Committee: UNHCR
Topic: Humanitarian Crisis in the Darien Gap
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Overview of the Problem

The Darien Gap between Colombia and Panama is the most dangerous migration route in the Americas. Between 2021 and 2025, approximately 1,800,000 refugees and migrants have crossed this area in search of safety, stability, and better opportunities. In this place, which is characterized by a dense forest, mountains, rivers, lack of roads, and lack of support. The journey of many refugees and emigrants who, in the search for a better life, flee from the civil war, violence, persecution, and hunger. Which is fraught with danger, and who suffers from lack of food, water, and medical assistance? Without living out, children, pregnant women, and unaccompanied minors are the most vulnerable, at risk from physical and mental risks throughout the journey. (Human Rights Watch, 2023; UNICEF, 2024).

The humanitarian crisis goes beyond the borders of Colombia and Panama, involving several states and international organizations. Servicio Nacional de Migración, 2025). Colombia is the main point of departure for people who cross the Darien Gap, and Panama is a country that has historically received large numbers of emigrants emerging from the jungle. Venezuela and Haiti are other countries of origin, with a large number of people leaving due to political, economic, and security difficulties; Mexico and the United States are major transit and destination countries. The UNHCR, the IOM, and UNICEF, together with the governments, provide humanitarian assistance, protect vulnerable populations, and promote regional cooperation. Their work consists of providing protection and humanitarian assistance.

In 2023, more than 520,000 people travelled north through Darien, showing the magnitude of the crisis. However, despite all these efforts, the task of resolving it is still difficult. The geography of the Darien route, its poor road and communication network, and the presence of organized criminals along the migratory route, all of which complicate the task even further, make the provision of assistance and the emergency response to it very difficult, as do limited funding, pressure on local communities, differing migration policies, and other difficulties encountered by different countries with respect to the question of migration. Even though the northward journeys have diminished significantly during the years 2024 and 2025, there has been an increase in southward movements. Law and human rights, especially the prohibition of return to persecution and serious threats.

Introduction

The Darien Gap is a dense jungle in the territory between Colombia and Panama and has become an important route for those who want to travel to North America. People from Venezuela, Haiti, Ecuador, and Colombia travel through the Darien Gap in search of safety, economic stability, and better living conditions. The aim of migration is the movement of people from one country or region to another, either temporarily or permanently, and forced flight is to leave one's country because of armed conflict, persecution, violence, or some other danger to personal safety. The reasons for people leaving their countries are political instability, gangs, violence, persecution, unemployment, and lack of services.

Considering the severity of the climate of the Darien, the dangers that threaten the lives of the migrants are many and varied: dehydration, starvation, infections, contusions, accidents, and exhaustion. Then again, to this vulnerability, there is added the abuses of criminals and human traffickers, who often rob, extort, and abuse the unfortunate. Finally, the lack of a suitable communication system and of corresponding emergency services makes it even more difficult for the migrant to seek help in case of an emergency (Human Rights Watch, 2023, 2024).

There are certain persons, in all this, more vulnerable than others. Among these are children who are exposed to malnutrition, separation from family, and the lack of medical and protective services; pregnant women who may be deprived of maternity care and medical attention; and the elderly and people with disabilities, who may face further obstacles in the difficult environment of the area.

The migratory crisis in Darien must be faced by an association of states and international institutions. The IOM helps to manage migration and assist in the delivery of humanitarian aid, the UNHCR provides refugee protection and asylum, UNICEF looks after the welfare of children and public health issues, and Colombia and Panama are important actors in managing migration flows, coordinating border activities, and providing services.

But the lack of financial resources, the different policies of states, and the criminal activity of criminal organizations create a real challenge for humanitarian agencies.

This is why it is important to understand the causes of migration and the difficulties of their journeys, and the representatives must take into account basic human rights,

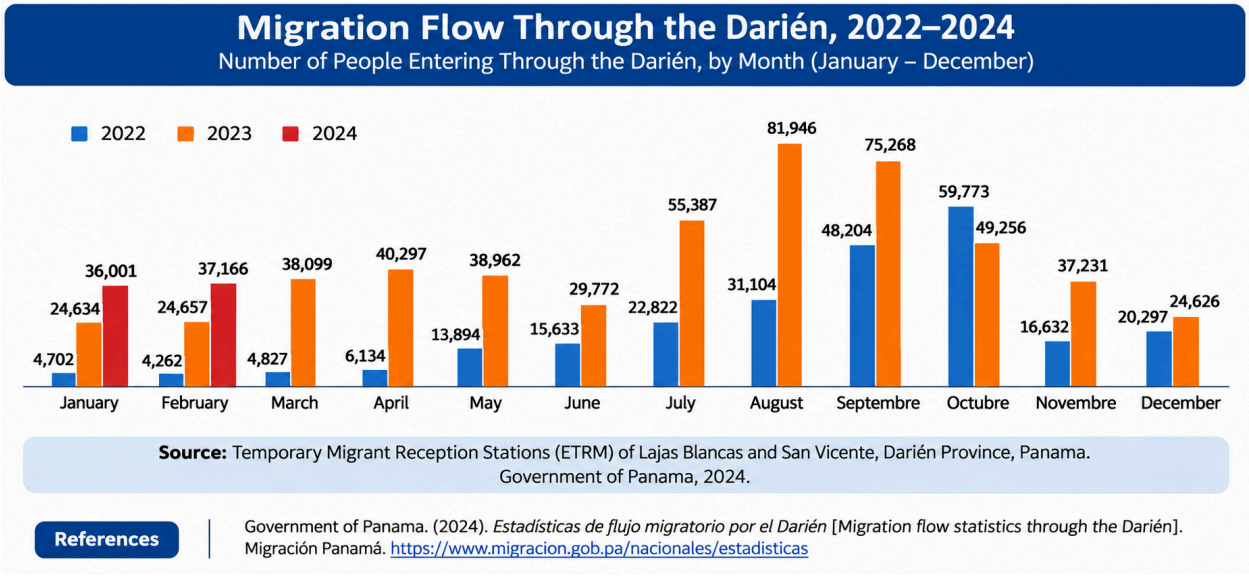
access to food and clean drinking water, emergency medical care, hygienic temporary shelter, and the prevention of human trafficking and exploitation through international cooperation.

Historical Background

The humanitarian crisis did not occur suddenly; in this zone for decades, people have been coming here in search of better opportunities, but the number of people who have passed through the route was still limited until the last decade. Then, as political unrest, poverty, and insecurity increased in different regions of Latin America, the Darien route gradually became an important gateway to North America. In the late nineties and the first two years of the new millennium, many of the candidates of this route were Colombians escaping from armed countries (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

In 2010, Panama began officially recording migrant crossings through the Darien Gap. From 2010 to 2014, approximately 2,400 people crossed the region annually; in 2015 and 2016, the figures increased to about 30,000 per year. Many of the migrants were natives of Cuba and Haiti; others came from Africa and Asia. Some were Haitians who had lived in Brazil or Chile and who had been driven northwards by changing economic conditions and limited employment opportunities. These movements showed the influence of regional instability and migration policies on the number of those who travelled over the route.

During the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the migration through the Darien Gap increased enormously. In 2021, more than 133,000 people crossed the region; in 2022, almost 248,000. The causes of this increase were many: the political and economic situation in Venezuela, the insecurity in Haiti, the few legal possibilities to enter other countries, and the difficulties of obtaining visas for the others. And more people began using the Darien Gap, which became more and more consolidated, although it was a dangerous one (Human Rights Watch, 2023; UNHCR, 2024).



(Buena Voz, 2024)

The highest peak of the crisis was in 2023, when 520,085 refugees and foreigners crossed the jungle, and according to UNICEF, more than 113,000 of these, approximately 22%, were children and adolescents (UNICEF, 2024). This unprecedented influx put considerable pressure on Panama's reception, health and sanitation facilities, and humanitarian organizations; it also increased international concern for the safety of the people traveling through the region. (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Consequently, the Panama government, in conjunction with the United Nations organizations, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and UNICEF, provided assistance and services of protection and humanitarian assistance. Temporary shelters, reception stations, food, medical care, and other necessary services were set up. UNHCR supported the provision of information services, while UNICEF took the lead in protecting children and families.

In 2024, Panama introduced further measures in the field of irregular migration. In July an agreement was signed between Panama and the United States to support the return of those who were in Panama without any legal right to remain there. At the same time, the Panamanian government introduced restrictions on certain migration routes for the purpose of improving border management. This measure reflected an increasing effort to control irregular migration, but it also raised questions about access to international protection and the effects of the restricted route (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

The conditions of migration were altered in 2024 and 2025. From the highest number reached in 2023, the number of crossings north was reduced to approximately 302,000 in 2024 and just over three thousand in 2025, and although a series of changes had taken place (changes in migration policy, increased border control, and a new orientation in terms of migration), the fall could not be attributed to any single one.

At the same time, some emigrations south were noted, with the intent to return to South America. The history of the Darien Gap shows how the conditions for the crisis change according to the political, economic, and humanitarian conditions that prevail. Although the number of the passages from this part of the world to the north has considerably diminished, international cooperation and refugee protection are still needed (UNHCR, 2025).

The Situation Today

Recently there have been great changes in the migrations that take place in Darien, according to the data provided by the National Migration Service in Panama. The year 2023 registered the transit of 520,085 people, and the following year the figure fell to 302,203, and it went still lower in 2025, when only 3,091 people transited through the Gap, a fall of nearly 99% (Servicio Nacional de Migración, 2025). The highest number of crossings in 2026 occurred in August, with 148 people. However, despite this decline, the problem is not solved.

Another important issue is the security and protection of the migratory population. In 2024, 64,764 children and adolescents were reported as being among the emigrating population through the Darien passage; among the risks encountered in the journey was the onset of diseases owing to lack of medical care, inadequate hygiene, lack of drinking water, food, and a healthy diet; moreover, migrants were subjected to human trafficking, robbery, extortion, and sexual violence. In 2024 alone, according to the Mixed Migration Center, there were 174 deaths and disappearances among the thousands of foreigners passing through the region of Darien, which was the highest recorded since 2015, when records started to be kept (Mixed Migration Centre, 2025).

This trend is characterized by the phenomenon of reverse migration, whereby emigration takes place in the opposite direction, to the south, to Colombia and other South American countries, instead of going north to North America. During the first six

months of 2025, thousands of individuals passed through Panama and headed south toward Colombia and South America.

In many cases, as a result of tighter laws on migration, lack of opportunity to reach the destination of their choice, or economic difficulties, it makes it more difficult for states that wish to offer information, transportation, and humanitarian assistance to deal with this phenomenon. (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2025).

The Darien Route is a regional issue, for it concerns other countries in the Americas. For example, Panama undertakes the task of controlling the border, giving humanitarian help and ensuring that the migrants' rights are safeguarded; Central American countries like Costa Rica have a similar transit role, as do Mexico and the United States, the latter of which is one of the main destinations and whose immigration policies may affect their decisions.

Despite the fewer people crossing into this country, there are still many challenges. The international community must find ways of preventing exploitation and providing the most basic services to this vulnerable population. The governments concerned are under an obligation to ensure that, while managing their own borders, they fulfill their obligations to respect human rights and protect people who are supposed to be under international protection. The International Organization for Migration, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund continue to play an important role in the context of this (UNHCR, 2024; UNICEF, 2024).

Key Stakeholders and Their Positions

In the Gap of Darien, the humanitarian actions involve governments, international organizations, NGOs, businesses, and local communities, each of which, according to the needs of the area, has its own priorities and responsibilities. Some emphasize border security and migration control; others, protection of the refugee and long-term solutions.

The two countries most affected by this route are Panama and Colombia. In Panama the control of irregular traffic and the fight against smuggling were the priority; in 2024 an agreement was made with the United States to send back some people who were unable to remain in the country.

In Colombia the priorities are regional cooperation, migrant protection, and the battle against the criminal networks operating on the migratory routes.

The United States and Mexico also count as influential parties in their capacity of receptacles and passages. The United States has contributed to the establishment of regional border measures to combat human smuggling and migration, and it participates in initiatives to facilitate legal migration. Mexico has to face the problem of asylum, border management, and the provision of services to emigrants passing through or staying on its territory. Both must take their own domestic policies into account as well as their international obligations.

Haiti and Venezuela are important countries of origin for people who cross the Darien in transit. Political unrest, insecurity, economic difficulties, and lack of opportunities are all factors that have influenced these countries' displacement, and their situations serve as a reminder that one must take into account the conditions that lead people to leave their homelands rather than merely concentrating on the routes of migration.

In the last few years humanitarian responses have been enacted by non-governmental organizations such as Doctors Without Borders and the International Federation of the Red Cross, and their priorities have been the provision of urgent medical care, the protection of the vulnerable, and the provision of the most essential needs. Also, human rights associations monitor abuses and urge greater protection. They point out the importance of maintaining humanitarian assistance and respect for human rights as a key component in any policy of migration. Businesses and industries in border areas, such as transportation, trading, and service companies, may experience an increase in activity and turnover, while other concerns may find themselves under pressure from lack of facilities and the changing circumstances. Business and industry also contribute to the employment of refugees and newcomers and thus help their economic integration.

The natives and the communities, especially the Embera-Wounaan and Guna, are directly affected by the movement of populations through the Darien region. They already have serious difficulties in obtaining medicines, clean water, and other basic services, and large migrations can increase the pressure on these natural resources and affect the environment and the well-being of the populations of those places. Their priorities are the improvement of services, the improvement in the protection of the environment, the participation in decisions that affect their territories, the greater safety of the peoples, the promotion of peace, and the greater participation in the decision-making.

As a final consideration, the peoples themselves are in the last degree the principal actors. They may have diverse conditions, but the main purpose is to seek security, a family, favorable circumstances for work and business, and protection. This shows why the humanitarian response must take into account the individual needs and not treat all people on the move as if they had the same status and the same reasons for migration.

While these parties approach the crisis from different points of view, they are largely concerned with the question of human security, the fight against organized crime, and the security of the area. Governments must take care of national sovereignty and the control of migration; humanitarian organizations must ensure that their mission is accomplished; local populations need support for the establishment of their basic needs, while refugees and illegal emigrants need safety and access to basic services.

Past Attempts and Existing Frameworks

In recent years, governments and international organizations have taken different steps to address migration problems in the Darién Gap. These actions include improving border security, fighting human trafficking and migrant smuggling, providing humanitarian assistance, and creating safer ways for people to migrate. However, protecting migrants' human rights and ensuring access to international protection remain major challenges (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

International refugee law is an important part of UNHCR's work in Latin America. The 1951 Refugee Convention explains the rights of refugees and the responsibilities of countries to protect them. One of its main principles is *non-refoulement*, which prevents countries from returning refugees to places where their lives or freedom would be in danger (United Nations, 1951). The 1967 Protocol removed the original time and geographical restrictions of the Convention, allowing it to protect refugees in more situations (United Nations, 1967). The 1984 Cartagena Declaration also influenced refugee protection in Latin America by recommending protection for people escaping widespread violence, internal conflicts, serious human rights violations, and other situations that threaten public order. Although the declaration is not legally binding, many Latin American countries have included its principles in their national laws.

One important regional effort is the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection, which was supported by 20 countries in June 2022. Its main purpose is to encourage cooperation between governments, improve refugee protection, and promote safe and organized migration.

It also encourages countries to strengthen their asylum systems, create more legal migration opportunities, and support communities receiving migrants and refugees. However, its success depends on how effectively governments put these commitments into practice.

In April 2023, the United States, Panama, and Colombia announced a 60-day joint campaign to address irregular migration through the Darién Gap. The campaign focused on stopping migrant smuggling networks, expanding legal migration options, and creating economic opportunities for communities in the region. In August 2023, the three countries renewed their commitment to working together on migration management, security, and humanitarian protection. Despite these efforts, dangerous migration routes and criminal smuggling activities continued.

Panama has also used a system called Controlled Flow (Flujo Controlado) to manage the arrival, registration, and transportation of migrants crossing the Darién Gap. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has monitored and documented this system through its migration reports (International Organization for Migration, 2023). Migrants are usually received at Temporary Migrant Reception Stations (ETRMs), where they can receive humanitarian assistance before continuing their journey toward Costa Rica. However, Human Rights Watch has reported problems with these facilities, including limited healthcare, inadequate living conditions, and difficulties accessing asylum procedures.

Since 2018, IOM and UNHCR have worked together through the Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V). This initiative connects governments, humanitarian organizations, and international partners to coordinate assistance and protection for Venezuelan refugees and migrants, as well as support the communities receiving them.

Another initiative was the establishment of Safe Mobility Offices (SMOs) in 2023, with support from the United States, UNHCR, and IOM. These programs operated in selected countries, including Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, and Ecuador, to help eligible individuals explore legal migration opportunities. Depending on their circumstances, applicants could be considered for refugee resettlement, family reunification, or other authorized pathways. The goal was to reduce the need for

dangerous irregular journeys. However, restrictions related to nationality, location, eligibility, and processing capacity limited access to these programs.

Despite these actions, several problems remain unresolved. Human trafficking, migrant smuggling, organized crime, insufficient medical services, poor sanitation, and limited humanitarian resources continue to affect people traveling through the Darién Gap.

Differences between national migration policies also make regional cooperation more difficult. To improve the situation, governments and international organizations need to strengthen cooperation, protect the right to seek asylum, increase humanitarian assistance, and develop safer legal migration options while respecting international refugee and human rights law (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

Challenges and Complications

Several obstacles make it difficult for governments and international organizations to develop effective solutions to the humanitarian crisis in the Darién Gap. These include political disagreements, limited resources, geographical difficulties, legal complications, and cultural differences.

Countries involved in the crisis often have different priorities regarding migration. For example, Panama and the United States have emphasized border security and the control of irregular migration, while humanitarian organizations focus on refugee protection and access to asylum. These different approaches can complicate international cooperation and delay coordinated responses (Human Rights Watch, 2024).

This isolated and mountainous region has very difficult topography, heavy rainfalls, and limited transport and communication infrastructure. These conditions make rescue operations, medical assistance, and the delivery of humanitarian supplies very difficult. Limited internet access and communication systems can also prevent migrants from contacting emergency services or receiving reliable information.

One of the main legal challenges is balancing national border control with international refugee protection obligations. Under the principle of *non-refoulement*, countries cannot return refugees to territories where their lives or freedom would be threatened. However, identifying individuals who need international protection can be difficult when large numbers of people cross borders without proper documentation. Governments

must therefore manage migration while ensuring access to fair asylum procedures (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR]).

Migrants traveling through the Darién Gap come from different countries and speak various languages. These language and cultural differences can make it difficult for humanitarian workers to communicate with migrants, explain asylum procedures, and provide medical assistance. Limited access to interpreters may also prevent vulnerable individuals from receiving appropriate support (UNHCR, 2024).

Although northbound traffic through Darien has decreased significantly, the obstacles to this do not disappear. The governments and international organizations must continue to address humanitarian needs while improving regional cooperation, strengthening protection mechanisms, and respecting national sovereignty.

The Committee's Role and Powers

The UN commissions, through their consultations and conferences, are the venue through which states seek to examine questions affecting the human rights of migrants and refugees and ways of resolving them; in the present case of the Darien Gap, the focus is on the defense of migrant rights, regional cooperation, the prevention of human trafficking, and access to humanitarian assistance.

The committee's main function is to discuss the problems of migration and forced migration and to suggest solutions. The committee is usually not allowed to impose laws, regulate the borders of states, or interfere in the migration policies of individual states. Delegates are allowed to put forward suggestions, reach an agreement, vote for the proposals, and then vote for a draft resolution.

At this conference the delegates will assist in the preparation of a draft resolution, which is an official paper containing solutions to the problem. These solutions may include proposals for increased access to health care, food, clean water, hygienic conditions, and dwelling places and for the protection of the rights of the emigrants. The draft resolution may also contain proposals for greater cooperation between Colombia and Panama and between the states concerned with the issue of migration.

The committee could cooperate with the other organs of the United Nations and with the international organizations in the various aspects of the migratory crisis. The

International Organization for Migration (IOM) would help in the direction of migrations and in humanitarian aid. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) would deal with all children's problems, including the rights of children, while the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) would be in charge of the health issues.

Delegates are expected to be diplomatic, listen carefully, and stay on topic. They are to negotiate and debate and reach an agreement to support human rights and the security of migration. Finally, the rules of procedure will be adhered to throughout the duration of the session.

Guiding Questions for Debate

1- How can national security and asylum obligations be balanced?

2- What measures can be taken to reduce the risks of the crossing of the Darien Gap without driving the emigrants to even more dangerous routes?

3- How should the costs of humanitarian assistance be distributed among the countries of origin, transit, and destination?

4- What role should UNHCR play by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in improving access to asylum procedures and in defending the vulnerable in the region?

5- What strategies could prevent human trafficking, smuggling, and violence against emigrants while respecting their human rights?

6- How could the international community better protect children, women, and unaccompanied minors travelling through the Darien Gap?

7- Which measures could be taken to support the local and indigenous populations in the region affected by migratory flows?

8- How should the success of international responses be measured, beyond the lowering of the number of emigres?

9- How can countries cooperate to address the political, economic, and social conditions that force people to leave their homes?

Conclusion and Call to Action

The humanitarian crisis in the Darien Gap remains a serious problem, as thousands of migrants and refugees have faced dangerous conditions while searching for safety, stability, and better opportunities. Many of these individuals, especially vulnerable groups such as children, women, and families, experience extreme difficulties during their journey, including violence, exploitation, harsh weather conditions, and a lack of basic necessities such as food, clean water, shelter, and medical services. Although the number of people crossing the Darien Gap has decreased significantly in recent years, challenges faced by migrants have not completely disappeared.

Many continue to struggle with insecurity, displacement, and limited access to international protection. This situation highlights the importance of finding solutions that not only address immediate humanitarian needs but also consider the long-term causes of migration, including poverty, political instability, and violence. International cooperation remains essential to protecting human rights and ensuring that vulnerable individuals receive the assistance they need.

In addressing this crisis, delegates of the UNHCR committee have an important responsibility to discuss possible solutions, understand the different perspectives of affected countries, and develop realistic proposals that can be supported through international cooperation. Delegates should consider how governments and international organizations can work together to improve humanitarian assistance, strengthen refugee protection, prevent human trafficking, and provide safer migration pathways. At the same time, they must recognize the challenges countries face in managing their borders, distributing limited resources, and respecting their international legal obligations. Through constructive debate, negotiation, and cooperation, delegates can explore strategies that balance national interests with humanitarian responsibilities. By working together as a committee, they have the opportunity to propose meaningful actions that promote safety, dignity, and respect for human rights while contributing to a more coordinated and effective response to the humanitarian challenges in the Darién Gap.

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