

**2020**

**Highlights**

**UNHCR**

**Mexico**



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**2020**  
**Highlights**  
**UNHCR**  
**Mexico**

# Foreword

The calamity that befell humanity due to COVID-19 had a major impact on the dynamics of forced displacement and migration in Mexico and the region in 2020. UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, made major adjustments to its programme to deal with the impact of the pandemic and to prepare for the inevitable increase in asylum claims once movement restrictions in Central America were loosened. It was therefore a year of major disruption but also of continuity, as the long-term trend in increased asylum claims remained.

In March 2020, Mexico declared a state of emergency due to COVID-19. Population movements from Central America decreased due to travel restrictions there. Mexico declared registration of asylum claims an essential activity and the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR) remained open. UNHCR supported COMAR to partially transition to remote processing. Additional technical advice and support were provided to simplify processing, leading to a rise in the number of claims resolved.

Under its global commitment to stay and deliver, UNHCR continued to operate. Where possible, activities such as registration were conducted remotely. Relocations to support local integration were suspended but later resumed under a health protocol developed with WHO. Work with shelters was stepped up to assist them to limit public health risks while continuing to function.

Mexico embarked on a major overhaul of its public health system and, as pledged in the Global Refugee Forum in 2019, new legislation guaranteed access of asylum-seekers and refugees to public health services. To support host communities, UNHCR stepped up support to public hospitals,

including delivery of auxiliary ventilators and personal protective equipment in an initiative by the Foreign Ministry together with national and local health authorities.

The root causes of forced displacement in the region remained and UNHCR prepared for an increase in new arrivals in 2021. The Office increased the number of contractors seconded to COMAR. Additional support to child protection authorities was foreseen due to legal reforms which enhanced protection of asylum-seeking children by stipulating they not be subject to detention.

The Office increased the capacity of the local integration programme and was ready to substantially boost the number of beneficiaries. The National Migration Institute streamlined procedures for the issuance of identity documents. UNHCR further expanded its footprint by establishing new offices in Palenque, Guadalajara and Ciudad Juarez and bolstering the protection teams in northern Mexico.

In 2021, key priorities include expanding the number of banks which open accounts for refugees and working with development actors to enhance education and health care in key refugee-hosting locations in southern Mexico.



**Mark Manly**  
Representative  
May 2021



*Construction of the first shelter for refugees and asylum-seekers in Mexico, financed by UNHCR and operated by our partner Hospitalidad y Solidaridad, in Tapachula. The shelter can accommodate 300 people. Built with recycled materials to reduce its environmental impact, it also has solar panels and a small garden to grow food.*

# 2020 operational context and UNHCR response

The rapid growth in asylum claims in Mexico that we saw in 2019 continued in the first quarter of 2020 and posed multiple challenges to the national asylum system, from the registration of the claims to adjudication. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the situation, even if the movement restrictions in Central America led to a substantial drop in the number of new arrivals to Mexico. As of 1 April, Mexico declared a national health emergency, and non-essential activities in the public, private and social sectors were suspended. However, access to the asylum system remained

open and the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance, COMAR, continued registering new asylum claims, even as the legally mandated processing time limits were suspended due to the pandemic. In addition to registering new claims, COMAR was able to process cases remotely, and the data show a substantial increase in its processing capacity. UNHCR, also stepped up to the challenge, using innovative help lines and web-based systems to carry out remote registration and interviews for protection services and humanitarian assistance.



*UNHCR staff installing Refugee Housing Units (RHU) in Tamaulipas where local health authorities sought to strengthen medical care for COVID-19 patients.*

In 2020, COMAR registered 41,303 new asylum claims. The first quarter of the year represented 42 per cent of all asylum applications, while the second and third quarters saw sharp decreases, with 8 per cent and 17 per cent of the total respectively. The figures rose again in the last quarter of 2020 (33 per cent of all claims during the year). Breaking down the figures by sex and age groups revealed changes from the previous year: while in 2019 adults and children represented 75 per cent and 25 per cent respectively, in 2020 this distribution was 81 per cent and 19 per cent. During the second and

third quarters – when restrictions on movement in Central America were greatest – the proportion of children on the move decreased significantly. Likewise, women, girls and female adolescents accounted for 38 per cent, compared to 42 per cent in 2019. This suggests that fewer were able to move during the pandemic.

COVID-19 impacted the Mexican economy and limited employment opportunities for refugees. Movement restrictions, supply chain disruptions, closure of businesses, and suspension of new



recruitment all impacted our relocation, job placement and local integration programmes. Some refugees, who had been successfully matched with jobs in the formal economy in the previous four years, reported finding themselves without work, and often in financial distress. Likewise, many newly arrived asylum seekers struggled to meet their basic needs. COVID-19 also affected reception conditions, with many shelters closing or limiting their capacity.

UNHCR adapted its cash assistance programme to expand its scope, and to include refugees who were already self-sufficient, but who – due to the impact of the pandemic – required additional assistance. We also provided cleaning materials and personal

protective equipment (PPE) to shelters so that they could continue to operate while observing sanitary protocols. Finally, UNHCR monitored the dynamics of local labour markets and decided to resume its relocation programme once state-level Ministries of Labour and private sector partners began to report an increase in job openings in September. A protocol was designed jointly with the World Health Organization (WHO) to mitigate any health risks.

During 2020 UNHCR and partners made major progress in strengthening legal protections for those forced to flee. Pursuant to commitments made in the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) and the Comprehensive Regional Framework on



©UNHCR/Iván García

*Donation of Personal Protection Equipment and RHU to health authorities in Tijuana.*



*UNHCR staff distribute cots in Tijuana as part of a drive to improve shelter conditions and prevent the spread of COVID-19. We also provided material and supplies to isolate patients.*

Protection and Solutions (more commonly known by its Spanish acronym MIRPS), in November 2020, Mexico adopted important reforms within its Migration Law and Refugee Law, to protect the rights of children in migratory contexts. These new measures include ending immigration detention for children and adolescents, which apply to all children on the move, whether they are accompanied or not. The reforms also reinforce the best interest principle in migration procedures and make children eligible for temporary humanitarian visas to prevent deportation until their best interests can be determined. UNHCR and other UN agencies have been working on a joint plan to complement the government's efforts and to address current implementation challenges, most importantly by enhancing the capacity of shelters and of the child protection authorities who are responsible for best interest determinations. Also pursuant to GRF and MIRPS commitments, the November 2019 reform of the national health system has provided for unrestricted access of asylum seekers and refugees to public health services in Mexico. Our support to the health authorities in the principal hosting communities turned out to be particularly pertinent during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, amendments to the Law on Population were adopted by the Chamber of Deputies, facilitating access of asylum seekers and refugees to documentation. In December 2020, the Mexican Congress adopted a reform to Mexican Political Constitution (Article 30), regarding the acquisition of Mexican nationality. This constitutional measure will prevent cases of statelessness.

Finally, the Executive and Legislative branches made significant progress on development of the legal framework to address internal displacement. In September 2020, a legislative proposal on internally displaced people (IDPs) was approved by the Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of Mexico's Congress and other proposals were pending before the Senate. UNHCR has provided technical assistance to both branches of government. The proposals must be reviewed by the Senate.

MIRPS, a regional initiative to better address forced displacement in and from Central America, also made strides during the year. An inter-ministerial working group was established to enhance labour market inclusion, access to health, education,

identity and documentation. In coordination with the relevant Ministries, UNHCR launched two interagency consultancies to map institutional capacities in the public health and education sectors in host communities in Chiapas and Tabasco, in southern Mexico. A new mechanism was also agreed with the Government of Mexico to jointly track and monitor progress towards the implementation of GRF pledges. Likewise, UNHCR established an internal mechanism to facilitate adequate reporting by private sector and civil society organizations. Among those, the BanCoppel pledge on financial inclusion was successfully realised, as the bank adjusted internal systems to offer financial products – in particular bank accounts – for refugees and asylum seekers.

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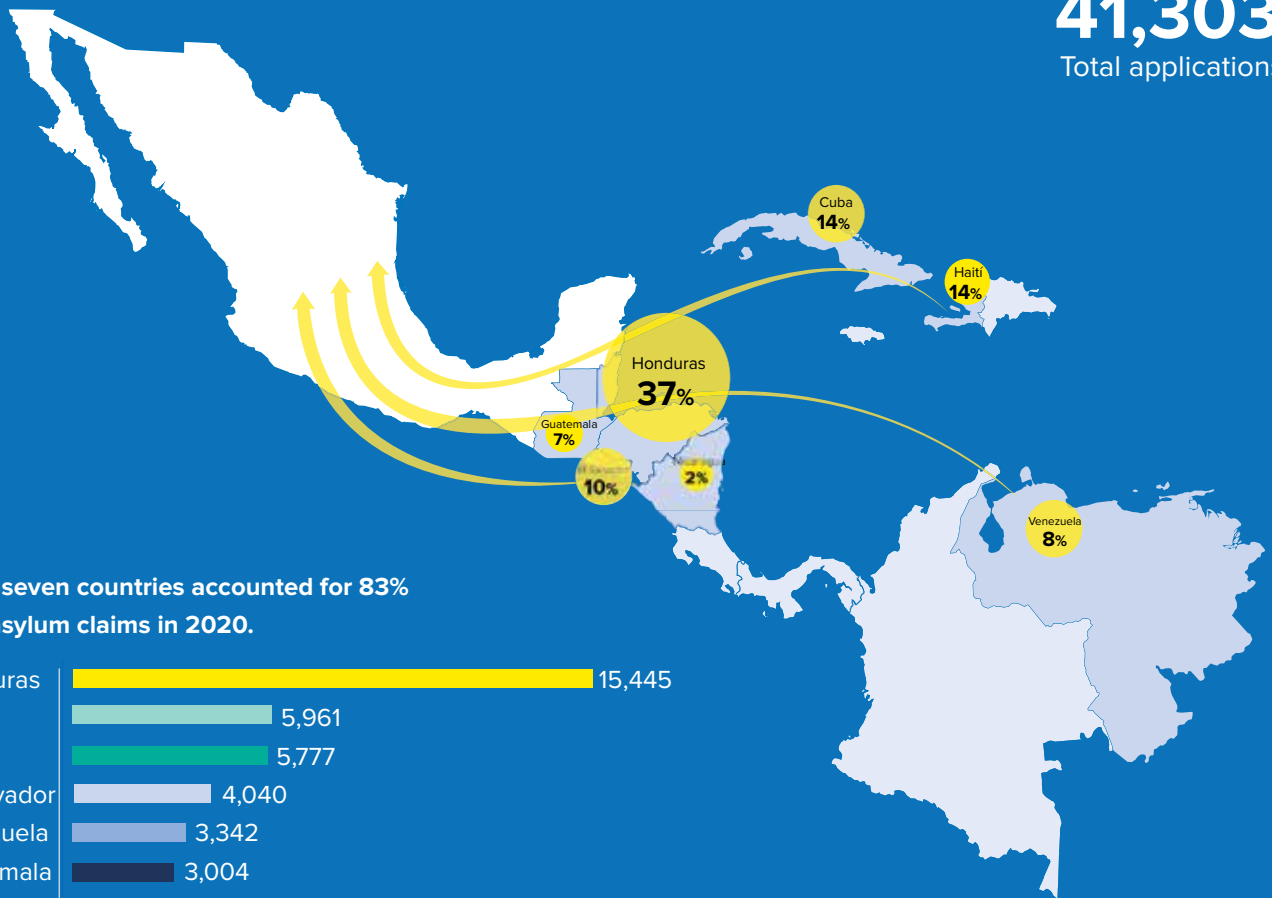


*UNHCR Representative Mark Manly inaugurates the refurbished Territorio Joven project in Tapachula. Supported by municipal authorities, it provides a space where young refugees and local people can interact peacefully.*

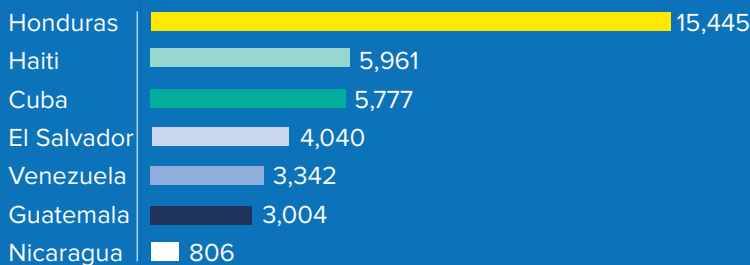
# UNHCR Mexico at a glance

## New asylum applications in 2020

**41,303**  
Total applications



These seven countries accounted for 83% of all asylum claims in 2020.



## Population Distribution:



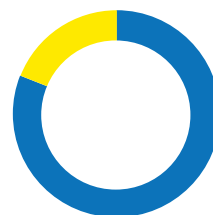
FEMALE **38%**



MALE **62%**

**19%**  
CHILDREN &  
ADOLESCENTS

**81%**  
ADULTS



## COMAR

**146**

**ADDITIONAL STAFF**  
provided to COMAR to  
increase its registration  
and processing capacity

## UNHCR Registration and assistance:



**28,264**

### REFUGEES AND ASYLUM SEEKERS

registered with UNHCR and received individualised protection and assistance



**59,627**

individuals assisted through the national UNHCR Help Desk

## Reception conditions



**105** in **52**  
SHELTERS LOCATIONS

supported with information on Covid-19 prevention, PPE, cleaning materials and food.

**300**

### NEW SPACES (BEDS)

for asylum-seekers and refugees established as a result of inauguration of Hospitalidad y Solidaridad shelter in Tapachula.

## Assistance to vulnerable groups

**16,788**

especially vulnerable asylum seekers identified and assisted by UNHCR

**2,622**

ASYLUM SEEKERS received individualised counselling

## CBI



**53,624**

ASYLUM SEEKERS and refugees received cash assistance

## Legal aid



**52,006**

asylum seekers in Mexico and US received legal assistance



**29,778**

asylum seekers received individualised legal counselling



**8,260**

asylum seekers received legal representation

### NETWORK OF

**76** lawyers and  
**32** paralegals

PROVIDED LEGAL AID

## COVID 19 Response

**496,560** items of Personal Protective Equipment delivered to public hospitals in South (Chiapas, Veracruz and Tabasco) and North Mexico (Baja California and Tamaulipas).



**20** auxiliary ventilators delivered to public hospitals in Chiapas



**19** Refugee Housing Units installed for isolation in hospitals in Chiapas, Tabasco and Veracruz.



**83** portable sinks installed in shelters and public spaces (public buildings, markets, etc).



**126** refugee health professionals identified to work in public health system, **21** successfully supported in revalidating their diplomas and **16** employed by the public health system



## Response to Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV)

**628** survivors of SGBV provided with support



**121** women at-risk relocated to safe spaces



**1,571**

people trained in prevention and response to SGBV, Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) and Age, Gender and Diversity (AGD) mainstreaming

## Release from Immigration Detention:

**3,262** asylum-seekers asylum seekers were released from detention and received assistance from UNHCR



## Child protection

**10,533** children benefited from psychological and emergency education activities in child-friendly spaces established in shelters



**1,024**

representatives of Child Protection Authorities and other government institutions, civil society organizations, UNHCR Field Offices and partners trained in refugee child protection



**312**

unaccompanied and separated children and children at risk supported with case management before Child Protection Authorities

# Education



**4,150**

**ASYLUM SEEKERS AND  
REFUGEE CHILDREN**  
supported with school  
enrolment



**2,038**

**REFUGEES**  
enrolled in vocational  
training

**88,000**  
KITS

with school supplies donated  
to families in key host  
communities in Chiapas,  
Tabasco, Oaxaca, Veracruz  
and Baja California

# Economic inclusion



**2,306**

**RELOCATED**  
from the South to the centre  
and North of Mexico

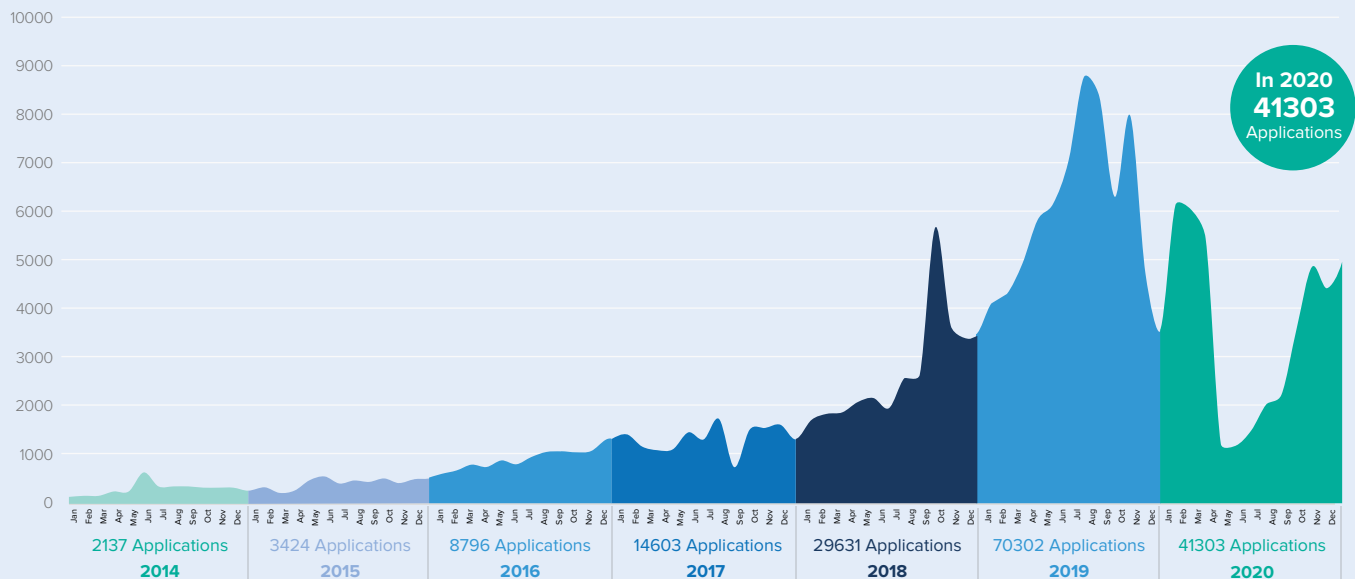
**7,349**

**PERSONS SUPPORTED  
IN OBTAINING RESIDENCE  
PERMITS**  
to allow them to access  
formal employment

**6**

**NEW LOCAL  
INTEGRATION PROJECTS**  
launched in 2020 (Puebla,  
Querétaro, Guanajuato,  
San Luis Potosi,  
Aguascalientes  
and Quintana Roo)

# New Asylum Applications in Mexico Monthly Evolution I 2014 - 2020





UNHCR Deputy Representative Giovanni Lepri, and Government Secretary Felipe Peñate inaugurate field offices in Palenque.

©UNHCR/Pierre-Marc Rene

## Working with others

In 2020, UNHCR continued expanding partnerships. The Office worked with a growing number of stakeholders, including: public institutions, at both federal and state level, civil society and faith-based organizations, as well as UN Agencies and other international organizations.

UNHCR maintained close cooperation with the Government of Mexico, including the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, COMAR, our counterpart

on refugee affairs, the National Migration Institute (INM), the National System for Integral Family Development (DIF), and Child Protection Authorities (CPA), the Public Defender's Office, ministries of Labour and Social Welfare, among many others. We saw further consolidation of the inter-ministerial working group on inclusion and integration of refugees set up with COMAR, which became an important platform for coordination between government entities, UN agencies and



development actors. Four technical sub-groups were set-up, focusing on access to employment (chaired by the Ministry of Labour), access to education (chaired by the Ministry of Education), access to Health (chaired by the Ministry of Public Health), as well as identity and documentation (chaired by the Civil Registry).

By the end of 2020, UNHCR had signed 33 Partnership Agreements (26 with local organizations and seven with international organizations), implementing activities to protect and find solutions for our people of concern.

In 2020, UNHCR Mexico further strengthened protection coordination activities and related capacity building. UNHCR led or participated in a range of interagency platforms, namely:

1) National Protection Working Group (PWG) attended by 22 different actors, and its sub-groups on legal affairs, and SGBV and migration. In 2020, in the framework of the PWG, a new Child

Protection subgroup was established by UNHCR and UNICEF to coordinate efforts to protect child refugees, migrants and asylum-seekers. The PWG led by UNHCR functions at the national and state level, including in Tapachula, Tenosique, Palenque, Acayucan, Monterrey, Matamoros, Ciudad Juarez and Tijuana.

2) Cash Working Group of UN agencies and international organizations which provide humanitarian cash assistance in Mexico, with an objective to establish a coherent approach and avoid duplication.

3) Shelter Working Group, through which UNHCR, IOM, UNICEF and ICRC coordinate support provided to shelters. This was of particular importance in 2020 as the Group mapped shelter needs and subsequently provided a timely response to the pandemic through targeted information, donations of cleaning supplies and PPE. Dedicated working groups were established in Tijuana, Matamoros and Tapachula among others.

© Distrito Sanitario VII Tapachula/ Elmer Vega Aceituno



© Distrito Sanitario VII Tapachula/ Elmer Vega Aceituno



*Health workers in Tapachula use PPE donated by UNHCR.*

## Funding

In 2020, UNHCR received a total of US\$54.1 million in contributions from public and private donors. The distribution of the income sources in the 2020 budget, as presented in the graphic below, shows not only the importance of the United States' contribution, but also an increasing diversification of support by other donors. Three new multiannual projects funded by the European Union began in 2020 and the joint UNHCR and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH (GIZ) multiannual project received a significant top-up from the German Development Ministry.

We were able to expand Private Partnership and Philanthropy relationships as companies and foundations responded to calls for COVID-19 prevention and economic reactivation. In total, more than US\$275,000 was raised for UNHCR Mexico direct implementation. UNHCR attracted a wide range of donors, from local NGOs to international foundations.

The contributions received allowed for a substantial expansion of the operation, both in terms of enlarging the scope of programmes such as legal aid, improvement of reception conditions, local integration, Cash Based Interventions and education to help people of concern, as well as extending UNHCR's physical presence to a total of 17 locations across the country. It also allowed us to respond swiftly to the COVID-19 pandemic and implement preventive measures.

Involving those working in the development sector in our programmes remains a challenge. More needs to be done to familiarize development actors with the deep-rooted challenges faced by southern Mexico's health and education sectors, in particular in refugee-receiving communities. The forging of partnerships with government ministries as well as groundwork carried out through the MIRPS process and two interagency consultancies have paved the way for further engagement in this area.

### Contributions to UNHCR Mexico in 2020



# COVID-19 RESPONSE

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, UNHCR committed to “stay and deliver” protection and assistance to the people in our care. The Mexico Operation rapidly adjusted the way we work so that we could continue with critical activities, when necessary by remote means. We identified four priorities, ensuring that all measures taken are aligned with the rights and needs of refugees and host communities:

- Strengthening protection space, safeguarding access to the asylum system, ensuring adequate standards for remote interviewing, registration, and remote information, as well as service provision and community engagement.
- Scaling up cash assistance programmes for the most vulnerable refugee families experiencing economic shocks and responding to specific needs through additional top-ups and rapid assistance.
- Improving shelter preparedness to prevent COVID19 transmission by supporting them with additional staff, training, information material, isolation tents, the provision of multiple months’ supplies of hygiene and sanitation items, as well as dignity kits for women and girls to ensure menstrual hygiene.
- Supporting municipal hospitals with personal protective and medical equipment to ensure that health attention continues to benefit not just the people in UNHCR’s care but also host communities.

To achieve these objectives, we worked with 27 partners and, indirectly, with 80 more local organizations in 52 locations in 18 states. UNHCR also closely collaborated with other UN agencies and international organizations, including IOM, UNICEF and WHO. We have identified 126 refugee health professionals to work in public health system, 21 were successfully supported in revalidating their diplomas and 16 were employed by the public health system.

©Pan de Vida/ Father Ismael Martínez



©Pan de Vida/ Father Ismael Martínez



*Health workers at the Pan de Vida shelter in Ciudad Juarez test personal PPE donated by UNHCR to curb COVID-19 transmission.*

UNHCR donated sanitary materials and personal protective and medical equipment to health authorities in localities with large asylum seeking and refugee populations both in the southern states of Chiapas, Tabasco and Veracruz, and selected municipalities in Northern Mexico: Tijuana, Mexicali, and Matamoros. The needs were determined together with PAHO/WHO, the federal Health Institute for Well-being (INSABI) and local health jurisdictions and hospitals. Through a health task force, UNHCR ensured a prompt response to any indications of saturation of local health systems and coordinated targeted support. In total, with an investment of US\$383,280 (7.7 million pesos), UNHCR delivered nearly half-a-million PPE items to public hospitals in the south and north of the country, including: 8,100 face shields, 9,200 medical goggles, 31,930 surgical gowns, 140,500 surgical

masks, 30,200 FFP2 masks (equivalent to N95), 6,500 litres of alcohol gel and 114,600 nitrile gloves.

In coordination with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (SRE) and the Mexican Foundation for Health (FUNSALUD), we provided 20 auxiliary ventilators to the Sanitary District VII of Chiapas, for use in hospitals in Tapachula, Mapastepec and Huixtla. Additionally, we distributed 120 accessory kits for the treatment of COVID-19 patients in those locations. UNHCR also installed 83 portable sinks in shelters and public spaces – such as public buildings and markets – and 19 Refugee Housing Units (RHU) to establish observation and isolation spaces in public hospitals in Chiapas, Tabasco and Tamaulipas. The Units were developed in collaboration with the IKEA Foundation as an innovative design for more durable shelter.



© UNHCR/Rene Arguellez

*Head of UNHCR field office in Tijuana Elizabeth McMunn, donating RHU. UNHCR provided municipal hospitals with medical equipment to support care for both refugees and the local communities hosting them.*

### Refugee doctors join health personnel facing the pandemic in Mexico:

Rosmary, a medical internist from Venezuela, arrived in Mexico with her three-year-old daughter in December 2019. At the airport, she was about to be returned to Bogotá, from where her flight left, but she knew she had the right to request asylum. Her friend Iriam, a Venezuelan refugee and surgeon, had arrived in Mexico in March 2018, with her husband and daughter. At the beginning, while revalidating her studies, she worked in a restaurant. After receiving her personal identity number (CURP) and professional license she took a job in a pharmacy.

The outbreak of COVID-19 led the Government to open recruitment for health professionals to help coping with the pandemic. Iriam, who had all her documents, was hired at the Enrique Cabrera Hospital. She convinced Rosmary to submit her application too, even though she was still waiting for her professional license after having revalidated her studies. After much thought, Rosmary decided to apply and in less than a week, she had been assigned to the Tláhuac General Hospital, also in Mexico City.

With UNHCR's support, 16 refugee and asylum-seeker health professionals have been hired by public and private hospitals across the country. Thirteen of them provide their services in COVID-19 clinics in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Palenque, Ocosingo, Reforma, Comitán and Venustiano Carranza, two in Mexico City and one in Aguascalientes. In Tapachula, UNHCR hired a doctor to provide medical care to refugees and asylum seekers at the Hotel San Agustín shelter – a move that helped to ease the demand on local health authorities.



*Rosmary Vieras, a Venezuelan refugee and doctor, provides medical attention at a hospital in Mexico City.*

UNHCR Mexico activated a dedicated coronavirus web page and our national Help Desk provided orientation on COVID-19 prevention measures, rights, regularization procedures and access to services. We have also extensively used social media to raise awareness about COVID-19 and prevent xenophobic, anti-migrant narratives and potential discriminatory behaviour.



*A man walks through a shelter for refugees and asylum-seekers in Tapachula. UNHCR set up the shelter to meet the needs of a growing number of asylum-seekers. UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi visited the facility in 2019.*

# Ensuring access to protection & protection responses

Ensuring that people are safe is our priority. In 2020, UNHCR significantly scaled up its operations in Mexico to ensure asylum seekers and refugees receive the protection and help they need. This included operational support to COMAR, through the secondment of 146 staff members, as well as providing technical support and training. Due to COVID-19, UNHCR shifted its registration processing in 18 locations to remote modalities. Improved remote interviewing methodologies allowed UNHCR and partners to register nearly 30,000 people of

concern, 60 per cent of whom received referral to services, shelter or cash assistance, depending on their specific needs. The approval of legal reforms to end the detention of child migrants, asylum seekers and refugees considerably strengthened our ability to protect children, as did the rollout of standard operating procedures and referral pathways to prevent and respond to Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV). These included measures to provide remote services to survivors during the pandemic, when face-to-face contact was limited.

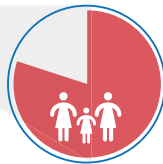
Main achievements included keeping UNHCR core protection activities running despite COVID-19; ongoing registration and processing of asylum claims; and maintaining access to humanitarian assistance programs. Mexico remained engaged with the Regional Asylum Capacity Building Initiative (RACBI)

with Canada and the USA. Mexico and Canada have shared their collaboration within the Asylum Capacity Support Group (ACSG) global platform, which was recently launched. The national protection working group and its legal protection, and migration and SGBV subgroups were formally established.

## 20 CASES submitted for resettlement to third countries

COMPRISING  
**59**  
PEOPLE

**80%**



cases involved women and girls at risk  
**47 people**

**15%**



legal and physical protection needs  
**9 people**

**5%**



survivors of violence and torture  
**3 people**

**24**

PEOPLE

were submitted under emergency priority

**40%**

**23**

PEOPLE

were submitted under urgent priority

**40%**

**12**

PEOPLE

were submitted under normal priority

**20%**





*UNHCR staff distributing hygiene and cleaning supplies at the Ejercito de Salvacion shelter in Tijuana.*

## Access to asylum

Although COVID-19 impacted administrative procedures in Mexico, access to asylum was declared an essential service by the Government and COMAR offices nationwide stayed open to receive new asylum claims. UNHCR procured smartphones and laptops and provided technical recommendations on refugee status determination remote interviewing, identifying potential risks and establishing mitigation measures and procedural safeguards. Remote interviews were widely taken up, leaving face-to-face interviews in COMAR offices for the most vulnerable and urgent cases.

In late 2020, COMAR and UNHCR, launched an assessment of the legal aspects of remote interviewing through videoconferencing to improve the quality and integrity of the process, and developed a manual for eligibility officers to adopt this new way of working. In 2021, COMAR will look into possible partnerships with NGOs and public institutions to identify safe spaces for

asylum seekers to connect to their video interview. Building on the Quality Asylum Initiative, or QAI, recommendations from 2019, COMAR continued implementing simplified procedures, based on the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, which has significantly reduced the time needed for interviewing and assessing each case.

At the beginning of 2020, COMAR also launched a pilot project in Mexico City which merged registration and determination procedures for the most vulnerable asylum seekers. The UNHCR QAI team provided profiling tools and accompanied the triage and interview phase, allowing asylum seekers to get registered and interviewed on the same day, while expecting a notification of a decision about 20 days later. Rejected cases were redirected for regular processing. Due to the pandemic, the pilot project was suspended in March and resumed in October 2020. A month later, the pilot project was extended to Tapachula.

© Keith Dannemiller



*Guatemalan refugees in Chiapas, Mexico 1991-1993. Cienegüitas Camp.*

© Keith Dannemiller



### **Guatemalan refugees in Mexico.**

As a result of the armed conflicts in Guatemala during the 1980s, various indigenous groups fled the violence and sought asylum in Chiapas. That exodus to Mexico led to the creation of the COMAR, which in 2020 celebrated its 40th anniversary.

In its first official intervention in Mexico, UNHCR acquired land on which the first refugee communities took shape – Nueva Libertad – located in the municipality of La Trinidad. “UNHCR began to promote visits from donors from different countries, to obtain funds and be able to support the refugees who stayed in Chiapas; we had visits from consultants or representatives and my job was to transfer them from the Tuxtla Gutiérrez airport to Comitán and then take them on visits to the camps”, says Julio López, who has worked for UNHCR since 1989 and is currently assigned to the Tapachula office.

On the 8 March we celebrated the First Festival of the Memory of Nueva Libertad, with the participation of anthropologist Verónica Ruíz and the photographer Keith Dannemiller and various generations of residents of the community.

## **Working with COMAR**

In July 2020, UNHCR and COMAR adopted a joint Work Plan for 2020 to ensure access to status determination procedures and to support COMAR’s presence in regions where there are high numbers of people seeking international protection. The

Plan sought to strengthen COMAR’s operational capacity, through support for its technical capacity, staffing, office infrastructure and equipment. Three full-time technical advisers provided by UNHCR worked with COMAR throughout the year.

Under the Plan, several key projects started in 2020, such as verification and digitization of all physical files of COMAR. UNHCR and COMAR also began a review of COMAR's identity and case management ecosystem and cooperated in the development of a new database with an age, gender and diversity focus. The ultimate objective is to ensure full digitization of COMAR's processes, including an interoperability scheme with the civil registry (RENAPO).

Seven working groups were established, all led by COMAR, to resolve recurrent issues and boost efficiency in key areas. Special efforts were made to prepare for a scenario in which there are many more asylum claims, while risks from COVID-19 remain high.

## Legal aid

In 2020, nearly 30,000 people of concern received individual legal counselling, out of whom more than 6,000 obtained legal representation with the support of an extended network of 76 lawyers and 32 paralegals. The availability of free legal aid was also expanded with a new pro-bono ally – Sánchez-Devanny, a Mexico City-based law firm – entering the network of law firms offering guidance and counselling to asylum seekers and refugees. The Public Defender's Office continued to play a key role in providing legal representation.

COVID-19 related restrictions had a major impact on the Release from Detention Program, and UNHCR and its partners' access to detention centres. During 2020, we conducted 245 visits to migration detention centres to inform over 11,000 people of their right to seek asylum. 1,755 asylum seekers received legal representation while in detention and 3,262 asylum-seekers were released from immigration facilities, among

them 523 children. The National Commission on Human Rights issued a recommendation regarding the violation of rights of people of concern in detention.

A legal aid protection group was established in September and has been working to coordinate interventions related to access to territory, non-detention and documentation. Two national virtual workshops for lawyers and paralegals were held to develop a common strategy, offer guidance on how to inform and assist people of concern and ensure all legal aid providers function as a network. Two additional virtual trainings were delivered in collaboration with pro-bono allies on appeal procedures with a focus on strengthening legal partners' technical capabilities. Additionally, a Manual for Legal Aid Providers was finalised which provides tools and guidelines to assist legal aid providers in offering guidance and counselling to asylum seekers and refugees.

## Community Based Protection

In 2020, UNHCR focused on strengthening its community engagement strategy by making full use of available mechanisms for participation and communication with affected populations. Our objective is to promote empowered, participative, informed, and organized communities. To better ensure accountability, UNHCR has also updated its Community Based Complaint Mechanism (CBCM) and the Methodological Guidance for participatory assessments.

Between February and March, UNHCR carried out participatory assessments in 10 locations: Mexico City, Monterrey, Guadalajara, Mexicali, Puebla, Acayucan, Veracruz, Coatzacoalcos, Ixtepec and Huatulco. More than 300 people took part, including children, adolescents, LGBTI, people with disabilities and the elderly, who are considered vulnerable. The main topics researched were: access to territory and asylum procedures, profiles of vulnerable people, integration opportunities and support to host communities. Additionally, we consulted and engaged with over 7,000 people of concern through other participatory mechanisms (outreach through communication with community programme, cash assistance post distribution monitoring and individual interviews in the context of the local integration program).

UNHCR expanded its communication channels to ensure continued engagement with key communities. Four animations and 12 videos were produced to inform about adaptations in our working methods and support measures in the context

of COVID-19, changes in asylum procedures and COVID-19 prevention. The UNHCR national Help Desk was reinforced, with measures including the use of a new WhatsApp platform. Throughout 2020, the Help Desk resolved 59,627 queries received by email, messaging and telephone calls, and provided information on COVID-19 prevention measures, rights, regularization procedures and access to services. Facebook El Jaguar posts reached over two million visits in the main areas where refugees are present, a growth of 113 per cent compared to 2019. Our Help webpage became available in English, French and Creole, and included audios for the visually impaired and those with literacy issues.

To respond to needs in the North of Mexico, where large numbers of people became stranded after they were returned from the United States under the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) or “Remain in Mexico” program, we prepared additional information products on documentation and US asylum procedures, which we delivered in shelters and among civil society groups working with our people of concern, as well as directly to the asylum seekers themselves. Our partner Casa de Teatro produced two plays, one on asylum procedure in Mexico, and the other focusing on the situation in the northern border and explaining who a refugee is. The plays were performed in seven cities and 12 locations, attended by over 540 spectators.

Finally, with the support of the UNHCR Innovation Service, UNHCR Mexico launched the first stage of a project that aims to develop a misinformation

debunking system based on a network of young refugees and local students. Twenty people participated in five sessions, three of which were focused on building digital capacities, and expressed their interests in continuing in the network. The project is being implemented with our partner Programa Casa Refugiados.

## Child Protection

In 2020, UNHCR provided continuous technical assistance and capacity-building activities for Child Protection Authorities (CPA) and other government institutions, civil society organizations and UNHCR partners, focusing on the identification of children in need of international protection, access to asylum, best interest determination, alternative care arrangements, family reunification and case management for children of concern. 1,024 representatives of authorities and civil society were trained in refugee child protection.

UNHCR continued to support government efforts to implement the national interinstitutional referral pathway for the protection of children on the move, approved in 2019 by the Commission for the Protection of Migrant and Refugee Children of the National Comprehensive Child Protection

System (SIPINNA). A total of 312 unaccompanied and separated children and children at risk were supported with case management before Child Protection Authorities. Within the National PWG, UNHCR and UNICEF established a joint Child Protection ad-hoc group involving other UN agencies, international organizations and local NGOs to discuss issues related to the protection of asylum-seeking, refugee and migrant children, and joint efforts to find concrete solutions for them.

UNHCR also partnered with Save the Children to conduct case management and implemented virtual and in-person recreational, psychosocial and emergency education activities for over 10,000 children in 10 shelters in Baja California, Chihuahua and Tamaulipas.



*A young Salvadoran girl holds up a picture she coloured in at a UNHCR registration centre in southern Mexico.*

©Lucero de Añva



*Children painting Bolay masks after a book reading with volunteers at a shelter in Ciudad Juarez.*

©Lucero de Añva



©UNHCR/Pierre-Marc Rene



*UNHCR staff playing with children and adolescents during recreational-educative activities in Tapachula.*

To advocate for the end of child detention and promote alternative care arrangements for unaccompanied children, UNHCR provided technical assistance to DIF in Tenosique, Tabasco, for the development of a community-based public shelter for unaccompanied refugee, migrant and local children. We also partnered with NGO Juconi to implement a foster care pilot programme in Puebla for unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee children, the first of its kind in Mexico. Two children were placed in the programme in December and three more were to be included in the first quarter of 2021. UNHCR also partnered with Covenant House Mexico and SOS Children’s Villages to provide residential care for unaccompanied children when family reunification is not possible.

In November 2020, following years of advocacy efforts from NGOs, UNHCR and other UN agencies, the Mexican government published a reform to bring Refugee and Migration Laws into alignment with the General Law on the Rights of Children, which represented a major achievement to ensure the full protection of asylum-seeking, refugee and migrant children in the country. The most relevant changes include: the prohibition of child detention (including families with children); placing the best interests of the child at the centre of every decision involving children on the move, and access to temporary immigration status for every child in order to prevent refoulement while CPA process their cases. UNHCR, along with UNICEF and IOM, developed a joint action plan to support the Mexican government with the implementation of the reform in 2021. A European Union-funded UNICEF-UNHCR project the “EU global promotion of best practices for children in migration” will play an important role in supporting the process.

## Preventing and responding to Gender Based Violence

In 2020, UNHCR rolled out new guidelines for response to Gender Based Violence, as well as guidelines for response to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse and Sexual Misconduct. We undertook comprehensive training on these guidelines with the specialized gender-based violence (GBV) focal points and with our specialized GBV partners. This training helped us strengthen GBV case management and response standards, and also clarified key concepts of the new UNHCR Policy on Prevention, Risk Mitigation and Response to GBV published in October 2020.

@UNHCR/Markel Redondo



*Electra, an LGBTI refugee from Honduras, hangs up a rainbow flag at the LGBTI module at La 72 migrant shelter in Tenosique, Tabasco, Mexico.*

Throughout 2020, UNHCR provided training on SGBV prevention, response and PSEA and Age, Gender and Diversity (AGD) mainstreaming, to 1,571 UNHCR staff-members, UNHCR partners, and government counterparts including COMAR staff. Referral pathways were reviewed and targeted materials on gender violence in lockdown were provided to over 100 shelters across the country. Specialized partners (HIAS, ALPAZ and ICR) assisted 628 survivors in the North of Mexico, while Medicos del Mundo begun mapping of available services in the South, in preparation for the rollout of case management in 2021. UNHCR relocated 121 women, girls and LGBTI people at risk of SGBV.

The Office also formally established the Protection Sub-working Group on Migration and SGBV. A Sub-working Group on strengthening Protection from PSEA was also formally established in July under the Interagency Working Group on Shelters. A webinar on PSEA for shelters, NGOs, and other key practitioners was organized and had over 390 participants. Its aim was to raise awareness about the cases of sexual exploitation and abuse committed by humanitarian workers against people of concern and to present the priority areas of prevention, reporting, assistance and research. With the leadership of UNHCR and together with IOM, UNICEF and Save the Children, the group produced a Code of Conduct for shelters which will be distributed as part of ongoing training in 2021. Targeted information materials were produced and distributed, including stickers and postcards for humanitarian worker with information about PSEA, and a short magazine *Nube Rebelde* – or *Rebel Cloud* – for people of concern with information about what harassment is, how to identify a violent situation and how to respond, listing organizations that offer aid and ways of making a complaint.

### Fleeing because of gender-based violence.

Sexual and gender based violence is one of the factors driving many women, adolescents and girls to seek safety in Mexico. Many come from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Violence disproportionately affects transgender women. Luna\*, a 35-year-old trans woman, from Honduras, hopes once and for all to be able to get out of the cycle of violence and persecution she has lived in since she was a child and to be able to find a new life in Mexico. “Since my family realized my identity, even when I was a child, they tried to change me. I have lived with a lot of violence for being who I am. As a teenager I suffered bullying from my brothers, uncles and other family members. They wanted to see if I would abandon my feelings of being a girl and not a boy. All this mistreatment hurt me and made me grateful that at least I was alive.”

For girls, adolescents and women affected by forced displacement, the risks of becoming victims of any type of violence increase due to unequal power relations and situations to which they are subjected, both in transit and at their destination. The risks of violence increase when factors of age, ethnicity, disability, as well as sexual orientation and gender identity are taken into account. In Mexico, SGBV is one of the grounds on which people can be recognized as refugees.



©UNHCR/Stephanie Galeana

*“Luna,” a survivor of gender-based violence in Honduras, shares her story with UNHCR.*



## Working with vulnerable people

During 2020, and as a response to COVID-19 public health restrictions, UNHCR moved its registration processing on-line. Together with our partners we registered 28,264 people of concern and provided them with targeted assistance. Of these, 16,788 were identified as vulnerable: people marginalized by COVID-19, people with disabilities, people with health problems, girls and boys at risk, seniors, pregnant women, survivors of sexual and gender-based violence and people released from migratory detention.

An increasing number of people with vulnerabilities with heightened protection risks led us also to establish an additional form of cash assistance to meet their needs. The new top-up, named *CBI Contingencia*, was provided to people of concern in locations where the epidemiological ‘traffic light’ was red and orange, indicating tighter restrictions and less economic activity. It was also disbursed

to asylum seekers released from detention but without access to shelters. The new top-up was also used to decongest overcrowded shelters in locations without reception alternatives, to provide assistance for asylum seekers from the high-risk groups, those with COVID-19 symptoms or already infected that needed quarantine; and those with aggravated specific protection needs as a result of the pandemic. From March to December, we identified 9,053 people in need: 3,738 girls and women, and 5,315 boys and men. Of this population, 7,953 people of concern were provided with the *CBI Contingencia*, for a total of US\$1.2 million.

Finally, we consolidated a network of 19 organizations providing psychosocial services. 2,662 people of concern received counselling, 444 people received psychological support and 64 people with psychiatric needs were referred to adequate services.



©Daniel Hernandez

Asylum seekers and refugees discuss their cases with local UNHCR staff in Puebla.



©Municipio de Solidaridad

UNHCR staff speaking with local authorities after opening the first shelter for people with protection needs in Solidaridad municipality, Quintana Roo.



Asylum seekers and refugees participate in activities at Casa del Migrante in Saltillo, Coahuila. They use PPE donated by UNHCR.

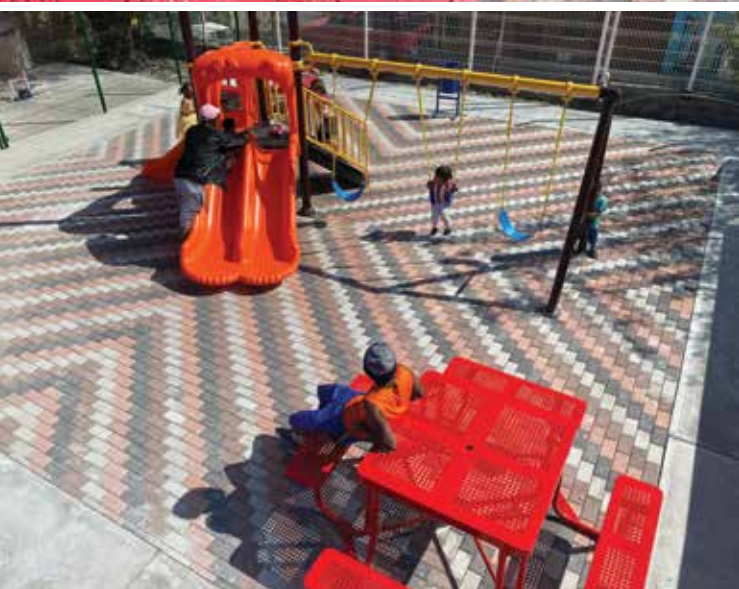
# Reception conditions and humanitarian assistance

## Shelters

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Mexico in March 2020, halted or led to reorientation of numerous shelter activities planned for the year. A rapid and coordinated reaction was needed to enhance shelter preparedness and establish a new sanitary regime. As a part of an interagency effort and in coordination with WHO, UNICEF, IOM and ICRC, UNHCR conducted monitoring in 105 shelters (64 in northern Mexico, 17 in Central Mexico and Mexico City, and 24 in southern Mexico), to follow up on conditions and urgent needs. An initial

distribution of PPE, antibacterial gel and cleaning/ disinfecting materials was undertaken between March and July, and a second one in November and December. To increase reception capacity during the emergency, UNHCR identified 1,023 hotel rooms and eight houses operated by Aldeas Infantiles SOS in Tijuana as alternatives for shelter and isolation space for the most vulnerable people. In collaboration with IOM, 13 large tents for isolation were distributed in six shelters in Southern and Central Mexico, adding to 27 other tents that we provided nationwide.

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*Integral care for asylum seekers and migrants is provided at Casa del Migrante, Saltillo, following upgrades.*

UNHCR facilitated a series of training webinars for shelters and hotels, jointly with WHO/PAHO and the Mexican federal public health authorities (COFEPRIS). These focused on building capacity in health risk prevention and management of spaces in reception areas. Information materials on the correct use of PPE were widely disseminated. More than 120 shelters also received the UNHCR Practical Guide for the Prevention and Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic in Shelters, which includes: guidance on physical distancing, protocols and health flow charts to prevent and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, and considerations for specific risk groups. Materials on gender-based violence in confinement situations and hand washing promotional materials for children (from Sesame Street) were also provided in conjunction with UNICEF and IOM. Additionally, 3,000 dignity kits – packs containing items like sanitary towels, bath soap, multiple pairs of underwear, detergent powder, a flashlight, toothpaste, a toothbrush, and a comb – were delivered to 50 shelters. Finally, in a joint effort with IOM and UNICEF, we set up a multimedia library for shelters, offering informative videos, emotional support, social activities and entertainment.

Beyond COVID-19 preparations, UNHCR carried out several refurbishment projects in shelters, among them the Hermanos en el Camino Shelter in Ixtepec, Oaxaca. The project included building a soccer and basketball court with a dome and an outdoor gym, rebuilding bathrooms, as well as installations of ventilation system and new windows in the men's area. As a part of the project, the Network of Migrants Defenders' Organisations (REDODEM) installed a rainwater collection system.

©UNHCR/Pierre-Marc Rene



*Facilities at Hospitalidad and Solidaridad, a UNHCR partner in Tapachula.*

#### **New shelter for refugees and asylum seekers in Tapachula.**

On 2 December, UNHCR and Hospitalidad y Solidaridad A.C. inaugurated in Tapachula (Chiapas), the first shelter in the country opened exclusively for refugees and asylum seekers. The shelter, whose construction was financed entirely by UNHCR, can house up to 300 people. Thanks to cooperation with other UN agencies and civil society organizations, it will offer a wide range of specialized services, such as legal aid, psychological counselling, medical attention, labour market orientation and recreational activities. The construction of the shelter and the organization of the facilities followed the UN sustainability criteria: solar panels and a rainwater collection system were installed, and the materials used allow air flow to provide natural ventilation. The shelter also has a garden to grow food for residents and raise their awareness of environmental issues.

©UNHCR/Pierre-Marc Rene



## Cash-based interventions (CBI)

Providing asylum seekers with cash continued to allow them to meet their basic needs in the first months after their arrival to Mexico during the asylum procedure and increase integration opportunities. In 2020, 18,174 individuals/9,871 households received Multi-Purpose Grants (MPG). In total, 53,624 people benefited from cash assistance, including emergency support in the context of the pandemic and support local integration. UNHCR's cash programmes amounted to US\$9,225,196.

Since November 2019, UNHCR Mexico has been targeting humanitarian assistance programmes using a scorecard, so that only vulnerable

households benefit from the grant. A part of aim of the shift was to discontinue blanket assistance. However, in 2020, we adjusted our processes to continue to provide cash to meet increased needs stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic. This included lowering the threshold of eligibility for MPG and creating new types of assistance to respond to more specific needs, including top-ups, funds for relocated refugees at risk of losing income, and support for distance-learning programmes.

In 2020, the operation launched a structured evaluation of its cash programme through monthly spot-check calls for a sample of 50 cases combined



©UNHCR/ Jesús Centeno

*UNHCR provides CBI to allow refugees and asylum seekers to meet their basic needs in the first months after their arrival to Mexico. Local staff in Nuevo Leon take a photo as evidence of the distribution.*



*UNHCR field staff from Monterrey provide attention to people in a remote area of Nuevo Leon.*

with Post-Distribution Monitoring (PDM) that was first carried out in the second quarter through telephone calls and then in the fourth quarter through a hybrid model of interviews on the phone and in person. Both PDMs confirmed over 70 per cent of the beneficiaries being able to cover all or most of their basic needs with over 90 per cent accessing required goods and services in the market. Programme satisfaction was very high and over 60 per cent of interviewed beneficiaries would have opted for the same assistance modality again. However, results also showed that people of concern continue to face challenges to meet their needs independently over the medium term and are

dependent on the assistance. This is due in large part to the lack of employment opportunities in the South, where the majority have to wait while their claims are adjudicated.

Despite the difficult context, we also gradually managed to migrate payment processes done through Excel and the SiVale platform to the more easily audited CashAssist online financial management tool. Establishment of a Cash Working Group, led by UNHCR and with the participation of other organizations delivering CBI in Mexico was another milestone, improving coordination and avoiding the duplication of assistance.



*A UNHCR reforestation initiative in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, seeks to improve the environment and strengthen ties with local authorities and residents.*



# Supporting host communities

At the beginning of the year, through a consultative process with UNHCR field offices and communities, we prioritized 35 peaceful coexistence projects for implementation during 2020. The outbreak of COVID-19 made us review this list and we prioritized support for the Mexican government's response to COVID-19 through donations of medical equipment for public hospitals in Chiapas, Tabasco, Veracruz and Oaxaca, benefitting the local population, including refugees and asylum seekers (details are included above, on page 19-20).

Other projects that UNHCR completed in 2020 included refurbishment of public spaces, primarily in the South of Mexico, frequented by both our people of concern and local communities. They included:

- Remodelling and renovation of the House of Culture and the Community Library in Tenosique
- Support with installing a water container in a community space in La Palma, Tenosique
- Renovation of a youth community centre belonging to the Youth Secretariat of the Tapachula City Council, as well as support with purchase of furniture and equipment
- Refurbishment of the Plazoleta de la Hermandad in Ixtepec
- Installation of 40 rubbish bins, together with community information campaigns in Tenosique
- Improvements to 10 public parks in Chiapas, Tabasco and Veracruz, and installation of prefabricated wooden kiosks in communities in northern Chiapas
- Installation of 131 solar street lights in Tapachula
- Installation of 17 ecological drinking fountains in Tapachula, Palenque and Tenosique
- We have also carried out a reforestation project at a community sports center in Matamoros, Tamaulipas.

In the last quarter of 2020, we also resumed work with school authorities in the South of Mexico to refurbish IT classrooms in 41 schools, including 33 classrooms in primary schools, six job training centres and one centre for adult learners, all in coordination with the Ministry of Education.



©UNHCR/Christian Cahuich

*Girls open school supplies packages in Palenque.*

#### **School supply packages donation, a way to encourage supportive host communities.**

In order to mitigate the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic on households in major host communities, at the beginning of the new school year, UNHCR distributed nearly 90,000 packs of school supplies to families in communities hosting refugees in the states of Chiapas, Tabasco, Oaxaca, Veracruz and Baja California. In Chiapas, in the cities of Tapachula, Ciudad Hidalgo on the border with Guatemala, and Palenque, the school kits were distributed in all public pre-schools, primary and secondary schools. The donation benefited both refugee and Mexican children. Each package consisted of items selected from the official list of supplies for each grade and included: pencils, notebooks, scissors, playdough, notepads, and a cotton tote bag. The delivery was intended to reduce the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and to ensure the attendance of girls and boys in schools. The donation was highly appreciated by both parents and school authorities, as these kits reduced some of the expenses of local families whose economic situation had been affected by the COVID-19. The project also sought to promote peaceful coexistence in key host communities.

# Rocking world refugee day in Mexico



On 20 June each year, World Refugee Day celebrates the strength and courage of people who have been forced to flee their home countries to escape conflict or persecution. To mark the occasion amid the pandemic, UNHCR Mexico brought together 15 rock musicians for a series of online jam sessions or palomazos. The “Palomazos for Refugees” were broadcast simultaneously across UNHCR social media platforms –twitter, Facebook and YouTube – and through our partner in the project, W Radio.

Hosted by Gabriela Warkentin, audiences were treated to fresh takes on popular songs by artists who usually don’t play together. Among those performing in the four, 50-minute concerts were Alfonso André, Denise Gutiérrez, Marcela Viejo,

Meme del Real, Cecilia Toussaint, Fer Casillas, La Marisoul, Dr. Shenka, Pascual Reyes, Sergio Arau, Lila Downs, Aterciopelados, Sofi Mayen and the Mexican writer, Juan Villoro.

Each palomazo focused on a specific topic related to refugees in Mexico, and the role UNHCR plays in meeting their needs. The partnership with W Radio allowed for significant visibility for refugees issues through interviews with the key UNHCR staff, and the participation of high-profile UNHCR supporters: Alfonso Herrera, Johanna Murillo, Luis Gerardo Méndez, Paola Espinosa, Alberto Lati, Manolo Caro and influencers: Kirén Miret and Ana Paulina Chavira.

The series helped reinforce the global theme “Everyone Can Make a Difference, Every Action Counts.” A message from UN High Commissioner for Refugees Filippo Grandi was included in the last palomazo. The first three concerts reached over 153,684 viewers on Facebook, 55,184 on Twitter 19,692 on Periscope and 57,500 on You Tube. The videos have racked up 286,061 views, a tally which is still growing. In 2021 UNHCR will carry out the second edition of the Palomazo for Refugees. Some of the artists participating have strongly engaged and committed to collaborate in the future.





*A mother and son, both refugees, play together in the backyard of their new house after being relocated to northern Mexico.*

# Durable solutions for refugees

2020 brought important milestones for our push to find lasting solutions for refugees in Mexico. First, upon the completion of a major overhaul of the public health system, asylum seekers and refugees received unrestricted access to public health services in Mexico.

Second, we made significant progress in terms of financial inclusion, with Banco de Bienestar, Banregio and BanCoppel taking steps to provide financial services for people of concern. BanCoppel was the first private sector bank to update its software systems for asylum seekers and refugees to be able to open bank accounts. Finally, digitalization

of the application procedure for residence permits by INM has reduced the processing period from up to nine months in 2019 to as little two hours by the end of 2020. As a result, in some locations, newly recognised refugees could acquire the permanent residence card and gain access to all public services within one day. However, in some locations INM did not have the staff to ensure that people of concern were expeditiously issued with documentation. Similarly, the issuance of the national population registration number (CURP) to asylum seekers and refugees was not yet being implemented consistently across the country and remains an area of focus for UNHCR in 2021.

In 2020, UNHCR reviewed and updated its Durable Solutions Strategy, setting three main components:

- Advocacy for a favourable environment for inclusion and integration
- Geographic distribution of refugees, through relocation at the national level, in order to relieve pressure on host communities and provide refugees with work placement to help them integrate
- Support for the main host communities in southern Mexico, in order to create additional reception, protection and integration space

The implementation of the Strategy will continue in 2021.



*Refugee boy studying remotely at primary school in Aguascalientes; his family received cash grant from UNHCR to purchase school supplies and a computer.*

## Education

The UNHCR Education Strategy for Mexico focuses on improving access to public services, supporting school enrolment for mandatory education (pre-primary, primary and secondary education), enhancing work placement opportunities with the recognition of diplomas, and promoting inclusion in public vocational training.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, UNHCR has shared information with refugee and asylum seekers' families about the Aprende in Casa – Learn at Home – distance learning programme, and helped parents to register their children. UNHCR also granted financial support to cover connectivity-related expenses and the purchase of items needed for remote schooling. In 2020, we supported 4,150 children with school enrolment. Cash grants covered expenses such as parents' association fees, and purchase of electronic devices.

We helped 208 people of concern with their enrolment in accelerated Education Without Borders programme of the National Institute for Adult

Education (INEA) to obtain primary and secondary education certificates, either because they were adult learners, or they were adults who could not provide diplomas for revalidation.

Likewise, UNHCR and its partners supported refugees with the recognition of diplomas issued in their home countries. In 2020, 65 refugees had their studies revalidated. Unfortunately, since the beginning of the pandemic, these procedures were suspended, and Mexican education authorities only slowly resumed them in the last quarter of 2020. Despite the suspension, we established an ad-hoc mechanism with the support of the Ministry of Education, to resolve the procedures for health professionals who had applied for revalidation before the outbreak, which allowed 16 people to obtain their professional licenses.

The university education programme continued with 125 refugees receiving university scholarships. Twenty-five of these students were beneficiaries of the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative Fund, or DAFI, program.

### First DAFI graduates.

In mid-March, days before the COVID-19 restriction began, Elena,\* name changed a Guatemalan refugee in Mexico, graduated as a Technician in Administrative and Accounting Systems from the Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City. She was the first of 25 DAFI students in Mexico to graduate. Elena has always known what it is like to work hard and strive to achieve her goals. But despite having permission to live and work in Mexico, like many Central Americans, she spent months in Tapachula working long hours without social security. "I worked at a rotisserie from 6 a.m. to 7:30 p.m., seven days a week, with one day off every 15 days or sometimes even once a month." When she was informed that she had a place to study at a university in Mexico City she could hardly believe it. "When UNHCR notified me I screamed with excitement! I knew that in Chiapas I was cheap labour but I was not sure whether I had the ability to study at university. The first semester I did not want to fail, I did not want to miss the opportunity; I just studied and didn't have time to talk to other people. But then I felt more secure." Her effort paid off and Elena currently works as an Accounting Assistant in a fair-trade company. While the company has taken a hit during the COVID-19 pandemic, Elena trusts that both she and her employer will be able to continue despite the adverse conditions.

\* Her real name was changed for protection reasons



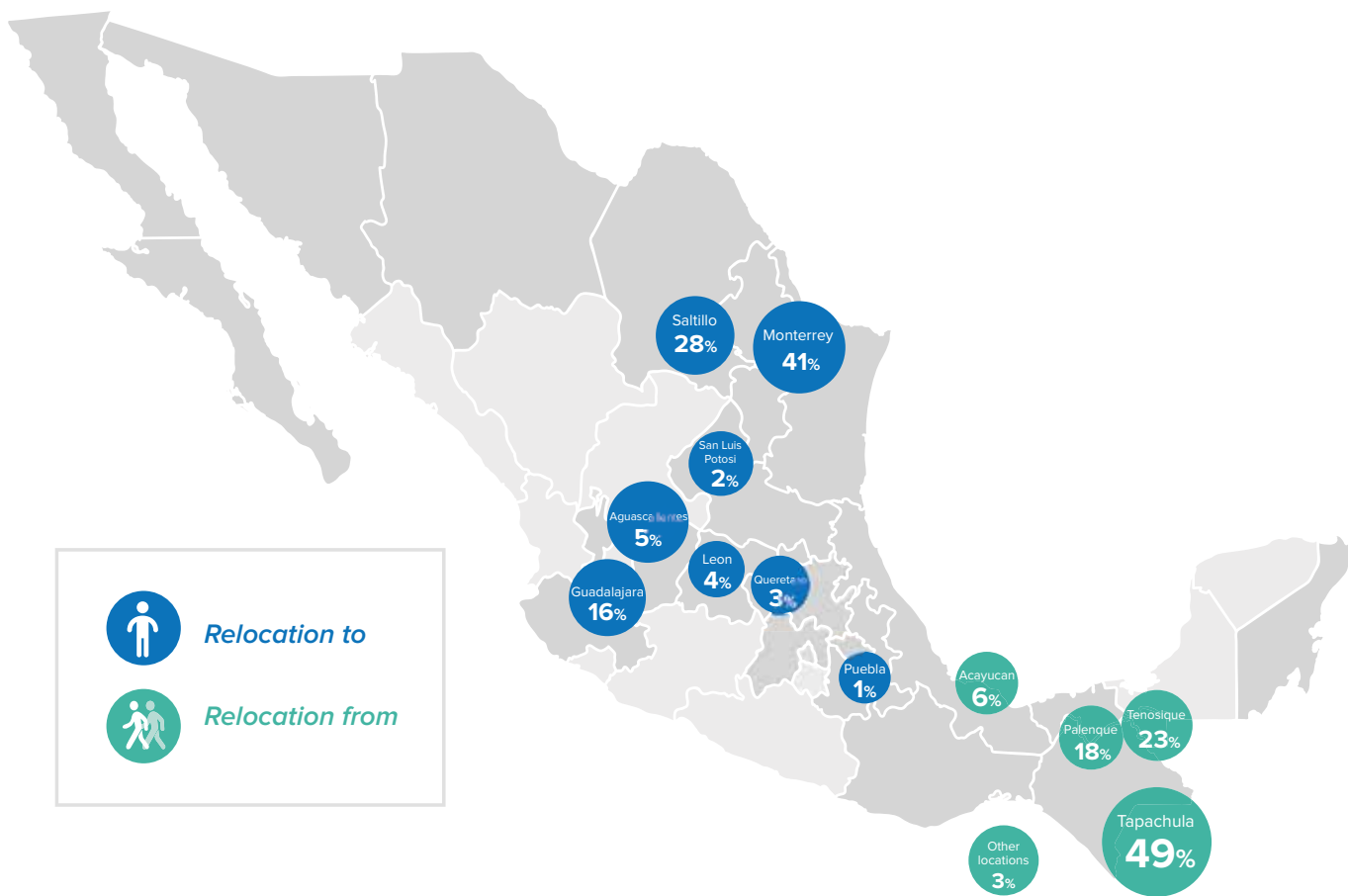
*Elena receiving her diploma during the graduation ceremony at the Ibero-American University, in March 2020, days before lockdown began.*

UNHCR supported 2,038 asylum-seekers and refugees in 2020 to take vocational training courses with recognition from the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Labour and the National Employment Service. A further 50 people received support to obtain skills certification to boost their job placement prospects.

## Socio-economic integration

From 2016 to 2020, the UNHCR relocation and local integration programme enabled 8,151 refugees to get jobs in the formal economy in Mexico. In 2020, and despite the COVID-19 pandemic, 2,306 people of concern were successfully relocated from southern Mexico to municipalities in the central and northern part of

the country, which have higher demand for workers and a better capacity to include newcomers in the education and health systems. The programme was implemented in 15 locations across the country, including six launched in 2020 - states of Puebla, Querétaro, Guanajuato, San Luis Potosi, Aguascalientes and Quintana Roo.





Cooperation has been established with federal and state authorities and with over 140 private companies, including Mabe, Kolon, Kimberly Clark, Palliser, Lennox, General Motors, Femsa, Hyatt, Home Depot, Soriana, Holiday Inn, Nissan, Exxon Mobil, Uber, Procter & Gamble, Lear and Faurecia. Participating firms have expressed satisfaction with the refugee workforce and describe refugee employees as highly motivated and loyal. They have lower turnover rates than the industry average and increase the range of skills and experience. Securing private sector funding will be a priority in 2021, as the programme directly benefits the local economy and private sector interests. Sustainable partnerships with the private sector are key so that we can replicate the existing model in new locations, and gradually ensure that main urban areas become favourable environments for reception, protection and local integration.

According to a study conducted with United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), the participants of the local integration programme have contributed over 60 million pesos (around US\$3 million) in taxes and contributions to the Mexico's social security system. Prior to relocation, 73 per cent of profiled working age adults were unemployed. 17 per cent counted on sporadic informal jobs and only 10 were employed with an average weekly income of 900 pesos. After relocation 92 per cent of working age adults are formally employed and contribute to the national economy as taxpayers. The average weekly income amounts to 1,500 pesos.

However, while access to formal employment became a reality in eight states where UNHCR

implements its job placement program, refugees who seek employment in other locations are likely to continue to face barriers. A strategic cooperation has been launched with the Ministry of Labor in order to sensitize the private sector actors, through guidelines and information materials. The ultimate objective for UNHCR is to provide systematic advice to refugees and the local population in specific locations on job opportunities across the country, prior to relocation via the National Employment Service. In 2020, through a collaboration with ILO, and supported by the European Union, UNHCR recruited personnel for the Ministry of Labor in order to design relevant systems and guidelines. Local job centres in Tapachula, Palenque and Tenosique will be supported with equipment and infrastructure.

During 2020, UNHCR continued to support refugees and asylum seekers through Roving Teams – mobile groups covering areas with limited UNHCR presence. Due to the pandemic, missions were replaced by remote interventions reaching a total of 6,987 people of concern. Nationals from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador made up 37 per cent of the cases attended.



Children showing their school kits in Palenque.

UNHCR is grateful for the generous support provided by donors as well as those who contributed with unearmarked and earmarked funds to the Mexico Operation and its programmes in 2020:



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Likewise, UNHCR thanks all our individual donors that every month contribute to our mission.

# 2020 Highlights UNHCR Mexico

PRODUCED AND PRINTED BY UNHCR  
(May 2021)

*Colors and positive messages for refugees and asylum seekers are part of the mural painted in front of Casa del Migrante in Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz. This is a peaceful coexistence space where locals and refugees can share time and other activities.*

