1. Background

During the last decade, the aggravation of the humanitarian situation in Colombia has left more than three million people displaced within the country - according to the Government’s register - and hundreds of thousands seeking asylum in countries within the region. In this context, the only way to address this complex humanitarian situation proved to be the development of a comprehensive regional approach. Therefore, UNHCR adopted the concept of “Colombia Situation”, with the objective of promoting a collaborative response to internal displacement in Colombia and, at the same time, ensuring the international protection of refugees. The “Colombia Situation”, covers the main neighbouring countries hosting refugees, namely Ecuador, Costa Rica, Panama, and Venezuela. Nonetheless, other country operations, such as Brazil, Chile and Peru, also maintain a close link with the region, due to the increased number of Colombian refugees.

All countries of the Colombia situation are party of the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. Colombia and Ecuador have also included in their internal regulations, the regional refugee definition proposed by the 1984 Cartagena Declaration. In line with Mexico Plan of Action, the main goal is to find common solutions to the problems of asylum and forced internal displacement, through promoting solidarity between people and countries for the construction of a peaceful and stable future.

In addition UNHCR is strengthening partnerships to cope with situations of mixed migration and statelessness as the region is receiving an increasing number of asylum seekers, often mixed with economic migrants, especially from the Horn of Africa and the Middle East, posing new challenges to some already fragile asylum systems. In fulfilling its mandate throughout the region, UNHCR works closely with Governmental and State and national NGOs, faith-based organizations and other UN agencies or international organizations as well as with the private sector authorities, international. About 250 UNHCR staff currently work in 25 offices in the region.

Regional Programs

The Mexico Plan of Action was signed in November 2004 by 20 countries, who committed themselves to strengthening refugee protection and implementing an integrated approach to durable solutions. In the framework of this Plan, UNHCR implements in the countries involved within the Colombia situation, three programs addressed to a) urban displacement, b) protection in the sensitive border areas and c) resettlement, in close coordination with local authorities.

The “Cities of Solidarity” program aims at the vast majority of refugees effective integration through self-reliance by promoting access to employment and housing as well as income generating projects and their free and fair access to the labor market.

Instead, the “Borders of Solidarity” program strives to assist both refugees and local host communities in border areas to coexist. Integration is promoted by linking refugee assistance to national and regional development plans, with benefit for both refugees and host communities.

Meanwhile, “Resettlement in Solidarity” is a regional responsibility-sharing program destined to benefit a limited number of refugees who face high protection risks in their current countries of asylum. In 2009, 614 Colombians were resettled from Ecuador to other Latin American countries.
2. Beneficiary populations

Refugees

There are now more than 115,000 refugees and asylum seekers in neighboring countries, most of them Colombian nationals. However, this figure represents only a small fraction of the Colombians who have fled their country due to violence and violations of their human rights. Surveys revealed that there are between 250,000 and 300,000 Colombians living in refugee-like situation in the Colombia situation countries. In Ecuador, after the implementation of the Enhanced Registration Project, more than 27,740 Colombian refugees living in remote areas in the North of the country were recognized as refugees and received identification documents. This project was an innovative initiative and a unique experience for Latin America. Colombians have also fled to other countries of the region, such as Panama, Costa Rica and, most recently, the remote Amazon region of Brazil and Chile. It is important to mention that in 2009 alone, some 13,000 asylum seekers requested asylum in the region. This represents an increase of 40% comparing with the number of new arrivals in 2008.

Colombians who are registered as refugees and asylum-seekers generally benefit from the same access to public health and education services as local populations. However, without official registration and documentation, most of them face serious hurdles in accessing basic services and finding work. Up to 70% of this population lives below the poverty line and only one in three has found formal employment.

Internally displaced

During the last four years the number of displaced persons has increased by one million in Colombia. Most displaced persons move individually, although during the last years there have been massive displacements from border departments as well. Generally, the pattern of displacement has been from rural areas to urban centers even if displacement occurring within urban limits or between cities is increasingly reported. Forced displacement significantly hurts family incomes and leads to high rates of poverty. Some 43% of displaced families have single women as head of household and the situation is particularly precarious for adolescents, with reports of child forced recruitment by irregular groups in several zones of the country. Ethnic minorities have also been disproportionately affected by the conflict: Colombia’s more than 84 indigenous groups make up for only two per cent of the total population, but represents a much larger part of the displaced population. In 2009, UNHCR had 572,000 direct beneficiaries of its programs in Colombia, in most cases women, children, indigenous and Afro-Colombians are targeted for special efforts and differential approach.

Colombian persons of concern in the region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Refugees</th>
<th>Asylum Seekers</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>44,380</td>
<td>42,469</td>
<td>86,849</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Costa Rica</td>
<td>10,199</td>
<td>377</td>
<td>10,576</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panama</td>
<td>1,299</td>
<td>537</td>
<td>1,836</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>1,244</td>
<td>14,223</td>
<td>15,467</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>605</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>643</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>57,727</td>
<td>57,844</td>
<td>115,371</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data as at December 2009

Note: according to surveys carried out in the region, the Colombian population in refugee like situation amounts to approximately 70,000 in Ecuador and 200,000 in Venezuela.

Resettled Colombian refugees

UNHCR uses Resettlement from the Americas primarily as a protection tool and durable solution. It seeks also to use it as a responsibility-sharing mechanism to alleviate pressure on asylum countries. Cases are submitted to both traditional and regional emerging resettlement countries, as encouraged by the Mexico Plan of Action. The Office supports cases of resettlement of Colombian refugees to third countries from Ecuador (4,048 up to December 2009), Costa Rica (1,341), and more occasionally from Venezuela and Panama. Five countries (alphabetically Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay) are part of the Solidarity Resettlement Programme, receiving up to 250 refugees from the region per year.

Returnees

UNHCR has focused on the implementation of a comprehensive protection response including the prevention of further displacements and the support for local integration in areas hosting IDPs. Recently the Colombian Government has launched an ambitious return programme called “Retornar es Vivir” whose goal is to facilitate the return of 120,000 displaced persons to 115 towns across the country. So far, unstable security conditions, difficulties in access to the land, and limited opportunities for income generation have impeded more progress in this area. UNHCR is monitoring a sample of returns in order to identify risk factor and make recommendations to the Government.

Regarding voluntary repatriation from neighboring countries, UNHCR policy has consisted in facilitating individual repatriation of refugees, whenever conditions are met in terms of access to information, safety and dignity. So far, only some individual cases opted for voluntary repatriation.
3. What we do at regional level

UNHCR’s overarching goal in the Colombia Situation is to promote a collaborative and comprehensive response to internal displacement in Colombia, maximising the protection space available for refugees in the region and IDPs as well as promoting durable solutions. UNHCR focuses throughout the region on the following main issues:

- Strengthen the asylum regime to effectively protect all those who are in a refugee like situation.
- In close collaboration with national actors, maximise the protection space where refugees are able to exercise their rights: sustainability of return and relocation processes;
- Refugees provided with proper identity documents, certifying their legal status and entitling them to fundamental rights: improve reliability of the registration system;
- Support local integration hindered by difficult socio-economic conditions, particularly in the access to housing and income generating activities in urban settings.
- Reinforce the capacity of the Colombia State to address internal displacement in all its phases (prevention, response, and with a growing emphasis on durable solutions) within the Colombian constitutional framework and in line with international law. A special attention to the protection and assistance of indigenous and Afro-Colombians living in isolated parts of the country;
- Implementation of bi-national initiatives belonging

### Colombia Situation Structure

As far as human resources are concerned, about 250 UNHCR staff currently work in 25 offices in the region, according to the following distribution:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staff</th>
<th>Colombia</th>
<th>Asylum countries</th>
<th>Colombia Situation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNV</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JPO</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>157</strong></td>
<td><strong>94</strong></td>
<td><strong>251</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The implementation of UNHCR activities in the region fully relies on voluntary contributions from third countries, international cooperation agencies, UN administrated Multi-Donor Trust Funds and, at a smaller scale, the private sector. Thanks to the continuing Donors' support, UNHCR activities in the region have been adequately funded so far. Nevertheless, given the effects of the international financial crisis and humanitarian competing priorities, it is expected that additional efforts will be necessary to cover the necessary financial requirements for 2010 and 2011.

In this respect, UNHCR will proactively seek to expand resource mobilization, focusing on shoring up existing contributions, courting new donors and expanding its private sector strategy. Furthermore, the Office will work to achieve greater consistency in resource mobilization at the regional level, in order to maximize results and avoid fragmentation or unnecessary competition.
4. The Way Forward

Given the complexity of the Colombian context, including the continuing internal violence and the rise of new illegal armed groups, UNHCR does not foresee dramatic changes in the regional displacement dynamics in the near future. Arrivals of new asylum-seekers, mainly from Colombia, are expected to continue to rise and the pressure on authorities and local communities to remain high. The Office, therefore, will continue to support Governments in order to provide protection and fair asylum procedures, to empower IDPs and refugee populations and to promote and develop durable solutions, such as return, local integration and resettlement.

Within Colombia, UNHCR foresees a trend with some regions showing improving conditions for the search of lasting solutions for displaced persons, while conflict and violence continue to hurt civilians in other zones (border areas and the Pacific are among the mayor concerns). The number of people arriving in Colombia as part of mixed migration, some of them in need of international protection, is also worrying. UNHCR will focus even more on helping public policies achieve a more concrete impact on displaced people's lives. It will work to contribute in the new scenario for the protection and restitution of displaced peoples' land. It will also accompany selected communities with return, local integration and relocation perspectives. And it will work to identify, through emblematic cases, factors which make policies for solutions successful in different contexts, always based upon the inputs of the men and women of different ages in displaced communities.

Ecuador has the highest number of refugees in Latin America. The increase of the refugee-flow in the country, which means 1,000 new arrivals per month, indeed will have an impact on assistance and integration activities, Refugee status determination (RSD) procedures and Government policies. In this context the main challenges of UNHCR in Ecuador will focus on supporting the Ecuadorian government for continuing its activities related to registration, eligibility and documentation in all the provinces of the country. Strengthen local integration of refugee population through community projects adapted to the socio-economic contexts (urban / rural) of the host populations. Strengthen the resettlement program to a third country as a protection tool. Promoting an integrated approach to combat gender based violence through project activities that benefit refugee women who live under difficult conditions, particularly those head of households. Empowering refugee population through the promotion of inclusive policies; exercising their social, economic and cultural rights and prioritizing the needs of women, children and adolescents as well as those from indigenous and afro-Colombians groups.

The number of Colombians seeking safety and asylum in Venezuela will also continue to increase in the near future. The main challenge will consist in strengthening the asylum regime and providing effective protection to all Colombians in refugee like situation, particularly those who have not been registered in border communities. UNHCR efforts to strengthen and expedite the Refugee Status Determination process by the authorities will continue being a main goal for next year. The Agency will also focus on the refugees’ local integration, mainly through the incorporation of refugees in existing social and economic programmes and micro-credit systems.

In Panama, promotion of fair and efficient asylum procedures and local integration, with the support of self-reliance and community-based projects, will continue to be the cornerstones of UNHCR protection strategy. In the context of its economic expansion, Panama is becoming a country of destination for mixed migration flows, with a steady inflow of asylum seekers to the capital city, mainly from Colombia, but also with extra-continental origins. Restrictive admissibility practices currently prevent asylum seekers and refugees from having effective full access to their rights. UNCHR will therefore focus on improving access to asylum procedures, contribute to make refugee status determination fairer and more efficient and further develop options for durable solutions.

In Costa Rica the number of new arrivals is expected to be in line with former years. However, the portion of asylum seekers from other Central American countries or with extra-continental origins is significantly increasing. UNHCR will continue to assist in the analysis of asylum claims, made more complex by growing incidence of human trafficking and gang-related violence.

UNHCR/Colombia