

COLOMBIA–PANAMA BORDER

Migration crisis

CRISIS OVERVIEW

Between January–September 2022, more than 150,000 people crossed into Panama from Colombia through the Darién Gap. Of this number, 71% were Venezuelans. Around 14,500 were children (UNHCR 11/10/2022; R4V 07/12/2021).

The Darién Gap is the swampy jungle area connecting the Colombian Urabá region with the Panamanian province of Darién (Minsalud 16/07/2021). The 100km jungle pathway involves crossing through more than 575,000 hectares of vegetation. Exposure to animal attacks and diseases, extreme environmental conditions, a lack of food, and contaminated water poses risks for people crossing the area (The Guardian 13/10/2022; VOA 19/08/2022). The presence of armed groups poses further risks of exploitation, robbery, violence, and human trafficking (R4V 07/12/2021).

Although migrants have historically used the Darién route to reach Central America, the flow of migrants through this route considerably increased between 2021–2022. The 133,000 migrants that crossed in 2021 is greater than the number of all crossings between 2010–2020 (UNHCR 28/02/2022).

The increase in Venezuelan migration through the Darién jungle is related to the imposition of visa requirements in early 2022 in Belize, Costa Rica, and Mexico. Since 2017, Guatemala, Honduras, and Panama have also established visa requirements for Venezuelans. These requirements mean that Venezuelans aiming to reach the US through Central American airports can no longer do so, forcing them to take risky informal routes, such as the Darién Gap (HRW 05/07/2022 and 27/09/2022).

1,600–2,000 migrants are arriving daily in municipalities on the Colombian side of the border to cross into Panama (CARE 24/10/2022; La Razón 15/10/2022; UN 11/06/2021). That said, the Panamanian Government allows only 650 migrants to cross into Panama per day (France 24 12/08/2021). This policy has left a large number of migrants stranded on the Colombian side of the border, generating needs for healthcare, food, and shelter (UNICEF 04/10/2022 and 31/08/2022). Colombian municipalities with a population of 70,000 have hosted up to 20,000 stranded migrants, implying limited resources for both migrant and host populations (Noticias RCN 27/09/2021; RNC 14/10/2022; World Vision 13/10/2022).

ANTICIPATED SCOPE AND SCALE

On 12 October, the US Department of Homeland Security announced that up to 24,000 Venezuelans could enter US territory if they entered through airports and could prove to have economic support in the US. People who have been “ordered removed” from the US border or who have entered Mexico or Panama irregularly after 12 October are no longer eligible for the programme (DHS 12/10/2022). These conditions are likely to generate migrant bottlenecks at the northern and southern Mexican borders and on the Colombian side of the Darién Gap, with people turning back from the illegal crossing to maintain their eligibility for the programme (La Silla Vacía 14/10/2022; NYT 24/10/2022).

Given the new US migration policy, some Venezuelans may return to their country to attempt to enter the US via airplane, as some Venezuelans who were in Panama have already decided to do (DW 26/10/2022). On the other hand, the Panamanian Government announced on 24 October that Venezuelan citizens could no longer enter Panama from Costa Rica without an authorised visa. This change blocks the return route for many migrants who have crossed to Costa Rica and could lead to a stagnation of people on the move at the Panama-Costa Rica border (Blu Radio 24/10/2022; SWI 24/10/2022).

Political instability and insecurity in Haiti and growing needs in Cuba are continuously driving more people to migrate through the Darién Gap (TNH 07/10/2021). Experts say that the number of people risking their lives to cross the gap is expected to increase as socioeconomic conditions worsen across the region (CFR 22/06/2022).

HUMANITARIAN CONSTRAINTS

People on the move have reported difficulties accessing accurate and reliable information in key decision-making moments, both at places of origin and along the route. The lack of access to official information services may lead them to rely on often unreliable third parties (IRC 09/12/2021). Some non-Spanish-speaking migrants have reported a lack of translators in the Darién Gap limiting their access to information (HRW 27/09/2022).

The capacity of institutions to collect information on migrants’ needs is limited. This constraint has led to large information gaps on the needs of people on the move, including the number of people in each municipality and the type of assistance they are receiving (MSF 21/06/2022; HRW 27/09/2022).

Given the lack of roads in the Darién Gap, migrants either travel on foot through the jungle or by boat (MSF 21/06/2022). These conditions make it difficult for assistance to be available the entire way, leaving migrants exposed to diseases, violence from armed groups, or accidents without access to humanitarian assistance for parts of the journey (Blu Radio 22/06/2022; VOA 23/06/2021).

IMPACT

Protection

People on the move have two options in crossing the Darién jungle from Colombia. First is to pay for a boat from Capurganá (Colombia) to Carreto (Panama) and then walk for two or three days in the jungle to Canáan Membrillo (Panama). From there, a six-hour boat ride takes them near San Vicente (Panama), where they can resolve their immigration status before continuing to other countries. The second option is to walk through the Darién jungle from Capurganá to Canáan Membrillo, which can take seven to ten days (MSF 21/06/2022). The first option reduces the travel time by several days, but both still involve travelling through the jungle for at least two days.

There are several dangers for people crossing through the Darién jungle. Firstly, non-state armed groups involved in drug trafficking and smuggling are present in this region. These armed groups force people on the move to transport drugs into Panama and sometimes they offer to guide the migrants in exchange for payment (Semana 07/10/2022; Blu Radio 22/06/2022). Médecins Sans Frontières reported treating 420 victims of sexual violence between April–May 2022 (MSF 21/06/2022). According to IFRC estimations, 10–15% of the migrants crossing the Darién Gap become victims of sexual violence during their journey (VPItv YouTube 18/07/2022; La Prensa de Lara 19/07/2022). At least 30 people died or disappeared in the Darién jungle between January–October 2022. Although the reasons behind the disappearances are uncertain, local authorities report that they could be related to the presence of armed groups in the area and their involvement in the migrant trafficking and smuggling market (El País 11/10/2022; France 24 20/10/2022; The Clinic 01/10/2021).

Secondly, the journey through the Darién jungle involves overcoming several natural obstacles, such as rivers and animals. The region is very wet, accumulating 5,000–10,000mm of rainfall per year. Drowning while attempting to cross rivers is one of the main risks people face. Since it is a jungle, it is also possible for people without a local guide to get lost (VOA 19/08/2022; GIFMM/R4V 14/10/2022; The Guardian 13/10/2022).

Thirdly, paid transportation by boat does not guarantee safe passage. Many boats are in poor condition, and in the absence of regulation, they usually do not have adequate safety

precautions (vests, life jackets, and emergency protocols). Shipwrecking is common and can cause death or injury for people on the move while being far from healthcare centres (GIFMM/R4V 29/09/2022 and 14/10/2022; EE 14/10/2022).

Finally, between January–June 2022, more than 5,000 children and adolescents crossed the Darién Gap – more than double the number of children who crossed in 2021. At least 170 of these children were unaccompanied minors, and the number could be higher (UNICEF 17/06/2022; VOA 19/08/2022). Colombian authorities have reported that children and adolescents in the Darién Gap are at risk of forced recruitment by armed groups (Cecodap 09/08/2022; El Colombiano 13/06/2022). Médecins Sans Frontières has also reported several cases of underage victims of sexual violence (El Diario 16/07/2022; MSF 21/06/2022).

Health

Migrants are often exposed to various health risks during their journey. For one, they are exposed to violence (assaults or sexual violence) that can occur far from healthcare centres, limiting their access to immediate care and complicating their health situation. A lack of roads in the jungle also delays transportation in the event of an accident (HRW 27/09/2022; Vanguardia 10/10/2022).

Migrants are also exposed to harsh environmental conditions in the jungle. The Darién Gap hosts several dangerous animals and insects, including mosquitoes that can transmit malaria and dengue fever (El País 13/03/2020; MSF 21/06/2022; BBC 28/07/2022). People moving through the jungle have reported skin lesions from animal and insect bites, sprains, and fractures from the extensive treks through the jungle. Migrants are also exposed to the risk of high temperatures, dehydration, food deprivation, and cardiorespiratory failure. The humidity in the jungle can also cause illnesses, like colds (VOA 19/08/2022; La Nación 13/10/2022).

People on the move waiting in municipalities on the Colombian side of the border also need health assistance. Patients include those with chronic illnesses, pregnant women, and children who have contracted infections and illnesses. About 47% of the people interviewed in a survey reported not having access to health services (GIFMM/R4V 29/09/2022; Health Cluster et al. 31/12/2021). The rough conditions and risk of physical and sexual violence migrants face during their journey lead some to suffer from acute stress, anxiety, and depression. Others have reported needing mental health assistance (Health Cluster et al. 31/12/2021).

The hospital in Necoclí (Colombia) has reported being overwhelmed by the sudden increase in requests for consultation, with many people on the move remaining stranded in the municipality. The mayor of Necoclí has stated that the town does not have the resources to increase the hospital's capacity of care nor the human resources to cover the situation (Colombian Ombudsman's Office 08/09/2021; VOA 13/09/2021). As the only hospital in Necoclí,

Hospital San Sebastián de Urabá has to serve 70,000 municipal inhabitants (around 13,000 in the urban zone) and a possible 20,000 additional people on the move in times of stagnation (El País 29/09/2021; El Tiempo 23/09/2021).

Shelter and WASH

People on the move arriving in municipalities on the Colombian side of the border usually have difficulty accessing shelters because of a lack of funds or available shelters (GIFMM/R4V 26/09/2022). Some people are transferred to temporary shelters that often do not have sufficient sanitary facilities or space for everyone's privacy (RNC 14/10/2022; Semana 12/10/2022). Those who are not placed in shelters usually set up makeshift shelters in the municipality. As at 12 October, about 3,500 migrants were sleeping in tents on the beaches of Necoclí without access to bathrooms or drinking water (EE 12/10/2022).

On the Panamanian side of the border, migrants often stay in overcrowded shelters with limited access to sanitary facilities and drinking water (El Debate 25/10/2022; Diario Las Américas 23/10/2022).

While crossing the jungle, migrants face inadequate sanitary conditions. People's consumption of contaminated water during their journey often leads to stomach infections and diarrhoea, which can be fatal in children (VOA 19/08/2022; NYT 07/10/2022; MSF 10/10/2022).

Livelihoods

Upon arrival at the Darién jungle, many people would have spent a lot of their savings to pay for the journey or had their money earmarked as payment for guides or transporters to Panama. As a result, many (74% of Venezuelans and 62% of other nationalities) would have no more money to continue their journey (GIFMM/R4V 26/09/2022). Although some are able to work in the informal sector, the high number of stagnant migrants makes obtaining even informal jobs increasingly difficult (El País 11/10/2022; The San Diego Union-Tribune 19/10/2022). As at 12 October, at least 3,500 migrants were begging in Necoclí (EE 12/10/2022).

On the Panamanian side of the border, the situation is similar. Upon arrival, migrants would have already spent much or all of their savings, meaning they no longer have any means of continuing onwards to other Central American countries or returning home. Humanitarian flights back to Venezuela cost around USD 280, meaning many migrants who have used up their savings are trapped with no way to return (France 24 23/10/2022; Semana 24/10/2022). There are also reports of people being robbed along the way, so even those with more savings at the start of their journey may arrive in Panama without money (Alnavío 03/08/2022; Proyecto Migración Venezuela 22/09/2022).

AGGRAVATING FACTORS

Climate hazards

The rainy season in the Darién jungle runs from late April–December. The highest levels of precipitation during the year occur during November (Climates accessed 26/10/2022). Higher levels of rainfall increase river flow, making migrants more likely to drown while attempting to cross. Some migrants camp on riverbanks, and the sudden increase in river levels because of rainfall can result in deaths (Cambio 30/09/2022). Rain also makes the route more slippery and limits visibility, putting migrants at risk of accidents or attacks and bites from dangerous animals and insects (El Colombiano 31/10/2021; El Tiempo Latino 29/08/2022).

During hurricane season, between May–November, tropical storms can make navigating the Darién jungle difficult (ETESA 2010). In mid-2022, Colombian authorities suspended the aquatic route through the jungle during the passage of some hurricanes, resulting in nearly 10,000 migrants being stuck on the Colombian side of the border. Strong flows may also cause more shipwrecks (Blu Radio 10/10/2022; TuBarco 10/10/2022).

Socioeconomic issues

In June, inflation in Panama reached 5.2%, the highest since 2015 (Statista accessed 28/10/2022; Bloomberg Línea 17/10/2022). Food and fuel price increases led to protests in June 2022 (France 24 30/07/2022). As a consequence, the Panamanian Government established a price control system for food (CNN 26/07/2022). Several analysts point out that price controls may produce a new wave of inflation as they force producers to sell at prices below the assumed costs of their items (Bloomberg Línea 27/10/2022). Towards the end of October, despite the price control measures, increases in the prices of several products led to new protests. The Panamanian Government has since announced a series of new price controls, including for gasoline and new food basket products (El Deber 27/10/2022).

In Colombia, the year-on-year inflation in October was 12%, more than four times the projected rate at the beginning of the year. If this rise continues, 2022 will end as the year with the highest inflation in over 20 years. Some basic food basket items, such as rice, fruits, and eggs, accumulate inflation above 30% (El País 05/10/2022; Semana 27/10/2022). The Colombian currency has devalued by 24% since the beginning of the year and is at one of its lowest levels against the US dollar since 1991. The devaluation of the US dollar also affects basic food basket prices as it increases the input prices used by several industries (Primicias 27/10/2022; El País 26/10/2022).

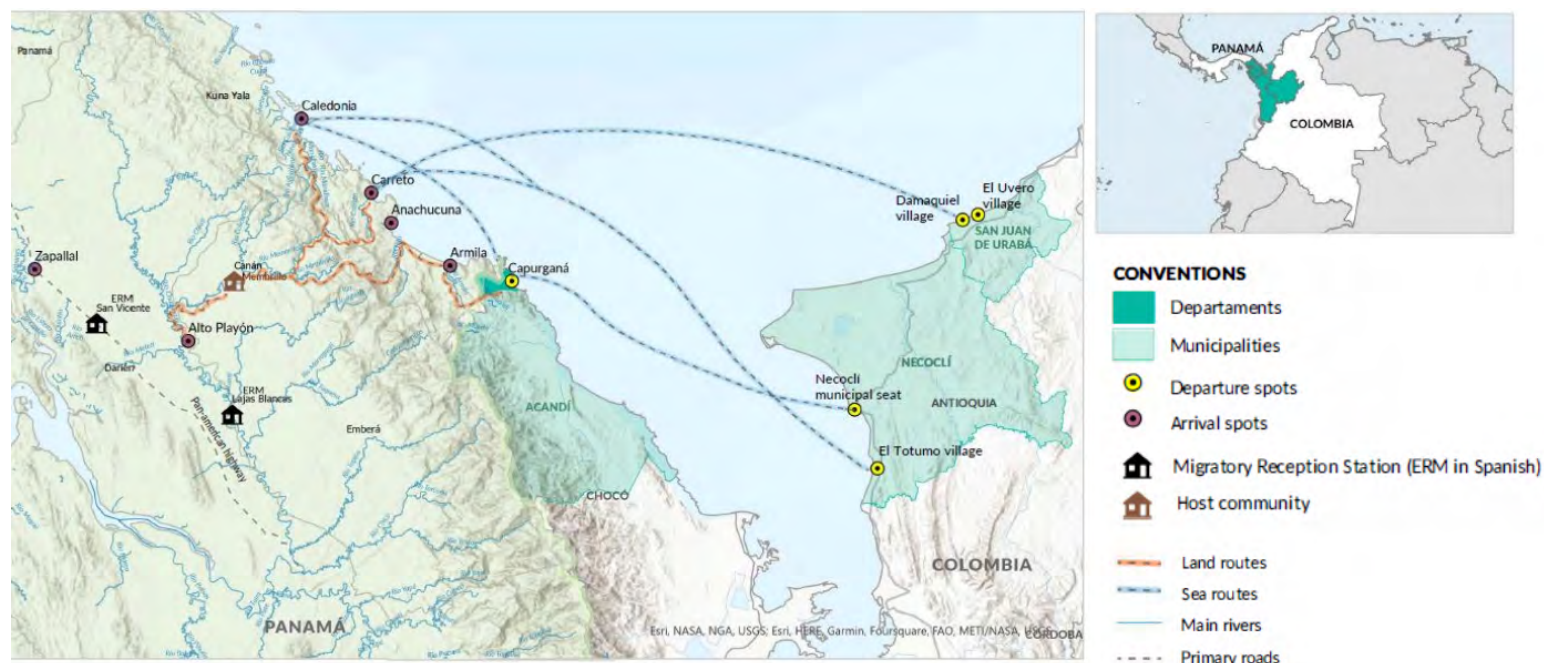
The increase in the prices of basic goods affects people on the move to a greater extent because they arrive in Colombia and Panama with little leftover savings and depend on

remittances from their relatives, which, in the face of inflation, cover less and less of their expenses (France 24 27/10/2022; NYT 24/10/2022).

Militarisation of the border

In late September and then again in mid-October, the Panamanian Government announced deploying military agents on the border with Colombia (Infobae 25/09/2022; PL 18/10/2022). The militarisation of the border poses risks for people on the move, who have reported mistreatment by migration authorities in Panama (Puro Periodismo 19/08/2021; MSF 16/06/2022). Militarisation can also make the route more costly for migrants, as smuggling networks may find it riskier to cross the border and increase their rates (El País 19/10/2022). In other migration contexts, such as in Mexico, military involvement in migration management has led to higher imprisonment rates and allegations of mistreatment for people on the move (WOLA 20/09/2022). So far, the Colombian Government has mentioned being unwilling to militarise the border with Panama (El País 19/10/2022).

Map: routes of migrants going from Colombia to Panama through the Darién Gap



Source: GIFMM/R4V (29/09/2022)