UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

BORDER REPORT
CHIRIQUI-DARIEN

FEBRUARY 2025

317
people received legal counselling and information on asylum

754
people informed on protection rights and access to essential services

818
people assessed in protection monitoring exercises

Situation

Since January, authorities have observed groups of people entering the western border attempting to return south. President Mulino confirmed that over 2,200 people crossed Panama from Costa Rica in February. Both countries established a joint protocol to ensure these individuals' safe and humane return. This protocol includes registration schemes, biometric screenings, and transfers to designated waiting areas.

Under the Memorandum of Understanding with the US signed in 2024, the Panamanian Government has conducted 45 charter flights and arranged seats on over 15 commercial flights, resulting in the deportation or repatriation of some 2,000 people as of 13 February.

Panama also received three deportation flights from the US, carrying 299 passengers. Authorities temporarily transferred them to a local hotel and are coordinating with IOM voluntary return procedures for most. At the government's request, UNHCR supports with basic humanitarian assistance as required. Moreover, UNHCR assists the National Office for the Attention of Refugees (ONPAR), the authority responsible for conducting refugee admissibility screenings for those seeking international protection, with technical support, including interpretation services.

Officials transferred over 100 people who rejected voluntary return to the ETRM San Vicente in Darien. Following this situation, a group of independent lawyers filed a request for precautionary measures and a petition to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) alleging a violation of human rights. In response, Panama provided these groups with temporary residency permits for humanitarian reasons, valid for 30 days and extendable to 90 days.

Highlights

- In Chiriquí, UNHCR conducted weekly monitoring exercises in the Paso Canoas border community, nearby areas, and Costa Rica's Temporary Reception Centre (CATEM).

  The visits aim to monitor and assess humanitarian needs and identify asylum-seekers. UNHCR also participated in an intersectoral working group on alternative care systems for children at entry points, organized by Panama's National Secretariat of Childhood, Adolescence and Family (SENNIAF).

- The IACHR conducted field visits in Bajo Chiquito and the ETRM Lajas Blancas in Darien. UNHCR accompanied the visit and convened a meeting with the Human Mobility Group to share advocacy messages on the human rights of people forced to flee.

- In the Alto Playona Indigenous community, UNHCR hosted a focal group session to explore livelihood opportunities and identify challenges and prospects for self-reliance among refugees, asylum seekers, and host community members. Over 30 participants contributed to the discussion, helping the Agency tailor its country strategy.

- Also in this province, UNHCR joined HIAS in the "My Voice, My Power" workshop attended by 12 refugee and asylum-seeking women. The event provided a safe space for discussion on rejecting all forms of violence. Participants engaged in a case-study to explore different types of violence and practice assertive responses.

Operational overview

UNHCR assists refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless people, and other vulnerable groups to ensure they can access protection mechanisms, fundamental rights, and life-saving services in Panama. The Agency supports the Government's humanitarian response delivering core relief items at the Temporary Reception Centres (ETRMs) and local communities hosting refugees and asylum-seekers in Darien and Chiriquí and provides technical assistance to ONPAR. In collaboration with the Norwegian Refugee Council, UNHCR provides information on the asylum system, offers legal support to people with international protection needs, refers those requiring specialized assistance to relevant institutions, and assists asylum-seekers with obtaining refugee status.

Together with HIAS, UNHCR delivers mental health and psychosocial support services, information on protection rights, and access to essential services. Through the Panamanian Red Cross, UNHCR provides primary health care at ETRMs. The Agency works with Emberá-Wounaán host communities, supporting the development of shelter spaces and infrastructure and facilitating integration programmes for community members, asylum-seekers, and refugees.

On 22 and 23 February, UNHCR hosted the movie 'Elemental' screening and the documentary series '(In) Visibles' co-produced by ECOCINEMA Foundation as part of its joint community cinema tour in Chiriquí. Some 400 people, including refugees, asylum-seekers, and host community members joined spaces for reflection on forced displacement. /©UNHCR

In Yaviza, a refugee host community, UNHCR joined a local fair organized by HIAS, providing legal counselling and information to over 100 people on international protection and the asylum system. The Norwegian Refugee Council and the Ombudsperson's Office also participated. /©UNHCR

Life saving information

Access to life-saving information is crucial for forcibly displaced people, helping them make informed, safer decisions.

Confía en el Tucán and the UNHCR HELP Page counter misinformation, providing accurate and up-to-date information on the Darien dangers, how to access essential services and international protection mechanisms in Panama.

UNHCR's Help Page registered 4,324 visits in February 2025.

UNHCR's Confía en el Tucán campaign reached 120,367 visualizations on TikTok and Facebook, with 4,388 engagements.

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For more information
Margarida Loureiro, Deputy Representative at
loureirm@unhcr.org
Benedetta Pignatti, External Relations Officer at
pignattb@unhcr.org

For media interviews:
panpamedia@unhcr.org