



# NORTHERN TRIANGLE OF CENTRAL AMERICA SITUATION

February 2017

## HIGHLIGHTS

**164,000**

Refugees and asylum-seekers from the Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA) at the end of 2016. Almost a tenfold increase over the last five years.

**174,000**

Internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Honduras (figure based on a 2014 profiling exercise carried out in 21 municipalities, out of a total of 298 in the country).

**214,000**

Deportations of NTCA citizens from the USA and Mexico in 2016. It is estimated that 450,000 migrants entered Mexico irregularly in 2016.

## CONTEXT INFORMATION

- UNHCR’s Regional Office in Panama is implementing the Regional Protection and Solutions Strategy for the NTCA situation in close collaboration with country offices, state entities and partners.
- The Regional Office oversees UNHCR’s operations in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, as well protection activities in Panama, Nicaragua and Cuba.
- The NTCA strategy also encompasses activities in the United States of America, Mexico, Belize and Costa Rica, with permanent coordination being ensured between respective country offices.

### Northern Triangle of Central America (NTCA) Situation:

UNHCR Presence, as of November 2016



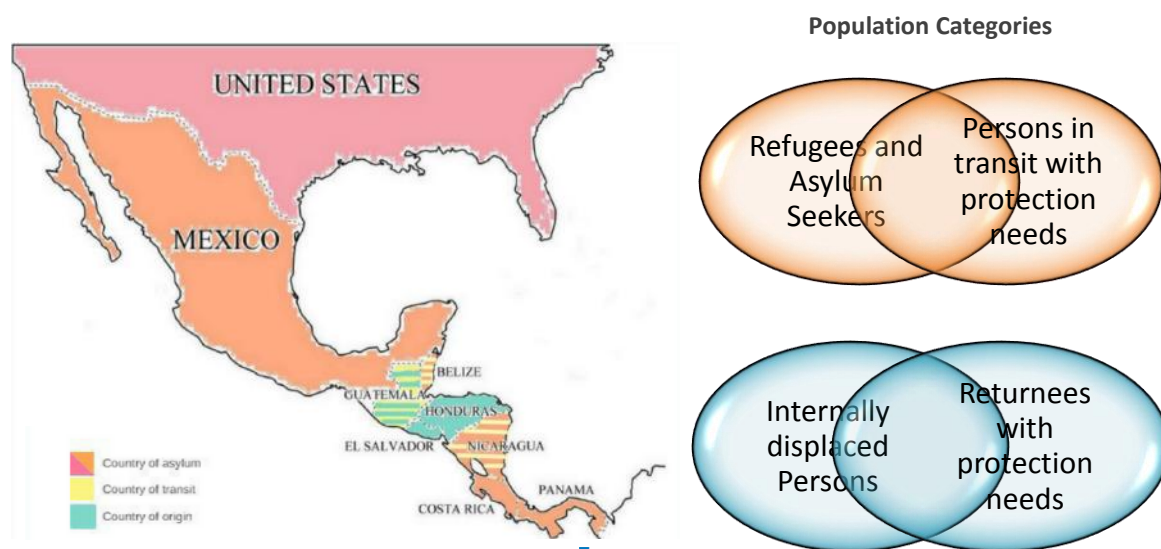
- Central America’s Northern Triangle suffers high levels of violence stemming from organized criminal groups, including record high homicide rates, sexual violence, disappearances, forced recruitment into armed gangs, and extortion. This violence affects a diverse range of people including children, women, as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) persons. Insecurity is

also compelling an increasing number of persons to flee their homes and to seek international protection, particularly in bordering and nearby countries. The United States of America, Belize, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama and El Salvador are all affected, either as countries of origin, transit or destination, and in some cases, in a combination of these.

- In response to the increasing numbers of NTCA unaccompanied and separated children (UASCs) and family units arriving at the U.S. southern border in summer 2014, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras collectively adopted the “Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle,” a regional development plan aimed at boosting security and economic development. As a result, the United States increased the aid package assistance for the NTCA region (US\$ 750 million) during 2016; and provided support for efforts to control irregular migration in the region. A significant increase has been observed in the number of unaccompanied children and family units fleeing the region with reaching or surpassing summer 2014 levels. More than 60,000 NTCA nationals applied for asylum in the U.S. in 2016 alone.
- Significant outflows from these three NTCA countries are occurring for a complex set of reasons. UNHCR considers that many of these persons would qualify as refugees. Traditionally, NTCA citizens seeking international protection request refugee status in the U.S. and Canada. In recent years, however, other countries in the region have experienced a drastic increase in the number of asylum-seekers from the NTCA, particularly Mexico (156.3 per cent increase in 2016, compared to 2015), Costa Rica (319 per cent increase over the last two years) and Belize, but also, although to a lesser extent, Nicaragua and Panama.
- In response to the protection crisis, UNHCR developed a multi-year Protection and Solutions Strategy (2016 – 2018) within the framework of the 2014 Brazil Declaration and Plan of Action.

## REGIONAL APPROACH

- Enhancing regional cooperation and partnerships to implement responsibility-sharing arrangements is an essential component of the strategy. The Regional Protection and Solutions Strategy for the NTCA situation covers the following operations, targeting specific population groups:



### Main Strategic Objectives

- Strengthening legal/policy frameworks (countries of origin and asylum)
- Developing protection networks (including safe spaces)
- Establishing minimum reception standards and fair/efficient asylum systems
- Enhancing protection of children and other persons with specific needs
- Increasing awareness and visibility of protection needs
- Promoting solutions, including enhanced legal pathways and local integration

## Responsibility sharing, cooperation and complementarity

- In a spirit of shared responsibility and complementary action, the governments of the region held a High-Level Roundtable on the protection of people forcibly displaced by violence in the NTCA in July 2016. As a result, they signed the **San Jose Action Statement**, acknowledging the need for stronger protection of asylum seekers, refugees and internally displaced people. Together with the Organization of American States (OAS), UNHCR and other UN agencies, the Inter-American Development Bank, the World Bank, national human rights institutions, national and regional NGOs, civil society and academia, the governments pledged concrete responses to address the many protection needs arising from this forced displacement crisis.
- Such cooperation is fully aligned with the **New York Declaration**, and its Annex 1 which calls for a Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) based on shared responsibilities between a wide range of stakeholders including local and national authorities, humanitarian and development actors, the private sector and civil society. Efforts to address refugee protection must now be centered on building on and following such cooperative and joint approaches.
- Protection responses must promote complementary effects in all countries in the region. Asylum adjudications in countries of destination are enhanced by well-developed country of origin information generated in countries of origin, and by effective monitoring and protection networks in countries of transit. Fostering cooperation between countries of origin, transit and destination through initiatives like the Protection Transfer Arrangement brings together protection and solution measures, reducing reliance on dangerous smuggling networks. All countries are affected, and all countries must work together at the solution.

## MAIN ACHIEVEMENTS

### Operational capacity

- Following the increase in displacement, a supplementary appeal was issued in June 2016, outlining UNHCR's protection and solutions interventions in the region in favor of refugees, asylum-seekers and IDPs from the NTCA. Additional resources received helped at strengthening child protection, community-based protection areas, increasing monitoring and protection networks capacity, reinforcing reception centres, and protection responses for cases at risk in the NTCA. Resources were also dedicated to reinforcing the NTCA countries' human rights entities (ombudsperson).
- UNHCR's staffing structure and presence in areas of the region were also strengthened. Currently, UNHCR has three national offices in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, as well as two recently established field offices in San Pedro Sula (municipality heavily affected by forced displacement in Honduras) and Petén (border area Guatemala/Mexico, one of the main transit areas between the countries).
- UNHCR's field offices in the Mexican border states of Chiapas and Tabasco have been reinforced. UNHCR also established field presence in southern Veracruz to focus on identification and assistance to asylum-seekers, and in the northern state of Coahuila to promote local integration. UNHCR has reinforced its presence in Costa Rica at border areas by deploying 2 liaison officers to *Peñas Blancas* and *Paso Canoas* respectively.
- In response to increased asylum seeker applications from the NTCA region, UNHCR re-opened its office in Belmopan, Belize in 2016.



*Mexico. Families find safety in UNHCR funded shelters.*

- In line with the San Jose Action Statement, which acknowledged the need for stronger protection intervention in the region, UNHCR strengthened alliances with partners, establishing a total of 30 agreements during 2016 for protection interventions in the NTCA.

#### ***Protection in countries of origin (NTCA)***

- In Honduras, the Government continues to be supported with technical assistance to develop legal frameworks and public policies for the protection and assistance of IDPs, while, at the same time and in alliance with the civil society, in the frame of two existing protection working groups, one in San Pedro Sula and another one in Tegucigalpa, protection and assistance networks are being established and will further be enhanced in 2017.
- In El Salvador, in line with Plan El Salvador Seguro (PESS), cooperation is centered on strengthening State responses in protection and assistance to displaced victims of violence, as well as support for the establishment of reception standards for deportees, the implementation of protocols for the identification of deportees with protection needs of, and their referral to protection alternatives.
- In Guatemala, the monitoring and protection network and temporary shelters used by the displaced, deported or persons in transit will continue to be supported in order to enhance safe spaces along the main migration route. This includes the provision of services, such as legal and psychosocial support and child friendly spaces in strategic areas of the country.



*A student walks home from school in the community of La Era in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. UNHCR/Tito Herrera*

- In all three NTCA countries, child protection initiatives and programmes targeting IDPs, deportees with specific protection needs (e.g. single-headed households, unaccompanied and separated children, LGBTI, etc.) are prioritized, together with community-based protection initiatives.
- Internal displacement in the NTCA reached a higher profile in 2015 and 2016 through the publication of the UNHCR supported profiling exercise conducted in Honduras, as well as the visit of the Special Rapporteur on IDPs, whose recommendations helped to increase visibility. In 2016, the Government of El Salvador has also requested UNHCR's support to conduct a profiling exercise similar to the one carried out in Honduras. In Guatemala, the former Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs agreed on UNHCR supporting an academic study on the different forms of displacement in the country. This is expected to have a positive impact on the visibility of the protection situation.
- Other protection responses in countries of origin include the establishment of the Protection Transfer Arrangement (PTA) programme, currently piloted in El Salvador and foreseen to be expanded to other NTCA countries in 2017. This programme supports humanitarian evacuation of heightened-risk cases to a third country (Costa Rica) and, further on, resettlement to United States according to specific profiles agreed upon. In addition, a few high-risk cases are channeled directly to the country of destination through in-country processing.

#### ***Safe spaces for people on the move***

- UNHCR is supporting Protection and Monitoring Networks (safe spaces) to register, document and refer cases of people in transit that need international protection. This includes psychosocial and legal orientation of persons in need of international protection.
- Costa Rica has supported the Government in the establishment of the Centre for Migrants' Care in *Rio Claro*.

**Protection and solutions in countries of asylum (mainly in Mexico, Costa Rica, Panama and Belize)**

- In countries of destination, UNHCR is working with asylum seekers and refugees, implementing identification and referral mechanisms, adequate reception arrangements and alternatives to detention (ATD). In Mexico, considering that decisions to release asylum-seekers remain ad hoc (since July 2016, more than 640 asylum-seekers were released from detention to UNHCR supported shelters), UNHCR is currently advocating for the adoption of a permanent public policy on ATD. This policy could be built on initial pilots and a continuous government position favorable to ATD, with the coordinated effort of migration officials, the Commission for Refugee Aid (COMAR) and civil society shelters supported by UNHCR. According to the COMAR, Mexico received a total of 8,781 asylum applications 2016, of which 91.6 percent were from the NTCA. In total, 3,056 were recognized as refugees or received complementary protection, an increase of 175 percent when compared with the total number of asylum applications during 2015, and the highest number of asylum applications recorded since the 1980s, with a recognition rate of 63 percent. Based on the average monthly increase of over 8% in asylum applications since January 2015 and changes in migration trends, UNHCR projects that the total number of asylum applications in 2017 could be over 21,000. Throughout 2016, 4,693 persons of concern were housed in 14 shelters supported by UNHCR in the States of Tabasco, Chiapas and Mexico City and a total of 4,552 asylum-seekers and refugees received humanitarian assistance outside of shelters.
- In Mexico, 17 shelters have carried out, or are in the process of carrying out, infrastructure improvement thanks to UNHCR's support, so to meet the increasing demand in long-term shelters for asylum-seekers who await a resolution of their asylum application, which can take up to 3 months. At the end of 2016, there were a total of 1,999 shelter spaces available to UNHCR's people of concern, with 883 spaces for men, 384 for women, 302 spaces for families, 36 spaces for LGBTI individuals, 151 spaces for women with children and 254 spaces for unaccompanied and separated children. Of the total number of spaces, in 2016, UNHCR supported the creation of 908 new ones.
- In Costa Rica, a shelter for vulnerable sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) survivors from the NTCA has been established, which has become operational in 2017. As of 31 December 2016, Costa Rica had received a total number of 4,470 asylum applications, of which 1,629 were from the NTCA (1,471 from El Salvador, 149 from Honduras, and nine from Guatemala). This represents a significant increase of 83 percent when compared with the total number of 889 applications from the NTCA during 2015, and of 319 percent when compared with the total number of applications received from that area in 2014. The upward trend is expected to continue in 2017.
- UNHCR is providing support to Governments (Mexico, Costa Rica Panama) in the implementation of the Quality Asylum Programme (QAI), aimed at enhancing the quality of status determination procedures and strengthening the capacity of national refugee institutions. Within QAI framework, UNHCR Costa Rica carried out a series of country of origin information visits to El Salvador and Honduras. Additionally, UNHCR assisted the Government in addressing the refugee status determination backlog with the deployment of additional adjudicators. In Mexico, UNHCR signed a bilateral agreement with the *Secretaría de Gobernación* (Ministry of Interior) in September 2016 to support COMAR in building up its staffing, open offices in two additional locations (beyond the existing 3 offices) and train newly hired staff. A first training took place in November for 23 newly recruited COMAR staff, supported by UNHCR. A two-week *Introduction Course on refugee status determination criteria and procedures* was completed in January, for a total of 29 staff of COMAR. This effort is expected to expand access to asylum, alleviate and facilitate adjudication and documentation processes under the responsibility of COMAR. In addition to the QAI, a quadripartite mechanism has been established amongst



*Families find safety in UNHCR funded shelters.*

UNHCR, Canada (the IRB and IRCC) and the US (DHS/CIS Asylum Division) to support COMAR (Mexico).

- Countries (Costa Rica, Mexico and Panama) are also working to achieve durable solutions - particularly local integration of refugees - through specific public policies and livelihoods programming. In Costa Rica, UNHCR signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Presidency to ensure equal access to



*Guatemala. Mexican border town popular with refugees*

governmental social and development programmes for PoC, particularly those vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers from the NTCA countries. In 2016, 252 people of concern from the NTCA countries benefitted from UNHCR's *Living Integration* corporate social responsibility programme, 51 of which have successfully been employed, 205 were trained, and 106 validated their high school diplomas before the Ministry of Education. Additionally, 119 families from NTCA countries have benefited from the Graduation Model livelihood project.

- In Mexico, UNHCR is working with authorities to identify federal, state and municipal social programmes, which can also serve to integrate refugees. The Office is also reaching out to the private sector to take advantage of opportunities for refugees to join the formal labour market, in particular in the industrial cities of central and northern Mexico. Mexico has implemented a local integration pilot programme in the northern town of Saltillo, in which 38 people have so far taken part. Furthermore, 51 Central American students graduated from vocational training at *Aldea Arcoiris* in Tapachula. As a result of these initiatives and the improved reception conditions outlined above, the percentage of asylum claimants in Mexico who abandon or withdraw their claims has dropped by one third since 2014 (to 23.4 percent).
- In Belize, UNHCR has aimed to ensure access to asylum through the provision of infrastructure and capacity-building support to the Refugee Department and the Refugee Eligibility Committee (REC), which began reviewing cases in November 2015. Capacity building initiatives were also carried out with Belizean Magistrates; and with high-level officials from the Police, Immigration, and Defense Departments.
- UNHCR undertook needs assessments in refugee-hosting communities and incorporated community projects related to health, security, and livelihoods in three communities in Central Belize. The projects targeted asylum seekers, refugees, and Belizean host community members. Through its NGO partner, Help for Progress, UNHCR also provides direct support for some vulnerable asylum seekers through provision of shelter, food, medical, and other assistance.

## MAIN CHALLENGES

- In spite of advocacy efforts, forced displacement remains a very sensitive issue in the region. Data collection and profiling are key to better understanding displacement patterns and promoting protection-related interventions.
- The lack of legal and institutional frameworks on internal displacement constitutes a major challenge for the effective protection of PoCs, as it hampers the development of specific policies and programmes and the allocation of resources by States.
- Data collection and identification of deportees with protection needs requires strengthening in NTCA countries, as well as the development of effective referral mechanisms for individuals with protection needs.
- In countries of asylum, the capacity of the national refugee authorities needs to be further strengthened, particularly in border areas.
- Violence in rural areas is closely linked to land disputes and land grabbing. Indigenous, afro-descendant communities and peasants are highly affected in situations that may not be linked to gangs but to other criminal structures. The gathering of information in isolated areas remain as a challenge.



*Backpacks of refugees sit by a local store in the Guatemala town of La Técnica as they await for a chance to cross to Mexico.*

## 2017 PRIORITIES

### **NTCA countries**

- Provide technical assistance for the establishment of a legal and institutional protection framework for the displaced population, promoting consultation process with victims of displacement or at risk of displacement.
- Strengthen and implement additional alternatives for the protection and assistance of the displaced population, the population at risk of displacement and deported population with protection needs.
- Enhance outreach and protection by presence in high-risk areas.
- Strengthen the operational response from Protection Working Groups and consolidate the gathering and exchange of information by such fora.
- Support community-based initiatives to promote dialogue and prevent forced displacement, focusing on the most affected communities and groups with specific needs (indigenous communities).
- Implement a progressive approach towards solutions, ensuring the inclusion of the displaced population in national programmes and the protection of physical assets (land and property).

### **Mexico**

- Ensure access to asylum procedures and reduce the risk of *refoulement*. Through mass information campaigns, an intensification of detention monitoring and engagement with faith-based shelters, UNHCR aims to reduce the risk of *refoulement* of people who are not informed on how to access asylum procedures, or who are identified as in need of international protection.
- Assess and map emerging humanitarian needs, particularly in relation to shelter. UNHCR will focus its efforts on long-term shelters used by those seeking asylum.

- Promote local integration under an umbrella of tolerance, non-discrimination and diversity. UNHCR is working to increase local integration prospects through improved coordination between NGOs and COMAR and other federal government programmes, as well as strategic alliances with state and municipal governments, and the private sector. This will require increasing the capacity of civil society shelters to provide assistance and livelihood opportunities in safe environments, in order to support the local integration of refugees through medium and long term activities.

#### **Costa Rica**

- Implement the Quality Asylum Initiative (QAI), which continues bearing positive results, significantly strengthening first and second instance due process, introducing registration at migration border posts and a fast track RSD for those most vulnerable.
- Enhance border monitoring in the Southern and Northern border, reflecting the increased mixed migration flow moving North, as well as the increasing refugee flow of NTCA persons fleeing persecution.
- Strengthen the Protection Transfer Arrangement (PTA), which was established in Costa Rica and became operational last year with 25 persons referred to the US for resettlement and 4 persons having already been resettled through this mechanism.
- Further build on the successes of the graduation approach to integration (socio-economic, legal and cultural), with 194 individuals (160 families) who already have reached the graduation criteria and have proved to be self-reliant.

#### **Belize**

- Advocate for improved access to asylum procedures, including through elimination of the 14-day asylum deadline, improved referral mechanisms, and the dissemination of information on the asylum process to reach potential asylum seekers. Continued capacity-building of relevant Government stakeholders.
- Mapping of asylum seekers and assessment of needs of the asylum seeker/refugee communities throughout Belize. Based upon this information, UNHCR will advocate for Government interventions and provide direct support through the implementation of relevant community projects in refugee-hosting communities.
- Activities and messaging to sensitize the Belizean population about the plight of asylum seekers and refugees in Belize.



*Guatemala. UNHCR along The Migrant House work on the project Children of Peace.*



## FUNDING REQUIREMENTS

- Through a **comprehensive needs assessment**, the funding requirements for the NTCA situation in 2017 have been set at almost USD 28.9 million. This amount is currently only 5% funded.
- The funding level for this situation was extremely low in 2016 (31 percent). Humanitarian needs are expected to continue to rise in 2017.

### Consequences of underfunding

- Development of frameworks (legal, institutional) and programmes for the protection of internally displaced persons and others affected by violence in the NTCA, particularly in El Salvador and Guatemala
- Community-based interventions to mitigate risks of displacement or forced recruitment;
- Child protection activities, prevention of sexual and gender-based violence and forced recruitment, in particular in border regions, in alliance with migrant shelters in the region;
- Psychosocial support targeting communities affected by violence;
- Interventions in indigenous communities affected by forced displacement regarding land related issues, in particular in Honduras (Mosquitia) on the Nicaraguan border (among other affected communities);
- Implementation of effective mechanisms for the protection of land and housing of IDPs in Honduras;
- Increased border monitoring and expansion of the monitoring and protection network in Guatemala and Mexico, as well as enhancement of safe spaces and information on asylum along the main migration routes;
- Strengthening of the PTA (Costa Rica) with cases from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala;
- Enhancement of access to RSD procedures, and ensure fair and efficient asylum systems (e.g. through the Quality Assurance Initiative);
- Development of alternatives to detention, arrangements for reception conditions for asylum seekers and refugees (Mexico);
- Promotion of local integration opportunities (including residence permits, rights to work for asylum seekers, naturalization, access to local services and access to micro credit or banking services for refugees and asylum seekers) in asylum countries in the region);
- Strengthening UNHCR's protection capacity in the field, particularly in border areas (Mexico, Guatemala) and communities affected by violence (Honduras).

### 2017 NTCA situation funding requirements (US\$)

Basic Needs and Essential Services	4.8 million
Community Empowerment and Self Reliance	0.25 million
Durable Solutions	1.45 million
Fair Protection Processes and Documentation	11.3 million
Favourable Protection Environment	5.8 million
Leadership, Coordination and Partnerships	0.07 million
Logistics and Operations Support	3.4 million
Security from Violence and Exploitation	1.9 million
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>28,9 million</b>