



Mixed Movements Darién

February 2023

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Context

February was marked by the most **tragic traffic accident** in Panama's history. On 15 February, a bus that departed from Darien with **66 passengers** crashed near the Temporary Migratory Reception Centre (ETRM) **Los Planes de Gualaca in Chiriquí**. Authorities confirmed that **42 people died**, mostly Ecuadorians, Haitians, and Venezuelans. Although officials are still investigating, some witnesses and survivors indicated the dangerous road, high speed, and capacity overload as the reasons that might have caused this accident.

In the following ten days, **a second accident** involving a bus leaving Darien's ETRMs occurred in Veraguas province, the centre of Panama. A vehicle with **57 refugees and migrants** caught fire. There were no injuries, and all the passengers were evacuated safely. These events followed a **report** prepared by the **Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants** denouncing "the supposedly precarious and unhealthy conditions" in the ETRMs in Panama.

Subsequently, the Government temporarily halted transfers from Darien to Chiriquí, ordering the National Transit and Land Transportation Authority to inspect all vehicles that provided the service. As a result of this suspension, both ETRMs surpassed their total capacity, and more than **four thousand people** ended up waiting in Darien. Tension in the ETRMs worsened, registering security incidents, poor WASH conditions, and food shortages that lasted a few days until transfers were reinstated. Nevertheless, the Government restated its commitment to providing humanitarian assistance to refugees and migrants.

As of February 2023, nearly **50,000 people** entered irregularly through Darien², **five times more** than those who arrived during the same period in 2022. Authorities estimate that by the end of the year, **some 400,000 people** will have crossed the Darien³ in 2023. The government has asked for all relevant actors' cooperation to find durable solutions and mechanisms to discourage irregular entries. The latest UNHCR monthly protection monitoring exercise¹ shows that **three out of ten** interviewed left their country of origin due to **threats or directed attacks** against them or their families. Around **55 per cent** fled due to **fear of violence and general insecurity** in their country.

UNHCR's Response

PROTECTION

In February, UNHCR worked with the Government, other UN Agencies, and partners to respond to the tragedy in Los Planes de Gualaca. The Agency coordinated the provision of **dignified shelter** for the survivors of the accident with partner **Pastoral de Movilidad Humana** and, with partner HIAS, provided **first psychological aid** to the survivors and their families.

Furthermore, UNHCR provided **Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS)** to people in mixed movements in both Darién and Chiriquí provinces. It offered **a 24-hour interpretation service** with information on legal and mental health services for those who did not speak Spanish.

Responding to the suspension of the transfer services, UNHCR provided additional assistance and information on the events to refugees and migrants that needed to stay longer in the ETRMs. The Agency distributed clothing and **Core Relief Items (CRIs)** to people in transit at the ETRMs.



¹ <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/99649> ² https://www.migracion.gob.pa/images/img2023/pdf/IRREGULARES_POR_DARIEN_2023_a_febrero.pdf ³ <https://mire.gob.pa/estrategia-regional-para-una-migracion-segura-buscan-panama-ee-uu-y-colombia/>









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HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

In February, UNHCR and partner Panamanian Red Cross (CRP) provided **primary health care** to some 1,482 refugees and migrants (513 men, 427 women, 285 boys, and 257 girls) at the ETRMs of San Vicente and Lajas Blancas in Darién, as well as at Los Planes de Gualaca in Chiriquí. UNHCR donated **126 blankets** to the National Migration Service (SNM) for distribution to people transiting in Darien and **36 additional** for the **survivors of the bus accident in Chiriquí**.

In the framework of UNHCR’s **community-based protection program** with **community leaders**, the Agency met with local representatives of the Canaan-Membrillo community to discuss the **training plan** for community leaders and create a **local committee**. UNHCR and the community leaders are also assessing the installation of **internet services** in the community and evaluating the initiative’s sustainability.

Key Achievements

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▪ In February, UNHCR and partner HIAS reached out to over **3,000 people** with information on the journey risks in the ETRMs and reception points in Darién and Chiriquí.
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▪ UNHCR and its partner NRC provided information to **128 people on the asylum system in Panama**, and **17** were assisted with their asylum application.
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▪ In February, UNHCR Panama’s **Help Page** registered **9,260 visits**, and **13 people** reached out to UNHCR through its **Chatbot**. Most required information on asylum, gender-based violence prevention, and the new US parole programme.
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▪ UNHCR **protection monitoring exercise** in Darien province, reached over **100** refugees and migrants.
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▪ UNHCR distributed **200 CRIs**, including blankets and clothes for people in transit in both Darien and Chiriquí ETRMs.
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▪ UNHCR and partner HIAS assisted **680 people** with Mental Health and Psychosocial Support related to traumatic experiences crossing the jungle in Darién and Chiriquí. The Agency also supported **182 people** at safe spaces in the ETRM Los Planes de Gualaca, Chiriquí.



UNHCR CHATBOT IS ACTIVE!
 For more information on protection mechanisms and the asylum system in Panama, please contact us here!

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