Mixed Movements Through Darién 2022

Context

Panama is facing one of the most challenging mixed movements crises of the decade. At the border with Colombia, an unprecedented number of refugees and migrants risk their lives in the inhospitable and dangerous Darién Gap, to pursue their journey northwards seeking protection and better opportunities.

As of 30 September 2022, 151,582 people have entered irregularly by this route, surpassing the already record figure of people crossing through Darién during the whole 2021 (133,726). In the month of September alone, over 48,200 people in transit were registered. Venezuelans represent 71 per cent of the total population on the move. Most of them lack resources to continue their journey and are constantly subject to violence and crimes like theft, robbery, sexual assault and human trafficking. By the beginning of October, more than 8,000 refugees and migrants were staying at the Migratory Reception Centers (ERM in its Spanish acronym) of San Vicente, Lajas Blancas, and other informal reception points in Canaan Membrillo and Bajo Chiquito.

The last UNHCR monthly protection monitoring exercise, shows that two out of ten people left their country of origin due to personal or family threats, as well as generalized violence. Around 10 per cent of those interviewed were traveling with pregnant and lactating women, and as of 30 September 2022, a total of 11 children were reportedly born during the crossing of the jungle.

The Government of Panama has reiterated the country’s commitment to provide shelter and humanitarian assistance to people in mixed movements, but has expressed concern about its response capacity, asking the cooperation of all international, regional and local response actors involved to find durable solutions and strengthen access to protection mechanisms.

UNHCR’s Response

PROTECTION

Since September 2022, UNHCR leads the local protection working group in Meteti, providing information on the risks of the route and the asylum system in Panama, as well as coordinating the response plan and strategies required in situ with the local authorities. The group consists of UN agencies, international and local NGOs.

UNHCR monitoring exercises continued at the Migratory Reception Centres, as well as in transit and host communities. In September, UNHCR met with the community leaders at Canaan Membrillo, with other indigenous authorities and officers of the National Border Service (SENAFRONT), Ministry of Health and National Migration Service, to evaluate the protection needs of the refugee, migrant and host communities for the provision of tailored technical assistance to strengthen the gender-based violence (GBV) prevention and response, as well as the age, gender and diversity approach. UNHCR, through HIAs, is present at Los Planes de Gualaca, in Chiriquí, providing mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) to people in need of psychosocial assistance related to traumatic experiences during the jungle crossing.

1 Source: National Migration Service
2 Source: Ministry of Public Security
HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

In September, UNHCR and partner Panamanian Red Cross (CRP), provided primary health care to over 1,478 men and 742 women in the ERMs of San Vicente and Lajas Blancas, making a total of 2,200 refugees and migrants who received first aid assistance. Of those, 230 were pregnant women and 354 were children.

UNHCR also conducted a joint mission with the Ministry of Government and the National Office for the Attention of Refugees (ONPAR) in Darien where core relief items (CRIs) were distributed to some 400 refugee and vulnerable families in Meteti, as well as hard-to-reach communities of Yaviza and Riocito.

Key Achievements

- In September 2022, UNHCR and partners, reached out to 1,329 persons with information on the journey risks, including an estimated 70 per cent of the people registered at Canaan Membrillo reception point.

- A total of 21 people who expressed an interest received information on the asylum system in Panama, adding up to 371 people in 2022.

- More than 186 officials of the National Border Service in Darién were trained on international protection (169 men and 17 women), reaching a total of 516 persons trained in 2022.

- 2,200 persons received primary health care and first aid in Darien’s ERM San Vicente and Lajas Blancas through UNHCR and partner Panamanian Red Cross.

- UNHCR donated and installed 14 large tents (10 in ERM San Vicente, three in Canaan Membrillo and one in ERM Lajas Blancas) for the National Border Service (SENAFRONT) and the National Migration Service, to protect people from harsh weather conditions at reception points.

- UNHCR supported a total of 35 persons from India, Afghanistan, and China with professional interpretation services to guarantee their access to basic services and protection mechanisms.

- At the ERM Los Planes de Gualaca, in Chiriquí, a total of 417 persons received Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) related to traumatic experiences crossing the jungle.

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