

Venezuela

March 2019

- The country was hit by a massive nation-wide blackout on 7 March which lasted five days and was followed by recurrent long power outages throughout the rest of the month. The blackout brought Venezuela to a standstill and interrupted already unreliable water, telecommunications, electronic payment and fuel services. Particularly hit were the western states of Apure, Táchira and Zulia –where most of UNHCR’s prioritised communities lie- and Maracaibo, the country’s second largest city, was wrought by widespread looting. The outage seriously affected operational capacity and morale in field offices and the living conditions of people of concern to UNHCR.
- The borders with Colombia and Brazil remained closed throughout the month, forcing people in transit to use increasingly risky and expensive informal crossing routes and impacting negatively on the livelihoods of border communities that have been traditionally dependent on cross-border commuting.
- The political power struggle continued, with opposition leader Juan Guaidó’ making a triumphal return to the country on 1 March and exploiting the blackout to step up mobilisation against President Nicolas Maduro. The government blamed the blackouts on sabotage by the opposition and technological attacks by the United States, while the opposition blamed it on government ineptitude and corruption.
- The economy of Venezuela ground to a halt, schools and offices remained closed for most of the month and shops only accepted cash, which has been traditionally scarce. The Bolivar has been gradually supplanted by the Colombian peso and the Brazilian real at the borders and by the US dollar in Caracas.

HIGHLIGHTS

TOTAL ESTIMATED HOST COMMUNITIES BENEFICIARIES

+ 270,000

PERSONS OF CONCERN (GOVERNMENT FIGURES)

Refugees 8,464

Asylum seekers 142

Source: National Refugee Commission Venezuela

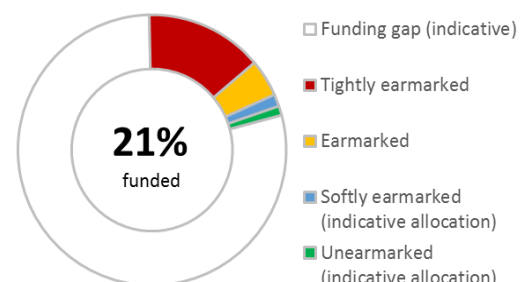
Persons in refugee-like situation: 117,653

Source: INE Venezuela

FUNDING (AS OF MARCH 2019)

USD 12.9 million

requested for Venezuela



UNHCR PRESENCE

Staff:

77 Personnel:

63 national staff

2 affiliate workforce/employees

1 national intern

11 international staff

Offices:

1 Representation in Caracas

4 Field Offices in

San Cristóbal (Táchira), Guasualito

(Apure), Maracaibo (Zulia) and

Ciudad Guayana (Bolívar)

1 Field Unit in Caracas

Working with Partners

- UNHCR is implementing community-based activities in 54 prioritised communities in eight states, primarily in the border areas with Colombia, Brazil and Trinidad and Tobago, but also in Greater Caracas and the nearby Miranda state. UNHCR is working with 15 implementing partners (Aliadas en Cadena, AZUL Positivo, Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS), Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), Refugee Education Trust (RET), Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), Red Cross Zulia, Luz y Vida, Fe y Alegría, Sociedad Wills Wilde, Fogones y Banderas, Fundación Innocens, Fundación Casa Bonita and Fundación Soy un Guardian), as well as other local actors, including government institutions and NGOs.
- UNHCR holds regular coordination meetings with humanitarian and development actors to discuss the design, coordination and implementation of the protection response for persons of concern and host communities, including identification, provision of humanitarian assistance, monitoring of refugee rights and promotion of durable solutions.
- UNHCR liaises within the United Nations Country Team and with specific United Nations agencies to mainstream protection issues within the United Nations Development Assistance Framework, and other shared mechanisms.
- UNHCR chairs the Protection Working Group, an inter-agency space for joint analysis of protection gaps and coordination of protection response and advocacy.
- UNHCR's main Government partners are the National Commission for Refugees (CONARE), the Ombudsperson's Office and Child Protection Councils, as well as community councils.

Main Activities

Community-based Protection

- UNHCR promotes an innovative community-based approach to assess and respond to the protection needs and risks of persons of concern in Venezuela.
- UNHCR is strengthening communication with communities and organizing trainings for outreach volunteers and youth networks to enhance the identification and referrals of persons with specific needs.
- UNHCR is working with community structures such as community groups, women and youth networks to engage the community in the implementation of **projects** identified by the communities themselves, seeking to improve community response and ensuring the sustainability of projects and community processes. Since 2018, UNHCR and its partners have been implementing community projects on nutrition, health, water and sanitation and education.
- UNHCR is supporting a national protection network providing assistance and counselling to persons in transit, and safe spaces for the attention of sexual and gender-based survivors and children at risk. The safe spaces provide confidential case management, counselling, psychosocial support, medical aid and legal services.
- UNHCR supports a community centre in Caracas delivering multi-sectorial services from different actors to provide legal counselling, group information sessions on different topics such as rights and referral pathways, hygiene promotion, HIC prevention, as well as catch-up classes for children out of school and material assistance for persons with specific needs, among others.

Asylum and Durable Solutions

- UNHCR promotes international refugee law and refugee status determination procedures, encouraging State institutions to identify and refer persons in need of international protection to the asylum procedure. UNHCR and partners conduct capacity building activities with government institutions.
- In close coordination with UNHCR in Colombia, UNHCR Venezuela facilitates and supports the voluntary repatriation of refugees, ensuring that they are enabled to take well-informed and voluntary decisions and are repatriated in conditions of safety and dignity. Since 2015, UNHCR has supported the voluntary repatriation to Colombia of 194 persons of concern.

Activities implemented in February 2019

Working with Partners and Authorities

- UNHCR Venezuela held a three-day (27-29 March) meeting and workshop with institutional partner National Commission for Refugees (CONARE) to discuss the details of a joint Work Plan that both sides hope to be able to launch in the near future.



Community-based Protection

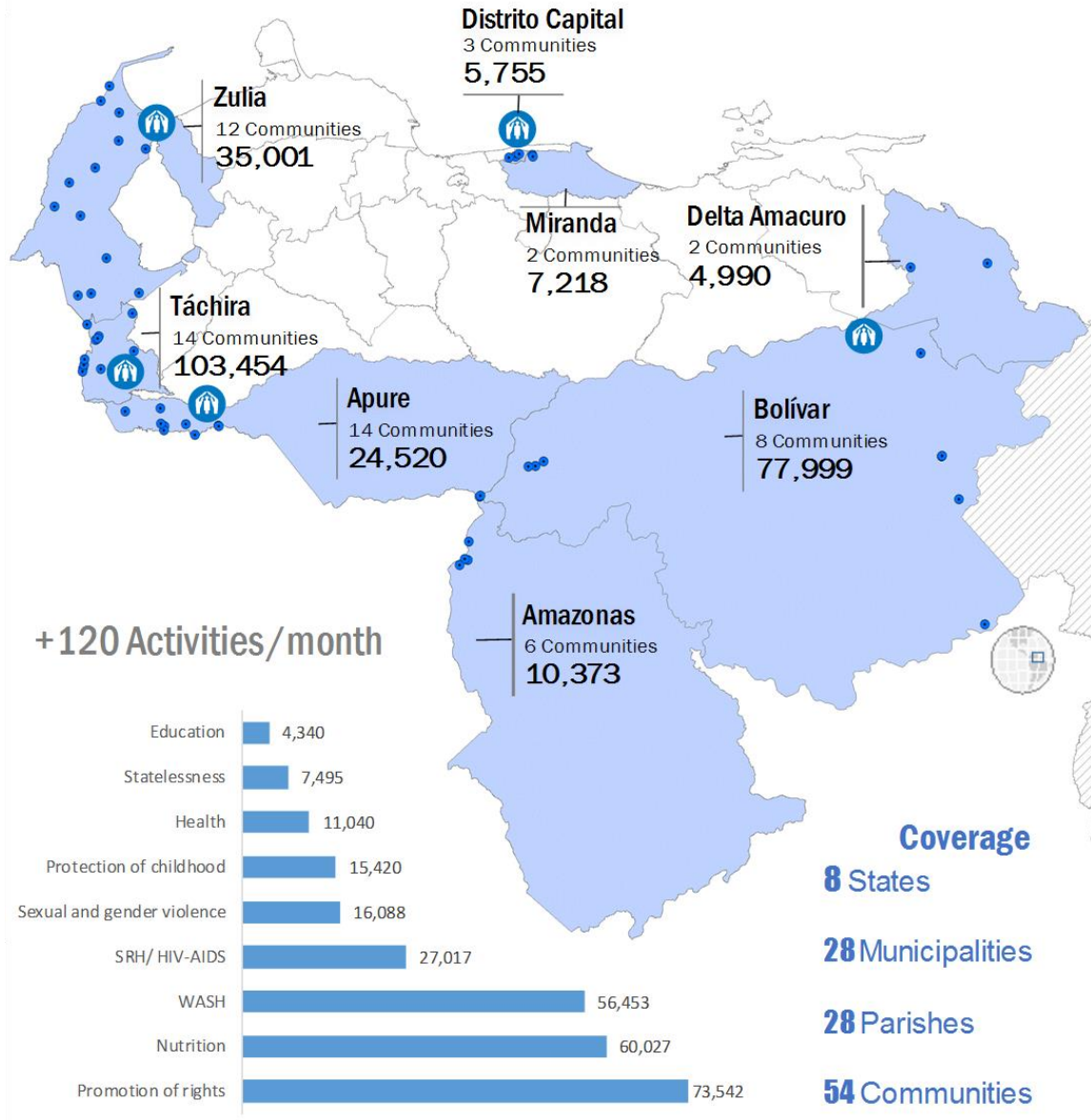
- UNHCR Ciudad Guayana met with representatives of the Catholic University Andres Bello (UCAB) to discuss the assessment on forced displacement the UCAB will carry out with the support of UNHCR in the states of Bolivar and Delta Amacuro to identify displacement trends in the region.
- On International Women's Day, UNHCR organized a cinema forum in Ciudad Guayana, showing the film "You are not alone, Sara", a story on gender-based physical and psychological mistreatment. The event was attended by members of the Safe Spaces Network, the Office of the Ombudsman, the Office of the Public Prosecutor, the Institute of Public Health, the Bolivarian National Police, the Bolivarian National Guard, the Childhood Protection System and other institutions and organisations. Following the film showing, 67 people participated in a forum on women's rights and the need to strengthen prevention and protection mechanisms against sexual and gender-based violence.
- Field Office San Cristobal visited Mi Pequeña Barinas and Llano de Jorge in San Antonio and also Boca Del Grita to meet with local communities and follow up on interventions carried out by UNHCR and partners. All projects proved to have had a positive impact on the prioritized communities, especially the ones involving WASH, and wide support was expressed for UNHCR's work and presence in the area, a factor that is conducive to a resumption of field missions as soon as conditions will allow it.
- Partner Red Cross has begun the implementation of CERF activities in Zulia State. The first nutritional task force was held in the community Gran Sabana and resulted in 144 nutritional evaluations of both children and adults. Also, an information session on nutrition and WASH was conducted with 39 community leaders.
- UNHCR carried out a joint activity with the Public Prosecutor's Office in the prioritized community of Guanamo, Bolívar state, involving a film forum on gender-based physical and psychological violence and providing information on national law on the rights of women. UNHCR Ciudad Guayana also organized an awareness-raising activity with partner Red Cross at the main bus station in regional capital Ciudad Bolivar, providing information on HIV/AIDS, contraceptives, blood pressure testing and information to people in transit to other countries to a total of 204 individuals.
- Within the CERF framework, UNHCR in Táchira supported two nutritional brigades in the prioritized community of La Tendida. Staff from the regional National Nutrition Institute (INN) office and local walk-in clinic evaluated 148 persons, 19 of whom were diagnosed with a nutritional deficit. The INN also delivered anti-parasitic drugs and vitamins to children under 5 years of age.
- In Amazonas state, UNHCR partner HIAS and INN have launched a nutritional evaluation activity in the community of Sabaneta, examining to date 106 individuals.
- UNHCR Field Office Caracas worked with the local Antonio José de Sucre prioritised community in Petare to develop the communications mapping for the establishment of a complaints mechanism within the local community centre. It also made the formal act of delivery of the infrastructure work carried out in the Hipólito Cisneros School in the "El Junquito" community centre in El Cafetal to improve its electrical system, sports field and sanitary services, an activity that will directly benefit the 600 children who attend the school.
- UNHCR in Bolivar held a HIV/AIDS and health awareness-raising activity in the main bus station in Ciudad Bolívar with partner Red Cross, distributing condoms, carrying out blood pressure tests and providing information to people in transit to other countries. UNHCR also held a first meeting on child protection within the Safe Spaces Network with partners LALA Foundation and Office of the Ombudsman.

Borders, Asylum and Durable Solutions

- Throughout the month, UNHCR and partners engaged in a number of border monitoring activities to try to determine the impact of the blackouts and border closures on cross-border movements and on the livelihoods of persons of concerns in border communities.
- UNHCR in Táchira conducted a border monitoring mission to determine the numbers of people crossing into Colombia through informal routes and estimated that they may exceed 25,000 per day in the San Antonio area alone. It has also received confirmation that people in transit using these informal trails are asked to pay 30,000 Colombian pesos (10 dollars) if they do so by foot and up to the equivalent of 50 dollars if they cross with a vehicle loaded with goods. A similar investigation at the bus terminal in San Cristobal evidenced that there has been a decrease in traffic towards the border and an increase of traffic to the interior of the country, which may signal returns to their home towns by people who had moved to the border to improve their livelihoods.
- The official border at the Simon Bolivar International Bridge in San Antonio remains officially closed, but some amount of flexibility has been introduced to allow people to cross the Simon Bolivar international bridge on foot. Those who return are requested to pay a “contribution” to the National Bolivarian Guard officers at the border. Economic considerations have supplanted vulnerabilities as the determining factor in deciding who is allowed across. The beginning of the rainy season has increased water levels and made fluvial crossings riskier.
- In the nearby state of Apure state, the official Al Amparo-Arauca border remains closed, while the irregular crossing routes are intermittently blocked by military authorities, who have been increasing inspections and impoundments of goods brought across the border. Military on speedboats have been intercepting the flimsy canoes people in transit use to cross the fluvial border.
- Further south in the state of Amazonas, the fluvial border between Puerto Paez and the Colombian town of Puerto Carreno is formally closed, but the military are charging up to 20,000 Colombian pesos (6.5 USD) to allow people across to stock up on medicines and food. There has been an increase of people crossing to receive attention for their medical needs (mostly prenatal, malnutrition, malaria and sexually transmitted diseases), as medical services are increasingly lacking on the Venezuelan side of the border. UNHCR also reports an increase in sexual violence cases on the border between Puerto Paez and Puerto Carreno, where the military is said to be exacting sexual favours from women in transit towards Colombia. The heavy military presence in Puerto Paez is also inducing people in transit to favour the Puerto Ayacucho – Casuarito crossing, where daily flows have increased to 500-600 persons per day.
- UNHCR in Bolivar has registered an increased flow through informal crossings into Brazil, with a daily average of some 400 people getting across the border through the “trochas” near and around Santa Elena de Uairen. People are charged 100 Brazilian reales (some 25 dollars) for a one way “ticket” along the informal border routes. The use of the trochas significantly increases protection risks for people in mobility: walking for over 20 kilometres, river crossings, exposure to sun and dehydration. Many locals have left Santa Elena in fear of reprisals: an estimated 2,000 indigenous Pemones are said to have fled to Brazil, with another 800 internally displaced in the nearby mountains. The 1,264 students from the Santa Elena area who are enrolled across the border in Pocaraima have been unable to attend classes since 21 February.
- Further north, in the municipality of Sifontes, residents of prioritized communities have taken to crossing the border into Guyana to stock up on food and other basic supplies. UNHCR and partners in Bolivar state are monitoring the situation closely and working on developing a humanitarian access strategy to reactivate missions in the field.
- In Zulia, residents of the prioritized communities of Cuatro Bocas, Santa Cruz de Mara, Carrasquero, Villa Bolivariana I have considerably increased commuter border crossings into Maicao, Colombia, to purchase food and other necessities for both personal consumption and resale in Venezuela.
- In the coastal state of Falcon, partner Red Cross in La Vela reported that prolonged blackouts have resulted in an increase of departures for the ABC islands, with at least three boats in as many days carrying a total of 66 migrants to Curacao during the last week of the month. Another vessel, with 35 people on board, was intercepted in Venezuelan waters by the National Bolivarian Guard, was brought ashore and its captain was detained, while the passengers managed to escape arrest and had to walk for several kilometres to return to La Vela de Coro.

2019 Planned UNHCR Beneficiaries

 **+ 272,000** Estimated beneficiaries
  **12** Project Partnership Agreements
15 Partners



Donors

UNHCR Venezuela wishes to convey a special thank you to its donors –the European Union, Italy and the UN Program on HIV/AIDS – and the following donors of non-earmarked funds: Sweden, Denmark, Norway, Netherlands, United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland and private donors in Spain.

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