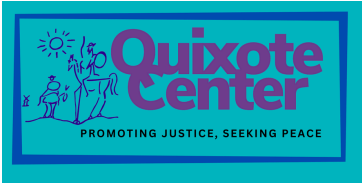


DANGER IN THE DARIÉN GAP: Human Rights Abuses and the Need for Humane Pathways to Safety

JUNE 2024



INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the treacherous journey through the Darién Gap, spanning the Colombia-Panama border, has become a crucial route for hundreds of thousands of migrants and asylum seekers from around the world. This perilous path has caused severe challenges and human rights abuses for those seeking refuge and better opportunities across borders. In 2023 alone, over 520,000 individuals traversed the Darién Gap. As of May 2024, over 139,000 people have crossed the Darién Gap with the top nationalities being from Venezuela (64%), Ecuador (7%), Haiti (6%), Colombia (6%), and China (6%). Among them, 32,911 children have crossed, with four children born in Panama's Darién jungle.



These migrants and asylum seekers risk their lives amid harsh conditions and widespread abuses by criminal factions, particularly sexual violence, with minimal protection or humanitarian aid. The lack of safe and legal routes from South American countries to Mexico and Central America forces migrants and asylum seekers into remote and dangerous territories, as regional governments implement policies restricting freedom of movement and asylum access. This situation has led to a surge in crossings through the hazardous Darién jungle, exposing border crossers to severe environmental conditions and horrific abuses, including rampant sexual violence, and bolstering organized crime in the region. Panamanian government officials, including officers of the U.S.-funded National Border Service (Senafrent), have themselves carried out abuses against migrants and asylum seekers with impunity.

The situation underscores the failure of national policies and governance across the hemisphere and the urgent need for a rights-based response to protect migrants and asylum seekers. Governments in the Americas must adopt immigration policies that respect human rights, recognize and address push factors, and ensure access to territory for humanitarian protection. Strict visa requirements and militarized border controls should not be used to block asylum seekers from reaching countries where they seek protection. Instead of preventing forced migration, these deterrence policies push individuals towards perilous routes like the Darién Gap, leaving them vulnerable to organized gangs, criminal groups, and corrupt government forces. Migrants and asylum seekers, whether escaping human rights abuses, environmental disasters, or poverty, have a right to safe and dignified pathways.

This report was researched and authored by a coalition of advocates and researchers from Immigrant Defenders Advocacy Center, Quixote Center, Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center, Witness at the Border, Human Security Initiative, American Immigration Council, and

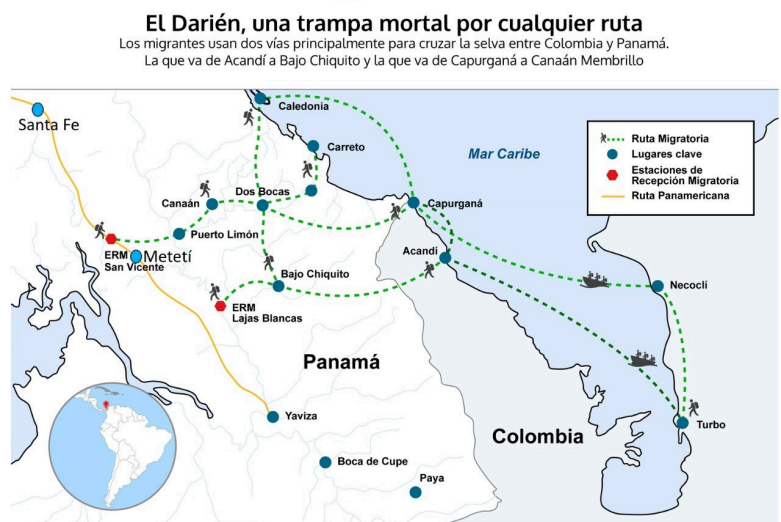
Red Franciscana Para Migrantes, collectively referred to as "the coalition." In March 2024, the team conducted on-the-ground fact-finding in Panama, involving at least 30 in-person interviews with migrants, asylum seekers, and humanitarian aid workers*. Additionally, the report draws upon a review of publicly available data, news media, and other human rights documentation.

This report seeks to supplement and corroborate recent comprehensive studies by organizations such as Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and Human Rights Watch, which have documented systemic abuses against migrants and asylum seekers in the Darién Gap and the failure of Panamanian government authorities to provide adequate protection. Despite substantial evidence, the Panamanian government has persistently denied these allegations. The coalition's findings, consistent with those of other human rights organizations, support calls for the Panamanian government to take action to protect vulnerable migrants and asylum seekers, and to seek accountability for abuses, including by Panamanian government officers. Additionally, the coalition calls on the United States government to implement significant policy changes to address the human rights abuses and humanitarian crises facing people crossing the Darién Gap.

BACKGROUND AND SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

BACKGROUND

The Darién Gap, a dense and dangerous jungle stretch between Panama and Colombia, has become a critical route for migrants fleeing crises in their home countries. In 2023, at least 520,000 people crossed the Darién jungle, more than doubling the 250,000 who crossed in 2022. This figure is starkly higher than the 109,000 who crossed between 2010 and 2019. In 2023, the demographic breakdown included 113,180 children, 134,646 women, and 272,259 men. By the end of March 2024, over 15,993 children had crossed, with births occurring in the gap, including two in the first three months of 2024. By the end of March 2024, 110,008 migrants, primarily from Venezuela, Ecuador, Haiti, Colombia, and China, crossed the Darién Gap, marking a 26% increase compared to the same period in the previous year.



The increases are driven in part by dire conditions in migrants' home countries. Between 2005 and 2020, the number of migrants in Latin America and the Caribbean doubled, reaching 15 million. Over half of the migrants interviewed by UNHCR by March 2024 cited

*ALL INTERVIEWS WITH MIGRANTS AND ASYLUM SEEKERS WERE CONDUCTED IN SPANISH. QUOTES IN ENGLISH THROUGHOUT THIS REPORT ARE COALITION MEMBERS' TRANSLATIONS OF THE ORIGINAL SPANISH.

insecurity, threats, intimidation, and violence as reasons for leaving their countries. Ecuador's homicide rate has escalated due to gang violence, and political unrest has led to the assassination of public figures, including the youngest mayor in March 2024. In Venezuela, widespread food insecurity, violence, and political oppression persist, with over 15,800 politically motivated arrests since 2014.

Policies restricting movement across the Americas force migrants and displaced people into more dangerous routes. Most of those who brave the dangerous journey through the Darién Gap are of nationalities that cannot secure visas to travel north by air. In the past, mostly Cubans and Haitians used this route. However, since January 2022, countries such as Mexico, Costa Rica, and Belize have introduced new visa requirements for nationals from countries that have seen increased arrivals at the U.S. southern border, including Venezuela. Additionally, Panama, Honduras, and Guatemala have imposed visa requirements on Venezuelans since 2017. Many restrictions are enacted at the behest of the United States. As a result of these visa restrictions, Venezuelans have consistently been the most represented nationality among people crossing the Darien Gap in recent years.

Recent president-elect José Raúl Mulino has pledged to shut down the heavily trafficked migration route through the Darién Gap, declaring, “Panama and our Darien are not a transit route. It is our border.” Further restrictions on movement in the region would likely drive migrants and displaced people towards even more dangerous, less regulated routes controlled by criminal networks and traffickers. The promised policy shift towards more rigorous enforcement and large-scale deportations could force many to return to countries where they face persecution or violence. Without addressing the issues that lead people to migrate in the first place, this approach risks increasing the vulnerability of migrants and asylum seekers and will likely lead to more severe humanitarian crises at Panama’s borders and elsewhere.

Human rights organizations and nonprofit groups have called on the Panamanian government to do more to protect vulnerable migrants and asylum seekers. In February 2024, Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) reported a significant surge in sexual violence against migrants in the Darien jungle. In just one week in February, MSF treated 113 people, including nine children, who were sexually assaulted by armed groups, marking a significant increase compared to the total number treated in the previous month. The organization reported that brutality has escalated to extreme levels, with armed men detaining large groups of migrants, threatening, assaulting, and systematically sexually abusing women in front of their families. MSF called for urgent action from Panamanian authorities to protect vulnerable migrants, emphasizing the unacceptable continuation of these atrocities. Shortly after, Panamanian authorities directed MSF to halt all medical operations for migrants arriving in the southern region of the country subsequent to traversing the perilous Darién Gap from Colombia to Panama. This presents a dire situation for migrants emerging from the Darién Gap, among whom are numerous survivors of sexual violence, given that MSF has been one of the limited organizations providing assistance in southern Panama.

In addition, Human Rights Watch has published two comprehensive reports based on almost 300 interviews over the course of 10 months in the Darién. The organization's latest report, published in April 2024, finds that "Panamanian security forces appear to have engaged in abuses against migrants and asylum seekers in some specific instances," and that "Colombia and Panama are failing to effectively protect the international human rights of migrants and asylum seekers transiting through the Darién Gap." Panamanian government officials responded by denying these claims, stating in a press conference, "We categorically reject the report presented by Human Rights Watch."

The coalition's findings, consistent with those of MSF and Human Rights Watch, paint a dismal picture of the journey through the Darién Gap and Panama, revealing a landscape fraught with violence, exploitation, and environmental hazards. Migrants and asylum seekers endure significant challenges, facing rampant abuse and exploitation at every turn. Cartels and other criminal elements, with the likely complicity of Panamanian SENAFRONT (National Border Service) officers, are responsible for systemic violence in the jungle, including widespread sexual assaults and frequent robberies.

Environmental hazards further compound border crossers' plight, with many suffering injuries, illnesses, and even death due to the treacherous conditions and lack of basic necessities like food and clean water. Exorbitant costs for guides and transport create financial burdens and endless opportunities for exploitation of people desperate to escape persecution, reunite with family, and seek better lives across international borders.

Migrants and asylum seekers who survive the hellish Darien jungle crossing find themselves stranded in overcrowded, poorly resourced government reception centers, where they endure further mistreatment at the hands of Panamanian officers. Fear of retaliation is pervasive, silencing both victims and international human rights groups who dare to speak out against these abuses. The government's crackdown on humanitarian aid and the criminalization of assistance leave migrants with little support, forcing them into even more dangerous situations. This oppressive environment perpetuates a cycle of exploitation and suffering, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive reforms and stronger protections for these vulnerable populations.

In June 2022, the United States and Panamanian governments, along with several other countries in the Americas, gathered in Los Angeles to affirm their "will to strengthen national, regional, and hemispheric efforts to create the conditions for safe, orderly, humane, and regular migration and to strengthen frameworks for international protection and cooperation." These governments committed to "protecting the safety and dignity of all migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless persons, regardless of their migratory status, and respecting their human rights and fundamental freedoms."

However, our research and first-hand encounters with migrants, asylum seekers, and humanitarian workers in Panama reveal that the Panamanian government has failed to uphold its commitments under this declaration. The conditions in the Darién Gap remain perilous,

with migrants facing severe environmental hazards and widespread abuses by criminal factions, including sexual violence, and receiving minimal protection or humanitarian aid. This situation starkly contrasts with the commitments made to ensure safe and humane migration.



Moreover, it is evident that both the Panamanian and United States governments have not lived up to their pledge to create "conditions for safe, orderly, humane, and regular migration through robust responsibility sharing across the hemisphere." There is an urgent need for these governments to reassess and reinforce their strategies, ensuring that their actions align with their declared commitments to protect the safety, dignity, and human rights of all migrants and asylum seekers.

KEY FINDINGS

VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

Migrants and asylum seekers frequently encounter theft and severe mistreatment, including widespread sexual violence, in the Darién jungle. Instances of robbery and assault are rampant, with many attributing complicity to Panamanian immigration officers. Harrowing examples abound: a man collapsed and died from a gunshot wound in front of his family after he was ambushed by armed robbers; a 17-year-old Venezuelan girl was sexually assaulted in front of her parents and siblings; armed men repeatedly robbed and assaulted an Ecuadorian father and daughter, taking their belongings and medications. Numerous individuals who were robbed in the jungle told the coalition they believe Panamanian immigration enforcement officers were complicit in some of these attacks, noting that the attackers carried the same weapons and equipment as the officers, and in some cases, the attacks occurred near where immigration enforcement officers were stationed. A Colombian asylum seeker recounted, "Military men stopped us, asked for our IDs, and when we didn't have them, they hit us and took our money."

ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARD

People crossing the Darien jungle endure severe environmental hazards including swift rivers, diseases from mosquitoes, and encounters with poisonous snakes. Cold weather, rain, and lack of food and clean water exacerbate the risks of injury and death. Examples include a Haitian woman and her son struggling with health issues exacerbated by the treacherous conditions and an Ecuadorian man suffering from a blister covering a quarter of his foot, making it difficult to walk. Numerous migrants reported seeing dead bodies along their journey.

EXORBITANT COSTS, EXPLOITATION, AND ABUSE IN RECEPTION CENTERS

The journey through the Darién Gap is financially taxing, with migrants paying significant sums for guides and transport. Costs range from \$170 to \$400 before even leaving Colombia,

and additional expenses are incurred throughout the journey. Those unable to pay for guides or transport face increased risks of robbery and assault. Government-operated reception centers are overcrowded, with inadequate food and medical care. Migrants are often forced to pay exorbitant bus fares to continue their journey, with no other viable options. Migrants at the Lajas Blancas government reception center reported being stranded due to inability to pay for bus fares, some waiting for over a month.

TENSION AND CLASHES WITH IMMIGRATION OFFICERS

Frequent clashes and abusive conduct by immigration officers exacerbate the harsh conditions in reception centers. Migrants and asylum seekers report disrespectful treatment and sanctions for speaking up. Videos sent to the coalition show protests met with force by immigration officers, including pepper spraying children. The March 2024 closure of the San Vicente government reception center following unrest and destruction is likely connected to escalating tensions over the price of buses and problematic conditions within the shelter. Witnesses' accounts suggest immigration police escalated the situation with excessive use of force, including pepper spraying a newborn baby in the face.



CRIMINALIZATION OF HUMANITARIAN AID AND ADVOCACY

Government crackdowns on humanitarian assistance have left many migrants without essential services. Private citizens and non-profit organizations are prohibited from providing aid, exacerbating the hardships faced by migrants. Migrants reported being denied water and basic assistance in the midst of excruciating heat due to government restrictions.

HORRORS IN THE JUNGLE

VIOLENCE AND ABUSE

During the multi-day trek through the Darién Gap, migrants and asylum seekers often encounter theft and severe mistreatment, including instances of sexual assault. Violence against migrants and asylum seekers in the Darien Gap appears to be systemic. The coalition heard accounts of individuals being beaten and robbed of all their belongings, including medications and baby food. Sexual violence has become increasingly brutal, where at times dozens of women are sexually assault at one time. In January and February 2024, Doctors Without Borders recorded 328 reports of sexual violence, compared with 676 in all of 2023. 113 sexual assaults occurred in only one week in February 2024. In addition, according to a survey conducted by the global network Mixed Migration Center, 97 percent of the 219 individuals interviewed in Costa Rica between July and September 2022 identified the Darién crossing as the most perilous segment of their journey. Migrants and asylum seekers recounted experiences of trauma, sickness, fatalities, robberies, sexual assaults, and other forms of physical violence. Similarly, UNHCR's interviews with over 1,380 people in the

Darién Gap between July 2022 and June 2023 revealed that more than 30 percent had encountered violence, robberies, and other abuses in the jungle, according to [Human Rights Watch](#).

Multiple individuals who were robbed in the jungle told the coalition they believe Panamanian immigration enforcement officers were complicit in some of these attacks, reasoning that the attackers carried the same weapons and other equipment as the officers, and in some cases, the attacks took place in close proximity to where immigration enforcement officers were stationed. A Colombian asylum seeker told the coalition, “Military men stopped us, asked for our IDs, and when we didn’t have them, they hit us and took our money.”

According to [Human Rights Watch](#) interviews, the typical pattern of these robberies involves the perpetrators ambushing their victims at gunpoint, forcing them to kneel or lie down, and demanding money. Often, they rummage through bags and backpacks, taking whatever belongings they find, including food, clothing, and footwear. In some instances, the criminals segregate victims by nationality or gender and force women to remove their clothes. Women recounted being sexually assaulted by these men, frequently under the guise of searching for concealed money, with some cases involving rape.

The coalition’s interviews are consistent with these accounts. Multiple migrants and asylum seekers recounted being assaulted, robbed of their cellphones, watches, money, or other belongings. They include:

- **Two women who had themselves survived sexual violence in the jungle reported that another woman who was with them was taken away by the assailants.**
- **A man collapsed to his death in front of his wife and child after armed robbers had shot the man in the chest,** according to an asylum seeker who witnessed the incident. “He endured a day walking with the bullet in his heart. The next day, he died. It was sad, very sad,” the asylum seeker told the coalition.
- **An Ecuadorian father and daughter were robbed and assaulted on multiple occasions in the jungle.** “They took our suitcases, money, and my daughter’s phone. They also took our medications,” the father told the coalition.
- **A Colombian man and the group with whom he was traveling were robbed by armed men who strip searched and raped some of the women.**
- **A Venezuelan couple traveling with young children said armed men surrounded their group and stole all their money, food, and other belongings at gunpoint.** They also said the assailants “touched the women in their intimate parts.” The family arrived in Bajo Chiquito, the indigenous village located on the edge of the jungle, with no money or food. The father told the coalition “we’ll have to work to be able to advance. We’ll sell whatever we can in the street.”
- **A Colombian asylum seeker and his cousin were robbed and beaten three times in the jungle.** “They took our money, gold jewelry, and everything we had. Those who resisted were beaten or threatened,” he said.

- **A 17-year-old Venezuelan girl was sexually assaulted in front of her parents and siblings,** according to an asylum seeker who witnessed the attack. He added, “another woman was assaulted in front of her husband and children. This kind of abuse happens often, and we have no way to defend ourselves.”

Individuals who reported being attacked and robbed told the coalition the attacks took place on the Panama side. This is consistent with Human Rights Watch’s report that most robberies take place on the Panamanian side of the border and that on the Colombian side, the Gulf cartel, an organized criminal group that controls large swaths of territory in the region, forbids abuse of migrants along the trail.

Environmental hazards like landslides, high heat and humidity, mountainous terrain, and rushing rivers have injured and killed many migrants and asylum seekers attempting to cross the Darién Gap. Interviewees described numerous environmental hazards, including swift rivers, diseases carried by mosquitoes, and poisonous snakes. Cold weather and rain further complicate the journey, making it extremely difficult. The coalition observed migrants and asylum seekers arriving in Bajo Chiquito with soaking wet clothing and belongings. "We could not sleep because we never knew if the river was going to rise or not," a Venezuelan woman told the coalition. The scarcity of food and fresh water adds to the danger, especially since many have been robbed of their supplies. Multiple interviewees reported becoming sick from drinking contaminated river water. "In the jungle, we had no clean water. **We had to drink the same water that the dead bodies were in,**" a Haitian woman shared with the coalition.

Dangerous environmental conditions have caused or aggravated injuries to people crossing the Darien Gap. The coalition heard several accounts about the treacherous terrain and observed people that had just made it out of the jungle limping and having difficulty walking. In Bajo Chiquito, the coalition interviewed numerous migrants and asylum seekers who became injured in the jungle. They include:

- **A Colombian man who had emerged from the jungle several hours earlier with a giant blister covering roughly a quarter of his foot said it was “very painful” and difficult to walk.** He said that a woman who had been walking with his group broke her ankle and could no longer walk. He does not know what happened to the woman and her family members.
- A Haitian woman and her son struggled to pass through the jungle due to multiple health issues. “We walked for four days through the jungle. It was not easy because of my weight. I felt like I couldn't continue. On the last day, I couldn't take it anymore. My friend encouraged me to keep going, saying, 'We will make it.'...My son is also sick. He has convulsions. He needs a lot of medication, and I can't walk much because of my condition,” she said.
- **A 53-year-old Ecuadoran man who had been injured by gang members in his home country struggled to complete the trek through the jungle after armed men stole the medication he needed for hypertension and diabetes.**

- **A young woman who was limping severely as she disembarked from a boat in Bajo Chiquito told a member of the coalition that the walk through the jungle aggravated a previous injury to her femur, causing her to fall behind. After becoming separated from her group, the young woman was raped.**

Migrants and asylum seekers suffer broken bones or dislocated joints, drown, or die during the journey. Authorities often struggle to identify bodies and determine causes of death due to decomposition. Reports received by [Human Rights Watch](#) suggest instances of decapitation, dismemberment, and other brutalities inflicted by armed individuals. The IOM's Missing Migrants Project has [documented](#) at least 300 disappearances in the Darién between 2021 and May 2024. These are likely significant undercounts, as many deaths and disappearances are never reported. Many migrants have reported encountering human remains along their journey, with some seeing multiple bodies. UNHCR's October 2023 [report](#) indicated that nearly half of surveyed migrants witnessed between 1 and 15 bodies.

Indeed, most of the individuals the coalition interviewed reported seeing dead bodies as they passed through the jungle or, in a few very disturbing cases, witnessing people dying firsthand. For instance:

- **A baby slipped from its mother's swaddle, which was wrapped around her body, and tragically fell to its presumed death. Overcome with despair, the mother then threw herself to her own demise,** according to an asylum seeker who witnessed the incident.
- **An Ecuadorian father and daughter said they saw at least 10 bodies of people who perished in the jungle, including a couple inside a tent.** "There were dead bodies in the river, in tents, a couple with a child. Some were bitten by snakes or couldn't continue due to exhaustion. It was a desperate situation," the father said.
- **A Colombian asylum seeker said a pregnant woman he assisted died in the jungle.** "There are many dead people, including pregnant women. I personally helped a pregnant woman, and I was told she died. She was left dead in the area," he said.
- **A Haitian woman saw at least three dead bodies in the jungle, including a man who had died recently after falling into the river and hitting his head on a rock.** "The man was just left there. It was terrible," she said.

EXORBITANT COSTS

The passage of migrants and asylum seekers through the Darién Gap generates tremendous profits for a wide range of actors. Human Rights Watch [reports](#) that migrant flows through the Darién region generate tens of millions of dollars a year, and that armed groups control every step of the Darién Gap. On the Colombian side, the Gulf Cartel keeps track of migrants' and asylum seekers' payments to cross the Darién Gap by providing wristbands or stickers on their passports. Migrants and asylum seekers reported to the coalition that they had paid approximately \$170 to \$400 before leaving the port in Colombia. They are then transferred to indigenous Panamanian guides at the border.

Most people who cross the Darién Gap pay for a guide ([UNHCR](#) estimates that 70% of those

who crossed the Darién paid for a guide from July 2022-January 2023). The coalition's interviews support Human Rights Watch's observation that "The level of risk to which migrants and asylum seekers are exposed during the journey depends in large part on the route they can afford." Some individuals who paid for guides through Panama reported that they made it through the jungle without being robbed, while generally, those who did not pay for guides or paid less reported experiencing more frequent robberies or attacks.

UNHCR estimates that the journey across the jungle takes approximately 4 days, which is consistent with the coalition's interviews, though Human Rights Watch found that the journey can take up to 12 days. Human Rights Watch reported that the journey usually begins with a boat ride from Necoclí, Colombia, where migrants and asylum seekers pay \$40 (more than twice the price charged to tourists). Those with fewer financial resources may depart from

Turbo, which is cheaper. Upon reaching Comegallina, migrants and asylum seekers enlist Indigenous people who operate small wooden canoes, referred to as "piraguas," to ferry them to the Indigenous village of Bajo Chiquito and subsequently to the Migrant Reception Station (Estación de Recepción Migratoria, ERM) at Lajas Blancas. This is consistent with the coalition's interviews. Migrants and asylum seekers the coalition spoke with in Baja Chiquito reported paying \$20 for the passage. A young woman said that she and her partner could only afford canoe passage for one, so the young woman arrived by canoe and was waiting for her partner to arrive by foot.

Upon arrival in Panamanian reception centers, migrants and asylum seekers face additional financial burdens. Under Panama's "humanitarian flow" strategy, the movement of migrants and asylum seekers is regulated by Panamanian authorities, who facilitate their transport across the country to the Costa Rican border. Human Rights Watch reports that during their transit through Panama, migrants must pay approximately \$140 per person, including children and babies, for transportation, which includes two boat rides in Darién province and a bus ride to Costa Rica. This fee is burdensome for many migrants and asylum seekers, who often face severe economic hardships.

The coalition's interviews indicate that the Panamanian government contracts private buses to transport migrants directly from Lajas Blancas to Costa Rica. The journey takes about 12 hours. Interviewees reported that the bus fare is \$60 per person, including small children, which must be paid in cash to Panamanian authorities. Interviewees reported that government authorities had warned them that they would be detained and deported if they attempted to leave the reception facility by foot. Thus, paying for a government bus is the only option to leave the reception center. And there is little aid or flexibility for those who cannot afford the fee: several individuals staying at Lajas Blancas told the coalition that several days earlier, Panamanian officials had removed a woman and her children from a bus because the family was short one dollar from the required fee. A family that had been staying at San Vicente reported a comparable situation: "The conditions in San Vicente were terrible. We had no money to continue, and the bus cost 60 USD per person. There was no way to earn money in the camp; they didn't allow us to work," the father said.

Those with the cash to pay for buses are often able to leave for the Costa Rica border the same day they arrive at Lajas Blancas. But individuals who arrive at the reception center who cannot afford to pay the bus fare wait indefinitely for other options without knowing when or if they will be able to leave. Some are able to receive payments via Western Union electronic transfers, but there is no facility nearby to receive such payments, and interviewees reported having to pay an exorbitant 30% fee to middlemen who travel to the city to receive the payments for them, on top of fees charged by the company facilitating the transfer. This situation has inflamed tensions among migrants and Panamanian government authorities, which the following section details.



RECEPTION IN PANAMA

PROBLEMATIC CONDITIONS IN RECEPTION CENTERS

Migrants and asylum seekers reported horrendous conditions in government-operated reception centers in the Darién region. Human Rights Watch found that “Panamanian authorities make little effort to ensure the rights to food, water, and health care for people living in the Indigenous communities where migrants and asylum seekers first emerge from the Darién, for those people crossing through this region, and for those in the migrant reception stations. The insufficient support available for migrants and asylum seekers in this region in particular is mostly provided by UN agencies and humanitarian non-governmental organizations.” The coalition’s findings are consistent with these observations.

At the time the coalition visited the Darién region, one of the reception centers, San Vicente, had been closed due to unrest the previous week. The closure of San Vicente led to crowded conditions in the other reception center in the region, Lajas Blancas. Panamanian government representatives denied the coalition access to the interior of Lajas Blancas, citing security concerns. The team was permitted to conduct interviews outside the center, where hundreds of migrants and asylum seekers were gathered in and around makeshift wooden shelters.

The coalition interviewed migrants and asylum seekers from Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, and Haiti. Interviewees reported that there were also individuals and families at the facility from Syria, India, Ghana, and Honduras, among other countries. Nearly all those interviewed at Lajas Blancas shared similar complaints of overcrowding, inadequate food, and insufficient medical care at the facility. Some families had sick children. Several people staying in the center said they were provided insufficient, poor quality food. Some had resorted to hunting and eating wild vultures that stalk the premises.

The Panama-based nonprofit organization Red Franciscana Para Migrantes, who accompanied the coalition, reported the following general observations about conditions in

las blancas,

“In general, the profile of the migrants at that time included young people, men, women, and many children. Their complaints were mainly about the lack of money to continue the journey, scarce food, health issues (primarily gastrointestinal diseases), and difficulty obtaining cash. Some migrants approached us and complained about mistreatment by the authorities, stating that the food brought from Panama by the station’s providers smelled bad and was inedible, causing intestinal problems for those who ate it. Another complaint was about the water, which caused diarrhea when consumed.”

Many asylum seekers and migrants arrive at Lajas Blancas with little or no money due to conditions in their home countries, or, in many cases, because they were robbed and dispossessed of their belongings as they passed through the jungle. Many do not have family members capable of sending them money through electronic transfers. For instance, a young Colombian man told the coalition he and his brother could not afford to pay the \$60 bus fare to reach Costa Rica after they had been robbed and beaten in the jungle.

In Addition, Red Franciscana Para Migrantes Reported:

“Some women mentioned that they were raped and assaulted in the jungle and had no money to continue. It was noted that there are no money transfer services like Western Union. They said that Panamanian moneylenders outside the Lajas Blancas station facilitated money transfers from their families but charged a 30% commission, which they found very high. The atmosphere outside was chaotic, with migrants frustrated and asking for support to continue.”

Those who cannot afford to leave may be stranded in the reception center for extensive periods of time. For example, a pregnant woman told the coalition she had been stranded in the facility for one week. Another Venezuelan woman said she had been in the facility for 15 days. A few individuals told us that they have been stranded in Lajas Blancas for eight to 10 days. An Ecuadorian father and son told the coalition they had been stranded for more than a month.

Some were desperate to continue the journey north on foot. However, interviewees reported that immigration police had warned them that they would be detained and deported if they attempted to cross Panama by foot. With few other options, some migrants and asylum seekers attempt to walk through Panama. A Venezuelan woman told the coalition, through a voice message, that she had left the camp along with a group desperate to move on from Lajas Blancas. The coalition lost contact with the woman and does not know if the group managed to traverse the country successfully.

TENSION AND CLASHES WITH IMMIGRATION OFFICERS

Problematic conditions and few options for those without the funds to leave have fueled tense conditions in Darién reception centers. Interviewees reported frequent clashes with immigration enforcement officers, who were visible patrolling the area with large guns. Many reported abusive conduct by immigration officers in the camps. “The guards treated us very rudely, especially when we lined up for food. They were very disrespectful,” and Ecuadorian man told the coalition. A young Colombian man also reported mistreatment:

“They treat us like we are nothing...When receiving food, I was sent back twice because they said I cut in line. That day, I didn’t eat. I complained to the immigration officials, but they did nothing...If you speak up or point out any mistreatment, they sanction you. They have the right to treat us however they want, but we cannot defend ourselves.”

After the coalition left Lajas Blancas, migrants and asylum seekers sent videos to a member of the coalition appearing to show a protest outside the facility. Videos depict chaotic scenes involving migrants and asylum seekers recounting grievances about shelter conditions and the cost of buses. Officers appear to respond with force, physically restraining individuals and pepper spraying a large group of people, including children. The coalition was later informed that approximately 12 individuals were taken from the crowd. Witnesses believe the individuals were targeted because they had been filming the events. For at least 36 hours, family members of those who were taken told the coalition that officials provided no information about their relatives’ whereabouts.

The sister of a Venezuelan man who was taken by SENAFRONT officers told a member of the coalition that two days after her brother was taken, she received a phone call from a man who said he was from the criminal prosecutor’s office. The man said that her brother had been accused of property damage after the windows of a bus were smashed during the incident. The brother spoke briefly on the call. The man told the sister she would need to send a wire transfer of \$125 to secure her brother’s release; and that if she did not send the money, her brother would be imprisoned for 28 months. The family managed to gather the money and send it as requested. However, the brother was not released; he was transferred to the custody of immigration enforcement agents, who told the family that he would be deported.

More than a month after the incident, the Venezuelan man remained in Panamanian government custody, where he has endured severe beatings and mistreatment. The man’s sister told a member of the coalition, “my brother is not doing well. I speak to him every 15 days and yesterday I talked to him...they treat people very badly there.” The Venezuelan man told his sister that the other people who were taken from Lajas Blancas during the protest were also being deported and were detained with him.

In late May 2024, after spending more than a month in horrible conditions in detention, the Venezuelan man arrived home with severe injuries, which he said were from beatings by Panamanian officials while in custody. His sister told a member of the coalition,

“My brother is finally home, thank God. **The guards inside beat him so badly that he has serious injuries on his body. He was crying when he came, recounting how they would strip them, tie their hands, hang them up, and brutally hit them on the back with sticks and also on the legs, which are swollen... My brother was hit so hard in his testicles that now he has a lump and we think he’ll be unable to have children. And on his back, they caused several fractures...**He said that they couldn't say anything because it would make things worse. It's not fair, the ordeal he went through, locked up without communication, and every time they spoke, someone was there beside them, they couldn't speak openly. He was desperate to get out, and if he endured all them, they couldn't speak openly. He was desperate to get out, and if he endured all that, it was because he wanted to see us again. But it's not fair the condition in which he arrived; he was too thin, too pale. Right now, we are giving him vitamins, injecting so many things to help him recover because he was sick with a cough that makes him vomit every time he coughs.”

TENSIONS AND UNREST IN SAN VICENTE

The coalition heard conflicting accounts of the reasons for San Vicente’s closure. A disruption resulting in the destruction of vehicles and tents set aflame was widely reported in news media. The incident resulted in the arrest of 45 migrants and asylum seekers who were accused of property damage. Associated Press and other major news organizations largely repeated the account of events recounted in a statement by SENAFRONT (the Panamanian National Border Service), which attributed the unrest and property damage to a dispute among migrants:

“Last night, a dispute between two irregular migrant women over a tent was reported, in which the partners of both migrants intervened, leading to a tumultuous fight between the different groups present there. This situation was addressed by units [SENAFRONT]. However, approximately 250 other migrants turned against the SENAFRONT units, prompting a greater deployment of our units in order to safeguard the lives of others.”

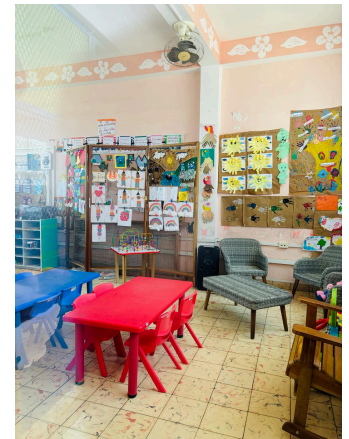
However, conversations the coalition had with witnesses suggest there is more to the story. An Ecuadorian father and daughter who had been staying at San Vicente during the incident and provided additional details. The father and daughter reported that an altercation indeed broke out between two women over a tent, but that immigration police escalated the situation by deploying pepper spray. The man said,

“The authorities from SENAFRONT came to separate the women who were arguing. They used tear gas and it hit the baby, a newborn. The baby started choking. Everyone panicked because the gas was so strong. The whole camp was in chaos. The baby was a newborn. This incident caused everyone to react, and they started breaking windows and setting fires...We were scared, hiding under beds, and later moved to sleep in bathrooms.”

The man added that SENAFRONT officers removed what he estimated to be 40 to 50 people from the camp, “including those who were innocent,” and he believes the officers targeted people who had been recording the incident with their phones. These claims mirror observations by witnesses of the unrest in Lajas Blancas, who told the coalition that officers targeted people who were filming the incident for removal. In addition, the Ecuadoran family members told the coalition they believe the unrest was motivated, in part, by frustrations among those stranded in the camp who are unable to pay for buses. “I think [the Panamanian government] should be more sensitive to migrants, provide buses for those without money, and help us move forward,” the father said.

CRIMINALIZATION OF HUMANITARIAN AID AND ADVOCACY

Multiple advocates interviewed in the Darien and in Chiriqui reported that government crackdown on humanitarian assistance to migrants heavily affected their ability to remain operational in the country, leaving many refugees without access to domestic or international protection and basic provisions such as food and shelter. A local church group located near the Darien, who had previously provided shelter and food services to refugees in transit, told the coalition they were forced to stop operations after the Panamanian government criminalized non-state shelter operations for migrants. Panamanian service providers informed the coalition that it is also illegal for private citizens to provide migrants with transportation. As a result, thousands are forced to make their way through inhospitable terrain, with the speed and safety of their transit dependent entirely on their access to cash.



Some migrants and asylum seekers the coalition interviewed were aware that Panamanians were prohibited from providing aid. A Colombian man told the coalition,

“When we arrived in the boats, there was too much sun, and they didn’t give us water. This path is terrible. It’s pure sun, no shade, no water, and everything is dry. Because of the lack of water and extreme heat, many die along the way. The government prohibits people from here from helping us when we come, that’s why there are many deaths. And if you go to the village and ask them, they’ll tell you they’re prohibited from helping us immigrants, and if they see them helping us, they’ll literally fine them or put them in jail. Because on the road, a truck that we stopped to ask for water and to get out told us that here the soldiers... that’s what they said, the soldiers forbid the people passing through that route from giving us water or helping us in any way, or even giving us a ride in their cars.”

An Ecuadorian man expressed similar sentiments: “There is a lot of mistreatment and discrimination. Migrants suffer a lot, and it’s a struggle to even get basic necessities like water. In my country, when Venezuelans came, we helped them. Here, it’s different,” he told the coalition.

Panama is not alone in its efforts to restrict the ability of organizations and individuals to provide aid to migrants. Across the Americas, aid providers are being targeted, to the detriment of migrants and asylum seekers. For example, in the United States, states like Texas have enacted or are considering anti-migration laws that criminalize the distribution of aid, equating it with human smuggling and imposing severe penalties. In late 2023, Texas passed two laws, both known as SB4, targeting refugees and advocacy groups. The first SB4 (88-4), signed in November 2023, empowers state and local police to enforce immigration laws, detain suspected non-citizens, and charge them with “illegal entry” into Texas, punishable by up to six months in jail and deportation. Re-entry can lead to 10-20 years in prison. Although currently stalled in litigation, this law has inspired similar legislation in other states and fueled xenophobic narratives. The second SB4, effective March 2024, increases penalties for smuggling and operating ‘stash houses,’ targeting those providing shelter to undocumented individuals. Texas Governor Abbott’s comments during the bill signing indicated that the law aims to target migrants seeking safety.



These measures, along with extensive border militarization, aim to intimidate activists and NGOs, harming public safety and exacerbating the vulnerability of migrant communities. The laws lack exceptions for children, crime victims, or asylum seekers. Furthermore, Texas has sought to apply these laws internationally, accusing Save the Children- a leading humanitarian organization working in over 100 countries- of smuggling despite a lack of evidence. These actions weaponize migration to instill fear and propagate false narratives of crime. This trend towards shutting down borders and disregarding international laws for political gain is mirrored in Panama’s recent actions, reflecting a broader shift in the hemisphere’s approach to migration.

CHALLENGES BEYOND THE DARIEN

In addition to criminalization of humanitarian relief, externalization of state borders and bilateral deterrence-focused agreements between states present some of the gravest challenges to refugees, asylum seekers, and persons on the move in the Americas. Those who make it beyond the Darien meet the U.S. border thousands of miles before they ever see the U.S. border wall thanks to the launching of CBPOne in January 2023, a cellphone application utilizing automated technology to enforce unlawful metering at the U.S./Mexico border. Although first launched as a platform for virtual port of entry business requests, the application is now touted as the sole means of properly accessing asylum in the U.S. The application is geo-zoned and designed to allow access to new applicants once they reach the latitudinal zone of Mexico City. Thousands of individuals interviewed in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, by Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center staff members (who separately co authored this report), reported technical difficulties with the app, in addition to language barriers, educational barriers, and sheer randomness of appointment designations, with some waiting 2 weeks and others waiting longer than six months.

Although U.S. efforts to control migration as far south as Panama is not new (2015 saw the U.S. enter into agreements with Panama, Colombia, and Costa Rica to restrict the movement of African, Asian, and Caribbean migrants), efforts to monopolize the technology and processing structures of the Panamanian borders are on the rise. In 2022, US-Panama cooperation was reinforced through the Bilateral Arrangement on Migration and Protection, further integrating migration management processes between Panama and the United States by adopting US-style border policies that increase border policing and the illegal detention of asylum seekers. The overcrowding, desperation, and harmful conditions we witnessed and heard about are a direct result of these efforts.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

TO THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT:

While recognizing that significant policy changes are necessary from the governments of Panama, Colombia, and others to address the human rights abuses and humanitarian crises facing people crossing the Darien Gap, this report focuses on recommendations for the United States. Its authors, being U.S.-based advocates and experts, emphasize the need for reform in U.S. policies that currently restrict the movement of individuals throughout Latin America. These restrictive policies fail to provide safe and legal pathways for people fleeing violence, poverty, or persecution, thereby creating opportunities for smuggling networks and criminal organizations to exploit migrants and asylum seekers for monetary gain and human trafficking. U.S. policies, such as the Circumvention of Lawful Pathways rule, have also complicated asylum laws and made them less accessible, placing significant barriers for those seeking refuge at the U.S. southern border. The increased militarization and restrictive asylum protocols hinder many who need protection.

The coalition calls on the U.S. government to take a leadership role in ensuring the protection of migrants' human rights and in creating safe, orderly, and humane migration alternatives. It advocates for the establishment of viable pathways for migrants who cannot afford to wait for a parole process or do not have the necessary documentation or sponsors required by some programs. Particularly vulnerable are those migrants with the fewest resources, who are often overlooked by current policies.

Given that the global number of forcibly displaced and stateless individuals reached 110 million by mid-2023, the report stresses that U.S. expansion of safe migration pathways, family reunification options, and work visa availability is crucial. The number of visas available for non-immediate family-based petitions and employment-based petitions have not been significantly updated since 1990. As of November 1, 2023, there were just over 4 million family members waiting in the visa cap backlog—not including the derivative family members who are also eligible to immigrate to the United States. There were a similar number of people waiting in the employment-based backlogs. Visa caps put people in unrealistic decades-long waits for an immigrant visa.

- While in Panama, the coalition spoke to a Haitian woman and her son. Both had been receiving medical care after a bus accident a year ago en route to the United States. The Haitian woman, D., initially left Haiti in 2010 after an earthquake made it impossible to continue to live there. At the time, she also filed for an immigrant visa through her U.S. citizen father. D. first traveled to Ecuador, then Brazil. She was unable to get a job due to her immigration status and could no longer wait for a visa to become available to immigrate through her father's petition. She traveled north and faced terrible violence as she walked through the Darien jungle. On her way to Costa Rica on a state-sanctioned bus, she experienced an accident that required several surgeries on her back. Luckily, her son only received minor injuries. A visa became available after 13 years; however, D. is facing bureaucratic delays as she transfers her case to Panama.

Instead of investing funding and resources to increase border enforcement, which places migrants and asylum seekers in vulnerable positions without addressing the root causes of migration, the United States should seek to create and expand alternative safe pathways for individuals and families to enter the United States. The United States Congress should increase funding to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services and the Executive Office of Immigration Review to reduce processing delays. The wait time for a family visa could be a minimum of several years. To address visa cap backlogs, the government should increase visa staff and remove overall and per-country caps on both employment and family-based petitions. In addition, to boost the United States economy, another viable solution is to expand temporary work visas with a path to lawful status after a set number of years residing in the United States.

President Biden should leverage his executive authority to expand alternative pathways for migrants to enter the United States, moving away from enforcement-heavy regional policies. This includes utilizing parole authority under U.S. immigration law pursuant to 8 U.S.C. § 1182(d)(5)(A), which allows for the temporary entry of non-citizens on urgent humanitarian grounds, as successfully demonstrated with Ukrainian refugees. Additionally, the Family Reunification Parole Program should be expanded beyond its current invitation-only basis to include more nationalities and individuals with pending family petitions. Safe Mobility Offices, which provide immigration information and referrals, should be established in more countries. Furthermore, increasing refugee caps and expanding the Welcome Corps Program, which allows Americans to sponsor refugees, are essential steps to address ongoing displacement trends and create safer, more humane immigration pathways.

TO THE PANAMANIAN GOVERNMENT:

The coalition strongly supports Human Rights Watch's recommendations to the Panamanian government for improving protection for people crossing the Darién Gap. These recommendations include collaborating with the UN and humanitarian NGOs to create a comprehensive contingency plan that addresses the needs of specific vulnerable groups.

They also suggest appointing a senior official to coordinate the response, modifying the "controlled flow" strategy to respect the right to seek asylum, and enhancing the capabilities of institutions that ensure accountability for abuses and provide necessary humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, the recommendations emphasize the need to facilitate humanitarian work in Indigenous communities and migrant reception centers, improve living conditions and healthcare in these areas, and reform reception centers according to UN guidelines to accommodate the high number of migrants and asylum seekers.

The coalition also supports the calls of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) to address the rising crimes and impunity faced by migrants in the Darién Gap. MSF has repeatedly condemned the lack of protection for migrants, particularly those needing urgent medical treatment for sexual violence as they emerge from the forest. MSF urges the Panamanian authorities to redouble their efforts to protect the most vulnerable people, especially families, women, and children in desperate situations. It is unacceptable that these conditions continue to persist, and immediate action is necessary to prevent further suffering and provide adequate support to those in need.

CONCLUSION

The Darién Gap has become a perilous route for hundreds of thousands of migrants and asylum seekers fleeing crises in their home countries. Despite regional commitments to create safe and humane migration conditions, the reality in the Darién Gap is marked by severe human rights abuses, including violence, exploitation, and environmental hazards. Current deterrence strategies, such as strict visa requirements and militarized borders, push individuals towards these dangerous routes, leaving them vulnerable to further abuses. The findings of the coalition underscore the systemic violence and exploitation faced by migrants and asylum seekers, with minimal protection or humanitarian aid available. Additionally, there is ample evidence of Panamanian government officers being complicit in these abuses.

At a minimum, governments should prioritize the preservation of life as a top priority. Panama should permit Doctors Without Borders to resume its services to migrants and asylum seekers. The U.S. government, along with other regional authorities, bears significant responsibility in addressing human rights abuses in the Darién Gap. Rather than focusing on border enforcement, which exacerbates migrants' vulnerabilities, there is an urgent need for policies that provide safe, legal pathways for those seeking refuge. Ensuring the protection of migrants' human rights and providing humanitarian aid is crucial to addressing the ongoing displacement and suffering in the Darién Gap. Comprehensive reforms and stronger protections are essential to uphold the dignity and safety of all migrants and asylum seekers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was researched and written by Julia Neusner, Margaret Cargioli, Jennifer Babaie, Adriel Orozco, Heidi Cerneka, Tom Cartwright, Crystal Sandoval, Karla Barber and Kim Lamberty. Rafael Lara, Renee Garcia, and Vivi Cianca provided additional research. We thank our colleagues from Quixote Center, Red Franciscana Para Migrantes, Medalla Milagrosa, Red Clamor, and other organizations and individuals who assisted with our research. We thank the asylum seekers and migrants who bravely shared their stories in hopes of bettering the system for all those who seek protection and refuge across international borders.

