
LIMITED EMERGENCY OPERATION – Costa Rica

Limited Emergency Operation – Costa Rica	
Number of beneficiaries	36,000
Duration (starting date – end date)	6 months (1 June to 31 November 2025)
Cost to WFP (6 months)	\$1,050,000

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For many years, the Western Hemisphere has experienced large-scale population movements running primarily along a south-north axis. In the past two years, however, the number of reported migrant arrivals moving northwards has declined significantly. Meanwhile, there are currently large numbers of South American migrants in Mexico who, having failed to successfully cross into the USA, are returning *southwards* towards their place of origin.

Costa Rica is an important transit point along that route and is seeing South American returning migrants arriving at the country's northern border with Nicaragua at a current rate of approximately 200 new arrivals per day. This population is in urgent need of humanitarian assistance to meet their basic food needs as they transit the country. However, the crisis threatens to overwhelm the response capacities of the Government and its humanitarian partners.

This Limited Emergency Operation addresses that gap. Working in close coordination with the Costa Rican authorities at the national and local levels as well as existing humanitarian actors, WFP will provide emergency food assistance in the form of hot meals to up to 36,000 returning South American migrants during a 6-month period (by which point the situation is expected to have stabilized, thereby enabling WFP to hand over and phase out).

1. HUMANITARIAN SITUATION

1.1. EMERGENCY CONTEXT

For many years, the Western Hemisphere has experienced large-scale population movements running primarily along a south-north axis. Within that broader pattern, Costa Rica has served as a major transit point on the migratory route that stretches from the Darién Gap to the Mexico-United States of America (USA) border. Various factors – most notably, diminished prospects for entry into the USA – have, however, seen the number of people moving northwards along this route decline significantly since the peak in 2023. At present, the number of reported migrant arrivals at Costa Rica’s southern border is very low.

Meanwhile, *reverse* movements are increasing. There are currently large numbers of South American migrants¹ in Mexico who, having failed to successfully cross into the USA, are trapped *in situ*. Of these, growing numbers are now embarking on the long, southward journey back towards their country of origin. Costa Rica is an important transit point along that southbound route. As a result, the country is witnessing a significant number of South American migrants arriving at the country’s northern border with Nicaragua (at a current rate of approximately 200 new arrivals per day).

Given the large number of South American migrants who are still in Mexico and assuming that return movements persist at the current rate, Costa Rica can expect to receive 36,000 new arrivals on the northern border with Nicaragua over the course of the next 6 months. For the reasons outlined in sections 1.2 and 1.3 below, this has created a humanitarian crisis that is overwhelming the response capacities of the Costa Rican authorities and their humanitarian partners. This Limited Emergency Operation (LEO) will enable WFP to address that gap through a targeted and time-bound emergency response.

1.2. FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION NEEDS

Robust information on the profile and vulnerability status of the migrant population can be found in several credible sources, including the Mixed Movement Monitoring (MMM) platform that WFP jointly operates with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (Unicef). The MMM is currently being recalibrated with a view to better capturing new dynamics associated with return movement. This will involve an interagency mission to Costa Rica, scheduled for the second half of May 2025. Any new insights from this mission will be integrated into the design of the LEO.

Nonetheless, it is already clear that the situation of South American migrants transiting through Costa Rica represents a humanitarian imperative. This can be inferred from the data already obtained from the same population during their initial journey northward. According to information in the MMM platform, 75 percent of interviewed migrants were experiencing food security challenges and resorting to severe coping mechanisms such as skipping meals and reducing food intake to prioritize feeding their children². Consequently, 79 percent of interviewed migrants identified food as their most urgent need.

This same population of South American migrants is now returning to Costa Rica, having failed to achieve their migrant objective. They are not only demoralized but also, in some cases, severely traumatized by negative experiences that occurred on their migration journey. They are also more food insecure. This is because whatever limited household assets they once had

¹ The South American migrant population comprises many different nationalities, with Venezuelans, Colombians and Ecuadorians being most highly represented (Mixed Migration Centre, 2025)

² Over a third of returnee households have at least one child (Mixed Migration Centre, 2025)

have been depleted by costs related to transportation and covering their basic needs while in Mexico. As a result, they are in urgent need of humanitarian assistance to meet their basic food and nutrition needs.

1.3. HUMANITARIAN NEEDS, PLANS, AND COORDINATION MECHANISMS

The Government of Costa Rica and its humanitarian partners (both international and local) have made laudable efforts to ensure safe passage and extend assistance to returning South American migrants as they transit the country. At the northern border with Nicaragua in the canton of Los Chiles, UNHCR, Unicef and international and local non-governmental organizations have been providing shelter and other types of assistance (including hot meals) at the “Casa Esperanza” facility. In the capital San José, similar arrangements have been put in place at the “Fundación Lloverá” facility.

However, there are significant and growing gaps in the response. While the “Casa Esperanza” facility is well situated to assist migrants arriving by the crossing point at Las Tablillas, no equivalent facility exists to assist the many migrants who are arriving by the alternative crossing point at Peñas Blancas³. To make matters worse, the assistance that is being provided has been reduced significantly due to funding shortages. For example, the service offering at the “Casa Esperanza” has already been reduced from three to two meals per day. Unless additional support materializes soon, this will be further reduced to only one meal per day.

Considering the severity and urgency of the situation, the Government has requested WFP to augment the provision of food assistance to returning South American migrants on a temporary basis until the situation stabilizes. Upon receiving the request in April 2025, WFP immediately deployed a small team to the country. During the mission, the team met with government counterparts at the national and local levels as well as key UN partners (including the Office of the Resident Coordinator, UNHCR, IOM and Unicef) and also visited the migrant assistance facilities. Information obtained during this mission has informed the design of this LEO.

2. WFP EMERGENCY RESPONSE

2.1. DIRECTION, FOCUS AND INTENDED IMPACTS

Right objective

Based on the analysis presented in section 1 above and in support of WFP corporate strategic objective 1, this LEO serves to temporarily augment the capacity of existing humanitarian actors in Costa Rica to provide emergency food assistance to returning South American migrants during a 6-month period as they transit the country towards the southern border with Panama.

2.2 STRATEGIC OUTCOMES, FOCUS AREAS, EXPECTED OUTPUTS AND KEY ACTIVITIES

2.2.1 STRATEGIC OUTCOME 1: CRISIS-AFFECTED POPULATIONS ARE ABLE TO MEET THEIR BASIC FOOD NEEDS (SO1)

➤ *Outcome description*

Working in close coordination with the Costa Rican authorities at the national and local levels as well as existing humanitarian actors, WFP will provide emergency food assistance in the

³ A map is included in the annexes

form of hot meals to returning South American migrants. This assistance aims to stabilize their food security and nutritional status as they transit the country.

➤ ***Focus Areas***

The entirety of this LEO falls under the ‘crisis response’ focus area.

➤ ***Expected outputs***

Migrant populations receive hot meals in order to meet basic food needs (SR1, Output category A).

➤ ***Key activities (right assistance at the right time)***

<i>Activity 1: Provide emergency food assistance to returning migrants. (Act Category 1: URT)</i>

In northern Costa Rica, WFP will immediately augment and strengthen the hot meals model in Los Chiles at “Casa Esperanza” that is assisting migrants crossing via Las Tablillas. This programme is already well established. In parallel, WFP establishes a second distribution point at La Cruz to reach migrants crossing via Peñas Blancas.

In the San José area, WFP will also augment and strengthen the hot meals model at “Fundación Lloverá” facility that is also well established.

WFP will reinforce assurance and accountability measures and adapt its assistance to the diverse needs of the population as needed, including coordination with Unicef to identify any additional opportunities for nutritional reinforcement of particularly vulnerable groups, especially pregnant and breastfeeding women, infants, and young children.

2.2. Transition and exit strategies

As highlighted in section 1, only very small numbers of South American migrants are currently moving northwards towards the Mexico-USA border. Considering also the fact that there are finite numbers of South American migrants in Mexico, it can be assumed that the current dynamic of return movement through Costa Rica will eventually wane. For that reason, this LEO is considered a temporary intervention that will eventually become obsolete.

Alongside the implementation of this LEO, WFP will build on existing relationships with the Costa Rican authorities at national and local levels, as well as other international and national partners, to transition ownership of the implementation arrangements. This will enable WFP to exit smoothly.

3. IMPLEMENTATION ARRANGEMENTS

➤ ***Right People***

This LEO is designed specifically for South American migrants who are transiting Costa Rica on their journey southwards. Available data indicate that the distribution of the population is approximately 50 percent female and 50 percent male (see Table 1 below). The population also includes children, whose special dietary and other needs will be catered for by working in close coordination with Unicef.

TABLE 1: FOOD & CASH TRANSFER BENEFICIARIES BY STRATEGIC OUTCOME & ACTIVITY					
SO	Activity	Modality	Female	Male	Total
1	Activity 1	Commodity voucher	18,000	18,000	36,000
TOTAL			18,000	18,000	36,000

➤ **Rations and Modalities**

Targeted migrants will receive hot meals via commodity modality. Hot meals are also known to be highly appreciated by migrant populations.

TABLE 2: FOOD RATION (g/person/day)	
Modality	Commodity voucher
Protein (Beef, Chicken)	180
Legumes (lentils, beans)	300
Cereals (fortified rice)	500
Fruits (variety)	100
Fats (vegetable oil)	20
Dairy and Derivatives	-
Vegetables (variety)	200
Sugar and Salt	10
total kcal/person/day	2,131
% Energy supplied by protein	10%
Number of feeding days in LEO period	180

Total estimated meals: 200 people × 2 meals × 30 days × 6 months = 72,000 meals

Estimated unique beneficiaries: Approx. 36,000 individuals

Supply Chain:

WFP will sign a field-level agreement (FLA) with the best positioned local partners to continue the provision of hot meals at the “Casa Esperanza” and “Fundación Lloverá” facilities (where programmes are already up and running) and establish a third distribution point at La Cruz⁴.

WFP’s partners will be responsible for food procurement, transformation and delivery of hot meals against a pre-validated list of items and other responsibilities as per the commodity voucher modality in accordance with WFP corporate norms. The partner will use a prepaid

⁴ In the event a hot meals modality is not determined to be viable in La Cruz, WFP will explore alternatives including the provision of ready-to-eat food using a commodity voucher modality.

card provided by WFP, which will enable better oversight and monitoring of the food procurement process. WFP will also provide additional oversight and capacity strengthening to local partners related to food safety and quality.

A market assessment mission in the second half of May will be undertaken to finalize the rollout of the assistance mechanisms.

WFP in-country capacity

Since Costa Rica is a non-presence country, WFP has no staff based permanently in the country. On the other hand, the organization has a large regional hub in neighbouring Panama comprised of the Latin America and the Caribbean Regional Office (LACRO), the United Nations Humanitarian Response Depot (UNHRD) and a cadre of outposted staff covering all relevant functions.

Building on this regional capacity, WFP will deploy an emergency coordinator to Costa Rica from its regional hub who will manage the operation on a day-to-day basis. For the duration of the operation, the emergency coordinator will report directly to LACRO under the leadership of the Regional Director and will receive support and oversight from Panama-based teams as required (including through surge and support/oversight missions).

Partnerships:

When designing this operation, WFP consulted with Costa Rican authorities at both national and local levels in targeted locations as well as other partners in coordination with the UN Office of the Resident Coordinator. As a result, WFP is very confident that the LEO is responding to and addressing a clearly defined gap while complementing (not duplicating) the work of other agencies.

WFP is launching this operation with USD 500,000 of multilateral financing already secured. Contact has already been made with WFP’s humanitarian/development donors with a view to mobilizing the additional required financial support.

TABLE 3: TOTAL FOOD/CASH-BASED TRANSFER REQUIREMENTS AND VALUE		
Food type / cash-based transfer	Total (mt)	Total (USD)
Cereals	0	0
Pulses	0	0
Oil and Fats	0	0
Mixed and blended foods	0	0
Other	0	0
TOTAL (food)	0	0
Cash-Based Transfers (USD)		252 000
TOTAL (food and CBT value – USD)	0	252 000

➤ ***Right Way***

WFP will work in close coordination with specialized agencies, including UNHCR (protection) and Unicef (child protection, nutrition), to ensure a safe and dignified environment at the distribution sites as well as the responsiveness of assistance to the needs of different groups.

In support of the localization agenda, WFP will prioritize working through Costa Rican civil society organizations, which are already known to be active in the response to the migrant crisis, including the provision of hot meals.

4. PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT AND EVALUATION

4.1 Monitoring and Evaluation

Noting that Costa Rica is a non-presence country where WFP does not have the regular capacities of a country office, WFP will work to ensure minimum assurance standards to ensure food assistance reaches the right people safely and effectively. Given the six-month duration of the crisis response, and in line with WFP corporate guidance on monitoring in emergencies, WFP will focus on output monitoring, including beneficiaries disaggregated by sex and age and the amount of transfers, as well as process monitoring.

To this end, the Emergency Coordinator will receive support and oversight from the regional functional teams based in Panama. For the provision of hot meals, cooperating partners will be monitored through WFP’s Caterer Performance Monitoring and Evaluation (CPME) tool, which assesses service quality, food safety, availability, and operational compliance. Additionally, WFP will conduct Food Safety and Quality (FSQ) technical visits to all active catering sites, in accordance with corporate standards. These monitoring exercises will be complemented by in-field visits for implementation follow-up and regular partner reporting, ensuring compliance with contractual obligations, addressing any issues that may arise during implementation, and tracking the results of activities.

4.2 Risk Management

In the second half of May, the regional security officer and regional protection officers will undertake security and protection risk assessments, respectively, including through a field mission to the project sites.

Prior to the launch of the response, the Emergency Coordinator will develop a comprehensive risk management plan in coordination with the regional Risk & Compliance Officer. During the scale-up and implementation phase, WFP will ensure continuous risk assessment and monitoring to assess the adequacy of mitigation measures and further actions.

WFP will keep stakeholders abreast of the evolving risk context, and ensure timely communication with government, donors, partners and communities on any changes to WFP’s response.

5. WFP RESOURCES FOR RESULTS

INDICATIVE COST BREAKDOWN ALONG STRATEGIC OUTCOME (USD)		
SDG targets/ WFP Strategic outcomes	SDG Target 2.1 - WFP Strategic Outcome 1	Total
CSP Outcomes	CSP Outcome 1	
Focus Area	Crisis Response	
Transfer	689 760	689 760

Implementation	279 251	279 251
Direct support costs	16 904	16 904
Subtotal	985 915	985 915
Indirect support costs	64 085	64 085
TOTAL	1 050 000	1 050 000