

Mixed Movements Through Darién 2022

August

Context

With an area of more than 11,896 km² and a population of 46,951 inhabitants, Darién is the largest and poorest province in Panama. Bordering Colombia and the Pacific Ocean, Darién is in the east of the country and is considered one of the most difficult areas to transit in the world. Yet, every year thousands of people cross the jungle in search of protection, dignified opportunities, and family reunification.

Before 2010, the Darién Gap was used mostly by people from Asia and Africa to cross from South to Central America. In 2020/2021 the number of Cubans and Haitians increased, and currently, Venezuela is the main nationality, making up to 67 per cent of the total population crossing the Gap¹.

Despite movement restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of borders in 2020, the transit of people through Darién has increased exponentially. In 2021, **133,726** people entered the country irregularly by this route. As of 31 August 2022, the number reached **102,067** people, setting an unprecedented record in crossings. In the month of August alone, **31,055** people in transit were registered². It is estimated that, by the end of 2022, some 200,000 people will have crossed through the perilous Darién jungle.

The main route currently used by refugees and migrants entering Panama irregularly is through the indigenous community of **Canaán Membrillo**. Due to affordability and safety reasons, a rising number of people are also using the **Bajo Chiquito** route. People in transit also continue to arrive in the **Zapallal** community, and at other informal reception points, without government registration mechanisms.

UNHCR's Response

PROTECTION

In 2022, through regular monitoring exercises and **presence** at the **Migratory Reception Centers** (ERM in its Spanish acronym), as well as in transit and host communities, UNHCR together with partner Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) provided information on the asylum system in Panama to **350 persons** and assisted five persons with their **refugee status application**.

UNHCR also provides **Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS)** through partner HIAS. In **Zapallal, Darién**, psychosocial support and referral of gender-based violence (GBV) cases are conducted twice a week. In the **ERM Los Planes de Gualaca, Chiriquí**, MHPSS is provided to people in need of psychosocial support related to traumatic experiences during the jungle crossing.

HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

As part of an inter-agency response, UNHCR supports the **ERM San Vicente (Darién)**, **Lajas Blancas (Darién)**, and **Los Planes de Gualaca (Chiriquí)**. In 2021, UNHCR purchased shelter materials and equipment to support and ameliorate the construction of the new **ERM San Vicente**, as well as the setup of a temporary reception center to avoid the interruption of service provision in 2022. In the **ERM Lajas Blancas**, UNHCR and partner Panamanian Red Cross (CRP), installed a safe space to provide primary health care and first aid, and in the **ERM San Vicente**, UNHCR supports the presence of health staff, assisting some 400 vulnerable people a week. In Chiriquí, as part of the response to mixed movements coming from Darién, **over 500** people have been supported with access to free internet, hydration, and information on the risks of the onward route north.



¹ Source: National Migration Service









² Idem



SUPPORT FOR HOST AND TRANSIT COMMUNITIES

UNHCR works together with host communities. In 2022, over **200 solar lamps**, **400 mosquito nets**, **200 sleeping mats**, and **200 blankets** were distributed in the indigenous community of **Canaan Membrillo**. A total of **650 kitchen sets** were handed to the Ministry of Interior, for the distribution in the host communities. In **Alto Playona**, UNHCR completed the **rehabilitation of the children's playground**. In the hard-to-reach communities of **Tortuga** and **Riosito**, and after consulting with host and refugee population, over **200 solar lamps** were handed over to support access to lighting and increase overall safety. Also, in Riosito, UNHCR together with partner RET is supporting the rehabilitation of the local school and carrying out a participatory assessment exercise on the needs of this community, including issues such as violence prevention, youth empowerment, and social cohesion. UNHCR, distributed to **Fundación Pro Niños del Darién**, a total of **3,500 mosquito nets** and **120 thermometers**, to respond to the needs of several indigenous host communities in the province.

Key Achievements

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 A total of **350 persons** people received information on the asylum system in Panama, and **1,000 were reached**.
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 In Darién and Chiriquí, UNHCR and partners reached out a total of **3,000** with information **on the risk on the routes**.
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 From January to August 2022, more than **330 officials** appointed to border areas were trained on **international protection** and **statelessness**.
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 IT equipment was donated to the National Border Service (SENAFRONT), to contribute to the registration of persons in the mixed movements, in the different ERMs.
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 As of August 2022, **10,000** persons received **primary health care** and **first aid** in Darien at the safe space set up by UNHCR and partner Panamanian Red Cross.
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 During 2022, **5,500 core relief items** and **1,500 food hampers** were distributed to transit and host communities reaching out to approximately **15,000 people**.
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 A total of **22,000 garbage bags** and **10,000 pairs of gloves** have been handed to the National Migration Service for waste management, and a total of **31 large tents** were delivered to the National Border Service (SENAFRONT), to protect people from harsh weather conditions at reception points.
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 Over **50,000 soap bars** were distributed to host communities, and materials for the construction of toilets and showers in the temporary reception center in San Vicente were provided by UNHCR, reaching approximately **600 people** that use them at a daily basis.

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