

## **Context**

Over the last three years, the number of people crossing the Darien jungle has set an alarming trend. From 2021 up to now, nearly one million refugees and migrants undertook this dangerous journey, with the numbers doubling each year. In 2023 alone, 520,085 people crossed, surpassing the Government's projections. In January 2024, authorities registered over 36,000 individuals, marking a 46 per cent increase compared to the same period last year. Officials estimate that irregular entries will surpass 800,000 people by the end of December.

Cases of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and sexual abuse are escalating. Many are victims of robbery, fraud, and human trafficking during their journey through the jungle. To address this, the Ministry of Public Security announced the launch of the Choco II operation to strengthen border monitoring activities and protect the lives of those crossing. In 2023, through its Escudo and Choco I programmes, the Ministry detained 72 people for crimes against refugees and migrants and rescued 730 individuals in transit.

UNHCR's latest protection monitoring exercise evidenced that 66 per cent of the interviewed left their country of origin due to threats, attacks, or general insecurity. Three in five people experienced mistreatment or abuse during their journey, and 59 per cent were victims of theft, scam, or fraud. Half of the respondents believe they might face risks if they return to their country of origin or residence.

Authorities opened an investigation into a group allegedly providing unauthorized money transfer services in the Temporary Migratory Reception Centres (ETRMs). Officials detained 12 people and seized over US\$78,000 in remittances. The individuals copied the logos of established money transfer companies and charged those in transit a fee of 25-30 per cent of the amount they received. As a result, some families stayed in the ETRM for a longer period as they could not cover the cost of the bus.

## **UNHCR's Response**

UNHCR supports the Government's response at the ETRMs and to host communities in Darien and Chiriquí. The Agency offers legal support to people with international protection needs, referring individuals who require specialized assistance to the relevant institutions. 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.

Moreover, through HIAS, UNHCR provides Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) to those in transit and continues to inform people in Darién and Chiriquí provinces about the risks of the journey through informative face-to-face sessions.

In Chiriquí, UNHCR and HIAS hosted the workshop "Feel the Joy," focused on providing 27 asylum-seekers with MHPSS and emotional regulation strategies.

UNHCR's protection monitoring exercise in the ETRMs San Vicente and Lajas Blancas in Darien reached 110 refugees and migrants.



## **INAUGURATION OF ONPAR's OFFICE IN DARIEN**

On 25 January, the National Office for the Attention of Refugees (ONPAR) inaugurated its field office in Darién, Metetí. UNHCR's Deputy High-Commissioner, the Minister of Government, and diplomatic representatives attended. ONPAR's field office is part of UNHCR's advocacy efforts to ensure asylum-seekers arriving at Darien's ETRMs can file timely claims and access documentation in this area. The delegation visited San Vicente and participated in focus group discussions with Ecuadorians forcibly displaced families, Haitian asylum-seekers, and Colombian refugees residing in Alto Playona.

In 2023, Panama achieved significant progress in refugee protection as part of its commitments to the Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework (MIRPS). The National Commission for the Protection of Refugees (CONARE) held eight sessions and recognized an unprecedented number of 134 refugees.

## **Key Achievements**



 UNHCR provided 2,100 people with information on the journey risks in the ETRMs and other reception points in Darien and Chiriquí\*.



 UNHCR and NRC provided 1,118 people with information on the asylum system in Panama\* and assisted seven individuals with their asylum application in border areas.



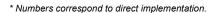
UNHCR provided shelter to 1.000 people in its Rubhalls at the ETRM Laias Blancas.



UNHCR Panama's Help Page registered 13,200 visits, 59 people contacted UNHCR through the Agency's Chatbot.



In January, through its social media campaign <u>Confía en el Tucán</u>, UNHCR released 21 digital publications. As of 31 January, and since its launch, the campaign reached 5,424,993 visualizations on TikTok and Facebook, with 212,639 engagements.







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

UNHCR's Multi-Country Office in Panama thanks the contributions from our direct and unearmarked donors







































Private donors include Australia for UNHCR, España con ACNUR, Japan for UNHCR, Sweden for UNHCR, UNO-Flüchtlingshilfe, United Kingdom for UNHCR, the USA for UNHCR, and those in China, Italy, Japan, and the Republic of Korea.