

Mixed movements in the Northwest of Colombia

May 2023

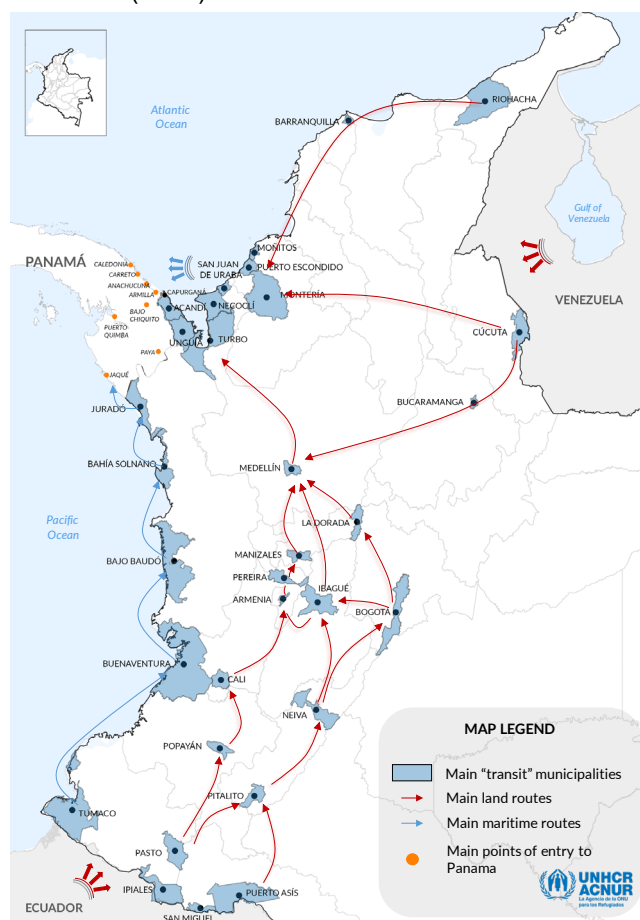
CONTEXT

Refugees and migrants of multiple nationalities travel or walk through Colombia from (1) the border points with Venezuela and Ecuador; (2) large Colombian cities, such as Barranquilla, Bogotá, Cali or Medellín, and/or (3) rural areas; heading towards the Gulf of Urabá to cross the border with Panama and reach Central or North America. In addition to the routes through the Darién Gap, there are also people attempting to cross along the Pacific Coast, via Juradó, and through the Caribbean Sea, via San Andrés and Providencia Islands.

The trend of people on the move passing through Colombia onwards to Panama and North America has continued to increase significantly in 2023. While in 2022, **248,284** people crossed from Colombia to Panama, in 2023 (Jan-Apr) **127,687** people have crossed, reaching more than 50% of all the movements registered in 2022. In addition, the country experienced an **exponential increase in the Venezuelan population in transit during the last two years** (150,327 people crossed into Panama in 2022 and 55,590 in 2023, compared to 2,819 in 2021), similar to the situation in 2021, when the peak was of Haitian nationals (82,000).

Medellín or **Montería** have become mandatory transit cities to access by land the main ports of the Gulf of Urabá, such as **Necoclí** and **Turbo**, in search of arriving by sea to **Acandí** (municipality bordering Panamá), **Capurganá** (town in Acandí) or directly to Panamanian towns (by using unregulated sea routes). These three municipalities in addition of hosting a porous jungle with no highways, are also in an area controlled by an illegal armed group that controls the mixed movement routes.

Figure 1. Main mixed movements routes through Colombia (2023)



Summary of the main transit municipalities and routes.
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HUMANITARIAN SITUATION: KEY FIGURES

- **127,687 people in transit** to Panama through the Darien (Jan-Apr 2023; Migración Panamá - MP).
- **55,590 Venezuelan nationals** in transit to Panama through the Darien (Jan-Apr 2023; MP).
- Venezuela accounts for **44%** of the nationalities in transit to Panama, followed by Haiti (**22%**), Ecuador (**13%**), China (**4%**), and Colombia (**3%**) (Migración Panamá).
- **42%** of the people monitored by UNHCR began their journey in Venezuela, followed by Colombia (**24%**), Ecuador (**14%**), Peru (**13%**), Chile (**7%**), and Brazil (**1%**) (UNHCR Protection Monitoring).
- **46%** of the people monitored by UNHCR are moving to the United States, while **20%** say they want to go to other parts of Colombia, and **2%** say they want to settle in Central American countries (UNHCR Protection Monitoring).

PROTECTION RISKS

- In the Darién, refugees and migrants are exposed to **physical risks** on the **maritime and land routes** through the jungle (gender-based violence, child exploitation, diseases, shipwrecks, deaths and disappearances), in addition to **extortion by the "guides"** who control the routes.
- Often, people arriving at the beaches of Necoclí camp there, while they attempt to earn the cash they need to pay for maritime transportation and cover additional cost for crossing the Darién into Panama
- During their time in the beaches of Necoclí, there are situations such as: **children and adolescents without access to education** (people on the beach for a prolonged period), presence of unaccompanied and separated children, presence of traffickers and members of the armed actor, dehydration, health emergencies, **commercialization and consumption of drugs**, poor **sanitary** conditions, difficulty in covering **food** needs, lack of minimum **security** conditions, discrimination towards members of the LGBTIQ+ community, harassment by the police, and risk of **gender-based violence**.
- Lack of support networks for **women in transit** territories, which represents a risk of gender-based violence, exploitation, and sexual abuse.
- There is a heightened risk of human trafficking due to **false job offers**, especially for those travelling unaccompanied, and the risk of involuntary returns.
- **Loss or theft of documentation** of people in transit.
- Risk of **accidents and family separation** due to travel in cargo trucks ("mulas" in Spanish).
- Risk of recruitment, utilization and use of children and adolescents for illegal armed actors.

PROTECTION NEEDS

- **Temporary shelter** for people with risk profiles.
- Enhance access to **food** (the food program in Necoclí cover only 100 daily rations)).
- Enhance access to **safe spaces** for children.
- Increase **presence of Migración Colombia and the Family Welfare Institute (ICBF)** in transit points and enhance the capabilities of the Local Child Protection Authorities in Necoclí, Turbo and Acandí to identify cases of unaccompanied and separated children and adolescents.
- **Information at transit points** on risks along the route and the right to seek asylum.
- **Gender-based violence prevention**.
- Access for mental health services to avoid violent outbreaks in the beaches and transit points.



Group of refugees in transit leaving Necoclí for Acandí.
 ©UNHCR/Catalina Betancur

UNHCR'S RESPONSE

- Improve the access and provide innovative information material to **orient people in transit to make informed decisions about routes** and the associated risks, protection gaps, institutional presence, shelter access and other services, as well as information about their rights.
- **Disseminate information at the Medellín's Northern Bus Terminal** (information on the 21 screens, strategy of the Mayor's Office of "Escuchaderos", UNHCR's presence with an [Information and Orientation Center-PAO](#)).
- Articulation with **local, regional, and national authorities** (R4V platform Multisectoral [Grupo Inter-agencial sobre Flujos Migratorios Mixtos – GIFMM](#) – of Antioquia and GIFMM Urabá) to activate the response routes, creation of contingency plans, advocacy for the creation of public policies, and access to rights for people in transit.
- **Protection monitoring** to identify specific protection profiles and needs as well as response gaps in Urabá.
- Promoting employability fairs with private companies as well as trainings to **enhance employment opportunities** for refugees and migrants living in Necoclí.
- Implementation of a **child friendly space** in Acandí, to mitigate the involvement and/or use of children by the trafficking and smuggling networks.
- Assist **community-based organizations** in Antioquia and the Eje Cafetero, and training of public officials on international protection and mixed movements in Chocó.
- Through 3 PAOs in Necoclí, Turbo and Acandí UNHCR and partners provide **Legal assistance and orientation**, water purification tablets, translation services, and humanitarian transportation for those who desist from the transit.
- Creation of the local **GIFMM Urabá**, co-led by UNHCR and the IOM.

Contact

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