



RETS standby partners, emergency.lu and Cisco Crisis Response, setting up secure and reliable internet connectivity in Darien province, Panama. © CCR/Joe Harrison

OVERVIEW OF THE CONNECTIVITY PROJECT

The connectivity project in Panama addresses the urgent need for internet services to support humanitarian efforts for refugees and migrants crossing from Colombia into Panama.

The Darien Jungle, a 60 mile deep stretch of rainforest separating Panama and Colombia, offers a challenging landscape for humanitarian reach, including thick forests, heavy rain, and river crossings. Due to the isolation and lack of resources, few UN agencies and NGOs can operate in this area. Even so, providing secure and steady internet connectivity is essential for enabling more humanitarian assistance in this remote location and empowering the host communities.

Recognizing that Internet access is crucial for accessing humanitarian services, obtaining medical help, arranging travel, managing finances, and staying in touch with family and friends, the **Refugee Emergency Telecommunications Sector (RETS)** and the **UNHCR Innovation Service**, in collaboration with standby partners, the Panama State authorities, such as the Ombudsman Office, and Indigenous traditional leaders, has initiated the Connectivity Project.

The execution of this project would also not have been possible without the support of **UNHCR's Information Technology (IT) experts** from the Regional Bureau and Multi-country office (MCO) in Panama, whose contributions have been pivotal to the project's success.

THE REFUGEE EMERGENCY TELECOMMUNICATIONS SECTOR (RETS)

RETS is a specialized team within **UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency**, tasked with coordinating the deployment of critical communication services for the humanitarian community in refugee emergencies. Together with partners, they provide vital internet connectivity and secure communications necessary for coordinating and delivering aid and protection to people forced to flee.

CONTEXT

KEY FIGURES

900,000+
People crossed the Darien
between 2021 and 2023

259,000+
Total entries in 2024

Darien is the largest and poorest province in Panama, covering over 11,896 square kilometers and home to 52,235 people. Bordering Colombia and the Pacific Ocean, its dense jungle is considered one of the most difficult places in the world to cross.

Despite this, thousands of people traverse the Darien jungle every year seeking safety, better opportunities, and family reunification. In 2023 alone, more than half a million people entered Panama this way, with 67 percent being Venezuelans, setting new records.



Over half a million people have crossed the Darien in 2023 alone. © UNHCR/Melissa Pintel

Refugees and migrants often cross many borders before reaching the Darien Jungle. Undocumented individuals face additional challenges, having limited access to basic services and face the risk of deportation. The journey poses numerous dangers, including theft, physical and sexual violence, murder, and extortion. The risks are increased for vulnerable groups, such as unaccompanied children.

When they reach remote Indigenous communities, many refugees and migrants are in dire need of food, water, rest, and medical care. These local communities, while playing a crucial role in assisting people in transit, face their own challenges, such as unreliable mobile services, poor internet access, and unstable power sources. UNHCR collaborates closely with the Panamanian government, calling for increased support and investment in these communities to improve services for both refugees and locals.

INTERNET CONNECTIVITY



Internet Connectivity: RETS has enabled internet access for humanitarian partners and local communities in **Canaán Membrillo**, **Alto Playona**, and **Bajo Chiquito** (see map).

Solar Power Solutions: RETS provides local solar power solutions for the equipment, ensuring energy efficiency and sustainability.

PARTNER CONTRIBUTIONS



With great thanks to standby partners, including the Government of Luxembourg (emergency.lu), Cisco Crisis Response, and Ericsson Response, RETS has achieved the following:

- **Satellite (VSAT) Connectivity:** The Government of Luxembourg (emergency.lu) provided equipment, bandwidth, and deployed a team to install the equipment.
- **Network Equipment:** Cisco Crisis Response supplied network equipment and volunteers to install it in all three locations.
- **User Management:** Cisco Crisis Response, with the remote support of Ericsson Response, worked on solutions to manage Internet service users and access rights.

LOOKING FORWARD

The connectivity project aims to foster local involvement and ownership by training community members and NGO staff to manage the networks. This capacity-building approach empowers communities, ensuring continuity of services and support. The use of solar-powered systems provides a reliable energy source, crucial for maintaining connectivity in these remote areas. RETS manages the technical aspects of the project, in close collaboration with the Multi-Country Office in Panama and the Regional Bureau, while the UNHCR Innovation Service leads community engagement efforts.

IMPACT

This project aims to improve the humanitarian response in one of the world's most challenging environments. By providing reliable internet connectivity, the project aims to enhance the capabilities of humanitarian organizations, support local communities, and improve access to protection and assistance for people forced to flee their homes. This initiative demonstrates the power of collaboration and technology in addressing complex humanitarian crises.

CONTACT

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 Find more information on the UNHCR [Operational Data Portal](#).

