

Operation: Panama Multi-Country Office

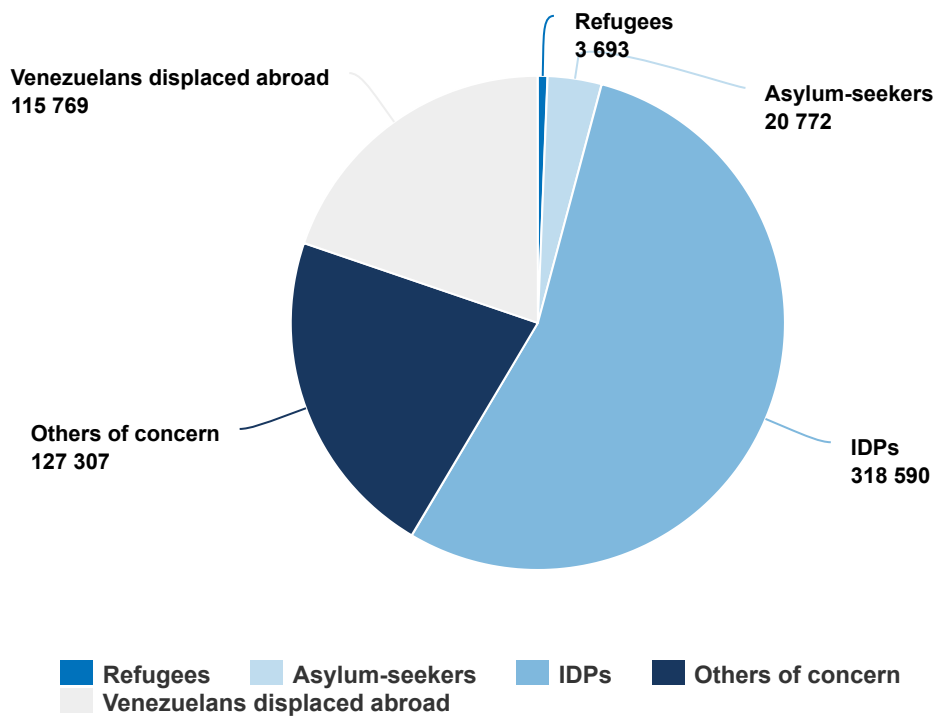


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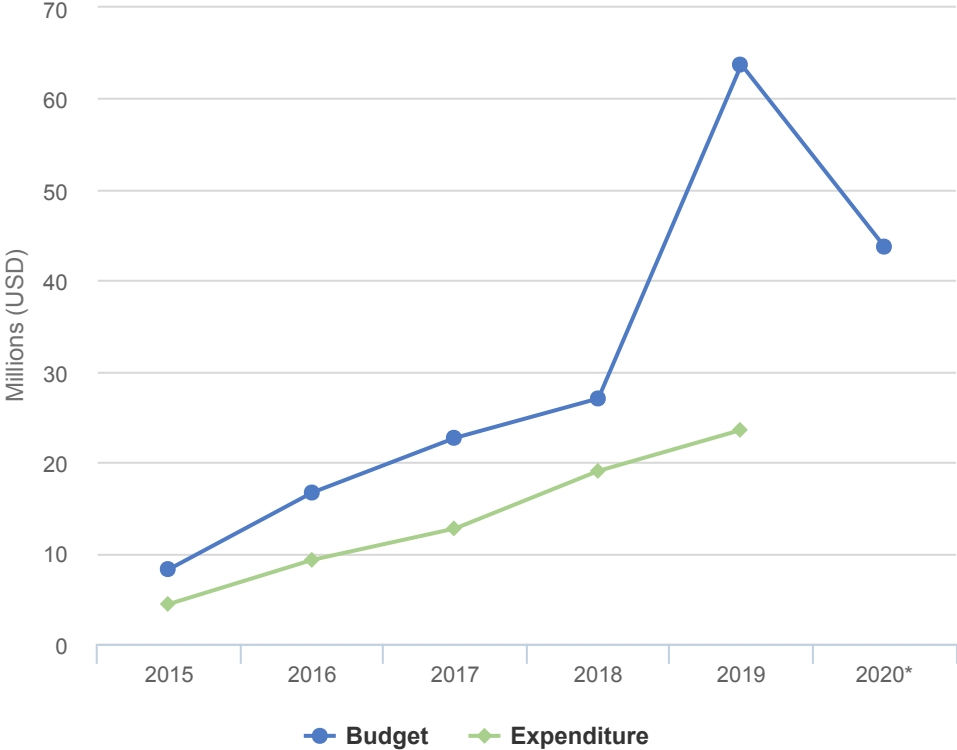
People of Concern

21 % INCREASE IN
2019

2019	586,131
2018	484,586
2017	375,326



Budgets and Expenditure for Panama Multi-Country Office



Operational context

In 2019, ongoing high levels of violence and crime in the north of Central America (NCA) continued to lead to displacement. While refugee and migrant 'caravans' occurred in the first quarter of the year – causing tensions with local communities and a challenging humanitarian situation - refugees predominantly opted to flee spontaneously or in small groups to avoid drawing attention.

To address this complex situation, UNHCR supported the State-led regional comprehensive protection and solutions framework (MIRPS) initiative to implement the Global Compact on Refugees in the region. El Salvador joined the MIRPS in mid-2019 and later assumed the pro tempore presidency. South–south cooperation was also strengthened through the MIRPS, including through twinning missions between Belize and Costa Rica.

The United States of America (United States) signed asylum cooperation agreements with the Governments of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, resulting in the potential for increased transfers of people of concern from the United States to these three countries. By the end of the year, transfers were operational to Guatemala only.

The social and political crisis in Nicaragua since April 2018 and the unfolding crisis in the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela also affected Central American countries, particularly in Costa Rica and Panama.

In Cuba, UNHCR continued to advocate for the ratification of the 1951 Refugee Convention and provided access to international protection through mandate refugee status determination (RSD) procedures.

UNHCR partnered with regional and sub-regional organizations such as the Central American Integration System (SICA), the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Central American Council of Ombudspersons, to enhance coordination in responding to and mitigating the causes and impact of displacement. Partnerships with IOM and UNICEF supported operational response plans across seven countries, together with common information management products.

Population trends

With a total of over 469,300 refugees and asylum-seekers having fled the NCA by the end of 2019, all countries in Central America were affected as either a place of origin, transit or destination for people with international protection needs. Moreover, some 320,000 persons were displaced internally in El Salvador and Honduras.

The situation in Nicaragua resulted in large-scale displacement, with over 71,500 asylum-seekers and refugees fleeing to countries worldwide between April 2018 and December 2019, an average of 4,000 per month. This included 43,400 Nicaraguans who sought asylum in Costa Rica and some 7,600 in Panama, where there in addition are 115,800 Venezuelans displaced abroad. In Belize, UNHCR estimated there were over 5,600 refugees, asylum-seekers and others of concern in 2019.

Achievements

- Nearly 2,200 people received cash transfers and psychosocial support and approximately 800 received legal assistance in Panama.
- Over 50 private companies implemented the “Talent without Borders employability programme”, which benefitted more than 100 people of concern and 40 Panamanians.
- Over 200 people of concern to UNHCR in Cuba (82% of the total) were provided with RSD and cash transfers to meet essential needs.
- 400 households received cash transfers in El Salvador, including more than 60 young entrepreneurs and 70 women participating in women-led community groups.

- Through a participatory approach, profiling of the internally displaced population was updated in Honduras. With support from UNHCR, a draft IDP law was delivered to Congress, and progress was made in the establishment of a registry for property abandoned due to internal displacement.
- In Guatemala, asylum-seekers were granted work permits, which were previously only available to recognized refugees. UNHCR supported the private and public sector initiative Turi Integra, which provided asylum-seekers and refugees with training and employment opportunities.
- Belize opened a new Resource Centre in Benque, a strategic location close to the border where asylum-seekers have access to key information about the asylum process. The resource center also serves as shelter for vulnerable asylum-seekers.

Unmet needs

The Panama multi country office was only 47% funded in 2019, and as a result the operations could not build up programmes to sufficient scale. This affected the implementation of comprehensive livelihoods and cash transfer programmes; the establishment of additional safe houses for persons at heightened risk; the establishment of data analysis capacities across all operations; and support to address child protection needs, including full best interests assessment/best interests determination processes, access to education and psychosocial support.
