According to UNHCR, there are around 370,000 Colombians living as refugees in neighbouring countries. NRC provides information and legal advice to Colombian refugees in Venezuela, Panama, and Ecuador.

Humanitarian and political background

Five decades of violence have transformed the conflict in Colombia into the worst humanitarian crisis in the Americas. Violence between armed groups, drug traffickers, and government forces has displaced 6.6 million people since the conflict began.

To escape violence in their home country, Colombians are fleeing across borders. According to UNHCR, there are around 370,000 Colombians living as refugees in neighbouring countries. The majority go unrecognised as refugees by their host governments.

Violence and deportations in Venezuela

In recent years, the political situation in Venezuela has worsened. Oil prices dropped. Food shortages and crime shot up.

In 2015, the deadliest place in the world was Venezuela’s capital. A city of 3.3 million, Caracas reported 3,946 murders in 2015. The tense political situation has affected Colombian refugees in the country. In August 2015, President Maduro declared a state of emergency and closed the border. Security sweeps followed in Colombian-populated neighbourhoods, resulting in the deportation of thousands.

The deported Colombians return to an unsafe situation. With normal border crossings closed, thousands have crossed the Táchira River back into Colombia.

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Unrecognised refugees in Panama

Colombian refugees experience low rates of Refugee Status Determination (RSD) from their host countries.

Without recognition, Colombians living in Panama may be deported at any time. Families are broken up, as parents may be forced to leave their Panama-born children behind. Finding work becomes difficult without the proper documents. Colombians fleeing death threats from armed groups are forcibly returned.

Historic haven for refugees in Ecuador

Historically, Ecuador has been a safe haven for people fleeing violence. In the 1930s and 1940s, thousands of Jewish immigrants came to Ecuador.

Today, Ecuador accepts more refugees than any other country in the region. Around 53,000 Colombians have official refugee recognition from the government.

However, recognition of refugee status in Ecuador is still low. A 2014 estimate places the recognition rate at 17 per cent. UNHCR estimates that around 90,000 Colombian refugees are in need of international protection in Ecuador.

Deadly earthquake

In April 2016, a powerful earthquake struck northwestern Ecuador, destroying buildings, infrastructure and livelihoods. More than 650 people were killed, and thousands injured. The disaster is considered the biggest tragedy to hit Ecuador in the past seven decades.

In response, NRC launched activities to continue children's education in spite of the crisis, and help communities return to normalcy. Our goal is to help children return to school as quickly as possible to protect them from the dangers of being out of school, such as violence and sexual exploitation.

Refugees unable to meet requirements

In June 2012, Decree 1182 imposed two barriers on those seeking asylum in Ecuador. The first required refugees to register with authorities within 15 days of arrival. Many were unaware of the rule, or lacked transportation to registration points. The second required refugees to prove they were persecuted based on the definition in the 1951 Refugee Convention.

The majority of new arrivals were unable to meet these requirements, and therefore denied refugee status. Without recognition, people are unable to work or get housing, and risk being deported back to Colombia.

Landmark decision for the protection of refugees

In 2014, thanks to advocacy efforts from NRC and other organisations, the constitutional court ruled that Decree 1182 violates the principle of equality laid out in the Ecuadorian Constitution. With this landmark decision, the court upheld Ecuador's history as a safe haven for people seeking safety.

NRC activities in the field

In 2010, we began a Regional Refugee Programme providing information and legal advice to Colombian refugees in Venezuela, Panama, and Ecuador.

We assist vulnerable people in gaining refugee status and other forms of international protection.

Venezuela

To protect Colombian refugees in Venezuela, we provide them with legal assistance and counselling. We also help them receive official recognition as refugees (refugee status determination) from the Venezuelan and Colombian governments.

We run our activities out of our offices in San Cristóbal and Mérida, Venezuela, and the Colombian border town Cúcuta.

Panama

To protect Colombian refugees in Panama, we provide them with legal assistance and counselling. We also help them receive official recognition as refugees from the Panamanian and Colombian governments.
We run our activities in Panama out of our Panama City office.

**Ecuador**

Through our Colombia programme, we help internally displaced persons in neighbouring Ecuador. We assist and protect them, and work for lasting change.

We operate out of our office in Esmeraldas, Ecuador.

**Regional Refugee Programme**

In Venezuela, Ecuador and Panama, we help refugees exercise their housing, land and property rights.

Our regional refugee programme aims to:

- Provide information and legal assistance to asylum seekers, refugees and people in need of international protection.
- Accompany recently arrived refugees to reach refugee commissions.
- Provide legal advice and assistance on housing, land and property rights.
- Ensure that asylum seekers, refugees and other vulnerable people can access the Colombian victims' registry and the reparation measures outlined in the victims' law.
- Give technical support to authorities, to increase their capacity in reaching vulnerable people.
- Overcome legal barriers that keep displaced people from accessing basic rights.
- Inform and empower individuals and communities on long-lasting solutions.