

# Field Office Upala, Costa Rica

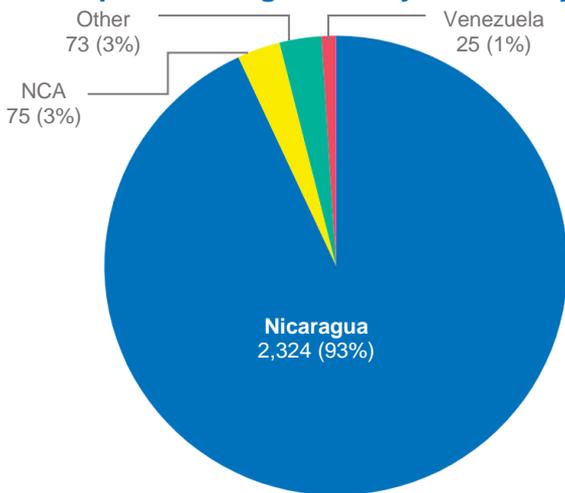
November 2019

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.

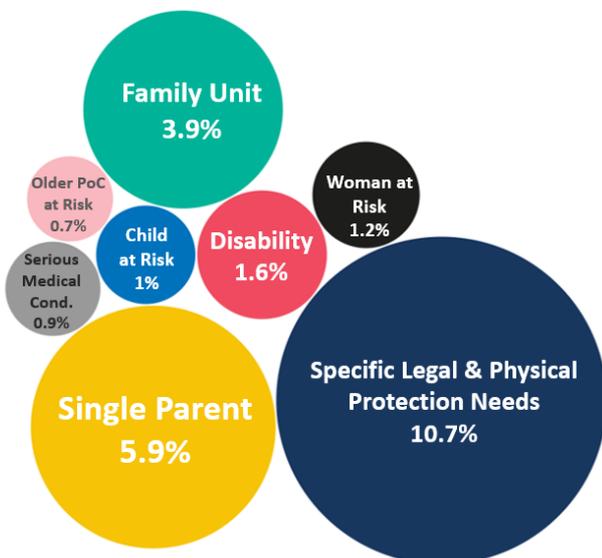
While the national legal framework allows asylum seekers to access social services such as education and healthcare, the rapid increase in asylum claims since early 2018 has overburdened capacities, causing delays, which increase their vulnerability. UNHCR has been present in the northern area of Costa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

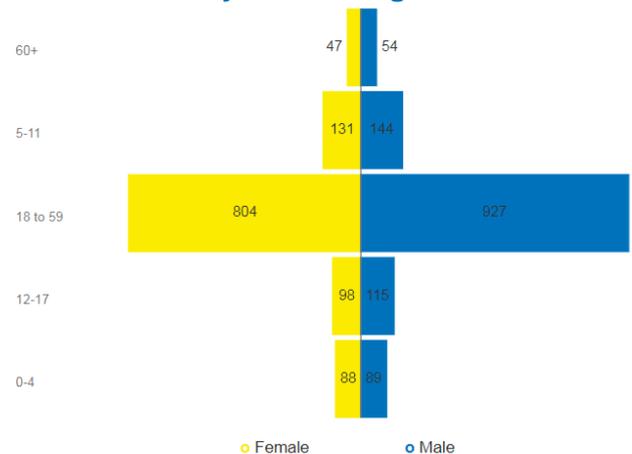
**Population Registered by Nationality**



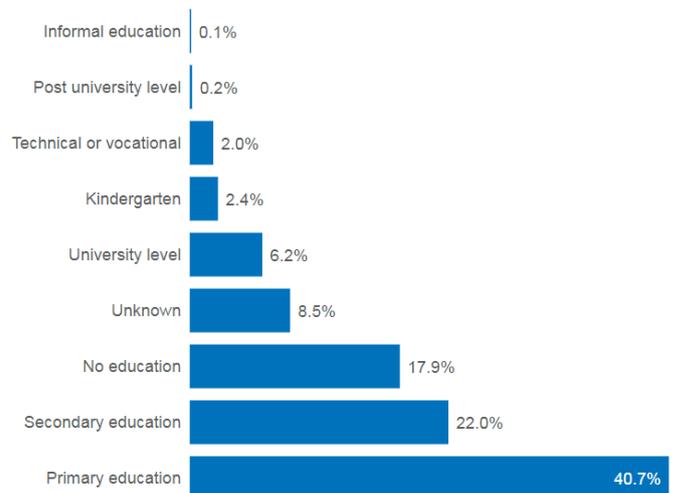
**Specific Needs**



**Population Registered Disaggregated by Sex and Age**



**Level of Education**



# 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*.

As part of its border monitoring strategy, UNHCR in coordination with partner agency HIAS has delivered humanitarian assistance to more than 1,730 family groups, conducted 984 legal assistance and orientation activities, 295 monitoring missions, 208 legal orientations to guarantee access to services, and has represented more than 144 asylum seekers in the RSD process.

## 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 who 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 strengthened its partnership with the Migration Authority by investing in human resources, office space, and equipment for the Refugee Unit in Upala, opened in March 2019. Insofar, the Refugee Unit in the North has tended to more than 1,500 asylum applications.

## 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, minors, people with disabilities, and critical health conditions. Through this, 115 individuals have received assistance. In addition, capacity building on protection for public and state institutions, with a focus on specific needs, helps promote inclusion of PoC within state programs.

Together with partner agency CENDEROS, emergency and high-risk cases receive shelter and psychosocial support until they can transition into stable housing. Individual cases also receive follow-up to ensure access to services and guarantee immediate assistance. Within host-communities UNHCR works on SGBV prevention, promoting PoC integration, and peaceful coexistence.

## Cash-Based Intervention

To respond to the immediate needs of the most vulnerable asylum seekers, UNHCR is providing a multipurpose, unconditional cash grant in the cantons of Los Chiles and Upala. These non-conditional, unrestricted cash grants provide a timely response, allowing prioritized individuals and families to address their most critical needs and support integration into their host communities. In the northern region, 841 socioeconomic evaluations were conducted during a two-week period along with financial training, legal advice, and other services. Through this exercise, 684 households qualified to receive a grant of USD 200 per month for three months.

## Emergency preparedness

To strengthen contingency planning and emergency preparedness, UNHCR enhanced its participation in the Emergency Committee (CCE) in Upala and its presence in the Interinstitutional Coordination Committees in La Cruz and Los Chiles. In July, UNHCR was part of the first line response for flooding in Upala, which affected 692 houses in 20 communities, gather and systematizing information for the Permanent Coordination Team of the CCE and providing emergency transportation. UNHCR is also preparing an emergency warehouse for contingency planning purposes, equipped with CRI, drinkable water, and food supplies for Upala and Los Chiles, and also renovating three community centers to be used as temporary shelters in case of an emergency.

### Peaceful coexistence & Livelihoods

UNHCR promotes peaceful coexistence, supports host communities and facilitates local integration of asylum seekers and refugees through: delivery of school supplies, furniture, kits, and electronic appliances to schools, public institutions, local authorities, and NGOs, as well as financial, material and technical assistance to establish and develop small- and medium-scale income-generating projects. At end October, over 350 individuals have benefited from technical trainings that promote integration into the labor market, and 30 entrepreneurs have received seed capital for their small businesses. In addition, eight community, income-generating projects centered on organic agriculture in Upala received support.

### Community-Based Protection (CBP)

UNHCR began implementing its CBP strategy in August 2019 and to date has conducted 23 introduction sessions for 27 communities in Upala and Los Chiles reaching 260 PoC. Introduction sessions focus on presenting UNHCR's mandate, the asylum process, promoting community participation and empowerment, and appointing community representatives. 21 representatives have been appointed and will be trained by UNHCR. UNHCR is also broadening communication with PoC through 12 phone trees and a 24/7 phone line available for information.

The strategy also seeks to support community initiatives and to promote integration through sports. As such, UNHCR sponsors children and female athletics teams in 18 communities in Upala and Los Chiles, and works with the local Government on an initiative called *Tardes en Familia*, which seeks to strengthen child protection in ten communities by working with local child protection groups to raise awareness and to support safe spaces.

## Working with Partners

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.

To strengthen its partnership with public institutions at a regional and local level in the Huetar Norte and Chorotega Regions, and to facilitate PoC access to services and basic rights, UNHCR is coordinating capacity building interventions with partner agencies CENDEROS and HIAS. To date, UNHCR has delivered more than 21 capacity building sessions covering child protection, international refugee law, SGBV, and psychological first aid techniques. These sessions have reached more than 450 persons in 20 public institutions and partner agencies and community leaders from five cantons. As part of the agreement with the National Institute for Social Welfare (IMAS), 340 PoC have been referred for socioeconomic assessments; 58 grants have been approved covering a three-month period.

Partner agencies RET, Fundacion Mujer (FM), and DNI are recently active in the northern region. RET appointed four protection and case management officers, DNI two child protection officers and two capacity building officers, HIAS will open an office and appoint another lawyer in Los Chiles, and FM recently hired two case workers.

### CONTACTS

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### LINKS

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