FACTSHEET

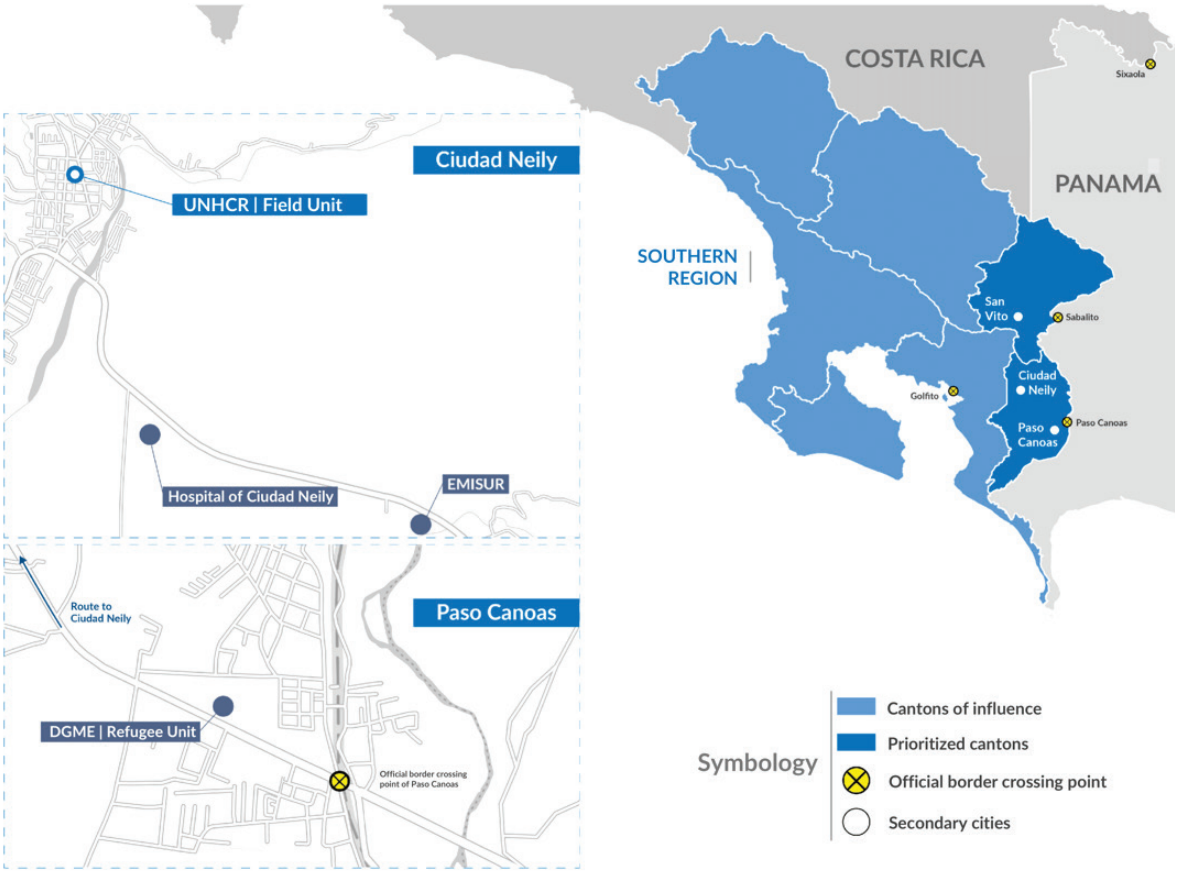
COSTA RICA: South border/Field Unit Ciudad Neily

As of June 2024

Context

Costa Rica and Panama share a **378 km border**. There are four official border crossings in this area, the main one being **Paso Canoas** (Corredores). This city is contiguous with **Paso Canoas** (Panama) and is characterized by a very **close binational dynamic** based on active cross-border trade.

Between **January 2023** and **April 2024**, more than **123,000 entries** and more than **124,400 exits** of foreigners were registered through this official crossing point[1].



In addition, the **Sabalito** border crossing (Coto Brus) has seasonal and pendular movements, mainly of Ngöbe Buglé indigenous people, associated with coffee harvesting.

Since 2023, a **considerable increase in the transit of refugees and migrants** of multiple nationalities has been registered. These persons arrive at the southern border of Costa Rica just after crossing the perilous Darien route. Their arrival **overwhelmed the local hosting capacity in Paso Canoas**; for this reason, in **September 2023** the Costa Rican government issued an **Emergency Declaration**.

To address this situation, from October 2023 the governments of **Costa Rica and Panama agreed on a bus transportation scheme**, with direct arrivals from the **Migration Reception Stations (ERM)** in Darien (Panama) to the southern border of Costa Rica. Thus, they designated the **Southern Migration Station** (**EMISUR**), administered by the **Migration Authority** (**DGME**) through the Professional Migration Police (PPM), as a temporary collective shelter as well as a transportation terminal. Between **January 2023 and June 2024**, more than **655,300 people** have transited through Costa Rica under this modality[2]. The volume of **transit depends on climatic and social circumstances** in Panama and other countries along the route.

EMISUR operation has gradually adapted, guided by authorities, to the needs of people in transit: both State institutions such as the National Women's Institute (**INAMU**), the National Children's Trust Fund (**PANI**), the Ministry of Health and humanitarian actors present at the station (including **UNHCR**) have **strengthened the intersectoral response**. Challenges and gaps have been also identified and will be addressed in light of the **Response Plan** led by the National Emergency Commission, which is under technical support by the United Nations System.

Some representatives of **host communities**, such as business associations and other interest groups, have **closely followed the situation of refugees and migrants**; other community actors have made efforts and mobilized response actions. Besides, they have been in constant dialogue with stakeholders about **the impact of this presence on local reception capacity**. For reference, the border canton of Corredores, where EMISUR is located, has 51,000 **inhabitants**[3], and has assumed the arrival of an average of **1,200 to 1,300 people/day** and peaks of **over 3,000 refugees and migrants** in transit per day during 2023 and 2024[2].

Sources: [1] DGME Statistics > Migratory Movements [2] DGME Statistics > Assistance to Migratory Flows [3] Estimation of Population and Housing 2022, INEC.

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Perspectives of the people with and for whom we work

Source: Mixed Movement Monitoring (UNHCR-UNICEF-WFP, supported by HIAS) Jan-Jun 2024.

616 persons surveyed (one per travel group)

- 54% of the people interviewed were women and 46% were men. The average age of these people was 31.6 years.
- The average size of the travel groups was 3.8 members. 10% of the groups had **lactating women** and 4.5% had **pregnant women** among their members. 81% were **traveling with children**, including some **unaccompanied/separated** from parents/caregivers (12%)[4].
- 82% departed from **Venezuela**, 11% from **Colombia**, and 5% from **Ecuador**. 87% were heading to the U.S. and 7% indicated **Costa Rica** as their final destination.
- 83% left their country of origin due to **lack of employment or income**, 39% due to **fear of violence/insecurity**, and 29% due to **lack of access to food**[5].

[4] Calculated on Q2-2024 surveys only.
[5] Respondents could select more than one reason for departure or need; for this reason, the results for the different reasons do not add up to 100%.

The main needs[5] they identified are:

- 52% clothes /shoes
- 51% food
- 35% internet/ communications
- 26% medicines
- 16% information

In February 2024, in coordination with **HIAS**, we prepared discussion sessions with **two focus groups** comprised of **different profiles** of the people we work with.

The main **concerns and needs** expressed by Venezuelans in **mixed movements** at **EMISUR** were:

- Lack of **food**
- Lack of money to cover the cost of **bus tickets** to the Northern border.
- **Health situations** derived from the journey
- **Insecurity** in previous points of the route

The main **concerns and needs** expressed by **asylum-seekers** present in **Paso Canoas**, mainly Nicaraguans, Cubans and Venezuelans, were:

- Lack of access to formal **employment** in their places of residence in Costa Rica.
- Barriers to **health insurance**, which hinders access to healthcare beyond emergencies.

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UNHCR's presence and priorities

Since 1979, **UNHCR has followed the dynamics of the South border** on an ad-hoc basis through missions. As movements have increased, **UNHCR decided to expand its presence on the field**, aimed since 2022 at dedicating **specialized staff on the ground**, and in 2023 to **expand this presence in EMISUR**.

In the first semester of 2024, **UNHCR opened a Field Unit** in **Ciudad Neily**, and established a **permanent team of five people**. The area of influence of the office includes **seven cantons**: Buenos Aires, Corredores, Coto Brus, Golfito, Osa, Puerto Jimenez and Perez Zeledón.

The activities are conducted primarily at the **South Migratory Station (EMISUR)**, but also with authorities and communities of the **Corredores** and **Coto Brus** cantons.

UNHCR works in the South area with **key partners** such as:

- State institutions such as **Municipalities, Ombudsman's Office, Social Defense Office and Courts of Justice, the Migration Authority (DGME), INAMU, Ministry of Health, PANI, PPM, Public Force** and other police forces and the **Refugee Unit**;
- UN agencies such as **IOM, PAHO/WHO, UNFPA, UNICEF and UN Women**, as well as humanitarian NGOs such as **Fundación Cadena, Hands4Health, HIAS, JSM, MSF and PADF**;
- Civil society groups, such as **Integral Development Associations (ADI), faith-based organizations** and representatives of **host communities**.

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As of June 2024

Our 2024 strategy

UNHCR has a presence at all borders from South to North of the Americas, in order to ensure protection and respect for the rights of refugees and migrants along the mixed movement route. This presence envisages a **route-based approach**, which implies **contextualizing our response** according to the protection and assistance needs identified. That said, the office prioritizes **four objectives**:

- Promote that **refugees and migrants meet basic needs** and access **protection systems** as well as **humanitarian relief** along this stretch of the route. To this end, we collaborate with response actors **through technical and humanitarian assistance**, aligned with international standards.
- **Identify movement trends, protection risks and incidents**, and needs for access to rights and services, including **access to the right to asylum** for those who require it. This is achieved by **strengthening border monitoring mechanisms**, hand in hand with UNHCR offices at key points along the route and also in dialogue with **local communities and authorities**. Ultimately, this will provide evidence to **inform the design and implementation of policies** for the protection and integration of refugees and migrants, contributing to **contingency planning**.
- **Design and implement effective tools for the identification, support, referral and follow-up** of the specific protection and care needs of refugees and migrants. This involves **standard operating procedures for case management** from an age, gender and diversity (AGD) perspective, as well as the provision of **psychosocial and legal assistance**.
- **Support refugees and migrants' informed decision-making** about rights and services, with a focus on preventing and mitigating violence and exploitation while promoting peaceful coexistence. This, through **a)** the **dissemination of information** from an age, gender and diversity (**AGD**) perspective, **b)** the effective use of **two-way communication channels (AAP)** and **c)** **community-based protection (CBP)** work.

Our response

Protection

- **UNHCR leads the EMISUR Protection Worktable**. In this coordination space, humanitarian partners identify protection needs and align inter-agency response.
- In context of the Protection Worktable, partners have designed protection mechanisms such as **Operational Procedures for Access to Asylum and Protection Assistance Pathways** in EMISUR, specifically for **children and adolescents and gender-based violence (GBV) survivors**.
- The Worktable also designed a plan to **strengthen the capacities of authorities and partners** to prevent and respond adequately to protection needs.
- Based on the needs of women, adolescents and girls identified by partners, as well as initiatives such as **socio-educational workshops** provided by HIAS, UNHCR is implementing the **Entre Nos strategy**, which consists of a **mobile safe space for GBV prevention and response** from an integral perspective. This will continue through ludic workshops and other initiatives.
- **UNHCR** has worked closely with the **World Bank** in the framework of its SAFE initiative on **GBV** prevention and response. UNHCR provided **needs and risk analysis, technical guidance and liaison** with key institutions on the southern border for this purpose.
- UNHCR has promoted **discussions on cross-cutting issues** such as **accountability to affected populations (AAP), led by UNICEF, and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS)**, together with the **EMISUR Health Worktable**; the latter includes technical support for the design of an **assistance pathway for mental health situations**.
- The Protection Worktable also **coordinates with the Protection Worktable of the Northern region** for border monitoring purposes and case management under a **route-based approach**.
- Through its implementing partners, **UNHCR ensures case management** activities under three programmatic pillars: **Legal Protection, Gender-Based Violence** Prevention and Response, and **Community-Based Mental Health**.

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Our response

Humanitarian assistance and emergency response

UNHCR has collaborated with other UN System actors to ensure **humanitarian response at EMISUR** through:

- **Permanent presence at the Station, to facilitate the reception** mechanisms for population arriving at EMISUR.
- Coordination and adaptation of a Listening Room, which can be used by any actor present in EMISUR, as a **safe and private space** for assistance and management of protection-sensitive cases.
- Distribution of essential assistance items such as **water, blankets, lamps, raincoats, menstrual cups, condoms**, according to operational priorities.
- **Improvement of electrical installations in different areas**. This facilitates **telecommunications** (cell phone charging) for some **250 families per day**, and also contributes to the safety of spaces and the prevention of protection situations, particularly at night.
- **Equipping of the health area** located at EMISUR.
- Permanent follow-up of local coordination spaces led by the **National Commission on Emergencies** (CNE).

Work with key actors

- UNHCR has developed **capacity building work** on international protection and refugee rights with the police forces / **Southern Command**.
- For **advocacy** purposes, UNHCR made contributions to make visible the presence of people in need of international protection in the Coto Brus Municipal Migration Policy 2022-2032, which has been technically supported by IOM.
- UNHCR works in coordination with the **Professional Migration Police** and other local authorities to **disseminate UNHCR's mandate** and raise awareness of **international protection** issues. Both parties are moving forward to explore mechanisms for **working together on violence prevention programs** at the community level.
- UNHCR has made **initial approaches to the Integral Development Association** (ADI) of Corredores canton, and with the **Local Humanitarian Network** (Red Humanitaria Local), including a discussion on **international protection with community leaders**.

UNHCR appreciates the contributions of donor countries that contribute to Costa Rica and global programs with unearmarked funds:
As of 31 July 2024

UNHCR Costa Rica also appreciates the contributions of our private donors globally:
Republic of Korea and Japan

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