

BRAZIL OPERATION

COVID-19 RESPONSE

FEBRUARY 2021



On 15 February, the Nova Canaã shelter reopened in Boa Vista to accommodate the Indigenous population

OPERATIONAL CONTEXT

As of 28 February, Brazil reached a total of 10,551,259 confirmed cases and 254,942 deaths from COVID-19, while the vaccination plan against COVID-19 targeted over 7 million people, which represents the 3,3% of the population.

The northern region of Brazil as a whole continued to be severely impacted by the second wave of COVID-19 pandemic. Amazonas already recorded more COVID-19 deaths in the first two months of 2021 than last year. On 20 February, the Governor of Amazonas, Wilson Lima, extended the night curfew until the end of the month, but progressively allowed the reopening of shopping centres and local businesses at reduced working hours. To support local authorities' response to the second wave of COVID-19, UNHCR provided 220 beds, 200 mattresses, covers and blankets to the Amazonas' Health Secretariat which, following the donation in January, contributed to expand public healthcare facilities' bed capacity by a total of 335 additional units. In addition, more than 1,390 non-food items were provided to the Municipal Secretariat for Women, Social Assistance and Citizenship to assist the Indigenous and non-Indigenous population during the pandemic. Remote support continues to be provided through a protection hotline that in February enabled 1,569 refugees and migrants from Venezuela to receive direct assistance and referrals to services in order to access documentation, urgent material needs (food and non-food items), financial support, and other protection needs.

On 22 February, the State of Acre declared a state of public calamity, facing the devastating combination of COVID-19 pandemic, an outbreak of dengue fever, and floods that affected 130,000 people in 10 of the State's municipalities, including the capital. In addition, on 16 February, the attempt of about 450 refugees and migrants, mostly Haitians, who had been stranded for days in the city of Assis Brasil, State of Acre, to cross the border to Iñapari, Peru, caused tensions between the group and the Peruvian Armed Forces, as the Peruvian border remains officially closed due to the pandemic.

Continuous arrivals at the border in Pacaraima accelerated the reactivation of the Nova Canaã shelter on 15 February, in order to receive Indigenous population and help to ease first reception pressure at the BV8 Transit Centre. The emergency response entailed UNHCR's close coordination with partners and the logistical and humanitarian task force of the army on site planning, in

compliance with COVID-19 prevention measures, and NFIs distribution, including mattresses, hygiene and cleaning kits. UNHCR also provided assistance in preparation of the reopening of Tancredo Neves shelter and expansion of non-Indigenous shelters, contributing with installation of additional RHUs and the enhancement of security measures (such as lighting, fences and cameras) at Rondon 3 and Rondon 1.

On 4 February, the R4V (Response for Venezuelans) Brazil Platform – coordinated by UNHCR and IOM – held a meeting with General Antonio Barros and the representatives of the 47 R4V partner organizations, including UN agencies and civil society organizations. The coordinator of the logistical and humanitarian task force of Operation Welcome, General Barros, presented the latest developments in the humanitarian response for refugees and migrants from Venezuela as well as priority gaps in shelter, health and voluntary internal relocation strategy, requesting the R4V support to complement State's interventions in these sectors.

From 23 to 25 February, UNHCR supported a mission of the Ombudsperson (Federal Prosecutor for Citizens' Rights – PFDC), Carlos Alberto Vilhena, to several strategic projects and partners in São Paulo to better illustrate efforts and existing challenges in the protection and integration of refugees and migrants in the South-Southeast and throughout Brazil. The Ombudsperson met with UNHCR Representative to discuss refugee issues including the current challenges of the emergency response and the access to documentation for refugees and migrants, which has come to a halt due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During the meeting, both representatives also discussed further cooperation opportunities, including expanding the humanitarian project from Guarulhos Airport to other airports in the country, and strengthening technical cooperation and capacity building opportunities within the federal justice system. The PFDC also visited UNHCR projects at Caritas São Paulo, Missão Paz and Aldeias Infantis, the Sao Paulo Municipality's Reference and Service Center for Immigrants (CRAI), and attended a visit to Guarulhos airport restricted areas accompanied by the Federal Police and other members of the Working Group coordinated by UNHCR. During this period, UNHCR Representative also met with newly elected representatives from the Municipal Secretariats of Human Rights and Citizenship, International Relations, and Social Assistance, to highlight the joint initiatives promoted over the past years and reinforce the collaboration for future initiatives. In addition, a donation agreement was also signed with the municipality of São Paulo, contemplating UNHCR's support to better equip public service structures supporting refugees and migrants living in the city.

KEY RISKS AND GAPS

Collapse in health systems: Local health systems in several Brazilian States continue to face multiple challenges in their COVID-19 response and capacity.

Socio-economic impact: Due to social distancing and isolation measures, many Venezuelan refugees and migrants are unable to continue with their economic activities and have lost their income source.

Access to territory and asylum: Entry restrictions result in increasing numbers of Venezuelans crossing irregularly the border into Brazil in extreme vulnerable situations, exposed to human trafficking, exploitation and abuse. Moreover, with no path to regularization and documentation, persons of concern to UNHCR are facing additional challenges to exercise their rights.

Increasing number of Venezuelans with expired documentation: Following COVID-19 containment measures, the Federal Police suspended in-person services and currently operates at reduced capacity, resulting in a significant backlog of asylum-seekers, refugees, and migrants who have been unable to renew their identity documents and therefore experience limited access to essential services.

UNHCR RESPONSE**Strengthening and adapting shelter support and reinforcing local health responses**

Access to Health: In Belém, the Municipal Health Secretariat (SESMA) has included Indigenous Warao within the priority groups of the vaccination plan due to their epidemiological, social and nutritional specificities. As a result, a total of 500 doses of vaccine have been reserved for this group and 141 Indigenous Warao, living both in the municipal shelter and private houses in Belém, have been vaccinated as of 28 February.

On 8 February, an elderly Indigenous Warao couple living in a private house in Manaus received the first dose of COVID-19 vaccine. UNHCR's advocacy efforts in the Amazonas also resulted in the recommendation, issued by the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office (MPF-AM), to prioritize all Indigenous Warao in the vaccination plan, including those living in urban areas and of Venezuelan origins.

On 17 February, the vaccination campaign in Operation Welcome's shelters in Boa Vista started, as a result of advocacy efforts promoted by the local interagency health working group with the Municipal Health Secretariat (SMSA). In line with the local vaccination plan, which prioritizes elderly persons and persons with disability, 5 PoCs were identified and received their first dose of COVID-19 vaccine, with UNICEF technical support.

As of 28 February, UNHCR is aware of 263 Venezuelans who have been vaccinated in Brazil, out of which 239 are Indigenous persons, in Belém, Brasília, Boa Vista, Manaus, Nova Iguaçu and Pacaraima.

Shelter: In February, 1,074 refugees and migrants were allocated to different shelters in Boa Vista. In the last week of the month, Operation Welcome also introduced medical screening for COVID-19 as part of the shelter allocation procedure in Roraima with UNHCR's technical assistance to operationalize the screening in accordance with WHO/PAHO recommendations and ensure timely access to shelter.

Ensuring protection and supporting integration processes

Integration: During the month of February, a total of 1,109 refugees and migrants were voluntarily relocated from Amazonas and Roraima states to other parts of Brazil by bus or flight. UNHCR supported the Fit For Travel (FTT) process for all these individuals and oversaw the institutional modality relocation of 120 individuals. Moreover, in the context of the *Empoderando Refugiadas* project, 16 women, including persons with disabilities, chronic diseases and other specific needs, were offered jobs in São Paulo, Porto Alegre and Natal and were supported by UNHCR to settle in their new destination cities.

On 10 February, UNHCR and the Global Compact Network Brazil launched the *Plataforma Refugiados Empreendedores*, which receives support from *Aliança Empreendedora*, IFC, Migrafix, Facebook and the government of the United States. Providing greater visibility to refugee entrepreneurs living in Brazil, the platform also gathers useful resources and information to facilitate engagement opportunities between private sector actors and refugees who intend to launch or expand their businesses in the country.

In the framework of the partnership between UNHCR and Banco Pérola, 20 Venezuelan entrepreneurs received microcredit loans through “Creditodos”, a program developed by this financial institution and currently piloted in Brasília and Manaus to support financial inclusion for refugees and promote income generating capacities and opportunities.

On 12 February, UNHCR conducted a capacity-building session with 62 directors of *Caixa Econômica Federal* operating in the Pará municipalities where Indigenous Warao live. As Caixa is the bank overseeing the allocation of *auxílio emergencial*, this training session specifically helped participants to familiarize with refugees and migrants’ documentation, overall raising awareness on how these groups may be more exposed to income shocks and limited access to social protection mechanisms.

In addition, UNHCR and partners supported 62 refugees and migrants in Manaus to access free distance learning courses available on Coursera, an online platform that launched the “Coursera for Refugees” initiative in 2016 to bring high-quality education to populations who need it most.

Protection: In the framework of CONARE’s 152nd Plenary Meeting, CONARE issued a positive decision on 338 cases, while 70 individual cases were rejected. In the Plenary, recent developments related to the integration between the asylum and migration information systems were also examined, including the issuance of provisional ID cards (Documento Provisório de Registro Nacional Migratório, DPRNM), which marks the transitioning from the paper-based certificates that, although legally valid, are more precarious and sometimes create suspicion among employers and service providers. Unlike the current asylum-seeker certificate, the new ID card is valid until the asylum claim is adjudicated and does not require to be renewed annually, overall helping to facilitate asylum seekers’ local integration. The issuance of this document, foreseen in Decree 9277 in 2018, is currently being piloted in all major cities throughout the country.

On 8 February, the Brazilian Federal Revenue Office (*Receita Federal do Brazil*, RFB) issued a note to the Public Defender’s Office informing that there is no constraint for undocumented refugees and migrants to be eligible to be issued a CPF (the individual taxpayer registry identification), using their documentation from the country of origin. This important development will help ensure refugees and migrants’ continued access to health services, including vaccination against COVID-19 and other basic rights, especially for those who entered Brazil after the border closure in 2020.

On 4 February, UNHCR and IOM held a training session with 18 participants of the Municipal Secretariat of Social Assistance of Montes Claros (MG), covering protection, local integration and durable solutions themes for the Warao population living in the city. In addition, on 10 and 11 February, UNHCR, together with IOM and the Ministry of Citizenship, conducted a training session for 200 social workers in Belo Horizonte (MG) to strengthen their knowledge on forced displacement issues and help standardizing social assistance practices. The capacity building is part of a broader initiative that UNHCR led in Belo Horizonte, involving donations of bunk beds, mattresses, computers and furniture to strengthen the local reception capacity and access to public services both for refugees and Brazilians in Belo Horizonte.

On 19 February, the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, the Federal Public Ministry, the Public Defender’s Office, the municipality of Guarulhos and UNHCR signed the extension of the Technical Cooperation Agreement to ensure that continued protection and humanitarian assistance is provided to foreigners at São Paulo International Airport. UNHCR will continue to support joint activities under this framework, including capacity building for border police and immigration officials to help prevent *refoulement* and ensure access to territory for PoCs.

Documentation and Registration: In February, in Boa Vista and Pacaraima, UNHCR and partners registered 2,060 persons in proGres v4 and generated 2,413 shelter IDs. The numbers reflect registration efforts targeting refugees and migrants who are supported through shelter allocation,

CBI assistance or are included within the voluntary relocation strategy promoted by the federal government.

Also, UNHCR supported the documentation of 928 individuals at the Reception and Documentation Centres (*PITrig*) in Boa Vista and Pacaraima, including 221 asylum seekers who entered Brazil before border restrictions came into force and were issued provisional ID cards by the Federal Police in Pacaraima.

As a result of the progress made within the scope of the Uberlândia Warao Working Group and the action of the local Federal Public Defender (DPU), the Court of Justice of the State of Minas Gerais issued a decision requiring registry offices to ensure the right to a birth certificate for Brazilian children regardless of the validity of their foreign parents' documentation.

Scaling up and adapting strategies for Communication with Communities (CwC)

In Manaus, UNHCR and Fraternidade Internacional (FFHI) held information sessions on healthcare, hygiene and sanitization, targeting 590 PoCs staying at the Manaus Transit Shelter (ATM) and promoted child-friendly activities on COVID-19 prevention methods for approximately 155 PoCs. In addition, UNHCR distributed, through partners and community outreach volunteers, information leaflets to approximately 4,000 PoCs informing them about access requirements for *Auxílio Estadual* and *Auxílio Manauara*, two social protection programs recently introduced in the Amazonas to promote immediate poverty relief through income-transfers directly to families.

On 26 February, UNHCR and partners launched the community radio “La Voz de los Refugiados” at the Rondon 3 shelter. The project, funded by Luxembourg through UNHCR Innovation Service’s call for proposals on digital inclusion, represents a creative response to the challenge of identifying and countering misinformation and rumours circulating among Venezuelans living in shelters in Boa Vista, while promoting community empowerment and helping refugees and migrants to make informed decisions throughout their displacement cycle.

From 1 to 28 February, [UNHCR’s Help Platform](#) registered 21,694 sessions, 71% of which were new visitors.

Ensuring the most vulnerable have access to basic items

Food and non-food items (NFIs) distribution: In Manaus, 73 Indigenous families and 7 groups of LGBTI+ living outside shelters were supported in meeting their food needs through food baskets and cards. This initiative, which directly impacted a total of 313 persons, stemmed from protection mapping regularly carried out by UNHCR, which enabled the prompt identification of food security risks within these communities and the coordinated response with UNHCR's local partners, Instituto Mana and Adra. Similarly, UNHCR’s advocacy efforts with Mesa Brasil contributed to secure a food voucher distribution to 49 Warao families living in Belém and Ananindeua.

UNHCR distributed 460 hygiene kits, 305 cleaning kits, 295 buckets, 440 jerrycans, 935 mattresses, 1,150 mattress protective covers, 65 plastic tarpaulins, 350 mosquito nets, 15 solar lamps and 365 packs of adult and baby diapers to support better reception conditions within shelters in Boa Vista. In addition, on 25 February, UNHCR delivered 102,816 UNILEVER bars of soap to support the state health response to COVID-19 targeting both refugee and host communities in vulnerable situation.

In Pacaraima, UNHCR also distributed 330 mattresses, 435 mattress protective covers, 1,200 cleaning kits, 5,076 bars of sap and 500 sleeping mats to continue assist the population at the BV8 Transit Centre. This NFIs distribution reflects efforts to respond to the increasing number of new arrivals, and included the donation of 6 Refugee Housing Units (RFU) to the logistical and humanitarian task force of Operation Welcome to help setting the COVID-19 isolation area.

Strengthening public knowledge on forced displacement through awareness raising

Public Information: As part of UNHCR's 70th anniversary and the celebration of the Folha de S. Paulo's centenary, the multimedia exhibition on refugee journalists was launched on 3 February at the Immigration Museum of São Paulo. The exhibition, open until 30 May, aims to shed light on displacement challenges and local integration opportunities and aspires to influence positively public attitudes on these topics. In parallel, on 2 February, UNHCR launched a workshop for journalists and communications students presenting a UNHCR guide for media coverage of humanitarian crises, involving 50 participants.



Recognizing the importance of sport as a tool for the inclusion of refugees and migrants, on 23 February, UNHCR and Santos Football Club signed a Memorandum of Understanding renewing the institutional partnership for the second year. The MoU aims to provide young refugees access to "Meninos da Vila" schools, among other sports and communication activities.



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