

Armed gangs force 'growing number' to flee north and south, in Central America

The number of people fleeing violence and persecution from States in Central America, including Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, has risen by nearly 60 per cent in the space of just a year, the UN Refugee Agency ([UNCHR](#)) has warned.

According to UNHCR, many vulnerable women and children are among the more than 290,000 people who sought refuge in the continent's north, during the course of 2017.

By comparison, that is a 58 per cent increase from the previous year, and sixteen times more people on the run from the same region during 2011.



UNHCR Costa Rica

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"We hear repeatedly from people requesting refugee protection, including from a growing number of children, that they are fleeing forced recruitment into armed criminal gangs – and death threats," said UNHCR spokesperson Aikaterini Kitidi, briefing reporters in Geneva.

“As people journey across borders and onwards, they face numerous dangers, including violence at the hands of criminal groups, often leaving women in particular, vulnerable to sexual abuse and exploitation.”

Despite the risks of travelling north to Belize, Mexico and the U.S. Ms Kitidi said that people felt they had no choice.

If they stayed in their home countries they faced “high levels of homicide” and violence, particularly targeting women and marginalized communities, she added.

Increasing numbers are also seeking refugee protection to the south; in Costa Rica and Panama. Applications for asylum from the region are increasing worldwide too, with 350,000 applications made globally between 2011-15, of which nearly 130,500 were filed in 2017 alone.

UNHCR helps asylum seekers and refugees by working with governments and civil society to provide access to shelter, jobs and welfare.

Of the \$36 million needed to fund the agency’s work, only around \$4 million has been received so far this year.