Mixed Movements
Darién and Chiriquí

June 2023

Context

By the end of June, nearly 200,000 people had crossed the Darien jungle in 2023. This is four times more than those recorded during the same period last year. Despite a slight decrease in irregular entries in May (38,962 people) and June (29,722), authorities still consider that the 2022 record number of nearly 250,000 people crossing could be doubled by the end of the year.

Despite Panama’s bilateral efforts, the National Director of the National Migration Service (SNM) stated that the country faces an unprecedented mixed movement crisis, and that from 2019 to date, the Government has spent over 65 million dollars to provide humanitarian assistance, including food, shelter, and primary healthcare.

Authorities launched the "Escudo" campaign and operation "Choco" in the border sectors of the Guna Yala indigenous region and the Darien province. These interventions focus on disrupting transnational organized crime operations, maintaining territorial control of land and maritime borders, and protecting the environment and natural resources. Moreover, health officials announced the provision of HIV tests to people entering Darien irregularly for early diagnosis, treatment, and mental health support.

UNHCR monthly protection monitoring exercise shows that one out of ten interviewed left their country of origin due to threats or attacks directed against them or their families. Around 65 per cent fled due to fear of violence and general insecurity in their country, and one out of three experienced mistreatment or abuse during the journey through the jungle.

UNHCR’s Response

PROTECTION

UNHCR supports the State’s response at the Temporary Reception Centres (ETRMs) and host communities in Darien and Chiriqui. Together with the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), UNHCR provides information on the asylum system in Panama and assists those in need of international protection with their refugee status application.

In June, UNHCR, the National Office for Attention of Refugees (ONPAR), and the Ombudsman Office trained 60 officials of the SNM on international protection and statelessness prevention in Progreso, a border community between Panama and Costa Rica.

As part of the Human Mobility Group, UNHCR conducted training on fire prevention for 15 border control officials and local NGOs’ staff at the University of Panama Regional University Centre in Darién. The Agency also participated in the II Forum on Communication and Migration organized by the Regional Conference on Migration (CRM) Secretariat. UNHCR briefed over 60 Latin-American journalists on its social media projects "Confia en el Jaguar" (Trust the Jaguar) and "Confia en el Tucán" (Trust the Toucan), highlighting the positive impacts of providing reliable and trustworthy information to refugees, asylum-seeking, and others on the move.

COMMEMORATING THE WORLD REFUGEE DAY

In Alto Playona, an indigenous Emberá-Wounaan host community, UNHCR organized football and basketball matches for asylum-seekers, refugees, and local community members. Together with NRC, HIAS, the Panamanian Red Cross (CRP), RET, and the Pan-American Development Foundation (PADF), UNHCR hosted a community fair to provide information on international protection, gender-based violence (GBV) prevention, and primary and psychosocial healthcare services.

In Darien, the Agency showcased the movie "The Swimmers” in the Regional University Center of the University of Panama, fostering social cohesion and raising awareness of the challenges refugees face in their search for protection. Local authorities, NGOs, students, and teachers participated in the activity and wrote solidarity messages for refugees and asylum-seekers.

In Chiriquí, UNHCR hosted a painting workshop in the ETRM Los Planes de Gualaca under the theme “Hope Away from Home.” The participants’ art pieces depicted their stories and were later showcased at UNHCR’s community fair. At the fair, refugee and asylum-seeking entrepreneurs had the opportunity to display and sell their products.

Key Achievements

- UNHCR and NRC provided information to some 260 people on the asylum system in Panama and assisted one woman staying in Darien with her asylum application.
- UNHCR, through CRP, provided primary health care to 2,334 refugees and migrants at the Government’s temporary reception centers in Darien and Chiriquí.
- UNHCR reached out to nearly 400 people with information on the journey risks in the ETRMs and reception points in Darién and Chiriquí.
- UNHCR donated 2,250 mosquito nets, to the SNM, for its distribution at Darien’s ETRMs and other reception points.
- UNHCR Panama’s Help Page registered 30,067 visits, and 52 people contacted UNHCR through the Agency’s Chatbot.
- Through its social media campaign “Confía en el Tucán”, and since April 2023, UNHCR has released 93 digital publications, reaching 120,238 visualizations on Tik Tok and Facebook, with 12,796 engagements as of 30 June 2023.