



**UNHCR**  
The UN Refugee Agency



**2019**

**Highlights  
UNHCR  
Mexico**



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**2019**  
**Highlights**  
**UNHCR**  
**Mexico**

# Preface

Nearly 80 million people around the world had been forcibly displaced by the end of 2019, many inside their countries and others across an international border. This is twice the number of people who were forcibly displaced a decade ago. The magnitude of forced displacement is a symptom of the failure to achieve international peace and security and to protect human rights in numerous countries around the world and is analysed in detail in the UNHCR Global Trends Report released in June 2020. Over 70,000 people made asylum claims in Mexico in 2019, more than twice as many as in 2018. This highlights the emergence of Mexico as an asylum country and the gravity of violence, persecution and economic hardship in countries of origin, in particular in Central America and Venezuela.

In 2019, UNHCR stepped up efforts to support Mexico to meet the challenges that arose as a result of the rise in the number of asylum claimants. It established a presence in cities such as Guadalajara, Monterrey, Queretaro, Mexicali and Ciudad Juárez, and reinforced offices along the southern border. As outlined in this report, it redoubled efforts to strengthen the capacity of the Mexican Commission for Refugee Aid (COMAR), child protection authorities, and other national and local institutions. In tandem, it worked with a range of civil society organisations to increase availability of information on asylum and to provide legal aid. A major effort was undertaken to increase sustainability and ability of civil society shelters to provide assistance to asylum-seekers. This was complemented by an expansion of cash-based assistance.

The Office bolstered efforts to prevent and respond to sexual and gender-based violence, including through new partnerships with specialised civil society organisations. UNHCR radically increased the scope of activities to promote the local integration of refugees, including support for primary and secondary education, vocational training, obtaining identity documentation and job matching. In coordination with the private sector and federal and local authorities, it



**Mark Manly**  
Representative  
August 2020

relocated more than 5,500 people from southern Mexico to cities in the centre and north of the country with better security conditions, public services and employment opportunities. UNHCR also invested in a wide range of peaceful coexistence projects to benefit host communities and refugees. All activities were undertaken following extensive consultation with local authorities as well as with people of concern to the Office, and applying an Age, Gender and Diversity approach. Despite these efforts, numerous protection challenges remained.

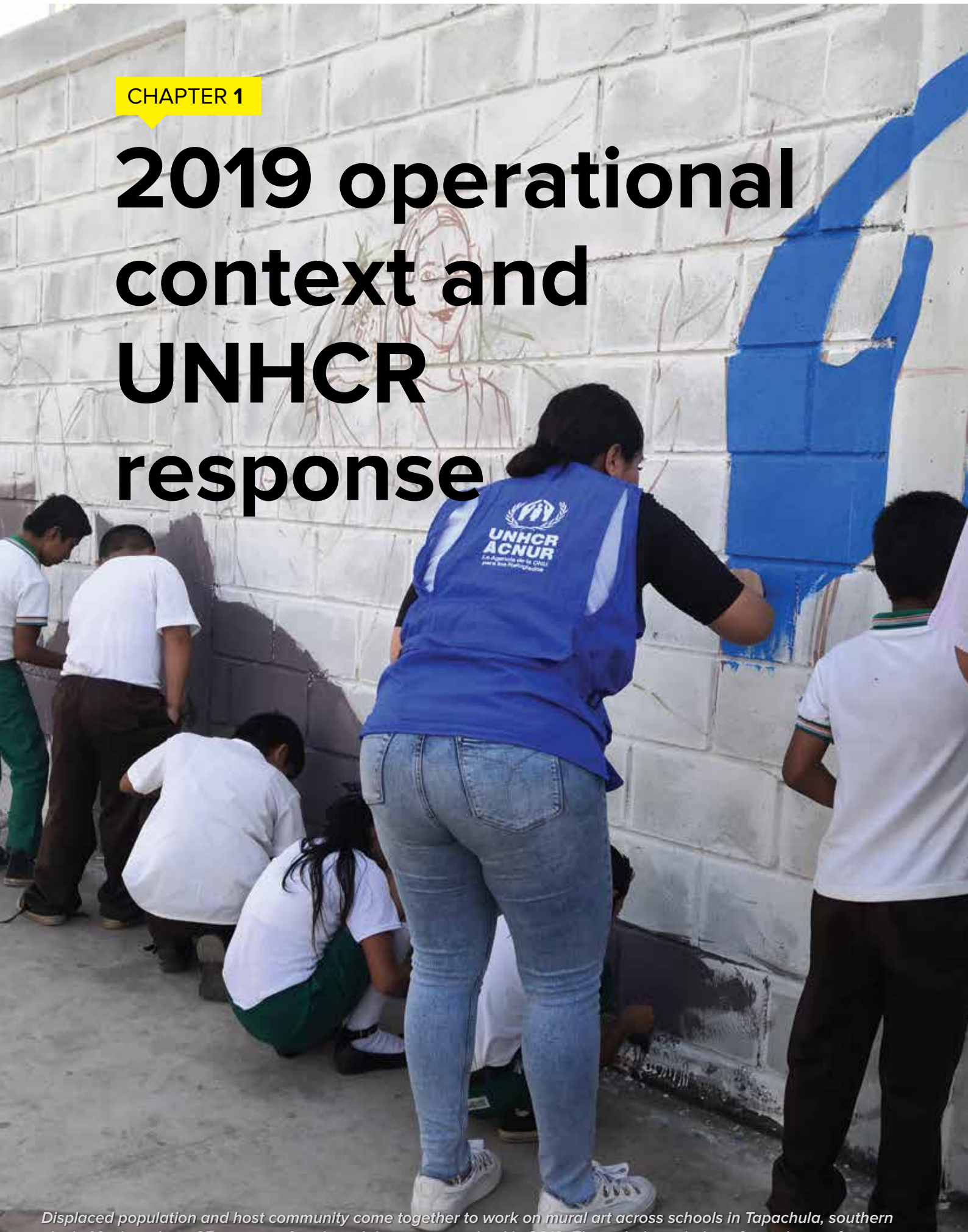
During the first quarter of 2020, the upward trend in the number of asylum claims continued. The situation then changed dramatically, and COVID-19 impacted all aspects of the lives of asylum seekers and refugees. Movement restrictions in Central America led to a major drop in arrivals as people could no longer move to seek safety.

At the outset of the pandemic, UNHCR Mexico adjusted its strategy and implemented steps to safeguard public health such that it was able to “stay and deliver”. We found that the efforts to build capacity in 2019 which are described in this report meant that Mexico was better prepared to address the crisis. COMAR, for example, was able to continue registering asylum claims throughout the pandemic.

Despite numerous challenges, Mexico is now better positioned to ensure the international protection of refugees and to find durable solutions to their plight. This reflects the contributions of federal, state and local authorities, civil society partners, host communities, the private sector, opinion leaders, other UN agencies, UNHCR staff and, of course, of asylum-seekers and refugees.

CHAPTER 1

# 2019 operational context and UNHCR response



*Displaced population and host community come together to work on mural art across schools in Tapachula, southern city in Mexico where 65 percent of asylum claims were received in 2019. Through the painting of mural art, refugees and people from the host community promote unity and friendship.*





The number of asylum applications in Mexico hit a record 70,302 persons in 2019. This is a 137% increase from 2018 and 20 times higher than 2015 when the steady increase in asylum claims began. This upward trend was the consequence of the continuing violence and deterioration of living conditions in several countries in the region, primarily in North of Central America (NCA: El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras), as well as in Venezuela and Nicaragua. Restrictions to access asylum in the United States (US) also contributed to the increase in the number of asylum applications in Mexico. In view of the growing refugee and migration flows, Mexico, with UNHCR support, took steps to strengthen its asylum system and its reception and integration capacity. The Government also stepped up migration enforcement activities in 2019.

President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador took office in December 2018 and announced a new, open and human rights-based policy toward migrants in Mexico. Mexico began to enhance its asylum system with a stronger leadership in the Mexican Commission for Refugees (COMAR), expanding its presence in the country and strengthening its capacity in receiving, processing and adjudicating asylum claims. Refugees and asylum seekers were included in the National Development Plan 2019-2024, as well as in relevant policy tools at state level. In particular, the Human Rights Plan of the State of Coahuila extensively referred to the integration of refugees, emphasizing refugee's contribution to local economies. This provided a positive example as to how refugees can be integrated in public policies at state level.

In December 2018, the US Government announced the introduction of the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), also known as “Remain in Mexico”, a policy requiring asylum seekers who arrived at the US southern border to be returned to Mexico for the duration of their immigration and asylum proceedings in immigration courts in the United States. In January 2019, the MPP entered into force in Tijuana (Baja California), and was then expanded to a total of seven border crossing points along the US-Mexico border. As at the end of December 2019, more than 62,000 people had been returned to Mexico under the MPP. In this context, both Mexico and the United States increased enforcement and border control actions, which

resulted in an increase of detention and returns to countries of origin in NCA.

Many of the persons of concern returned by the US under the MPP remained in dangerous areas of Northern Mexico, exposed to critical protection risks. Although UNHCR is not operationally involved in implementing the MPP, given the humanitarian needs at various points along the northern border, the operation enhanced its protection capacity in key locations, by providing protection counselling, child protection activities, support for victims of sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) and other protection services to persons returned under the MPP.



©ICRC/Aimee Guzmán

*Working with stakeholders and partners is key to provide support for refugees. UNHCR, ICRC and Diócesis of Coatzacoalcos opened a large capacity shelter in Veracruz to support migrants and refugees, becoming the first collaboration of this type between UNHCR and ICRC in Mexico.*



©UNHCR/Carlos Colmenares



*During a large-scale mixed population movement in Tapachula in 2019, UNHCR ensured its presence along the route to provide assistance and information about the asylum process in Mexico.*

©UNHCR/PI Mexico



*UNHCR staff in Palenque provides support to an asylum seeker who arrived at Albergue Jtatic after a long way walking from their country of origin in Central America.*

In addition, UNHCR provided support to local partners and shelters to help them address the immediate needs of those returned to Mexico under MPP, as well as a much smaller number of people seeking asylum in Mexico. These interventions were undertaken in seven cities in Northern Mexico: Tijuana and Mexicali (Baja California), Ciudad Juárez (Chihuahua), Piedras Negras (Coahuila), Nuevo Laredo, Reynosa, and Matamoros (Tamaulipas).

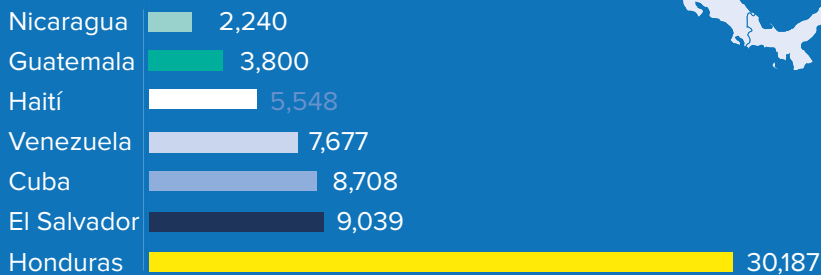
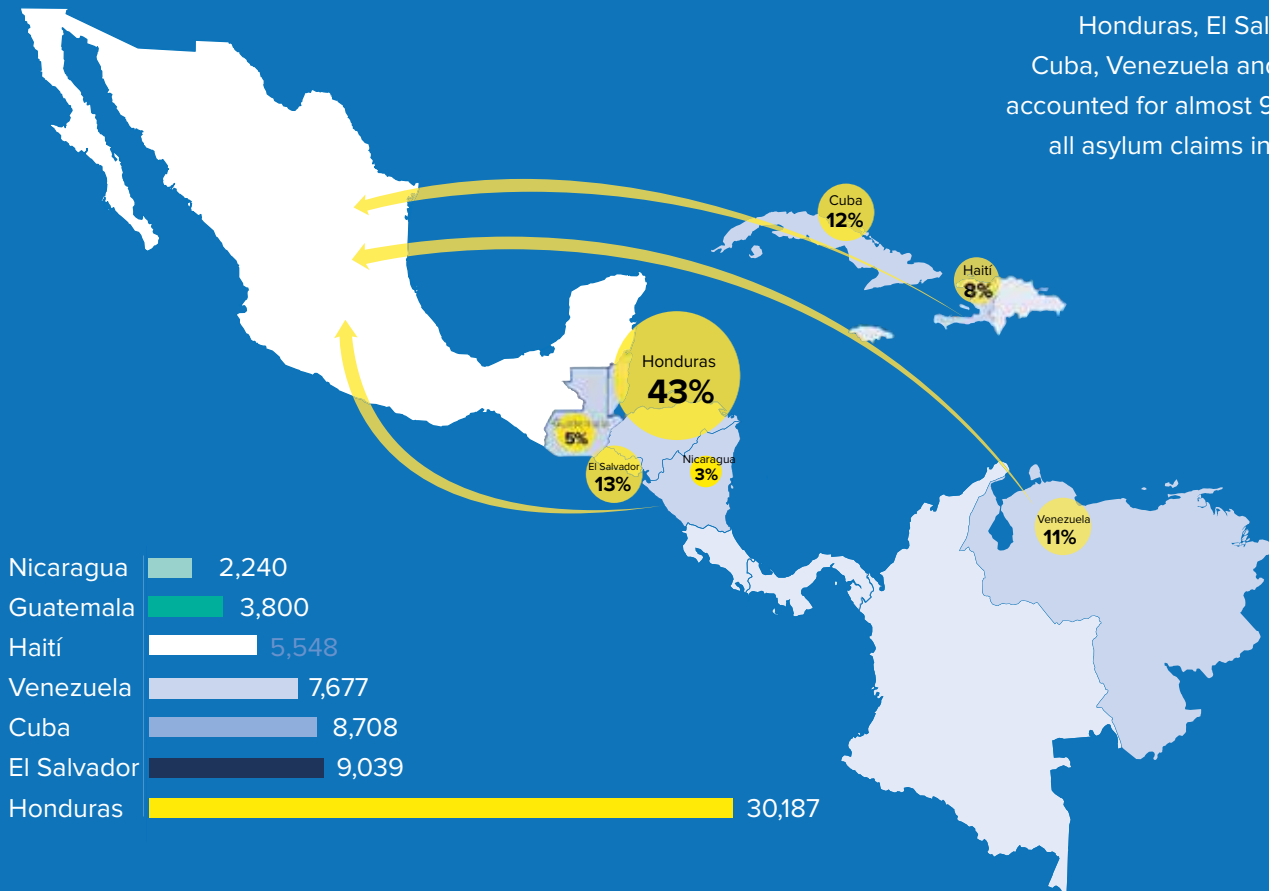
Internal displacement continued to impact thousands of Mexicans in various parts of the country. In March 2019, the Government of Mexico expressed its intention to address the situation, starting by developing a legal and institutional framework at the federal level. UNHCR was requested to contribute with coordinating the UN inputs to the draft law. UNHCR responded by providing technical support and offering training for governmental officials.

Mexico took a strong leadership role in migration and asylum matters at the regional level. During 2019, Mexico held the pro-tempore presidency of the Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework (MIRPS, for its acronym in Spanish), which is the regional application of the Global Compact on Refugees/Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, which brought new dynamism to the process. At the same time, UNHCR Mexico actively supported the Comprehensive Development Plan (Plan de Desarrollo Integral) for the North of Central America and southern Mexico to promote social and economic development and to address root causes of displacement and migration. In December 2019, Mexico attended the Global Refugee forum in Geneva and 41 pledges were presented by Mexican authorities and civil society.

# UNHCR Mexico at a glance

## New asylum applications in 2019

Honduras, El Salvador, Cuba, Venezuela and Haiti accounted for almost 90% of all asylum claims in 2019.



LEGAL AID

**25,000**

ASYLUM SEEKERS

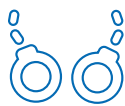
received individualized legal counselling



**3,519**

ASYLUM SEEKERS

received legal representation



**9,926**

ASYLUM SEEKERS

were released from detention

**48,000**

REFUGEES AND

ASYLUM SEEKERS

Have been registered with UNHCR and received individualized protection and assistance



CHILD PROTECTION

**3,356**

CHILDREN

benefited from psychosocial and emergency education activities



**240**

COMAR STAFF

Trained on refugee law and refugee status determination

COMAR PROCESSING

capacity increased by

**23%**



**14**  
SHELTERS

benefited from equipment, infrastructure development and rehabilitation of spaces



**41**  
SHELTERS

participated in comprehensive needs assessments



**43K**  
CASH ASSISTANCE

newly arrived asylum seekers received cash assistance



**60K**  
INDIVIDUALS BENEFITED

From asylum information materials

**3,500**

CHILDREN REACHED

with Bolay, a children book about asylum. The book was also presented at the Guadalajara International Book Fair.

## RELOCATION AND LOCAL INTEGRATION FOR REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS



**720**

enrolled in vocational training and certification of skills

**5,206**

relocated from the south to central and northern Mexico

**34K**

received financial and other support for local integration

### EL JAGUAR FACEBOOK PAGE



**1.6**  
MILLION

unique users were reached per month

### UNHCR responded to

**2,260**

INQUIRIES

from refugees and asylum seekers



**34K**

individuals assisted through UNHCR Help Desk



**14**

“Con los Refugiados” programs were emitted in cooperation with Justicia TV



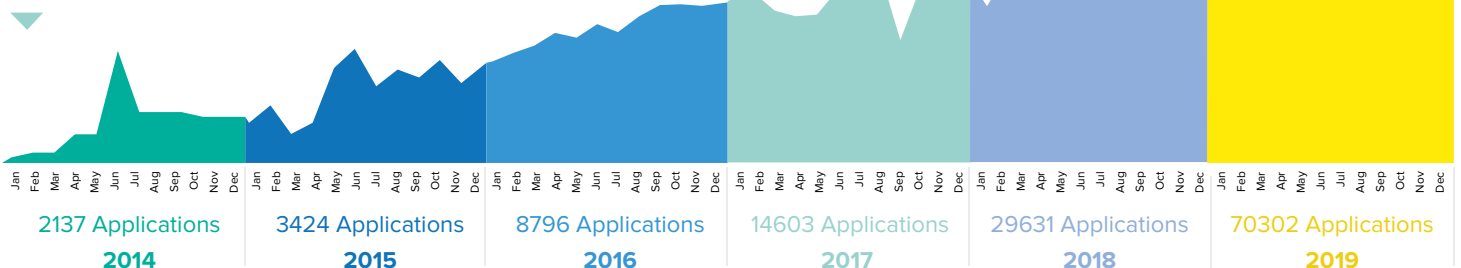
**2,800**

Twitter followers on local account since its launch in September 2019

**70,302**

asylum applications lodged in 2019 manifested an exponential growth in the number of people seeking international protection in Mexico. It also marked an increase in asylum claims for the fifth consecutive year.

Source:  
COMAR, Yearbooks 2014-2018. COMAR-SIRE 2019





**In 2019, UNHCR's Mexico**

Operation faced the fastest growth since the agency established its presence in the country in 1982. UNHCR expanded its capacity, opened field offices and established a presence in seven new locations across the country, and roving teams were created to ensure temporary presence of UNHCR and remote case management. Likewise, several new positions were created across different functions and locations: as of 31 December 2019, UNHCR had 227 local employees as well as 44 international staff. Members of UNHCR staff come from numerous countries with 21 different nationalities currently working in Mexico. Female staff members accounted for 61% the total 271 employed. The Country Office located in Mexico City accounted for 46% of the staff, followed by Sub Office in Tapachula (18%).



In 2019, similarly to previous years, just over half of all applicants for asylum were male (57%). Close to three quarters of the applicants were aged between 18 and 59 years old, and almost a quarter were minors. The number of asylum applications submitted by unaccompanied children has continued to rise, from 78 in 2014 to 673 in 2019.

During 2019, COMAR adjudicated the asylum claims of 24,754 individuals and issued 15,118 substantive decisions. Positive decisions adjudicating the refugee status represented 72% and complementary protection 8%, for a total protection recognition rate of 80%.

Migration towards and through Mexico has been characterised by mixed flows. Multiple causes are at the root of displacement of refugees, asylum seekers, economic and other types of migrants from the region of NCA, Venezuela, Haiti, Cuba and other countries, including nationals from several African countries. The vast majority of those from African and Asian countries arrived in Mexico with the intent of reaching the US. The mixed nature of migration implied the necessity to develop further not only the Mexican asylum system but also alternative and safe migratory solutions for third-country nationals entering Mexico irregularly and not seeking international protection.

## Violence, one of the main reasons to flee from Central America

Karina\*, from El Salvador, and Marisol\*, from Honduras met in Guatemala when they were moving north, fleeing from violence in their countries. They met in the context of a migrant ‘caravan’ that arrived in Mexico in January 2019.

They were part of the small 7 percent of this large movement of people who claimed asylum in Mexico, at the office of COMAR in Tapachula.

UNHCR conducted 409 interviews representing 988 people between January 21 and 25, of which 63 percent claimed to have left their country because of violence or fear of the violence, but only 7 percent claimed asylum in Mexico.

For Karina, 30, staying in El Salvador was not an option. The gang members threatened to recruit her 11-year-old son to sell drugs at his school and work as an informant.

“it is dangerous to be a child in El Salvador today”, Karina explained. “The schools are infested with gang members. My priority is that my children study here in Mexico, I see that studying is worthy here”.

Marisol’s goal was clear: to escape to Mexico with her two children and four younger brothers, all minors.

The 20-year-old Honduran woman had fled her uncle, who was convicted of sexually abusing her as a child. From prison, he has continued to threaten her.

In addition, her mother was murdered in strange circumstances while driving to a funeral. “A man came up and started shooting at her, I don’t know why,” she said.

## Working with others

In 2019, UNHCR worked with an increasing number of stakeholders to implement a comprehensive Protection and Solutions Strategy in Mexico. UNHCR partners included the Government of Mexico, federal and state public institutions, civil society and faith-based organizations, academia, private companies as well as refugees and host communities.

UNHCR developed formal partnerships with 24 national and international NGOs: Asylum Access México AC, Casa del Caminante Samuel Ruiz Garcia AC, Casa del Migrante en Tijuana AC, Casa del Migrante Monseñor Guillermo Ranzahuer Gonzalez, Casa del Migrante Scalabrini AC, Casa Monarca - Ayuda Humanitaria al Migrante, Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Matias de Cordova, Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos AC, Dialogo Intercultural de Mexico Activo AC, Dignidad y Justicia en el Camino AC, Diócesis de Tapachula AR, Formación y Capacitación AC, Frontera con Justicia AC, Fundación Casa Alianza Mexico IAP, Fundación Juconi Mexico AC, HIAS Inc, Jesuit Refugee Service, José María Vilaseca AC, Padre Jose Marchetti AC, Programa Casa Refugiados AC, RET International, Save the Children Mexico AC, Sin Fronteras IAP Mexico, Una Mano Amiga en la

Lucha contra El Sida, Universidad Iberoamericana AC. Additionally, UNHCR cooperated with more than 100 organizations throughout the year, mostly managing shelters located across the country.

COMAR is UNHCR's institutional counterpart on refugee affairs. Other public authorities with whom UNHCR worked in 2019 included: The National Migration Institute (INM), the National System for Integral Family Development (DIF), the Public Defender's Office and the Child Protection Authority (CPA), among others. UNHCR pursued a close cooperation with the federal government, most importantly with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Labour and Protection, the Ministry of Social Welfare, the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Health.

In 2019, cooperation with United Nations agencies and International Organizations was further reinforced. Key UNHCR partners included the UN Resident Coordinator Office United Nations, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Labour Organizations (ILO), the International Organization for Migration (IOM), UNESCO, the United Nations

"I did not want to go to the United States because I would not like to expose the children. I decided to apply for asylum in Mexico," she said.

Karina, Marisol and their children stayed for a few days in a shelter in Tapachula and received humanitarian assistance from UNHCR.

In 2019, one third of asylum seekers were women, and another third were children.

©UNHCR/Daniel Dreifuss



*Caravan of refugee and migrants seek shelter and work in the city of Tijuana, northern Mexico. Tijuana is known for being the busiest land border in the world. In recent years, Tijuana has become home to hundreds of refugees.*

Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and the World Health Organization (WHO). UNHCR contributed to the drafting of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2020-2025 (UNSDCF – former UNDAF), which affirmed migration and asylum as priorities and cross-cutting themes, and stipulated setting of the Interagency Migration and Asylum Task Force chaired by UNHCR and IOM. In September 2019, the interagency Working Group for Shelter was reactivated involving ICRC, IOM, UNHCR and UNICEF, to ensure close coordination in the humanitarian responses of each organization, avoid duplications and complement resources when providing support to shelters in Mexico. Finally, UNHCR established protection working groups at the national and local levels in Tapachula, Tenosique, Palenque, Acayucan and Ciudad Juarez.

In February 2019, Mexico assumed, for a period of one year, the Presidency of the Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework (MIRPS) which includes Mexico and six states in Central America. UNHCR, as a member of the Technical Country Team, provided support to the Mexican authorities in implementing MIRPS commitments and contributed to achieving various important regional and national results. At regional level, MIRPS was expanded to include El Salvador. National Action Plans were strengthened, and all countries conducted a technical revision of their national commitments. The main results for Mexico were related to the strengthening of COMAR by creating new directorates and field offices, training and simplification of procedures.

©UNHCR/Gabo Morales



*UNHCR Chief inaugurates new extension at partner shelter in Mexico City*  
UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi (right) and UNHCR's Mexico Representative Mark Manly (left), join the Coordinator of the CAFEMIN shelter, Sister Magdalena Silva Renteria (second left) and 24-year-old Honduran refugee, Nelsy Suazo, to cut the ribbon of the shelter extension in Mexico City.

The government of Mexico assured implementation of already existing good practices, such as the issuance of the temporary fiscal ID known as CURP for asylum seekers, a roadmap for the comprehensive protection of children, the alternatives to detention project, and the labour integration programme. The second annual MIRPS report and the Mexico City Declaration were adopted during the regional annual multi-stakeholder meeting in November 2019.

In 2019, UNHCR managed to further foster private sector engagement and increase the number of private-sector supporters. UNHCR pursued engagement with key stakeholders and proactively sought the expansion of its existing network of employers, chambers of commerce and other relevant actors particularly in the context of the durable solutions and integration components of its strategy. Over 36 companies partnered with UNHCR in hiring refugees. At the Global Refugee Forum, two companies, Mabe and Palisser pledged to recruit 300 refugees each, over the next three years.



In the lead-up to and during the Global Refugee Forum, which took place in December 2019 in Geneva, several stakeholders from Mexico made pledges that will benefit asylum seekers, refugees and their host communities. Mexican government institutions made 23 pledges related to the protection and integration of refugees. 18 pledges were made by other actors such as civil society organizations and the private sector to improve

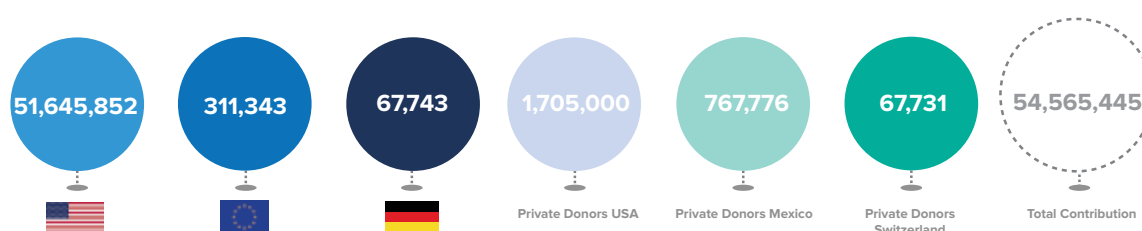
access to education, health and employment for refugees. It is worth highlighting pledges made by COMAR to improve the asylum procedure by simplifying and merging processes, by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss the ratification of international legal frameworks on statelessness, as well as pledges by the Federal Institute of Public Defence, and the Ministries of Health and Labour to include refugees in their programmes.

## Funding

UNHCR funding comes from voluntary contributions of Governments and private donors. In 2019, UNHCR's Mexico Operation had budgeted revenues of USD 54M, which represents a five-fold increase compared to the previous year. The distribution of income sources in the 2019 budget, as presented in the chart below, shows the magnitude of the contribution received from the US. This allowed for a substantial expansion of the operation both in terms of enlarging the scope of assistance programmes for refugees and asylum seekers in Mexico, i.e. provision of legal aid, improvement of reception conditions in shelters, creation of local integration opportunities, provision of cash-based humanitarian assistance, etc.); and in the expansion of UNHCR's physical presence to a total of 12 locations across the country.

Over USD 300,000 were received from the European Commission – Directorate-General for European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (DG ECHO) under the regional project to enhance reception and protection mechanisms in the NCA and Mexico, and contributed directly to the Cash Assistance programme in the states of Chiapas, Tabasco, Veracruz, and in Mexico City. Towards the end of the year, UNHCR was finalizing the negotiation of a multiyear EURO 4 M grant, which was later approved, with the EC mostly focusing on protection interventions in the north of Mexico. In December, together with ILO, UNHCR signed a three-year contract named “Promoting Employment and Social Protection under the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework in Central America and Mexico” financed by the European Union. Finally, over USD 67,000 constituted the first allocation of the multiannual project presented jointly with Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) to the German Development Ministry for a total of USD 7.1M, out of which USD 3.9M were assigned to UNHCR over three years. The project aims to enhance public services in host communities in southern Mexico and expanding the opportunities for durable solutions for refugees and asylum seekers.

### Contributions to UNHCR Mexico in 2019 (in USD)





CHAPTER 2

# Safeguarding fundamental rights







## Access to asylum procedure

While Mexico significantly stepped up its reception and asylum capacity during 2019, it remains clear that public policies need to be further adapted and accompanied with assigned budgets to ensure the sustainability of Mexico's asylum system. The significant increase in asylum applications observed in 2019 has impacted the capacity of COMAR to process claims. Detention of asylum seekers, including of children, continued to be enforced, and limited effective access to the asylum procedure acted as a disincentive to filing asylum claims for many. Challenges remained also while providing response to immediate and ongoing needs of refugees and asylum seekers due to limited funding and capacity of certain specialised government institutions, such as Child Protection Authorities, Special Prosecutor's Offices for Migrants, and public health institutions.

*Home visit at Oluta, Veracruz, southern Mexico. UNHCR Staff talks to a refugee woman whose children have been reported to be at risk.*



## Working with the Mexican Commission for Refugees (COMAR)

Throughout 2019, UNHCR worked closely with COMAR to improve access to the asylum system in Mexico and to increase COMAR's capacity to process asylum claims. COMAR was also supported in conceptualizing and facilitating a National Training Programme. In 2019, UNHCR provided training to a total of 240 COMAR officials and affiliated staff. The first three sessions targeted COMAR personnel nationwide and the curriculum included basic concepts of International Refugee Law, the Age Gender Diversity approach, and the duty of self-care. The

second, one week-long module, focused on refugee status determination (RSD) procedures and protection from sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA). Additionally, UNHCR trained 164 officers of INM on international and Mexican asylum law, human rights and identification of people with protection needs.

UNHCR supported COMAR in designing and implementing simplified procedures for Honduran, Salvadorian and Venezuelan asylum seekers, under the refugee definition embodied



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*UNHCR chief hears refugees' stories of hope and despair. UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi attends the inauguration of the new registration centre of the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR) in Tapachula, alongside COMAR director, Andrés Ramírez.*

in the Cartagena Declaration. As a result, COMAR's processing capacity substantially increased, representing 24,754 claims processed by the end of 2019, compared to 12,326 in 2018. However, the backlog of unprocessed claims remained significant and is likely to increase in 2020. Therefore, UNHCR acted to strengthen its efforts to support COMAR's efficiency in procedures, without undermining integrity and procedural safeguards.

COMAR's office in Tapachula was the most affected by the surge in asylum applications in 2019. It received some 65% of all applications lodged countrywide and had waiting periods for registration of up to eight weeks. UNHCR partnership with COMAR contributed to scaling up of registration capacity in Tapachula. In September, a new registration centre was opened to ensure access to registration and asylum documentation in a single day, with a capacity to process more than 10,000 persons per month. Similar results were obtained in Mexico City, both in receiving and documenting all asylum seekers on the first day, but also in improving overall access to procedure and documentation through mobile teams. With UNHCR support, COMAR opened three new offices in 2019: in Tijuana, Palenque and Monterrey.

Moreover, UNHCR assisted COMAR in establishing Registration, Statistics and Analysis Units. Progress was made also in COMAR's statistical analysis capacity, where efforts were invested in aligning statistical methods to standard refugee statistical reporting and assessing the registration system's capacity to support and control the entire process and to ensure access to real-time data.

*Mexico Representative, Mark Manly, talks to asylum seekers at a shelter in Tapachula, southern Mexico.*



©UNHCR/Julio López



©UNHCR/Julio López



©UNHCR/Rafael Sánchez

*Women in Tapachula prepare to take a sculpture workshop, guided by UNHCR staff.*

## Legal aid

UNHCR has been expanding its legal aid network, which by the end of 2019 included 64 lawyers and 36 paralegals. UNHCR also signed partnership agreements with public and private organizations including the Federal Public Defender's Office (IFDP), Universidad Veracruzana and two additional Pro Bono law firms: Santamaria and Galicia, to offer free of charge legal counselling and representation. As a result, throughout the year, more than 60,000 individuals received information and guidance related to the right to seek asylum in Mexico, more than 25,000 received individualised legal counselling regarding their asylum claim, and over 3,500 received legal representation. After the scale-up of protection activities in northern Mexico in the second half on 2019, UNHCR expanded and strengthened its legal aid network in Tijuana, Mexicali, Ciudad Juárez, Piedras Negras, Nuevo Laredo and Matamoros, providing protection counselling to more than 6,500 individuals.

UNHCR facilitated three national trainings for lawyers and paralegals, a workshop with 28 lawyers from six different law firms and six trainings to the Federal Public Defender's Offices (IFDP) in Cancun, Veracruz, Monterrey, Coahuila, Oaxaca and Mexico City. In total, 159 IFDP lawyers were trained by UNHCR. On 18 June, UNHCR signed a memorandum of understanding with the Federal Judiciary, which provided a basis for enhanced collaboration on training for judicial officers and research on refugee issues in 2020.

INM and COMAR, with the support of UNHCR, continued implementing the Release from

Detention Programme. This Programme benefited 9,926 asylum seekers in 2019, 26% of whom were children. In 2019, UNHCR conducted 384 visits to detention centres throughout the country and registered 7,938 detainees whose cases were followed individually. Despite some advances in the implementation of the programme in the detention centres, access to asylum from the immigration areas at airports continued to be a challenge.

Similarly, appeals before the courts on negative asylum decisions continued to have limited impact. In 2019, UNHCR partner organizations, the Federal Public Defender's Office and pro bono allies filed 213 administrative appeals with COMAR, but less than 100 jurisdictional procedures were initiated. Although 15 cases have reached the Supreme Court, more needs to be done to compel courts to interpret the scope of asylum legislation in Mexico. During 2020 UNHCR has made efforts to foster collaborative spaces to facilitate the development of common and collective litigation strategies.

Finally, 2019 brought changes in the immigration policies in the United States and Mexico, which increased uncertainty among persons of concern and legal service providers. In this difficult climate, disseminating information and providing legal assistance to support informed migratory decisions of asylum seekers and persons returned under the MPP remained major challenges. Few actors had the expertise and technical knowledge on both countries' legal systems and could quickly and efficiently expand their presence and activities to Mexico's northern border.



## By looking back to the Spanish Exile, UNHCR highlights Mexico's asylum tradition

The 80th anniversary of the Spanish Republican Exile was commemorated in 2019. In the late 1930s, thousands of Spaniards fled their country due to violence, the Civil War, and the dictatorship of Francisco Franco. The families of those refugees now call for support for Central Americans and Venezuelans who are currently fleeing the violence and political situation that impact their countries in search of a better future. In this context, UNHCR produced a series of seven videos with testimonies of refugees from the Spanish Exile, drawing parallels between their experiences and the experience of today's refugees. Videos were produced thanks to the support of the Ateneo Español and presented during the official commemoration of the Spanish Exile in Veracruz. The videos were uploaded to [www.acnur.org/exilioespanol](http://www.acnur.org/exilioespanol) and were posted on social media. UNHCR organised events at the Ateneo Español and at the Spanish Chamber of Commerce to talk about the Spanish Exile. One of the interviews was held with Laura Bosques, a 98-year old woman, daughter of the Mexican Consul in Marseille in 1939, Gilberto Bosques: I am very proud of being Gilberto Bosques' daughter, of course, but he was only doing his job. He used to say, 'it was not me, it was Mexico'. Now it is time to open the doors to Latin Americans, to our brothers. Mexico has an asylum tradition, it has always been open, and it will continue to be, I hope", she said.



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©UNHCR/Sarape Social

*Spanish refugees give their testimony to UNHCR during the commemoration of the 80 years of the Spanish Exile. From top to bottom, Víctor Rivera, Laura Bosques (daughter of the Consul of Mexico in Marseille, Gilberto Bosques) and Helios Estévez. More information at [acnur.org/exilioespanol](http://acnur.org/exilioespanol)*

## Community Based Protection

In 2019, UNHCR conducted 23 participatory assessments in 21 different locations throughout Mexico involving a total of 927 refugees (245 adult females, 256 adult males, 95 adolescent females, 119 adolescent males, 85 children, 52 elderly persons and 75 persons from the LGBTI community). Participants highlighted several issues such as challenges in accessing the asylum system both in the southern and northern border and lengthy asylum process, often exceeding the three-month legal term. Persons with specific needs such as SGBV survivors, people with disabilities, children at risk, the elderly and pregnant women struggled to find access to specialised services in areas such as shelter, health, education, justice, and psychosocial aid. This was especially true in cities of southern Mexico where institutions have limited capacity.

Coexistence projects such as sport and cultural activities organised by UNHCR and its partners, together with local authorities, in some cities in southern Mexico proved to contribute to enhancing strong relationships between the local community and refugees. However, lack of migratory documentation prevented many asylum seekers from accessing formal labour opportunities, therefore the great majority resorted to the informal economy. On the other hand, refugees and asylum seekers with documentation have had positive experiences of local integration in central and northern cities, which offered more opportunities for employment, education and access to public health services. The overwhelming majority of refugees and asylum seekers consulted, expressed their intention to settle in Mexico and



*Neighbors from the Xochimilco neighborhood in Tapachula talk with UNHCR about the needs to improve public spaces, as part of peaceful coexistence initiatives.*

©UNHCR/Carlos Colmenares



©FM4Pasolibre/Gabriel Covarrubias



Children at FM4 Shelter in Guadalajara make masks of “Bolay”, a female jaguar who helps refugees in their way. The children’s book Bolay was published in August, 2019, in alliance with the publisher Ateconqueso and United Way Mexico.



did not envisage returning to their country of origin in the near future due to the continued prevalence of the conditions that forced them to flee.

Listening and talking to communities is a fundamental part of humanitarian response, including the work of UNHCR and its partners. To enhance communications with communities, UNHCR continued to expand social networking tools such as the “El Jaguar” Facebook page. With an investment of USD 60,000 in 2019, El Jaguar reached over 8 million users and had over 350,000 interactions. Through the direct message function of the page, UNHCR responded to 2,260 consultations. In addition, UNHCR set up a new national help desk to provide information and

support to asylum seekers and refugees. Asylum-related information material was translated to English and French and distributed widely, including in partnership with COMAR, the National Commission for Human Rights (CNDH) and Federal Public Defenders Office.

In response to asylum seekers’ request for testimonies from other refugees and more engaging communication, 16 peer-to-peer videos were produced to inform about the asylum procedure and UNHCR’s integration programme. Additionally, together with theatre specialists, UNHCR produced a short play on international protection and the asylum system in Mexico. The play was presented in eight shelters in three different cities to more than 600 people.





## Child Protection

The number of asylum-seeking children has risen in recent years, with 18,280 claimants registered in 2019. Nevertheless, the figure of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children was still very low compared to the number of those detained by immigration authorities: 13,242 unaccompanied children (UAC) were detained. All told, only 673 UACs filed an asylum claim including those in shelters, DIF facilities, and migration detention centres. In 2019, UNHCR identified and assisted 14,281 children and adolescents through different protection and assistance programmes. It continued to focus on capacity building activities and provision of technical assistance to Child Protection Authorities (CPA), which are in charge of the best interest determination (BID) process, and other relevant stakeholders in the country. To this end, UNHCR conducted training for over 800 officials from governmental institutions, civil society organizations, UNHCR field offices and partners. The curriculum focused on the identification of children in need of international protection, access to asylum, BID, alternative care arrangements and case management.

UNHCR is a member of the inter-institutional Commission for Refugee and Migrant Children led by the National Comprehensive Child Protection System (SIPINNA), a key coordination mechanism to promote public programmes and policies to address the protection of children on the move. Within this framework UNHCR provided technical assistance for the implementation of best interest procedures and the child protection legal framework. In addition, UNHCR conducted advocacy interventions aimed at ending child detention, improving reception conditions for children and promoting alternative care arrangements for unaccompanied children,



*Refugee children in the southern city of Tenosique paint during a community fair coordinated by UNHCR and local partners.*

particularly community and family-based alternatives, when family reunification was not possible. In this regard UNHCR cooperated with different organizations, such as Casa Alianza (Covenant House Mexico) in Mexico City, JUCONI in Puebla and Aldeas Infantiles SOS in Chiapas.

UNHCR distributed child-friendly kits to 45 civil society shelters, partners, government and UNHCR Field Offices across the country. As part of the scale-up protection strategy in the north of the country, UNHCR also signed an agreement with Save the Children to establish five child friendly spaces (CFS) in shelters in the states of Baja California and Chihuahua, implementing identification and referral mechanisms for children at risk and conducting psychosocial and emergency education activities for over 3,350 children.

## Raising awareness through ‘little and extraordinary things’

In 2019, UNHCR presented the theatre play “Little and Extraordinary Things” in five locations in Mexico. Little and Extraordinary Things is a children’s play that helps to raise awareness towards refugees and tackle xenophobia. The play, written by Micaela Gramajo and Daniela Arroio, was successfully presented in Guadalajara (2 performances), Villahermosa (2 performances), Tapachula (2 performances), Jalapa (1 performance) and Mexico City (8 performances at UNAM).

“Many times, girls and boys are more open and empathetic and understand very well why in Mexico we must show solidarity with people who have to flee their countries to survive”, said Giovanni Lepri, Deputy Representative of UNHCR in Mexico.

The play portrays the life of Emma, an eight-year-old girl who collects small and “extraordinary” things. However, the place where she lives is going through a violent situation, so she and her family have to move. They arrive in a country where they speak another language, they eat strange food and it is very hot. There, Emma sees the sea for the first time and receives letters from her grandmother. In the new place, Emma meets a cat named “cat” and a girl named Maia. Little by little she discovers the small and extraordinary things that are hidden in her new home.

“Telling Emma’s story is telling the story of millions of families who are forced to flee their homes to seek life in a new country. Does everything I have and everything I am fit in a suitcase? What would you take with you? For various reasons, people walk the world. We move. We migrate. Hopefully on the way we will always find a hug”, said playwright Gramajo.



*Wearing her favourite jacket, Emma shows the audience her collection of little and extraordinary things, which she will have to leave behind when she and her family are forced to flee.*



## Preventing and responding to Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

During 2019, UNHCR increased its efforts to strengthen capacity building on the prevention of and response to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), as well as on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA). UNHCR provided training to over 500 staff members, partner organizations, and State officials. Additionally, standard operating procedures (SOP) on the prevention and response to SGBV were drafted, leading to the creation and update of service mappings and referral pathways for SGBV survivors in UNHCR Mexico Field Offices.

Regarding individual interventions, UNHCR assisted 785 SGBV survivors (629 women, 24 girls, 96 men, and 16 boys) through counselling, referral to relevant services, and in certain cases, the provision of cash-assistance. Furthermore, UNHCR assisted 191 vulnerable women and girls and LGBTI persons to relocate within Mexico due to security threats they faced in the initial place of residence.

©UNHCR/Marta Martínez



*Central American women find safety and strength in mural painting. Asylum seekers from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala hide their identity, standing in front of the collective mural they painted in Tapachula, Mexico.*





*A trans woman from Honduras that was forced to flee because of violence and discrimination in her hometown finds shelter and safety in Tapachula.*

## Persons with specific needs

During 2019, UNHCR enacted standard operating procedures (SOP) on identification of persons with specific needs and trained over 200 persons among staff members and partners. As a result, service mappings and referral pathways were developed in the locations where UNHCR established a presence in central and northern Mexico.

UNHCR significantly improved the quality of its protection screening at registration, doubling the capacity to identify persons with specific needs over the course of 2019. Over half (56%) of the individuals registered in the last two months of the year had been identified as having a specific vulnerability. In total, 26,053 persons with specific needs identified were registered, out of a total 47,952 persons registered by UNHCR in 2019. These were assisted either by UNHCR and partners through counselling and referral to specialised services; or received financial support

through cash assistance based on a thorough needs assessment. The main categories of needs identified comprised legal and physical protection, children at risk, serious medical conditions including mental health, women at risk, SGBV survivors and persons with disabilities.

Regarding persons with disabilities, UNHCR has strengthened its collaboration with the Mexican Coalition for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (COAMEX), a strategic partner in advocacy on the rights of refugees and asylum seekers with disabilities, their needs and identification of barriers in accessing public services. UNHCR participated in awareness raising events and has trained COAMEX on refugees in Mexico, the reception conditions, integration opportunities and gaps. As a result, a joint agenda was established for 2020 focused on improving the protection and integration opportunities of refugees with disabilities.



CHAPTER 3

# Reception conditions





*UNHCR officers talk to migrants and asylum seekers in Ciudad Hidalgo about the asylum process and resolving their migratory status in Mexico. In January 2019, the Mexican Government granted humanitarian cards to access the country to people coming in caravans, a policy that was applied only a few months.*



## Shelters

Shelters play an important role in the overall UNHCR approach of promoting and providing international protection and solutions in Mexico. A thorough needs assessment with 41 shelters was carried out during 2019 to assist the development of an evidence based and comprehensive UNHCR strategy for the coming years. The assessment focused on protection issues, sustainability and the institutional capacity of shelters.

A new UNHCR Shelter Strategy 2019-2022 was completed and its implementation began in the second half of 2019. It established a common vision for medium- to long-term goals, which included a consolidation of a cluster of shelters offering specialised services for persons in need of international protection in Mexico. UNHCR aimed to strengthen the capacity of key partners as providers of flexible shelter solutions and being in a position to quickly scale up the reception capacity when circumstances require it. The Shelter Strategy has also addressed the

main gaps identified during the assessment, such as a lack of referral to procedures and assistance; limited access and capacity of competent state institutions; limited integration opportunities in places where shelters are located; no satisfactory reception conditions in shelters which were not formal partners of UNHCR; highly vulnerable economic situations; low capacity to accommodate refugees and asylum seekers for longer periods; lack of human resources; lack of technical capacity as well as a lack of equipment, and finally, lack of capacity to provide special assistance from an age, gender and diversity perspective.

The Shelter Strategy has also served as a powerful communication tool for donors and stakeholders in order to ensure predictability and external support to UNHCR's efforts in this area. All interventions implemented under the Strategy were closely coordinated with ICRC, IOM and UNICEF within the interagency Working Group on Shelters.



*Mexico. UNHCR Chief hears refugees' stories of hope and despair. "The people I met were physically and emotionally impacted, frightened and in need of help. I am grateful for Mexico's efforts to protect and assist them." UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi and a team of UNHCR staff visit a shelter in Tapachula, southern Mexico, established in response to the increase in asylum-seeking families and LGBTI persons.*



©UNHCR/Arturo Almenar

*A young Honduran entrepreneur who arrived in Mexico during the January 2019 caravan. He had a transport company and was threatened by gangs, a situation that forced him to flee his country. One of his colleagues, a taxi driver, was assassinated. When coming in the caravan, he helped other Honduran people by giving them money to buy food. Now in Tapachula, in search of a future far from violence.*

It is important to note that most shelters in Mexico are managed by faith-based and other civil society organizations which are to be praised for the essential services they offer to migrants and refugees under very difficult conditions.

## Cash-Based Interventions

In 2019, the operation has substantially increased the use of Cash-Based Interventions (CBI) to respond to the needs of the rapidly growing number of new asylum seekers who arrived in Mexico during the year. The operation closed the year with assistance provided to 42,912 individuals/22,392 households with a total budget of over USD 14M. At the same time, thanks to improved coordination efforts with COMAR as well as other measures of verification, UNHCR suspended cash assistance for 2,540 households who had abandoned the asylum process.

The objective of UNHCR cash assistance is to support asylum seekers in covering part of their basic needs during the first three months of their regularization process with COMAR. Data obtained through monthly monitoring calls done

by partner focal points and triangulated with information collected through household visits carried out by UNHCR mobile teams for all cases registered by UNHCR, confirmed that the programme was functioning correctly, and the key objectives were being met. The rapid assessment done at the end of 2019 for Tapachula identified, however, gaps in the access to dignified and safe housing options, and some complementary activities/tools were proposed to ensure cash assistance can meet the desired programme objectives for the shelter component, e.g. legal support for informal housing arrangements to minimise the risk of eviction.

A key milestone during the year was the implementation of a targeting approach to ensure a more sustainable programme and to provide humanitarian assistance based on vulnerability. Finally, the need to provide humanitarian assistance to the vulnerable cases of the population in northern Mexico has also become evident during the year. The scale up of cash-based interventions was proposed for 2020 UNHCR work plan and will imply the need to strengthen the registration capacity of UNHCR and partners in new locations.



CHAPTER 4

# Peaceful coexistence







*The shade provided by this leafy tree was the perfect space to have a dialogue among asylum-seekers and people from the host community in Tapachula, to find out their needs and lead to peaceful coexistence projects.*

The promotion of peaceful coexistence has been increasingly challenging given the precarious socioeconomic realities of coexisting population groups, particularly along the southern and northern borders of the country, and perceptions fuelled at times by local media with the tendency to see foreigners as a threat. In response, UNHCR strengthened its efforts to pursue activities benefiting both host and displaced communities, promoting interaction and peaceful relationships, improving the local environment and quality of life, mitigating risks and possible tensions, and strengthening the protection space.

2019 projects included:

- Establishment of groups of young community leaders, both local and asylum seekers and refugees in Tapachula, who attended workshops to strengthen their leadership capacities and develop projects to benefit their communities;
- Interventions to support education through the donation of equipment and school kits;
- Improvement of public spaces, such as rehabilitation of recreational facilities, installation of solar-powered public lighting, mural paintings, the opening of parks and sports fields, installation of fresh and potable water access points, water filters and trash cans;
- Interventions in the fields of sports, arts and culture, through donations of equipment and the rehabilitation of spaces for young people, sports facilities, community gyms, cultural centres, municipal libraries and music schools, among others;
- Providing Wi-Fi connectivity services to rural communities at the southern border;
- Organization of community fairs to sensitise local communities and to promote cultural exchange and integration.

In the second half of 2019, UNHCR carried out comprehensive consultations with communities and authorities in Tapachula, Saltillo, Tenosique, Palenque and Acayucan. As a result, 30 peaceful coexistence projects were identified and prepared, funding permitting, for implementation in 2020.

UNHCR launched a joint digital campaign with other UN Agencies: the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, UN Woman and Information Centre of the United Nations and public institutions, the National Population Council (CONAPO), National Comprehensive Child Protection System (SIPINNA) and National Council to Prevent Discrimination (CONAPRED) to raise awareness about refugees in Mexico. Short videos with real stories and photographs were launched in social media through all seven institutional accounts.

On the occasion of World Refugee Day, UNHCR together with Instituto Mexicano de la Radio (IMER) and non-governmental partner Sin Fronteras (IAP) launched a campaign during which dedicated spots were transmitted in 17 public radio stations throughout the country.



## Sports unites Mexicans and refugees

Sport activities continue to be an essential component of UNHCR's overall peaceful coexistence strategy. Through sports, refugee youth have a safe space to interact with local youth, which help their local integration and to reduce negative perception towards them.

In 2019, UNHCR and partners used the opportunity to promote other topics such as respect for public spaces, environmental protection, and gender equality among many others.

Thanks to the support of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), UNHCR implemented the project "using sports as a vehicle to protect asylum-seeking and refugee youth from violence". Refugee adolescents and youth, through their engagement in sports, increased access to safe community spaces contributing to ensure their protection, prevent negative coping mechanisms and strengthen peaceful coexistence with their peers, and the host communities.

Sport was not only used as a hobby but as a vehicle to engage adolescents and youth in protective environments and facilitating their local integration.

In 2019, also thanks to the contribution of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), UNHCR inaugurated a gym in Palenque, and soccer fields in Tenosique.

"I thank the municipal authorities and UNHCR for contributing with their grain of sand so that young people can practice the sport they love," said César López Díaz, one of the organisers of the Tenosique youth soccer league.

With the support of OIC, our partner Programa Casa Refugiados in Mexico City organised a walk at the Bosque de Tlalpan park, in which 30 refugees participated.

"This way is like our life, we didn't know where it would take us, but here we are", said Sandra, a Venezuelan woman that did the hike with her seven-year-old daughter.

©UNHCR/Scopio/Carlos Pérez



*Refugee girl is part of RET International's soccer team in Tapachula, Chiapas.*



CHAPTER 5

# Durable solutions for refugees

*Construction of a training center for migrants begins in Tijuana, northern Mexico. Migrants, refugees and people from the community will benefit.*







Mexico offers opportunities and a favourable legal framework for integration, allowing refugee inclusion into the local community, access to public and private services and programme and enjoyment of legal, civil, cultural, social and economic rights at equal conditions as the local population. UNHCR's Durable Solutions Strategy is oriented towards ensuring access by refugees to existing public services in order to avoid the creation of parallel structures. In 2019, significant results were achieved. Coahuila became the first state to articulate a public policy oriented toward the inclusion of refugees and asylum seekers. The governor presented the Human Rights Plan underlining the contributions by refugees to host communities and the economy, inviting UNHCR to design the local integration programme component of the plan. Following meetings with key stakeholders, two banks began to review internal processes in order to allow refugees and asylum seekers to open bank accounts. BanCoppel presented a pledge at the Global Refugee Forum in December in Geneva oriented toward the financial inclusion of refugees. UNHCR accompanied the legislative reform process and advocated in favour of the inclusion of refugees into the universal health system. Strategic alliances were established with key ministries and institutions at local and federal levels and several UN agencies contributed to the design of a comprehensive inclusion strategy.

©UNHCR/Julio López







*After a football match organised by RET International in Tapachula, UNHCR staff talks with children from different teams, to hear about their needs and the development of the programmes run by partners and local authorities.*

## Graduating out of poverty in northern Mexico

Claudia\*, a single mother of an 11-year-old girl and a 7-year-old boy, came to Mexico in 2016 with her children, forced to flee from violence and threats in El Salvador.

“The situation in my country is very complicated because of the insecurity and the gangs. It wasn’t safe for my children anymore”, she said. Claudia and her children claimed asylum in the state of Veracruz, southern Mexico. In 2018, with UNHCR support, they moved to Saltillo, a city where UNHCR has an integration programme for refugees, supported by local and federal authorities. She is now building her new life and she is studying to become an industrial engineer.

“This is a very nice programme because it helps you to continue to develop in your professional and personal life. This is a programme of opportunities”, she said. The programme has benefitted almost 6,000 refugees, of which 48% are women and girls. Besides being one of the safest cities in Mexico, Saltillo is one of the country’s fastest growing cities, where many companies from the industrial and manufacturing sectors require workforce.

Claudia works at Mabe, a company that makes home appliances. With support from UNHCR, she is earning a degree in industrial engineering, which, she said, she would have never been able to start in her country. According to Claudia, what she needed to move forward was to have appropriate security conditions, which she found in Saltillo.

“The wage is challenging for me, as I have to cover both, the family expenses and my studies. Also, I have to do my homework and attend to the tasks and activities of my children, but by doing all of this we are moving forward”, she said. The move to Saltillo also allowed Claudia’s

children to continue their primary education. “The girl is one of the best of her school and the boy is not the first in his class, but he is doing very well too,” she said. “We are doing well; integration is going well. Saltillo is very quiet, and people accept us well, they give you a hand in terms of employment. They do not discriminate us because we are from another country”, she said. Claudia and her family have begun their naturalization process.

During the visit of High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi to Mabe in 2019, Claudia had the chance to tell her story, and Mr. Grandi replied “I am very happy and proud to see that people that had to flee their homes because of violence, insecurity, lack of opportunities, find themselves in the opposite situation. A stable situation where they live dignified lives”, he said.

©UNHCR/Scopio/Carlos Pérez



*Claudia studies, works and supports her two children in Saltillo, Coahuila. Gone is the life of violence and poverty that they had in El Salvador.*

## Education

By the end of 2019, 51 refugee and asylum-seeking students were enrolled in the UNHCR scholarship programme, which has been facilitating the access to higher education options for refugees in Mexico. In this regard, UNHCR established a cooperation agreement with the DAFI (Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative)

scholarship programme which supported 28 scholarships. The main beneficiaries of this UNHCR programme were nationals of Venezuela, while other nationalities included persons coming from NCA, Nicaragua, Colombia and the Democratic Republic of (DRC). Of the students, 60% were female and 40% male.



Five out of ten UNHCR cash-based local integration support programmes implemented in 2019, targeted education-related purposes, such as school enrolment, education certification, recognition of diplomas issued in countries of origin, examinations for upper secondary diplomas, and university education scholarships. Through these programmes 2,160 children and teenagers were supported in order to cover school materials, uniforms and other education related costs. Two additional programmes supported 720 refugees and asylum seekers to enrol in vocational training and the certification of skills. UNHCR signed an agreement with 32 Centres for Industrial Labour Training (CECATI) throughout the country in order to facilitate access of asylum seekers and refugees to vocational training. 647 refugees and asylum seekers completed vocational training and obtained diplomas, whilst 73 were supported in accessing examinations for certifying skills and competencies.

In 2019, UNHCR strengthened its collaboration with the National Institute for Adult Education (INEA), which allowed the implementation of accelerated programmes for adult learners. As a result, 300 asylum seekers and refugees obtained certificates of primary and secondary education, and 117 persons were supported in revalidating diplomas issued in countries of origin.

Finally, in order to contribute to the creation of a favourable environment for refugees and asylum seekers to access education in southern Mexico, UNHCR supported schools in Tapachula and Ciudad Hidalgo with close to 1,200 desks and 100 computers. The expansion of this programme as part of the efforts to implement the government-led Comprehensive Development Plan are foreseen in 2020.

©UNHCR/Carlos Colmenares



*During World Refugee Day, UNHCR staff talk to children before the performance of the theatre play “Little and Extraordinary Things”, in Tapachula.*



*UNHCR Mexico provides support to young people to continue their studies. Despite the pandemic, the perseverance and determination of refugee students is one of the reasons that inspire us.*



*UNHCR and Habesha Project strengthened its collaboration to expand the access to superior education for young refugees in Mexico.*

## Scholarships for refugees

In 2019, UNHCR signed an agreement with Proyecto Habesha, based in Aguascalientes. Proyecto Habesha, an NGO that was created to make it possible for young Syrians to continue their higher education in Mexico, decided to expand its scheme to include refugees from other nationalities, so that, like Syrian students, they can study at the university. Through the partnership agreement, the project sought to provide free admission to universities (public and private) in Aguascalientes for asylum seekers and refugees (mainly Central Americans and Venezuelans). Habesha provided temporarily accommodation and psychosocial support to students. They also helped refugees in completing the revalidation of diploma and degrees. Once refugees were admitted into a university programme, UNHCR provided monthly supports (scholarships). By the end of 2019, two Nicaraguan refugees were relocated from Mexico City to Aguascalientes in order to join the programme and enrolled in the Technological Institute of Aguascalientes. Twelve other cases had been identified and referred to Habesha. In November 2019, Habesha, WUSC (World University Service of Canada), UNHCR, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Mexican Refugee Commission (COMAR) organised a two-day conference on higher education opportunities for refugees in Mexico with the participation of universities from several states. WUSC provided technical advice to Habesha in order to strengthen the alternative pathway to solutions component of the project. The collaboration between UNHCR and Proyecto Habesha contributes to UNHCR's overall goal of increasing access to higher education of young refugees by 15% by 2030.



## Socio-economic integration

Over 2,500 asylum seekers and refugees were employed in the formal economy in Mexico in 2019. UNHCR established cooperation with federal and state authorities and employment offices as well as with over 50 private companies that were hiring refugees in Saltillo, Monterrey, Guadalajara, and Aguascalientes, including Mabe, Kolon, Kimberly Clark, Palliser, Lennox, General Motors, Femsa, Hyatt, Home Depot, Soriana, Holiday Inn, Nissan, Exxon Mobil, Uber, Procter & Gamble.

In 2019, UNHCR assisted in the relocation of 5,206 refugees and asylum seekers from cities in southern Mexico, where opportunities for socio-economic integration were scarce, to municipalities located in the central and northern part of the country characterised by a higher demand for workers and a better absorption capacity in the education and health sectors. The relocation programme was first launched in Saltillo in 2016. In 2019, UNHCR expanded the programme to Monterrey, Guadalajara and



*“This scheme is a win-win. It helps fill labour shortages in some regions, while giving refugees and their families access to jobs, education, housing, safety, and dignity”. A man at work at the Mabe factory in Saltillo, northern Mexico, during the visit by UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi. Mabe is a major partner of UNHCR’s local integration programme and employs dozens of relocated refugees. “This scheme is a win-win. It helps fill labour shortages in some regions, while giving refugees and their families access to jobs, education, housing, safety, and dignity”, Grandi said.*

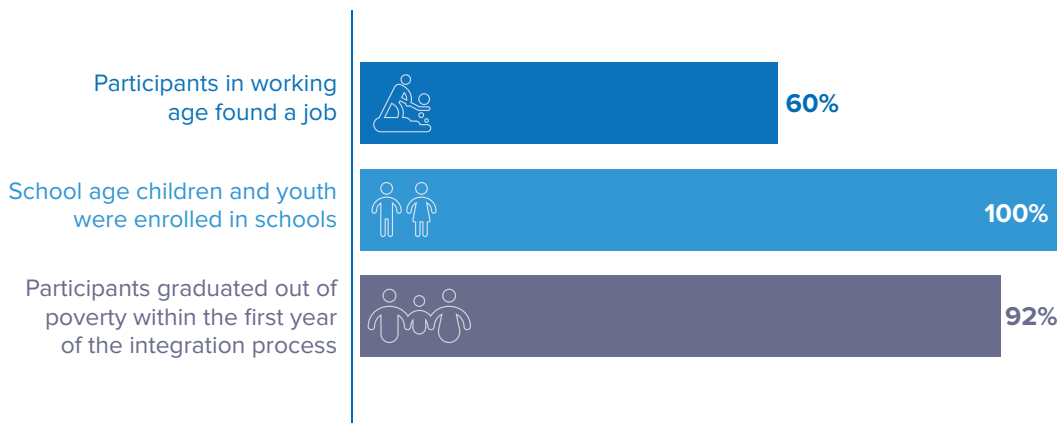
Aguascalientes and began preparations for its implementation in additional locations, including Queretaro, Puebla, Leon and San Luis Potosi. Upon refugee status recognition and issuance of relevant documentation by authorities, refugees were screened for relocation and provided with bus transportation to one of the cities partnering with the programme. By the end of 2019, 5,874 persons had benefited from the programme since its launch. Of the persons relocated in 2019, 84% (4,370) were recognised refugees and 2,291 were supported in obtaining permanent residence and work permits. Sixteen percent were asylum seekers, out of which 475 needed support in obtaining temporary stay permits upon arrival. Two thirds (64%) of relocated refugees and asylum seekers were working age; 35 % were children and 1% elders. Over half (53%) of beneficiaries were male and 47% female.

During a week-long induction, participants were lodged in a hotel and provided with a series of workshops aimed at equipping them with necessary knowledge and orientation in order to facilitate the socio-economic integration process in their new city of residence. Participants received information on housing options and a one-off cash grant, covering the first month of

rent and installation related costs. Designated focal points within the Ministry of Education ensured that relocated children were enrolled in school. Job interviews were conducted at the hotel and generally resulted in several job offers per each participant to the programme. A permanent dialogue with chambers of commerce, private sector companies and local authorities guaranteed an efficient match between profiles of relocated refugees and the needs of the local labour market. Monthly home visits and psychosocial support by UNHCR and its partners ensured that participants were accompanied during the first year of the integration process.

Three years into the implementation of the project in Saltillo, the results are promising: within the first month of the integration process, refugee families became independent from assistance. Ninety-two participants of working age found a job, 100% of school age children and youth were enrolled in schools, and 60% of the participants graduated out of poverty within the first year of the integration process. Relocated refugees are expected to access nationality within the first two years of the integration process and access their own dwelling within the first three years.

### Local Integration in Saltillo | Results after a month





In 2019, UNHCR also strengthened its local integration programme for the in-situ population in Tapachula, Tenosique, Mexico City and Acayucan. New projects were established, with refugees settling locally in Palenque and Tijuana. In addition, preparations started in order to launch local integration support in Cancún and Ciudad Juarez. Projects in these locations allowed UNHCR to provide local integration support to over 34,000 refugees and asylum seekers. UNHCR carried out regular monitoring

of inclusion and local integration, as well referred persons with specific needs to relevant institutions or non-governmental organizations. The teams in charge of conducting home visits, included social workers and psychologists. In 2019, the teams conducted 4,873 home visits to 11,041 refugees and asylum seekers. The home visit programme allowed UNHCR to ensure decent employment conditions, enabling income generation and access to public services by beneficiaries.



*UNHCR's staff explaining refugees the process for their reintegration to a new life in Palenque*

## Naturalisation

In 2019, UNHCR, in partnership with Sin Fronteras (IAP), provided legal counselling on the naturalization processes to 134 refugees. Candidates for naturalization were identified through UNHCR's local integration projects in various locations across the country. By the end of the year, 41 refugees submitted their naturalization request before the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, whilst 77 of those assisted were pending to submit their files.

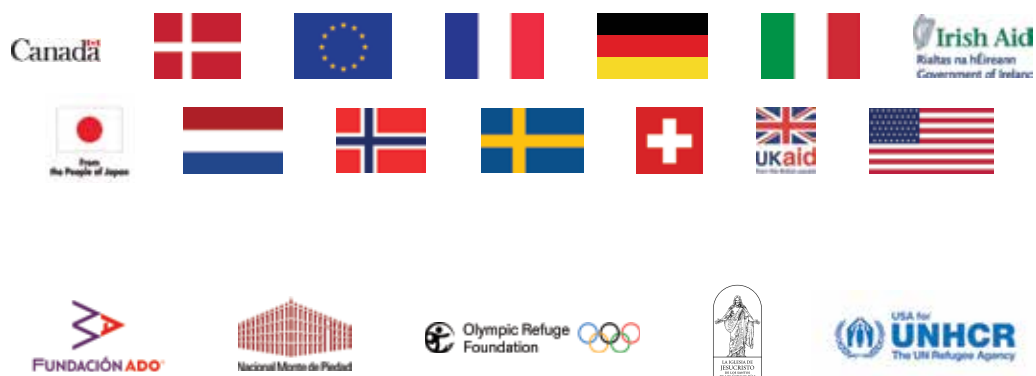
The Law on Citizenship and its regulation was under revision during 2019 and UNHCR was invited to share its comments to the existing provisions and recommendations for improving access to naturalization for refugees. UNHCR pointed out procedural constraints, such a passport or travel document requirement and a selective implementation of the exemption from the naturalization test to recognised refugees only and not to the beneficiaries of complementary protection.



World Refugee Day 2019. Arrangements at the Central Park of Palenque



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# 2019 Highlights UNHCR Mexico

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*Sport tournament "Soccer for peace": A peaceful coexistence activity organized by UNHCR and Acayucan and Oluta authorities to celebrate World Refugee Day.*

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