The vast majority of the world’s refugees are hosted in low- and middle-income countries. The international community must do more to support host governments with access to the vaccines. Global and equitable access is what will ultimately protect lives and stem the pandemic.”

Filippo Grandi
UN High Commissioner for Refugees

You can read the press release on one of the first countries to start COVID-19 vaccination for refugees HERE.

Situational Highlights

According to WHO/PAHO, the COVID-19 pandemic swept through every country in the Americas in 2020, infecting more than 35 million people across the region and causing some 850,000 deaths. Health systems throughout the region struggled to manage the outbreak on account of limited supplies, space, and staff. Brazil and Colombia are now reporting the highest numbers of new cases, with a particularly worrisome rise in infections in Brazil’s south-eastern regions. The situation in the northern Brazilian border state of Amazonas is also of serious concern and is limiting humanitarian operations there to lifesaving activities.

Although several countries had reported a decline in cases at the end of 2020, in January, infections spiked across the region, accounting for 51 per cent of all new cases globally and 45 per cent of all new deaths. Tighter restrictions were reintroduced in several countries, including Argentina, Canada, Costa Rica, Brazil, Peru, Chile, and Uruguay. Colombia announced that its land borders will remain closed until March. In Central America, Panama and Belize are seeing a rise in COVID-19 infections. Meanwhile, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua were reporting relatively low COVID numbers overall. However, these trends should be taken with a pinch of salt, as Hurricanes Eta and Iota may have impacted national monitoring systems. Additionally, the storms displaced many residents from the affected regions.

Despite pandemic-related restrictions, countries throughout the region are facilitating refugees’ and migrants’ access to protection and regular stays. By the end of 2020, Mexico registered a 40 per cent increase in asylum applications – with a total of 41,303 claims filed – as COVID-19 restrictions and the impact of the two devastating storms exacerbated the habitual drivers of displacement in the north of Central America. The same confluence of factors led to a large mixed movement of an estimated 8,000 Hondurans in mid-January. From 15 October to 28 December, Colombia registered 18,252 applications for the Special Stay Permit, or PEP, from Venezuelans who had entered the country regularly prior to 31 August, 2020. Introduced in 2017, the PEP allows Venezuelans to work, study, and access healthcare for up to two years. The Peruvian Commission for Refugees extended the asylum-seeker document and work permit until 30 June.

Challenges

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, is continuously advocating at the country, regional and global levels for refugees and the other people we protect to be included in national social protection strategies. UNHCR is calling for the equitable inclusion of refugees, and internally displaced and stateless populations through the COVAX Facility, a global initiative that brings together governments and manufacturers to ensure that COVID-19 vaccines eventually reach those in greatest need. Low- to middle-income countries have been identified as priority countries for support. UNHCR is also working with international partners to ensure that ‘leaving no one behind’ and ‘equitable access to vaccines’ are not just phrases, but actual practices.

Ensuring that refugees are included in the vaccine rollout is key to ending the pandemic. Excluding refugees, other displaced people or non-nationals from vaccination plans carries the risk of prolonging transmission within these groups, with spill over into national populations.

There are tangible protection risks associated with excluding refugees, including potentially dire consequences to their health, access to services, work, education, and livelihoods, as well as freedom of movement and freedom from discrimination. While UNHCR is not procuring vaccinations – that remains governments’ responsibility – the agency is supporting refugee host countries with other COVID-preparedness and response initiatives. Those initiatives include critical health, sanitation, hygiene, and logistical support, as well as the provision of personal protective equipment.

UNHCR’s response in the Americas

Despite the pandemic-related restrictions, UNHCR is working to provide emergency assistance, including safe shelter spaces and cash-based assistance, as well as to advocate for the inclusion of refugees in national public health responses, social safety nets and emergency assistance plans. Urgent action is required to help the most vulnerable refugees and IDPs, particularly those in countries where they are unable to access state-run social protection schemes. With the coronavirus crisis exacerbating already dire humanitarian needs globally, timely and flexible support from governments, the private sector and individuals remains critical. Click HERE to see an update on UNHCR’s COVID-19 emergency response in the Americas since October, 2020.
Ruth’s family, also fled. The mara is coming!

It was 4:50 in the morning of a hot Thursday in March in San Pedro Sula, located in northern Honduras, when the Mara Cremaro, a violent gang, knocked on the door of the modest house where the 18-year-old Ruth Salgado lived with her parents. Her parents weren’t home and Ruth took over. She took her younger brother in her arms and left the small family home. "The mara is coming!"

More than 830,000 people have been forced to flee the countries of North Central America. Increasingly, gangs and criminal groups target entire families forcing them to flee together. Entering the Mara Cremaro’s territory, families are often tortured, and women are raped. Refugees and migrants who flee gang violence are often forced to live in a state of continuous fear.

Entire family flees from home to save their lives in Central America

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It was 4:50 in the morning of a hot Thursday in March in San Pedro Sula, located in northern Honduras, when Ruth Salgado, 19, heard the phrase that changed the life of her and her entire family: "The mara is coming!"

Her parents weren’t home and Ruth took over. She took her younger brother in her arms and left the small family house made of zinc sheets and wood to flee with her seven siblings, between one and 16 years old. Ruth’s only thought was saving their lives. Thirty other members of the extended family, who lived in the five houses around Ruth’s family, also fled.

Stories from the field

Entire family flees from home to save their lives in Central America

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Coordination and Response to date

MIRPS

The MIRPS is the annual strategic framework for the Cash, Social Protection and Temporary Stay programme, which is organized in a central region and is implemented in five countries of the region: Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, and Panama. The MIRPS Pro-tempore Presidency, the Government of Guatemala, is leading the elaboration and approval of the MIRPS regional annual plan for 2021. The plan brings continuity to initiatives from 2020 and integrates new strategic lines aimed at responding to forced displacement amid the coronavirus pandemic, natural disasters, and economic challenges. The plan foresees the creation of new working groups in reception and local governance, economic inclusion, and admission of people with international protection needs. It also follows up on the working group on internal displacement, which was created in 2020. Strengthening alliances with civil society, the private sector and the UN system will be key to achieving the goals.
FUNDING THE RESPONSE

Financial Information

COVID-19 SUPPLEMENTARY APPEAL 2021

To respond to the most pressing needs resulting from the pandemic, UNHCR is appealing for $455 million in funding for the Americas in 2021. As of January, donors had already pledged $18 million.

UNHCR is grateful for the critical and generous support provided by donors to the Coronavirus Emergency Situation globally, and to the Americas, as well as those who have contributed to UNHCR programmes with unaired marked funding.

Thanks to donors in 2020:

And to our private donors:

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