



Panama CO

Situation Report Children on the move

10th of March 2023



Highlights

- Between January and February of 2023, the Migration Services registered 9,656 children of a total of 45,727 people that transited through Darien, the number of children in transit increased seven-fold compared to the 1,378 children that transited in January and February 2022.
- In 2022, 40,438 children (50% under 5 years old) and more than 570 pregnant women transited through the Darien Gap, the jungle between Colombia and Panama, representing the highest yearly figure on record. In total, 248,284 migrants transited in 2022, including children.
- 1,067 unaccompanied and separated children were registered in 2022, which is five times higher than the number registered in 2021 (202 cases). Unaccompanied adolescents from Venezuela and Ecuador made up 70% of the total.
- Between the 1st to 10th of March, more than 6,500 migrants remained temporarily stranded at the Temporary Migrant Reception Stations (TMRS) in Darien, waiting to access the transport service, which exceeded the shelter capacity by 600%. Essential services were oversaturated and insufficient, and there was an increase in the exposure of women and children to the risk of violence, sexual exploitation, and abuse.
- With the funding support of the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations and the US Government, UNICEF is increasing its presence and provision of services at different points along the migration route. UNICEF has scaled up its response to provide lifesaving services in water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), child protection, case management, mother-child health, and [Gender-Based Violence \(GBV\)](#) at the TMRS in the Provinces of Darien and Chiriquí. UNICEF maintains protection through presence actions on a daily basis.
- UNICEF is supporting 12 host communities affected by migration through the building the protective environments for local children and access to safe drinking water.

Situation Overview

According to the Migration Services in 2022, 248,284 people transited through the dangerous Darién jungle, of which 40,438 are children and adolescents, accounting for 16% of the total population and representing the highest yearly figure on record. Last year, people of 70 nationalities transited, with Venezuela representing 60% of the total, followed by Ecuador (12%), Haiti (9%), Cuba (2%), Colombia (2%), and India (1%).

In October 2022, the U.S. Government announcement of the new *parole*¹ program for Venezuelans significantly impacted the transit of people through the Darien Jungle causing more than 6,500 migrants to be stuck in Panama waiting for return flights to their country of origin. This caused a 90% reduction in the controlled flow² of Venezuelans. On January 6th, the *parole* program was extended to Haitian, Nicaraguan and Cuban nationals.

¹ The *Parole* is part of the diverse humanitarian and protection programs of the United States government for foreigners who need refuge or help due to circumstances such as catastrophes, oppression, medical emergencies, or other urgent circumstances, which proposes an updated process of Temporary stay will allow up to 30,000 of those people to enter the United States each month in a safe and orderly manner. See the [link](#).

² Operation Controlled Flow is the agreement established by Panama with the neighboring countries of Colombia and Costa Rica to carry out migration management in an orderly, regular, and safe manner through daily limits to control the irregular migration flow to the north.

Numbers in 2023

45,727

Number of people on the move through the Darien Jungle in January and February of 2023 (Source: Border patrol).

9,656

Number of children in transit through the Darien Jungle in January and February of 2023 (Source: Border patrol).

3 to 7

Unaccompanied and/or separated children identified on a daily basis in 2023 in the Darien. (Source: UNICEF)

Numbers in 2022

248,284

Number of people in transit through the Darien jungle in 2022 (Source: National Migration Service of Panama).

40,438

Number of children and adolescents in transit through the Darien jungle in 2022 (Source: National Migration Service of Panama).

1,067

Number of unaccompanied and separated children in transit through the Darien jungle in 2022 (source: UNICEF based on data from local authorities).

14% of children are under 5, followed by children from 6 to 12 years (23%), and adolescents from 13 to 17 years old (56%). There is not age information for 7% of children (Source: NMS)

At the end of 2022, 1,067 unaccompanied and/or separated children and adolescents of more than 26 nationalities were registered transiting through the Darien; 49% were Venezuelan and 22% Ecuadorian, as well as 75 cases from the continent of Africa and 25 cases from different countries in Asia. Children from 0 to 5 years made up 14% of the cases, followed by children from 6 to 12 years (23%), and adolescents from 13 to 17 years old (56%). 7% of the cases had missing information; the number of unaccompanied and/or separated children in 2022 was five-fold the number in 2021 (202 cases). In addition, 25 cases of sexual violence on the route against girls and female adolescents were registered, and [6 cases of stateless children](#). The unprecedented increase in migration through the indigenous communities on the route resulted in changes in traditional livelihoods, towards an economy based on providing of services for the population on the move. Particularly for children, it means irregular school attendance or school dropout (exacerbated by the years lost in education due to COVID19), exposure to child labor and the loss of recreational spaces for the use of migrants as shelter.

Between January and February 2023, 45,727 people transited the Colombia-Panama border, including 9,656 children and adolescents (110 of them traveling alone) and at least 200 pregnant women. This year, people from Haiti, Ecuador and Venezuela represent 77% of the migrants in transit through the inhospitable Darien Gap, followed by nationals of Cuba, Colombia, Afghanistan and China. Most of the families are Haitians with children born in Chile, Brazil and Guyana, as well as Ecuadorian families from peri-urban areas of the capital cities and border areas, and Venezuelan families coming from Ecuador, Peru, Colombia and directly from Venezuela, all in search of better opportunities for their children in the United States or Canada. Young adults from Afghanistan, China, Bangladesh, Nepal and India, among other nationalities, transit in search of protection and/or as economic migrants to North America. Particularly, for the Chinese population, the impact of the COVID19 measures limiting work and living opportunities is a mayor driver for migrating towards North America.

The transit route of Acandí (COL) - Bajo Chiquito (PAN) - Lajas Blancas (PAN) is used by 90% of people. The route Capurganá (COL) - Canaán Membrillo (PAN) - San Vicente (PAN) receives the remaining 10%, mostly used by extracontinental migrants. The routes through the communities of Canaán (PA) - Zapallal (PAN) and Turbo (COL) – Púculo (PAN) – Paya (PAN) in Panama are used sporadically. In the months of January and February 2023 (summer season), between 900 and 1,300 people with critical humanitarian needs arrived daily to the host communities and subsequently to the Temporary Migratory Reception Stations (TMRS) in the Province of Darien. This increase exceeds the already limited capacities of infrastructure and services offered by the Panamanian State, generating overcrowding, lack of protection, lack of food in host communities, and difficulty in the timely provision of health services, particularly in cases of sexual violence, which is added to the lack of economic resources to continue their journey, generating stress and discontent among migrants.

The difficult transit through the Darien, one of the most dangerous migratory routes in the world, is aggravated by events of assault, homicides, drowning, aggression, physical and sexual violence, and family separation. When children arrive at the TMRS in Darien, they require psychosocial support and medical attention to treat gastrointestinal illnesses (diarrhea, vomiting), fever, skin diseases, wounds and dehydration; 23 cases of malnutrition have been identified and referred to the Ministry of Health in the first two months of the year.



At the TMRS of Los Planes de Gualaca in the Province of Chiriquí, on the border with Costa Rica, people arrive from Darien to quickly continue their transit to North America. Small groups of Venezuelan migrants who were impacted by the *parole* measures, or Haitians affected by the social crisis in their country of origin remain in the area. National child protection authorities have reported that migrant families with limited financial resources are resorting to informally selling goods or begging in the streets of David (Capital City in the provinces of Chiriquí) – which is prohibited by Panamanian law – raising concerns about the exposure of children to vulnerable situations. National authorities have identified an increase in cases of gender-based violence, including sexual violence and human trafficking, especially of local girls and adolescents under the age of 18 in the Province of Chiriquí.

On February 15, 2023, the most tragic bus accident in the history of Panama occurred when it transited 66 migrants including 10 girls and 9 boys from Cuba, Ecuador, Venezuela, Colombia, Nigeria, Haiti, Brazil, Cameroon and Eritrea. The accident occurred a few meters from the TMRS of Planes de Gualaca leaving 42 dead (including 4 children) and 24 survivors (including 5 girls, 4 boys, 1 female adolescent and 5 male adolescents). The national authorities with support from international humanitarian organizations attended the situation. Additionally, on 25 of February, a bus carrying 57 migrants caught on fire, no one was affected, and no casualties were reported. This situation led to a temporary suspension of the transit of buses to the border with Costa Rica as mechanical revision of all buses was required by the authorities to guarantee safe conditions for the mobility of migrants.

Due to the temporary suspension, between March 1 and 10, up to 6,500 migrants remained temporarily stranded at the TMRS of Lajas Blancas and San Vicente in Darien and host communities, exceeding the shelter capacity by 600%. Basic services were oversaturated and insufficient, and there is an increase in the exposure of women and children to the risk of violence, sexual exploitation and abuse. The influx of more than 1,300 people per day to the host communities of Bajo Chiquito and Canaán Membrillo, limits the government's efforts to provide assistance and guarantee an orderly flow.

The seven-fold increase in the number of children and adolescent on the move in the first two months of 2023 (9,656 children), compared to the same period in 2022 (1,378 children), indicates a vertiginous growth in the number of people moving along this route. Extracontinental flows are expected to continue, as well as flows from South America, especially Haitian, Ecuadorian and Venezuelan populations. The increasing number of unaccompanied adolescents in transit indicates major challenges in the guarantee of rights in countries of origin, transit and destination.



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Humanitarian Needs

The substantial increase of people in transit in 2022 and in the first two months of 2023, the change in routes, nationalities, and family demographics, creates particular humanitarian needs on the ground, especially for children, families, and the host communities. The main humanitarian needs are:

- Strengthen the State's capacity to develop a long-term response plan for protracted crisis, with a focus on age, gender and a no-harm approach.
- Support the national government with the creation of a contingency plan and response.
- During crisis periods due to limited availability in transportation leading to migrants stranded at the TMRSs, support local authorities' efforts through:
 - Provision of information and orientation services for people at the TMRS and on the route.
 - Increase health services in host communities and at the TMRS in Darien.
 - Increase the capacity of water production to guarantee safe drinking water 24/7.
 - Increase sanitation and hygiene services to reduce open defecation.
 - Guarantee access to food, specially at the host communities.
 - Extend protection services through on the ground presence of humanitarian actors and the Ombudsman office.
- Mitigate impact of host communities by decreasing the time of stay of migrants at the communities.
- Advocate with national authorities to strengthen security measures during the transit through the Darién jungle to prevent situations of gender-based violence and violence against children.
- Draft and implement a service route for the provision of health and justice services to survivors of sexual violence, including children in border areas ((taking up the recommendations of the CEDAW in 2022).
- Strengthen schools in host communities through community protection services for children.
- Maintain the provision of basic services with personnel and supplies in the sectors of water, health, protection, justice, food, and shelter in the communities of Canaan Membrillo and Bajo Chiquito, as well as at the Temporary Migrant Reception Stations in Darién and Chiriquí.
- Strengthen cross border and monitoring mechanisms to improve coordination, particularly with Colombia and Costa Rica.
- Provide technical support to the State's child protection authorities in the creation and sustainable of mechanisms for the care of unaccompanied and separated, especially for adolescent boys.



Summary Analysis of Humanitarian Response

In Panama, UNICEF coordinates its humanitarian response with the National Border Service (SENAFRONT), the National Migration Service (SNM), the National Secretariat for Children, Adolescents and Family (SENNIAF), Civil Protection (SINAPROC), and the Ministry of Health (MINSa). As part of the coordination Human Mobility Group of the United Nations, UNICEF implements services in the sectors of WASH, Child Protection, GBV, and maternal and child health, through its implementing partners RET Americas, Global Brigades, SOS Children's Villages, HIAS, and the Panamanian Red Cross. On the ground, UNICEF works closely with Doctors Without Borders, the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC), and the Pan American Development Foundation (PADF).

Given the rise in the number of migrants in 2022 and the two first months of 2023, UNICEF expanded its humanitarian response to five hotspots: Bajo Chiquito, CanaanMembrillo, Migration Reception Stations of San Vicente, Lajas Blancas, and Los Planes de Gualaca, as well as in 12 communities affected by migration, with the following specific interventions:

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of services through implementing partners with a team of 88 staff on the ground and with support from CivilProtection volunteers in the sectors of WASH, Child Protection and Gender-based violence. • Coordination of the WASH group under the local coordination mechanism led by the Human Mobility Group of the United Nations. • Participation at the Protection group under the local coordination mechanism led by the Human Mobility Group of the United Nations. Lead the Child Protection and co-lead the GBV component under the umbrella of the Protection group at the local level. Provide technical assistance to the Child Protection Roundtable led by child protection entity - SENNAF. • Permanent presence at the Temporary Migration Reception Stations in Darien and Chiriquí with 6 UNICEF specialists.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • WASH technical assistance to state institutions. • Construction, maintenance, and repair of WASH infrastructure – including bathrooms, showers, installation of hand and foot washing points, and hydration points, reaching more than 14,780 beneficiaries in 2023. Provision of garbage cans and supplies for garbage collection, cleaning of sanitary and common areas, vector management, and handwashing activities. • Water quality assessment and actions to strengthen the Rural Aqueduct Management Boards in 12 communities affected by migration. • Delivery of adapted hygiene kits for babies, children, adolescents, and women in the MigrantReception Stations of San Vicente and Lajas Blancas reaching more than 1000 people. • Delivery of hygiene supplies through the Safe Spaces at the TMRS and little humanitarian store³ for basics.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2022, provision of maternal and child health services, as well as nutrition follow-up to more than 14,558 people children, adolescents, and pregnant women in the community at the TMRS and the host communities. In the first two months of 2023, 5,318 beneficiaries have already been reached. • Provision of medicine and supplies for wound dressing to the Ministry of Health. • Technical and financial support to the Ministry of Health in the construction of a nutritional care guide for children in emergencies.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2022, some 23,156 children and caregivers received psychosocial services through Child- Friendly Spaces at 5 humanitarian services points along the route (TMRS and host communities). In first two months of 2023, 7,254 beneficiaries have already been reached. • Provision of alternative care to more than 251 unaccompanied and separated children, as well as to local children under protection measures in the Province of Darien. • In 2022, implementation of activities with 1,119 parents and children to build protective environments for children in ten communities impacted by migration in the Embera-Wounaan Indigenous territory. In 2023, 751 beneficiaries have already been reached. • Provision of case management support for 1,885 cases of children at risk of statelessness, survivors of sexual violence, unaccompanied and separated children, and families with specific needs. • Technical and financial support to the state authority in the creation of the Protocol for the Care of Unaccompanied and Separated Children in Panama.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implementation of Self-care Spaces at the San Vicente and Lajas Blancas Migration Reception Stations to promote listening, conversation, and self-care for adolescent girls and women in transit and to prevent gender base violence. In 2022, 6,245 people participated. In the first two months of 2023, 3,470 beneficiaries have already been reached. • Technical support to local authorities in the creation of a service route for survivors of sexual violence.

³ Little humanitarian store: Strategy created by the WAHS team in Colombia, it seeks to provide personal hygiene items, based on the selection by the beneficiaries such as repellent, alcohol, underwear, flip-flops, sunscreen, tampons, moisturizing cream among others. These elements complement the personal hygiene kits that are distributed. Those are in the child-friendly spaces and the self-care spaces, available for delivery on a regular basis.