



KEY PRIORITIES

+230,000

PEOPLE CROSSING
FROM NECOCLÍ TO THE
DARIEN GAP BETWEEN
JANUARY–AUGUST 2023

8,900

CHILDREN CROSSING
FROM NECOCLÍ TO
THE DARIEN GAP
IN JULY 2023

High risk

OF HUMAN
TRAFFICKING

**FUNDING AND
RESPONSE CAPACITY**

- UN agencies (IOM, UNHCR, UNICEF)
- Colombian Red Cross
- INGOs (World Vision)

CRISIS IMPACT OVERVIEW

In Colombia, the municipalities of Acandí, Juradó, Unguía (Chocó), Necoclí, and Turbo (Antioquia) serve as transit areas for refugees and migrants seeking to reach Central and North America through the Darien Gap (MSF 05/05/2023; DP Panamá/DP Colombia 11/04/2023). Necoclí is one of the main transit points for those heading to the Darien jungle through Acandí and Capurgana, generating problems such as overcrowding, a lack of resources, and violence in the municipality. The presence of the Gaitanist Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AGC)* aggravates this situation (Infobae 24/08/2023; VOA 21/06/2021; OCHA 20/06/2023).

Necoclí is a coastal municipality of Urabá region in northeastern Antioquia department. In Necoclí, a total of 230,162 departures were registered between January–August 2023, of whom 130,768 were Venezuelan. Between 1–16 August, the daily average of departures from Necoclí was 1,700, with a total of 28,643 registered departures. Most of the refugees and migrants were Venezuelan (21,608), Ecuadorian (4,454), Chinese (784), Haitian (703), and Afghan (182). The increase in the number of people in transit in Necoclí and Turbo is linked to their insufficient financial resources to continue the journey (GIFMM/R4V 30/08/2023).

Approximately 8,900 refugee and migrant children and adolescents left Necoclí pier in July 2023 (GIFMM/R4V 14/08/2023). This represents a significant increase, around twice the number in June (4,373) and much higher than in May (4,966) (GIFMM/R4V 19/07/2023 and 09/06/2023). By 16 August, nearly 400 people were living on the beach or streets (GIFMM/R4V 15/08/2023). The AGC have territorial control of Urabá, exercising control over the population and the economic activities in the territory (DP Panamá/DP Colombia 11/04/2023; InSight Crime 08/11/2022).

*Disclaimer: by using this name, ACAPS is not confirming the legitimacy of this armed group or its status as an armed group with political or non-political objectives. It uses the name that the group has given itself as a way of standardising it.

Anticipated scope and scale

The progressive rise in the number of transiting refugees and migrants in Necoclí coincides with the seasonal increase in the flow of refugees and migrants from August–September since 2021, with people hoping to reach Central and North America before the start of winter (GIFMM/R4V 30/08/2023). The influx may strain local resources, infrastructure, and services, potentially leading to socioeconomic tensions for the local population.

In March 2023, the Colombian Government announced the lifting of the ceasefire with the AGC. This could lead to confrontations between the two parties, putting refugees and migrants, as well as host communities, in Urabá region at risk of confinements, mobility restrictions, and internal displacement (DP Panamá/DP Colombia 11/04/2023; EE 23/03/2023).

The August 2023 announcement of the Panama Government that they intended to intensify the deportation of refugees and migrants entering through the Darien Gap may increase the number of people in transit in Necoclí, waiting for a change in Panamanian policies (DW 08/09/2023; LA Times 24/08/2023). This may result in more people without shelter and not enough resources to live in Necoclí.

Humanitarian constraints

The AGC controlling Urabá region presents humanitarian access constraints for organisations in reaching affected people, aggravated by the lifting of the ceasefire between the Colombian Government and the AGC (Infobae 08/04/2023). Humanitarian access barriers are mainly related to illegal checkpoints, armed confrontations, the presence of explosive devices, and social protest events (OCHA 18/08/2023).

There are information gaps on cases of gender-based violence, human trafficking, and the recruitment of minors, representing a limitation for information-based decision-making.

CRISIS IMPACTS

Shelter

The increase in mixed migration flows in Necoclí has resulted in a surge in local economy prices, making it difficult for refugees and migrants to afford shelter. This increases the risk of greater numbers of people occupying the beaches and streets without shelter, particularly family groups from Venezuela with pregnant or nursing women, children, and adolescents. As at August 2023, about 400 refugees and migrants were without shelter in Necoclí and more than 420 in Turbo (GIFMM/R4V 30/08/2023; DP Panamá/DP Colombia 11/04/2023).

Protection

Packages offered to refugees and migrants to cross the Darien Gap cost USD 500 or higher (NYT 14/09/2023). Those who do not have sufficient resources to cross stay in Necoclí to work on the streets or the beach, exposing themselves to the risks of homelessness, begging, and sexual exploitation (Semana 13/10/2022). There is also a risk of financial exploitation from boat owners who charge around USD 50 for boat travel from Necoclí to either Acandí or Capurgana. The same trip for tourists costs only around USD 25 per person (El Colombiano 20/02/2023).

For those who make the trip, there is also a risk of shipwreck and subsequent physical harm or even death since the increase in refugees and migrants has led transport companies to increase the number of people per boat, increasing the risk of capsizing; in August, maritime transport companies reported an 88% increase in migrant transit in Necoclí (GIFMM/R4V 15/08/2023). The scarcity of boats and the high demand for them often lead to a situation where not everyone can secure a spot on a legal boat. This compels refugees and migrants to resort to clandestine vessels that depart at night, where minimum safety conditions cannot be guaranteed. In 2021, authorities reported two shipwrecks of boats carrying refugees and migrants from Necoclí to Panama (El País 12/10/2021; EE 23/06/2021).

The increase in local prices and the presence of the AGC and migrant smuggling networks in Necoclí expose families, pregnant or nursing women, and children and adolescents to multiple protection risks. These include human trafficking for sexual and labour exploitation, weapon and drug trafficking, child recruitment, disappearances, extortion, scams, heists, and homicide (PGN 20/06/2023; Semana 13/10/2022; La Razón 11/10/2022; WVI 06/10/2022). There is a risk of minors engaging in commercial sexual exploitation to finance their journey through the Darien jungle (Semana 15/10/2022). Separated and unaccompanied children are also at increased risk of protection threats (WVI 06/10/2022). There are information gaps on cases of sexual violence and human trafficking, especially concerning children, given the limited capacity of institutions to conduct assessments and collect information (DP Panamá/DP Colombia 11/04/2023).

The presence of the AGC also signifies protection risks for host communities related to armed violence, forced recruitment, and confinement. Half of the host population in Necoclí are Afro-descendant, while 4% are indigenous (DANE/Gov't of Colombia accessed 15/09/2023). These are communities that have been historically affected by armed conflict in Colombia (Comisión de la Verdad 09/12/2020 and 15/08/2020).

Health

There is not enough human, technical, or infrastructure capacity to provide healthcare in Urabá. Those most affected are usually children, nursing and pregnant women, and people with disabilities (DP Panamá/DP Colombia 11/04/2023). With the lack of access to shelter, drinking water, and sanitary services, the majority of health problems reported are related to respiratory issues, diarrhoea, and urinary tract infections. For women, consultations are generally for abdominal pain (Health Cluster 11/06/2022 and 27/02/2022).

The San Sebastián de Necoclí Hospital is the main provider of first-level health services in urban and rural areas. Emergencies must be referred to other municipalities (Health Cluster 11/06/2022). In 2021, the hospital announced that it was no longer able to continue providing medical care given the high demand resulting from the crisis (Semana 09/09/2021). However, the hospital continued to provide medical care to the extent possible. In 2022, humanitarian health assistance was expanded with the arrival of the Colombian Red Cross, Mercy Corps, and IOM, which provided for the basic health needs (i.e. primary healthcare, diagnostic tests, and medications) of refugees and migrants (Health Cluster 11/06/2022). Despite this, healthcare continues to be insufficiently covered (El Colombiano 05/09/2023 and 04/09/2023).

In September 2023, the hospital announced a debt of almost USD 177,500 given the high demand resulting from the migratory crisis. It has begun a legal process to receive the payment from the Mayor's Office of Necoclí. If the debt is not assumed, the hospital could be forced to close (El Colombiano 05/09/2023 and 04/09/2023).

WASH

The main WASH need of refugees and migrants living in Necoclí is clean drinking water for consumption, cooking, and hygiene. In the municipalities of Necoclí and Acandí, 83% of households in rural areas and 75% in urban areas do not have continuous piped water service throughout the day and week. The population must resort to collection methods typically assigned to children. The lack of access to clean drinking water contributes to the development of diseases such as allergies, diarrhoea, and stomachache, which in 2022 affected 41% of people in urban areas (GIFMM et al. 08/02/2023).

According to a September 2022 survey of refugees and migrants who wished to stay in Necoclí, 87% of households stated that the economic situation affected access to menstrual hygiene products. As an alternative, those who could not afford sanitary pads used cloth

and paper pads (GIFMM et al. 08/02/2023). The lack of access to this item can have a number of health and protection risks for women and girls related to infection, disease, school and work absenteeism, and stigma and discrimination. The arrival of women of reproductive age, including pregnant or nursing women, highly requires the delivery of hydration, hygiene, and personal care supplies. Between 29 May and 1 June 2023, among 108 refugees and migrants surveyed in Necoclí, 47% reported that women in their travel group had difficulties accessing menstrual care items (REACH accessed 15/09/2023).

Humanitarian responders are providing approximately 1,600 people per day with hygiene products, including menstrual hygiene and early childhood kits. The amount is insufficient, with deliveries only proving enough to satisfy the demand for two days (GIFMM/R4V 15/08/2023).

Food security and livelihoods

In August 2023, more than 200 people did not have access to hot meals (GIFMM/R4V 15/08/2023). In September 2022, among surveyed refugees and migrants who wished to stay in Necoclí and Acandí, 39.1% of those in urban areas and 72% of those in rural areas reported consuming less than three meals a day (FSC et al. 13/12/2022).

The inflation resulting from migratory flows affects the cost of living and purchasing power of the local population (GIFMM et al. 08/02/2023). In Necoclí and Acandí, 93% of surveyed refugees and migrants who wished to stay in Necoclí and Acandí worked in informal jobs in September 2022 (FSC et al. 13/12/2022).

The mixed migration flows also generate significant risks for host communities. These risks are related to changes in economic activities, the contamination of essential water resources for their subsistence, and an increase in the cost of living (DP Panamá/DP Colombia 11/04/2023).

DRIVERS OF THE CRISIS

Venezuelan crisis

Given that more than half of the refugees and migrants in transit to Panama between January and mid-August 2023 were Venezuelans, the unfolding of the humanitarian situation in Venezuela can be tied to the movement of people to Necoclí (GIFMM/R4V 30/08/2023). More than seven million people have left Venezuela because of the crisis, and Colombia is the country receiving the most Venezuelan refugees and migrants, with more than two million as at August 2023 (R4V 07/09/2023). In February 2023, the IMF projected the real GDP growth in Venezuela to be 6.5% in 2023 but later corrected it downwards to 5.0% given the slowdown in economic activity in the country (BBC 17/05/2023). Over half of the population in Venezuela lives in poverty, with rural areas suffering disproportionately and lacking access to electricity (ACAPS 19/04/2023).

The upcoming elections in Venezuela in 2024 and 2025 are likely to be characterised by the disqualification of opposition politicians and a lack of professional election observers, increasing uncertainty about the resolution of the crisis (ICG 16/08/2023). This challenging economic and political situation is a major driver of migration, which is anticipated to persist in the short and medium term.

Ecuadorian crisis

Ecuador's economic and political crisis drives the influx of Ecuadorian refugees and migrants passing through Necoclí, with poverty rates in their country reaching 33% in 2020 (WB accessed 18/09/2023). By June 2023, poverty rates as high as 46.4% had been reported in rural areas (Bloomberg Línea 26/07/2023; INEC 06/2023). The situation has put young people at risk of recruitment by local criminal gangs, which have formed alliances with transnational criminal organisations to control the drug trade, fueled by one-third of Colombia's cocaine production passing through Ecuador (UNHRC 08/09/2023). The Mexican Government's imposition of visa requirements for Ecuadorian citizens since September 2021 has also pushed individuals to seek alternative migration routes to the US, such as the Darien Gap route (BBC 28/02/2023; El País 13/01/2023). The current crisis in Ecuador is expected to continue influencing emigration decisions in the near and medium term.

The situation in China and Haiti

Between 1–16 August, the main nationalities of refugees and migrants arriving at Necoclí, after Venezuelan and Ecuadorian, were Chinese and Haitian. The crises in these countries are determining factors for the continuity of the mixed migration flows in the municipality (GIFMM/R4V 30/08/2023).

China's Zero-COVID policy, marked by city closures and population confinement, affects the economy and daily life in the country (France 24 24/01/2023; NYT 11/09/2022). In 2022, over 1,300 Chinese individuals crossed the Darien Gap, a nearly threefold increase compared to the previous decade (BBC 30/12/2022). On the other hand, Haiti is facing an economic decline and heightened insecurity as a result of natural disasters, such as earthquakes and hurricanes, triggering violence among criminal groups seeking territorial control. These disasters have also resulted in a severe food crisis, affecting approximately 4.9 million people as at June 2023 (ACAPS 02/08/2023; ACAPS 02/06/2023).

COMPOUNDING/AGGRAVATING FACTORS

AGC control over Urabá region

The territorial control of the AGC and the group's relationship with the Colombian Government, other armed groups, and criminal organisations affect the response to the migration crisis in Necoclí. The AGC originated from the demobilisation of the paramilitary organisation called the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia. The Colombian Government refers to the AGC as Clan del Golfo given their significant presence in the Gulf of Urabá, a geostrategic exit point to the Atlantic Ocean (ACAPS 26/07/2023). The main criminal activity of the AGC is transnational drug trafficking. They are also involved in other criminal activities, such as illegal mining, extortion, drug trafficking, and migrant smuggling (SWI 22/03/2023; InSight Crime 08/11/2022).

In March 2023, the Colombian Government announced the lifting of the ceasefire with the AGC, which might increase future blockades and armed activities in the area. This would affect humanitarian access and increase protection risks for the population in Necoclí.

Rainy season

The rainy season in Necoclí, (April–December) has already caused issues in the past (Weather Spark accessed 08/09/2023). In April 2022, constant rains led to flooding in Urabá region, affecting indigenous communities (Semana 22/04/2022). Later in October, the overflowing of Nechí River caused flooding in Necoclí, affecting households and crops (Radio Nacional 28/10/2022). This seasonal pattern may aggravate the needs of unsheltered refugees and migrants, as well as host communities, exposing them to harsh weather conditions and potentially compromising their health while limiting humanitarian access.

FUNDING AND RESPONSE CAPACITY

UNHCR funding in the Americas was insufficient in 2022, with less funding secured compared to 2021. In 2023, the total amount needed (USD 827 million) is again expected to be higher than the funding projected by the end of 2023 (USD 277 million) (UNHCR 18/08/2023).

On 28 July, the local health board of Necoclí, together with the local health sector of the Interagency Group for Mixed Migration Flows in Urabá, held a healthcare day for refugees and migrants living on the beach in Necoclí. The Government is also providing various types of support. For example, the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare has been focused on the protection of children through its Migrant Response Team and Mobile Comprehensive Protection Team (GIFMM/R4V 14/08/2023). In September 2023, the institute announced the creation of a local unit in Necoclí, with a focus on prevention and protection care for refugee and migrant children and adolescents (ICBF 06/09/2023).

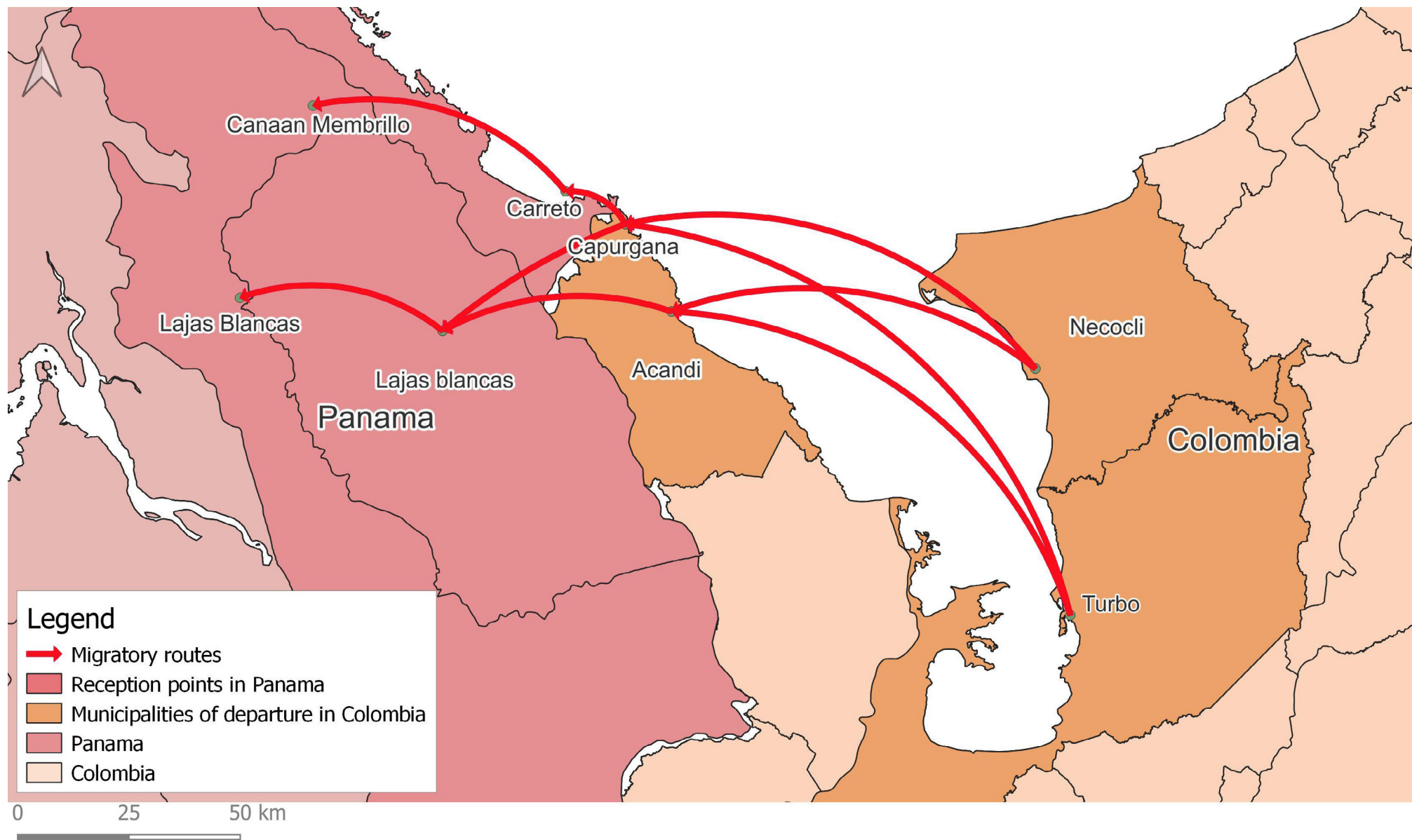
UN agencies (UNHCR, UNICEF, IOM) are also present in the territory. On 15 August, it was reported that the UNHCR had set up an emergency team to provide medical care on weekends and that Points of Attention and Orientation (PAOs) would extend their opening hours (GIFMM/R4V 15/08/2023). PAOs are physical UNHCR spaces for refugees and migrants to access reliable and secure information related to the Darien Gap crossing (UNHCR 26/04/2022). IOM and UNICEF provide portable toilet services on weekends (GIFMM/R4V 15/08/2023). UNICEF also provides drinking water stations and hygiene services and collaborates with local authorities to identify unaccompanied and separated children. IOM supports other health authorities in facilitating the setup of mobile clinics, distributing hygiene items, and setting up Wi-Fi stations (RI 19/07/2022).

The Colombian Red Cross provides health services, such as medical consultation, first aid, psychological support, and medicine delivery; information on the transit route; and translation services (RI 19/07/2022).

World Vision carries out support sessions for children and adolescents to identify risks during their transit to the Darien Gap (WVI 15/02/2023).

The Catholic Church in Necoclí collaborates with UN agencies, INGOs, and NGOs to provide assistance to refugees and migrants. The church is also engaged in discussions with the AGC and Community Council leaders regarding the transit conditions of refugees and migrants when crossing the Darien Gap (La Silla Vacía 14/03/2023). The Community Council is the ethnic authority that administers the territories of Black, Afro-Colombian, Raizal, and Palenquera communities in each area (UNHCR 12/2016).

MIXED MOVEMENTS BETWEEN COLOMBIA AND PANAMA (DARIEN GAP)



Source: ACAPS using data from MSF (05/05/2023)

Disclaimer: the boundaries, names, and designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by ACAPS.