

Central America and Mexico

Operational Update | February 2021

Regional context

The overall situation in Central America is increasingly complex, with heightened risks related to persistent violence and the socioeconomic impact of a prolonged pandemic, aggravated by the tropical storms that hit the region in 2020.

On the pandemic, every country in Central America is reporting a drop in cases, although the virus is still surging in localized hotspots around **El Salvador**, the indigenous province of Guna Yala in **Panama** and **Guatemala's** northern municipalities. Despite reduced infection rates, Mexico remains one of the hardest hit countries, surpassing 2 million cases.

Women are particularly exposed to violence in the north of Central America. The Citizen Observatory in El Salvador reported that 541 women disappeared in 2020, according to data from the Office of the Attorney General (FGR). According to the Crime Complaints Index of the Guatemalan National Economic Research Centre, January 2021 was the most violent month for women in **Guatemala** since July 2019, with 52 violent deaths recorded. Other forms of violence related to gang violence or territorial disputes also affect population in municipalities around San Pedro Sula (**Honduras**). Six massacres were reported since January in the country.

According to WFP, hunger in **El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua** increased fourfold since 2018, from 2.2 million people to close to 8 million people in 2021.

During a three-day visit to **Costa Rica**, UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi travelled to the northern city of Upala to hear directly from Nicaraguan refugees and asylum seekers about their needs and struggles to integrate. Grandi met with mayors and visited a local market where locals and asylum seekers sell their goods. During the visit, President Alvarado announced his decision to extend Costa Rica's commitments to address the challenges of forced displacement, as part of its participation in the MIRPS, a regional framework for protection and solutions for those forced to flee.

The **end of the US Migrant Protection Protocol - MPP** (or "Remain in Mexico") policy started in February, as announced, with the first group of over 300 people allowed to enter from **Mexico** to the US to continue their asylum proceedings.

During the month, **Mexico** reported the increase in people claiming asylum, with 6,992 new asylum claims lodged in February. So far 2021, 13,516 people applied for asylum.

DON'T MISS...

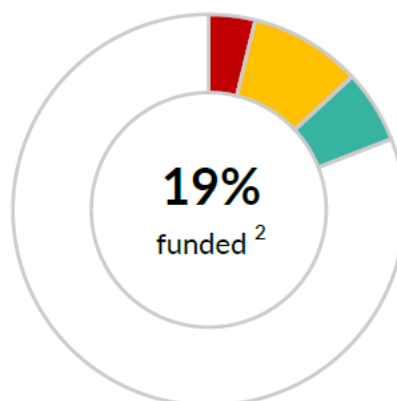


Around 40% of the people who arrived in Mexico from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala left their homes after suffering violence and persecution, according to research by UNHCR. The report « [Forced displacement to Mexico from Central America, 2014-2019](#) » (ES), analyzes the multiple causes behind displacement from and within Central America. As the report shows, Mexico is one of the preferred destinations for those forced to flee.

Funding (as of 16 March) USD 170.9 M

requested for North of Central America situation in 2021

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



Updates from the field

COMPREHENSIVE REGIONAL PROTECTION AND

SOLUTIONS FRAMEWORK (MIRPS)

- **Guatemala** presented the Regional Work Plan that it will carry out during its 2021 pro tempore Presidency of the Comprehensive Regional Framework for Protection and Solutions (MIRPS), which includes shared efforts to care for people in need of international protection.
- As part of the Support Platform, the European Union and Canada have confirmed their participation in the series of round tables to strengthen asylum systems in MIRPS countries, that will be organized by AECID during the first semester of 2021. The Platform's first technical meeting of the year was on 24 February.
- As part of **Guatemala's** MIRPS commitments, a [new office of the Refugee Status Recognition Department](#) of Guatemala's Migration Institute, supported by UNHCR, was inaugurated with expanded capacity to process asylum claims.
- **Costa Rican** President Carlos Alvarado confirmed the extension of Costa Rica's CRRF National Chapter (MINARE) to continue addressing the challenges of forced displacement and contribute to the MIRPS.

COORDINATION WITH LOCAL & NATIONAL

GOVERNMENT/ STRENGTHENING INSTITUTIONS

- In a continuous effort to support the Government of **Costa Rica** with the digitalization of 100,000 paper files of asylum seekers, 20,017 (20%) files were processed since 18 January 2021.
- In the **Honduran** municipality of Choloma, UNHCR supported a review session on the local work plan on migration and forced displacement, assessing the possibility to implement activities suspended due to the pandemic and the impact of hurricanes.
- In Flores and San Benito municipalities in the border department of Petén in Guatemala, asylum-seekers and refugees, together with institutional representatives identified priorities to move forward in the framework of Cities of Solidarity.
- In **Honduras**, the UNHCR and the National Human Rights Commissioner agreed on a referral mechanism to ensure access to rights and services of individuals, and joint work to help defining coordination in case of large movements. Also, UNHCR and the Human Rights Secretary signed the 2021 project agreement for a pilot program on humanitarian assistance and durable solutions, the first of its kind in the country.
- In **Panama's** Darien border area receiving thousands of people travelling as part of mixed movements, UNHCR donated [furniture, medical equipment and medicines to the local health centre](#). UNHCR also donated solar lamps and bars of soap to population in mixed movement. The items will be delivered through the Ombudsman's Office to Bajo Chiquito.

- In El Salvador, UNHCR and the Ministry of Health (MINSAL) are reviewing the results of a needs assessment conducted by UNHCR on GBV survivors' access to services. The purpose is to reinforce the institutional response to GBV including improving the quality of the attention provided in hospitals.

PROTECTION (INCL. CBP AND SGBV)

- **Guatemala.** Inaugurated a UNHCR-supported counselling and information centre at the Santa Elena Bus Terminal, Peten department, which offers psychosocial, legal and health care for people in transit, as well as local population with a complementary and interagency approach. 1,113 individuals or 429 family groups have been registered for assistance.
- In Tapachula (**Mexico**) UNHCR closed the former registration and humanitarian assistance centre, which will be replaced by a more spacious facility with capacity to register over 2,200 people/per month. Thanks to the new centre, in-person registration, interviews and verifications for cash support will resume in March.
- In El Salvador, UNHCR organised four field missions to border points with Guatemala and Honduras with the General Directorate for Migration, the Refugee Status Determination National Commission, Caritas and IRC to raise awareness among officials on the right to seek asylum and asylum procedures in El Salvador.

CHILD PROTECTION

- UNHCR trained 83 people from the Departmental Directorate of Education of Jutiapa (**Guatemala**) on international protection, national legislation, and the ministerial agreement 1723-2019, making reference to the regulation to promote the access to the school system for refugee boys and girls.
- [A safe shelter for girls and adolescents was open in Honduras](#) in cooperation with local partner Casa Alianza Honduras benefiting 150 boys, girls and adolescents fleeing violence and persecution and at risk of displacement as a result of recruitment, extortion and other forms of targeted violence. UNHCR support represents a 50% increase in Casa Alianza's capacity.

INTER-AGENCY COORDINATION

- UNHCR participated in a high-level meeting between the UN Country Team and the Government of **El Salvador**, where the development challenges and priorities identified for the drafting of the new UNSDCF for 2022-2026 were presented and discussed, in line with national priorities. As the Deputy Minister of Security highlighted, strengthening of the National Directorate of Attention to Victims and Forced Migration is a priority for the next years.
- In **Honduras**, UNHCR-led Protection Cluster agreed to socialize the response plan for "caravans" and

mixed migration movements for inputs. The sub cluster on sexual and gender-based violence also included in its terms of reference the analysis of violence in situations of internal displacement, mixed migration flows and affecting deported population.

DELIVERY OF HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE & CASH

- Help for Progress partner in **Belize** assisted 133 cases with food, medical attention, rent, gas, and with documentation processes.
- In **Costa Rica**, 179 beneficiaries received prepaid cards for cash assistance purposes and 38 Nicaraguan family groups from the communities of El Manzano, San José de Upala, as well as from Upala and Los Chiles, benefited from school kits, uniforms, school bags and hygiene kits.
- During February, 77 people of concern to UNHCR in **El Salvador** received support in cash thanks to the cooperation from WFP. The two agencies are finalizing the new agreement that will allow to continue to provide humanitarian assistance through cash support in the next several months.
- In the aftermath of hurricanes Eta and Iota, UNHCR in **Guatemala** delivered most needed NFIs items such as plastic sheeting, mosquito nets, water filters and jerry cans for more than 1,200 refugee families and members of host communities still struggling in Izabal and Peten regions after the Eta and Iota hurricanes. 864 people of concern to UNHCR

received support in cash assistance, reaching a total of more than USD150M distributed among the most vulnerable population.

- In **Honduras**, UNHCR improved four shelters managed by Caritas for people on the move.
- In a back-to-school operation organized by partner **Panamanian** Red Cross, 70 tablet computers were given to children and 75 families were supported with cash to buy schools supplies. Additionally, 80 families were supported through electronic transferances to buy food, medicines and pay rent.

DURABLE SOLUTIONS & LIVELIHOODS

- After being trained in how to run a business in **Belize**, 20 refugees and asylum seekers expect to launch small enterprises in cosmetics, sewing, fast food, agriculture, clothing, mechanics and produce vending. In cooperation with Humana, trainings in furniture/ woodwork, cosmetology, music and electricity are improving opportunities to find job.
- Refugees and asylum seekers in Guatemala employed as park rangers under the “green jobs” initiative, have been deployed to a park in the capital city permitting the premise to reopen after many months of closure due to COVID-19. Thanks to the refugees employed to check biosecurity rules are respected, now the park is accessible by locals.

The importance of flexible funding for UNHCR's situations

Flexible financial support allows UNHCR to place funds anywhere within a given situation, in line with the office's priorities, from where people in need are forced to flee, to where they find refuge. Flexible funding needs to be timely for UNHCR to plan in the most efficient manner, allocating to priorities first.

UNHCR's humanitarian response in **Central Americas** is made possible thanks to the generous support of major donors who have contributed unrestricted funding to UNHCR's global operations, and to donors who have generously contributed directly to **UNHCR Americas operations**.

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CENTRAL AMERICA and MEXICO

PERSONS OF CONCERN as of Mid Year Statistics

