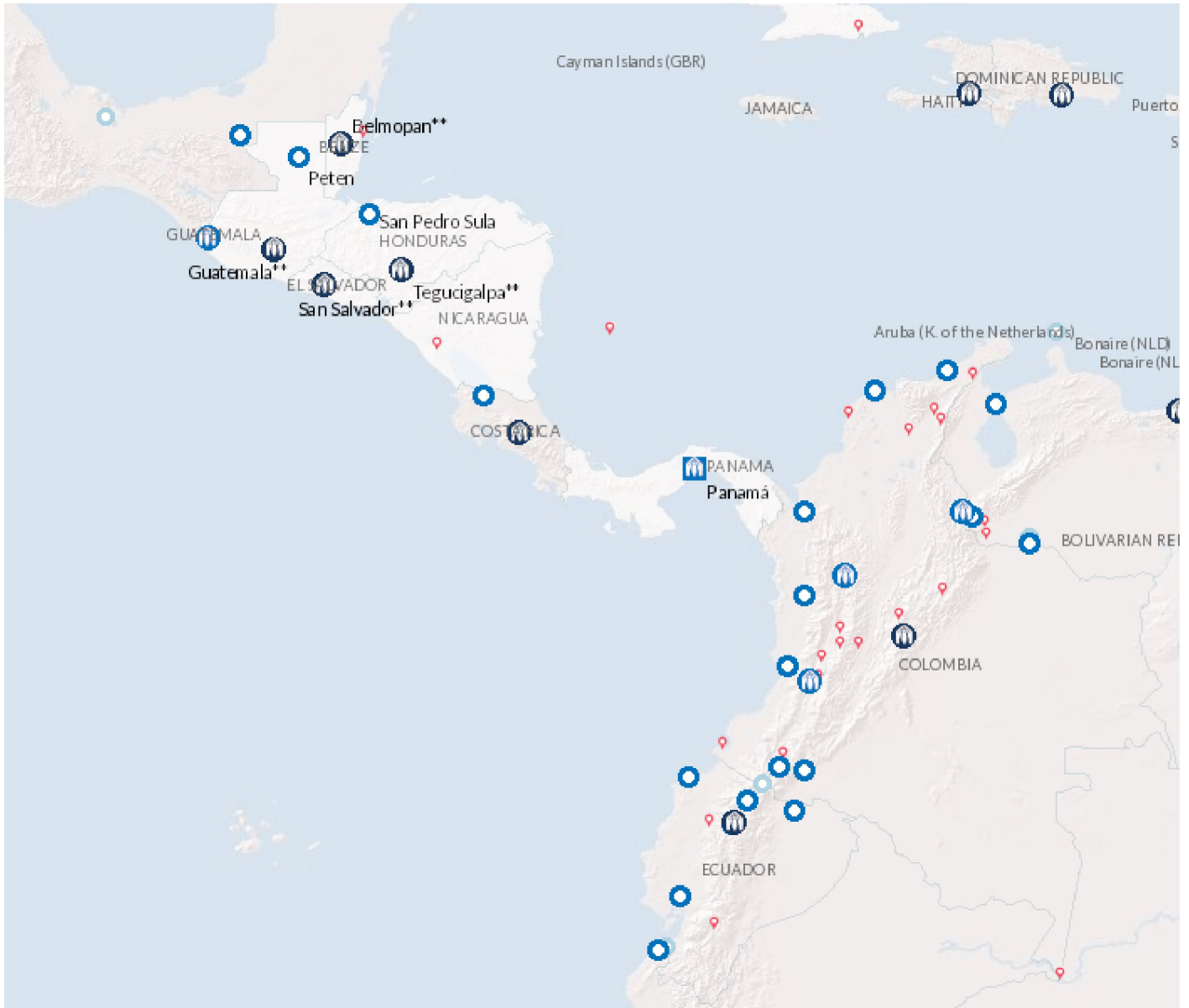


## Operation: Panama Regional Office

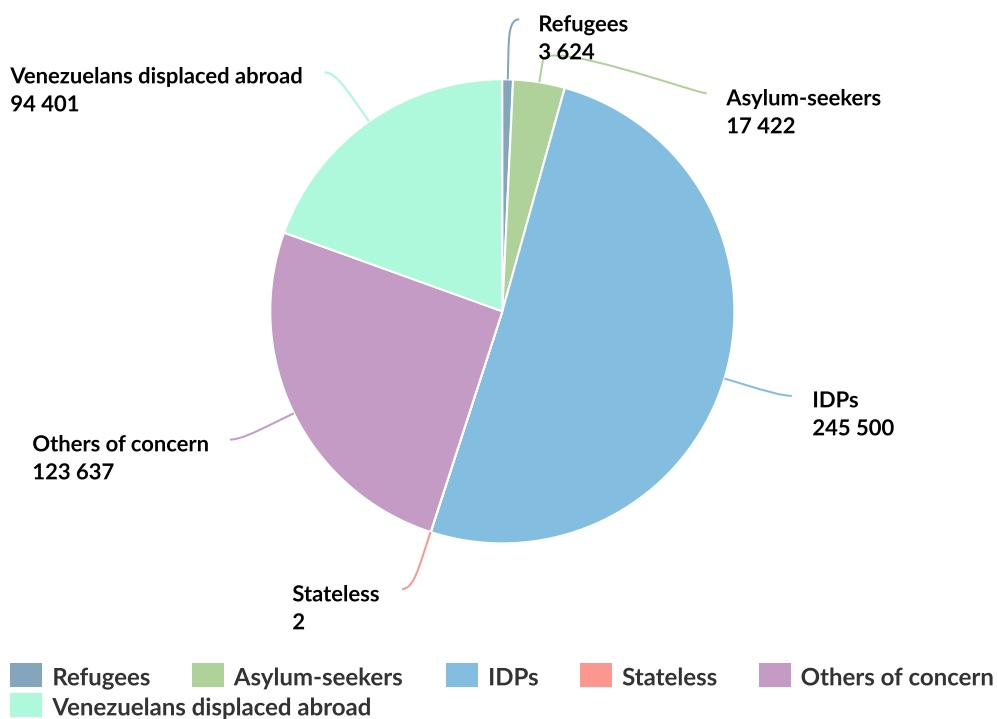


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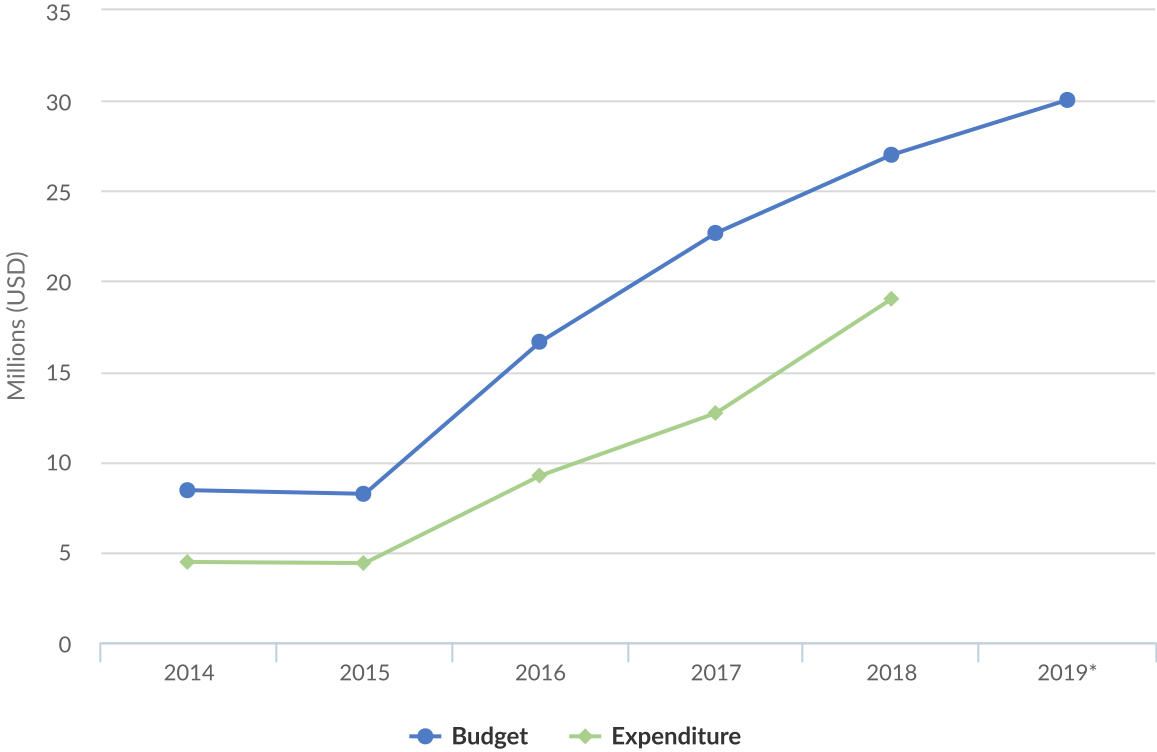
# People of Concern

INCREASE IN  
**29%** 2018

2018	484,586
2017	375,326
2016	235,707



# Budgets and Expenditure for Panama Regional Office



## Operational context

In the North of Central America (NCA), organized crime and drug cartels, urban gangs, rampant corruption, combined with limited services, as well as poverty and exclusion have led to an increasing trend of forced displacement. Internal displacement increased, as many families sought protection within their own country.

Furthermore, political and social tensions triggered several episodes of violence in Nicaragua in April 2018, leading to a large influx of people, mainly into Costa Rica, but also to the North of Central America and Panama. UNHCR's regional response plan for the Nicaragua situation focused on strengthening reception capacities in Costa Rica, El Salvador and Honduras.

In addition, the unfolding crisis in Venezuela has led to Venezuelans seeking safety in the region and beyond. The main asylum systems in the region, principally Belize, Costa Rica and Panama, have been challenged by increasing arrivals of asylum-seekers from NCA, Nicaragua and Venezuela. During the first half of 2018, a total of 10,700 new asylum claims were registered in these three countries, six times higher than the 1,800 applications observed in the first half of 2015. Since April 2018, over 20,000 asylum claims from Nicaragua were registered in Panama and Costa Rica alone, and approximately 10,000 more waiting to formalize their asylum claim in Costa Rica.

In response to the increase in forced displacement in the region, UNHCR expanded its presence and operational capacity to strengthen protection alternatives and encourage solutions for those affected, promoted mechanisms to prevent and address situations of forced displacement and, together with other UN agencies, assisted States to address the root causes of flight and promote a secure environment free from persecution.

## Population trends

During 2018 there were 11,200 new asylum-applications in Central American countries (excluding Costa Rica), 80% higher than in 2017. A significant proportion of the increase was due to new Nicaraguan (more than 3,200 people) and Venezuelans (4,500 people) asylum-seekers in Panama, coupled with a continued flow of asylum-seekers from NCA into Belize, Guatemala and Panama (more than 900 people). The total number of refugees and pending asylum-seekers in the region reached 20,500 by end of 2018.

Mixed movements from NCA countries increased during 2018, UNHCR estimates that the number of people on the move and deportees with possible protection needs from the NCA reached around 91,000 people in 2018.

In addition, the number of Venezuelan in Panama is estimated to have reached 94,000 people in 2018, with at least 60% of them considered to be vulnerable and in need of protection as per regional response planning figures.

## Key achievements

In 2018, progress was made in the creation or strengthening of laws, public policies, operational guidelines, regulations and protocols on the asylum process and the assistance and protection to forcibly displaced populations; the establishment of safe spaces, such as reception and community centers, for refugees and asylum-seekers, IDPs, people on the move and deportees with protection needs; the establishment of measures to address the access to education and security in schools; better identification of the needs of host communities; an analysis of the socioeconomic condition of refugees and asylum seekers; the promotion of access to work permits and job opportunities, micro-credit and seed capital.

In response to the so-called "caravans", UNHCR reinforced border monitoring in all three NCA countries and led the UN assessment mission. In Honduras, UNHCR carried out strengthened border monitoring and individual case management through additional staffing at deportee reception centers. In Guatemala, information of the rights of asylum and the asylum systems in Guatemala and Mexico was provided to more than 16,000 people transiting

through Guatemala between October and December 2018. In both El Salvador and Honduras, community-based interventions were enhanced and a total of 51 communities were prioritized with targeted protection interventions in 2018.

The Protection Transfer Arrangement (PTA), which started as a pilot in El Salvador, was expanded to Guatemala and Honduras. The PTA is a regional cooperation mechanism that aims to provide a safe and legal alternative for a limited number of people with specific profiles to access the international protection system. Costa Rica remained the main country of transit, whilst the Australia, Brazil, Canada and Uruguay have all signed on as countries of destination in 2018, in addition to the United States. Since the start of the programme, UNHCR has processed and submitted the cases of just over 1,000 people to the PTA. Of those submitted, close to 250 people have been transferred to country of transit, and 319 people have been resettled.

Panama has made some progress in implementing its MIRPS commitments, including the approval of a new Executive Decree on the recognition of the refugee status, as well as the increased frequency of refugee commission' meetings during the year. Belize initiated the Quality Asylum Programme (QAI) to strengthen its asylum system, also in line with its MIRPS commitments. In Cuba, UNHCR continued providing the only space for international protection in the country, through mandate RSD and resettlement to third countries. Also a decree eliminating an important requirement to access citizenship was implemented. This was an important step toward statelessness prevention, confirming the path towards the State's possible accession to international instruments on statelessness.

## Unmet needs

If additional funds were made available, the following would be prioritized:

- Increased psycho social support and conflict resolution skills targeting communities affected by violence
- A higher number of communities prioritized for community based interventions, including improvement of community or educational infrastructure, to mitigate risks for displacement or forced recruitment.
- Increased child protection activities and prevention of sexual and gender-based violence and forced recruitment; particular in border regions, in alliance with migrant shelters in the region; and the establishment of safe spaces.

(<http://reporting.unhcr.org/node/24177/edit>)

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