

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 canton). 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 October 2024, more than **266,000** entries and more than **279,400** exits of foreigners were registered through this official crossing point¹.



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

Between September and October 2024, around **6,000 people** entered Costa Rica from Panama for this reason. In this indigenous group, as well as in other communities and populations, particularly the elderly, risks of **statelessness** have been identified. Gaps in identifying and addressing these cases still exist despite efforts in recent years to strengthen local response capacities.

According to UNHCR registration records, there are an estimated **1,000 people in need of international protection** in the Southern Region. Furthermore, in 2024, about **70 new asylum applications per month** have been registered in this region². Refugees and asylum seekers are clustered in a few specific communities, and face barriers in accessing information and guidance, as well as in accessing asylum.

Since 2023, there has been a **substantial**

increase in the transit of refugees and migrants of multiple nationalities, who have arrived at Costa Rica's southern border from the dangerous Darien route. Their arrival **overwhelmed the local reception capacity in Paso Canoas, which is why in September 2023 the Costa Rican government issued a Declaration of Emergency.**

To address this situation, as of 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 accommodation and transportation terminal. Between **January 2023 and October 2024**, more than **750,000 people** transited under this modality³. The volume of transit is relative stable, and it **varies according to the conditions of 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 inhabitants⁴, 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 2024³.

¹ DGME Statistics > Migratory Movements. ² DGME > Asylum statistics 2024. ³ DGME Statistics > Assistance to Migratory Flows. ⁴ Housing and population estimate 2022, INEC.

Perspectives of the People with and For Whom We Work

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

1,018 persons surveyed (one per travel group)

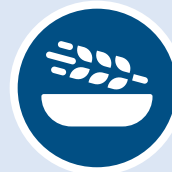
- **50%** of the persons interviewed were men, **49%** women and **1%** others⁵. The average age of these persons was **31.8** years of age.
- **11%** of the groups had **lactating women** and **3%** **pregnant women** among their members. **1.5%** of the groups had at least one unaccompanied/separated child⁶.
- Among groups traveling with part of the family or the entire family, the average number of members was **4.4**. **Of these groups, 56%** had **children and adolescents**.
- **79%** came from **Venezuela**, **14%** from **Colombia**, and **3%** from **Ecuador**. **82%** were headed to the **U.S.** and **13%** indicated **Costa Rica** as their final destination.
- **78%** left their country of origin due to **lack of employment or income**, **42%** due to **fear of violence/insecurity** and **25%** due to having been victims of violence, threats or intimidation⁷.

⁵ Includes persons with non-binary gender identities or who did not want to answer the question.

⁶ Calculated as of July 2024.

⁷ Respondents could select more than one reason for departure or need; for this reason, the results of the surveys were not available different reasons do not add up to 100%.

The main needs⁶ they identified are:



62% food



55% clothes/shoes



39% internet/
communications



20% medicines



13% shelter



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Persons intending to stay in Costa Rica

- **Territorial dispersion** and distance from intermediate cities and capital cities make it difficult for refugees and asylum seekers to access institutions to exercise their rights.
- The authorities have required additional support given the **increasing demand for asylum applications** in the southern part of the country. There are ongoing efforts by UNHCR under the DGME Asylum Strategy to increase capacity and provide a child-friendly space in the Shelter Unit.

- The presence of **stateless** populations, particularly the Ngäble Buglé Indians, has been identified.
- Due to lack of information and guidance, gaps in **access to justice** are identified (e.g. for documentary procedures).
- Local institutions have identified that there are gaps in **access to health** beyond emergencies, due to lack of enrollment and lack of knowledge on the part of the population about free services for children, adolescents and pregnant women.
- **Precarious living conditions** are identified among the residents of the Southern Region (e.g., limited **housing** and access to services).
- There is limited capacity in **temporary accommodation** for new applicants (and/or the possibility of relocating to the Greater Metropolitan Area).
- There is limited access to **caregiving networks** for children in early childhood.
- Access to **education** is limited due to challenges in the certification of academic documentation.

UNHCR Presence and Priorities



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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, and Osa.

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.

Our Strategy

UNHCR has a presence at all borders from South to North of the Americas, 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 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. It also involves bringing national authorities closer to specific protection situations identified at the local level (e.g. statelessness), facilitating referral and case management by these authorities.
- 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, and d) initiatives to enhance livelihoods opportunities, entrepreneurship and solutions.

Our Response

Protection

- UNHCR leads the **Protection Worktable** in EMISUR, which integrates UN agencies, national and international NGOs and relevant entities⁸. From this space, protection needs are identified, and the inter-agency response is coordinated.
- Within the framework of the Protection Roundtable, discussions have advanced to update the **care routes for GBV response**, including informative materials for GBV prevention, and to support an audit led by UNHCR for the identification of security and GBV risks, in order to align EMISUR's operation with international standards in this area.
- Likewise, in the area of **mental health and psychosocial assistance (SMAPS)**, together with the **Health Working Group**, UNHCR and HIAS provided technical support for the development of diagnosis of care capacities of humanitarian actors in EMISUR. With this input, the Board is advocating with health authorities for the design and implementation of a mechanism for attention to suicide risk in EMISUR, among other actions.
- UNHCR continues to lead the inter-agency strategy **Entre Nos**, with contributions from UN Women, HIAS and National Women's Institute, which consists of a **mobile safe space** for **GBV** prevention and response. Between August and October, 120 women have participated in participatory workshops on self-care, emotional management, menstrual management, sexual and reproductive health; these safe spaces for dialogue have allowed the identification and individual attention of GBV and MHPSS cases. .
- UNHCR has **promoted discussions** on cross-cutting issues such as **accountability for affected populations (AAP)**, co-led with UNICEF, and on populations with specific needs for protection (e.g. persons with disabilities).
- UNHCR has designed and implemented mechanisms to inform and orient people in mixed movements about the services available in Costa Rica and other issues of interest to them, in order to encourage them to make informed decisions.
- The Protection Desk also coordinates with the **Northern Region Protection Workgroup** for border monitoring purposes and case management under a route-based approach.
- Through its **partners**, UNHCR implements **case management** work under three programmatic thrusts: **Legal Protection, Gender-based Violence Prevention and Response, and Community-based Mental Health**.
- UNHCR has **approached institutions** such as the Office of the Comptroller of the Judiciary and the Public Defender's Offices of Corredores and Golfito to learn about the needs and coordinate response actions in this area. This has made it possible to **identify**

protection needs and opportunities for institutional strengthening, both for the access to rights by refugees and for technical guidance on specific issues (e.g. statelessness).

- As a result of these approaches, UNHCR is joining efforts with the Courts of Justice of Ciudad Cortés (Osa) and Corredores, in **advocacy actions regarding access to rights**, as well as through **informational materials** for refugees and asylum seekers, in order to improve knowledge of their rights in Costa Rica, key to promoting their access to justice.
- In response to **statelessness**, through two visits to Ngäbe Buglé indigenous communities (El Gallo, Coto Brus and Altamira, Golfito) **UNHCR has approached national institutions** such as the Civil Registry (Supreme Elections Tribunal) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to identify and refer cases - including binational dialogues with Panama - to analyze and define their situation of access to nationality.
- UNHCR has engaged in **dialogue with key actors** to ensure prevention and response to gender-based violence. Conversations with National Women's Institute and the Municipal Women's Office of the canton of Corredores and with local women's networks in the canton have made it possible to **link refugee women and asylum seekers with the institutional offerings** of these entities, which in the case of the Office focuses on training and capacity building processes for women, favoring their economic independence. This allows the **integration of women in need of international protection in their communities**, as well as the development of information and orientation activities to prevent situations of gender violence.



⁸ UNHCR, HIAS, National Women's Institute, UN Women, UNFPA and UNICEF.

Humanitarian Assistance and Emergency Response

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

- **Permanent presence** at the Station, to facilitate the **reception mechanisms for the 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 the attention and management of protection cases.
- Distribution of essential assistance items such as **blankets, lamps, rain coats, menstrual cups, hygiene kits, hydration kits, toiletries for local authorities and local partners, condoms**, according to identified needs and operational priorities.
- Permanent monitoring of local coordination spaces led by the **Municipal Emergencies Committee (CME)**.



Work With Key Actors



- UNHCR participates in the **Cantonal Inter-Institutional Coordination Committee (CCCI)** of Coto Brus canton, in the framework of the implementation of the canton's public migration policy. Recently UNHCR was incorporated by the Municipality in the Municipal Migration Policy Commission (PMM), a space where it will work on the implementation of the 2022-2025 action plan of the Committee.
- UNHCR is also part of the Cantonal Inter-institutional Coordination Committee (CCCI) of the canton and the Municipal Emergencies Committee (CME) of **Corredores**. UNHCR supports these spaces with the goal of providing technical assistance and promoting the strengthening of inter-institutional dialogue for preparedness and response to emergencies (related to human mobility and disasters) in the canton, considering the capacity and good practices of EMISUR's work.
- UNHCR works in coordination with the **Professional Migration Police** and other local authorities to raise awareness of **UNHCR's mandate and international protection issues**.
- To strengthen protection networks for forcibly displaced persons residing in the Southern Region, UNHCR works hand in hand with the **Frontera Sur Local Humanitarian Network**, which is the reference point for community organization in the region. This includes local advocacy work to bring the Network closer to the municipality of Corredores, DINADECO and other institutions, so that the Network obtains legal advice and comprehensive assistance. Likewise, UNHCR has supported the Network by bringing together multiple local actors for the development of local integration and peaceful coexistence activities in key areas with the highest concentration of persons in need of international protection.

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

As of November 15, 2024



UNHCR Costa Rica also appreciates the contributions of our private donors globally:
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