

# UNHCR PRESENCE IN MEXICO



School supply packages were donated to families in Chiapas, Tabasco, Oaxaca, Veracruz and Baja California.

## COVID RESPONSE – HIGHLIGHTS



**80,000 kits with school supplies** donated to families in Chiapas, Tabasco, Oaxaca, Veracruz and Baja California



**781 asylum-seekers** released from migration detention under the Alternative to Detention program since the beginning of pandemic (2,863 in 2020)



**14,169 individuals** provided with emergency cash assistance covering basic needs for 3 months



**45,785** attended by national Help Desk through calls and messages

## OPERATIONAL CONTEXT

The decline in the number of confirmed and suspected Covid-19 cases that began in August stopped by mid-September. Cases have once again started to increase. Chihuahua, where many asylum seekers and refugee live, became the first state to return to “red” in the Covid-19 traffic light system after registering a rebound in Covid-19 cases. The National Asylum Commission (COMAR) has continued registering new asylum applications in its offices, while the subsequent processing has been carried out both in person and remotely.

With 32,260 asylum claims at the end of end of October 2020, asylum applications in Mexico continued to rise, especially during the last two months. This brings numbers closer to the levels seen immediately prior to the onset of Covid-19.

UNHCR expects that approximately 44,000 asylum applications will be filed in 2020. The increase of asylum-seeking children indicates also that more families are on the move.

## SUPPORTING EDUCATION SECTOR

UNHCR continue to provide support for enrolment into pre-school, primary, and secondary public education as part of its commitment towards the protection of children and adolescents. Since the beginning of the pandemic, UNHCR has shared information with families about the distance learning program in Mexico “Learn at home” and accompanied parents in registering their children. Financial support was also granted by UNHCR to cover connectivity related expenses and purchase of materials needed for remote schooling. Despite the adversities, many refugee and asylum-seeking children and adolescents, continued to study from home and have successfully completed the 2019/2020 school year.

At the beginning of the new school year, UNHCR distributed over 80,000 packages of school supplies to families in communities inhabited by refugees in the states of Chiapas, Tabasco, Oaxaca, Veracruz and Baja California. In the city of Tapachula and border town Ciudad Hidalgo (Chiapas), the school kits were distributed in all public pre-schools, primary and secondary schools. The donation benefited both refugee and Mexican children. Each package consisted of items selected from the official list of supplies for each grade and included: pencils, notebooks, scissors, play dough, notepads and a bag made of ecological fabric. The delivery was intended to reduce the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and to ensure the attendance of girls and boys in schools. The project also seeks to promote peaceful co-existence in key host communities.

UNHCR also continued working with the authorities to assist asylum-seekers and refugees in obtaining primary and secondary school certificates through the “Education without borders” program of the National Institute for Adult Education (INEA). Since the beginning of 2020, UNHCR has supported 185 certifications. Likewise, UNHCR and its partners support refugees with the recognition of diplomas issued in their home countries. In 2020, 65 refugees benefited from the revalidation of studies. Unfortunately, since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, both procedures were suspended, and Mexican education authorities have only slowly resumed them through ad-hoc actions of certification and revalidation.

Finally, since the last quarter of 2018, UNHCR has been supporting refugee youths in accessing tertiary education opportunities thanks to a dedicated scholarship program. Currently 136 students in different states in Mexico are supported, of which 18% are funded by the DAFI (Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative) Program. UNHCR university education program has recently broadened its outreach through the collaboration with other partners, such as Habesha Project, which placed 15 refugee students in university programs across Mexico.



## UNHCR REINFORCES ITS PRESENCE IN MEXICO

Although it has had a presence since 2019, UNHCR officially opened its office in Palenque (Chiapas) in early October. The increased arrival of persons in need of international protection in the northern region of Chiapas as well as an increase in asylum applications in Palenque were the key factors leading to the establishing of the office. The new office facilitates close coordination with the authorities to better serve the needs of refugees and asylum seekers support and benefits the local population through investment in infrastructure and projects such as remodeling of parks and sports spaces or bringing internet to neighboring towns.

The office in Palenque complements the other three UNHCR offices in southern Mexico (Tapachula, Tenosique and Acayucan), where most asylum applications are registered in the country. UNHCR has also 3 offices (Tijuana, Monterrey and Saltillo) and a presence in Mexicali and Ciudad Juarez in northern Mexico. In the Center of the country, the offices in

Mexico City, Aguascalientes and Guadalajara are completed by the UNHCR presence in Puebla, Leon, Guanajuato and San Luis Potosí. In the Yucatan Peninsula, UNHCR provides services in Cancun.





**“Refugee Family”** Author: Alonso Zapata, 1st place in the graphic category of the 12th Contest on Refugees.

## ART CONTEST ABOUT REFUGEES “ALL DREAMS COUNT”

The 12th edition of the “Art contest about refugees: all dreams count” was promoted by UNHCR in cooperation with the National Council to Prevent Discrimination (CONAPRED), the Human Rights Commission of Mexico City (CDHCM), the Mexican Commission for Aid to Refugees (COMAR), the Executive Secretary of the National System for the comprehensive Protection of girls, boys and adolescents (SIPINNA), the Secretary of Public Education (SEP) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF).

122 art works by children and adolescents from 24 Mexican states were received, in three main categories of graphics (drawing, comic strip, comic, photography), writing (story, poetry, song)

and digital (video, animation and videoblog). Participants included children living in Mexico but originating from other countries such as Colombia, Cuba, the United States, El Salvador, Honduras and Venezuela. A number of refugees participated.

The competition encouraged a reflection on how to help refugees fulfill their dreams in host countries. Themes addressed by participating children and adolescents included: guarantees of rights, health, social relations, protection and violence. The contest showed a great understanding and empathy towards refugees and their life circumstances, which are important for creating a society of integration, solidarity and respect.



Remodeling of spaces for the refugee and local youth population where they can participate in sports, artistic, cultural, environmental and social activities.

## NOTES FROM THE FIELD

### Enhancing peaceful coexistence in the South

In cooperation with local authorities, UNHCR completed three projects that aim at strengthening the peaceful co-existence of refugees and host communities in Tapachula and Tenosique.

The first project focused on renovating of the Youth Territory, a structure belonging to the Youth Secretariat of the Tapachula City Council. It consisted of creating a space to be shared by refugees and local youth where they could participate in sports, artistic, cultural and environmental activities. The work carried out by UNHCR resulted in a construction of an “ideas room” and remodeling of the area outside the center to allow for presenting plays and carrying out artistic activities. In addition, a new space was constructed to hold a public library.

The other two projects consisted of the remodeling and renovation of the House of Culture and the Community Library La Palma in Tenosique (Tabasco). The House of Culture offers artistic activities for people of all origins and of all age, such as theater, dance and exhibitions. Meanwhile, the Community library La Palma is a space used for meetings, consultations and dissemination of information, both for the local and refugee populations. The mayor has committed the installation of internet for the users of the library.

The three projects seek to support communities in Tapachula and Tenosique, which are the main entry points to Mexico for thousands of people who flee their own countries in search of protection. These initiatives are examples of UNHCR efforts to enhance solidarity of local populations with asylum-seekers and refugees.

## Leon: “Casas de Cuidado Bajío” opened to refugee children

UNHCR began a collaboration with the “Casas de Cuidado Diario”, a non-profit civil association originating from Chihuahua state. For the last 6 years, the program “Casas de Cuidado Bajío” has also been implemented in León with two structures that serve approximately 180 girls and boys from 1 to 9 years old. By linking with Casas de Protección Diario AC, UNHCR aims to solve the problem of lack of pre-school care for children from single-parent families who participate in the UNHCR Local Integration Program (PIL) in Guanajuato and who do not have access to a public or private nursery. This contributes to better integration of families into the community, in addition to promoting non-discrimination, elimination of xenophobia and racism from an early age in the communities that receive persons of concern to UNHCR.



## Support for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence in Monterrey

UNHCR, in collaboration with AIPaz, which benefited from the UNHCR’s “Safe from the Start” fund, began in October the implementation of urban gardens and sports activities in its two shelters in Monterrey.

The urban gardens are under construction and will provide a space where SGBV survivors will learn to obtain food for their own and other families for and the shelter consumption. Besides being a learning area, the gardens will contribute to the sustainability and will offer a common space to relax in contact with nature. The project seeks to strengthen the feeling of belonging

in asylum seekers and refugees, and to help families revalue and appropriate the space and to feel at home.

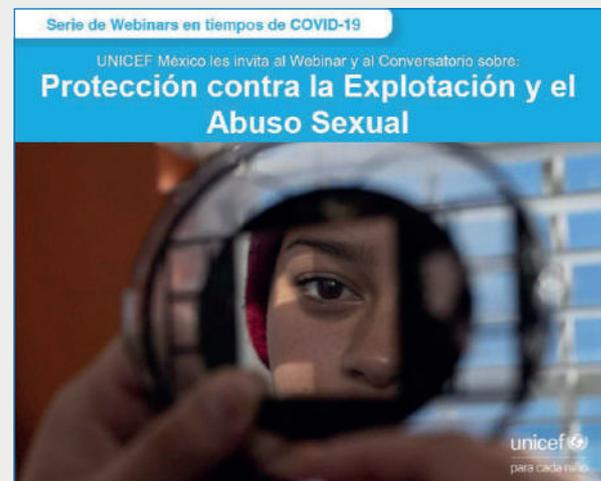


Likewise, the sport activities have a focus not only on the development of motor skills of children in shelters, but also as part of their psychosocial care. Through sport, boys and girls express their concerns and build resilience, they learn to value the positive aspects of their lives. Since the beginning of the project, 27 boys and 21 girls have benefited from the daily activities in the AIPaz shelters.

## Reinforcing protection against sexual exploitation and abuse

On July 27, 2020, UNHCR, in cooperation with UNICEF and Save the Children hold on a webinar on Protection against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA). The webinar was targeted at shelters, civil society organizations and state actors involved in the protection of children in Mexico and Latin America. Its aim was to raise awareness about the sexual exploitation and abuse committed by humanitarian actors against persons of concern and to present the priority areas of prevention, reporting, assistance and research. The webinar was attended by more than 390 participants. It was very well received by NGOs and shelters, who indicated that PSEA was a priority for them and called for further training in this area. UNHCR leads a Sub-Group on Protection against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA), members of

which include UNICEF, OIM, Save the Children, HIAS, MDM, IRC, MSF, CRS y CICR.



## UNHCR HUMAN STORIES

### Francisco and Maxlenin Alejos

Francisco and Maxlenin Alejos are refugees. They are psychologists, committed to help people, who, like them, have experienced the emotional consequences of forced displacement. Since they arrived in Aguascalientes, they have been offering pro bono trainings and workshops on management of emotions to asylum seekers and refugees living in the city. They also contributed to a psychosocial support project targeting young people in Aguascalientes.

In the context of the COVID-19, Francisco and Maxlenin started distance mental health and psychosocial support to asylum seekers in managing pandemic related stress. Their commitment inspired other refugees in cities across Mexico to voluntarily support mental health of forcibly displaced persons. According to Francisco and Maxlenin, it is extremely important to provide psychological support to asylum seekers and refugees, so that they are better prepared to address the consequences the pandemic has generated, such as: insecurity, emotional and physical isolation, school after closures loss of livelihoods and inadequate resources for individual's medical response.





“Listening to local people is important to generate refugee-friendly host communities.”

### **Testimony of de Mónica Najera, Senior Assistant for durable solutions at UNHCR'S Sub-office in Tapachula**

“Listening to local people is important to generate refugee-friendly host communities. Although the local population has been familiar with the migratory dynamics of southern Mexico, transit and return migration; they need to adapt to the increasing presence of refugees who, due to the procedure before COMAR and requirements of Mexican law, remain in the region for a period of 3 to 6 months.

Due to geographic location, our area of operation is the largest in Mexico. We serve 65% of the people who request asylum in Mexico, and we provide the highest number of services in the country.

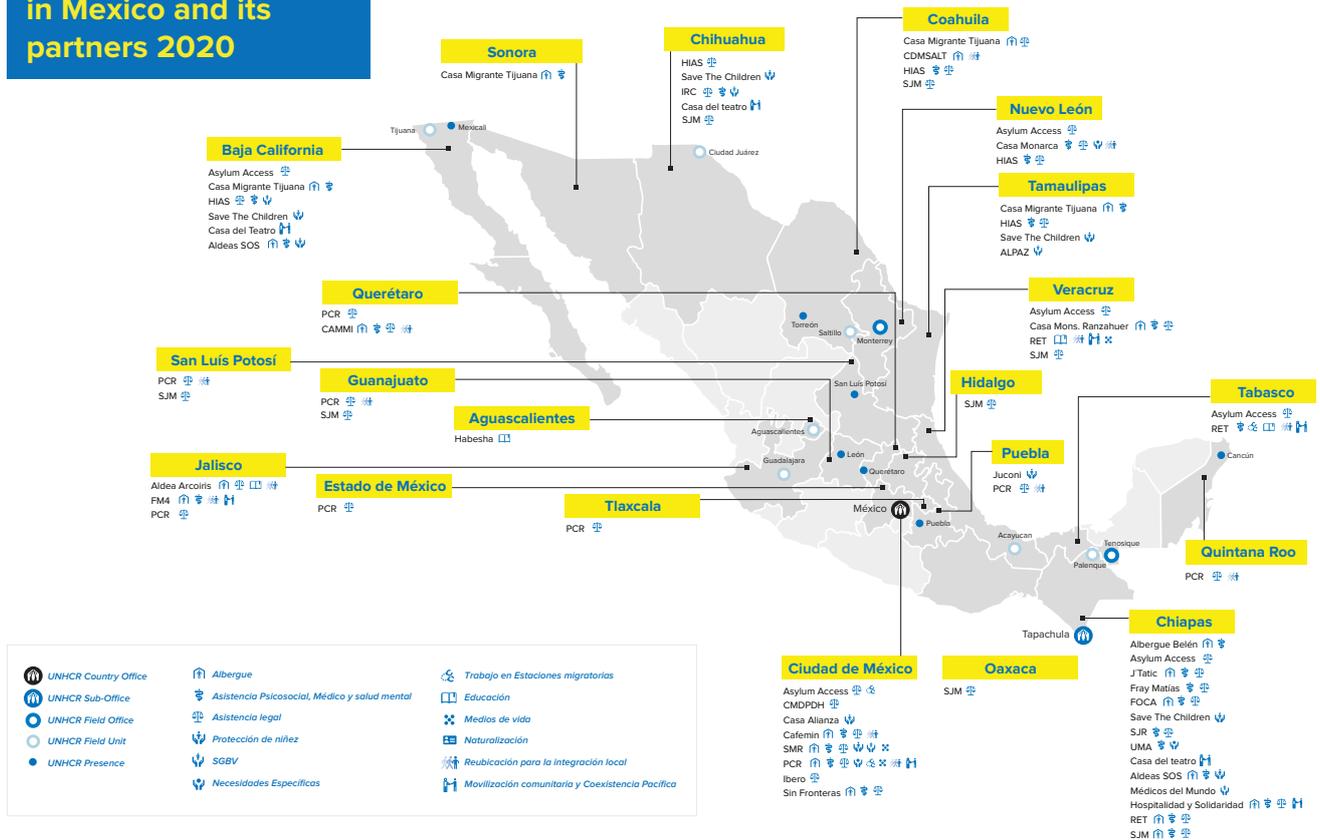
The context can be complicated, Chiapas and its population have their own challenges and refugees add to them, making the local dynamics a little more complex. Here we work hand in hand with the authorities, there are great advances in issues of access to rights and services, but there is always more to do.

I am from Tapachula, a city with a cross-border culture and tradition located in southern Mexico in the state of Chiapas. Since I was small, I could notice the presence

of migrants in my city and the surrounding communities. But it was only when I grew up that I understood that not all these people moved voluntarily, and that in addition to being forced to leave their countries for different reasons related to violence and persecution, they arrived in places where sometimes they were not well received. When I got to know UNHCR, I was already working on migration issues, but I felt that what I was doing was not enough, my perception of the problem at that time was limited and getting to know the work and impact that UNHCR had on people's lives was decisive in finding me on the right path.

I never thought I could be a part of this! Working for UNHCR was an almost unattainable dream, not only because of what it represents, but because when you are inside, you immediately understand that you are a tiny part within an extraordinary humanitarian machine. A machine that provides help and protects thousands of people who are fighting to save their lives by requesting international protection in another country, such as Mexico. One believes that these services are for people who come from abroad, but today, more than ever I know that UNHCR provides opportunities for everyone”.

# UNHCR Operation in Mexico and its partners 2020



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