

Information Bulletin no. 2 Panama: Population Movement

Information Bulletin N° 2	Date of issue: 9 April 2021
Date of disaster: Ongoing since October 2018. The humanitarian crisis has experienced different peaks of migrant mobilization during the last week.	Point of contact: Gonzalo Atxaerandio, Disaster Management Coordinator – Central America and Recovery focal point, gonzalo.atxaerandio@ifrc.org Katherine Fuentes, Migration Officer for Central America, katherine.fuentes@ifrc.org
National Society Presence (No. of volunteers, staff, branches): Click here to view the overall numbers of volunteers, staff and branches per National Society based on FDRS data.	
Number of people affected: A total of 23,968 migrants arrived in Darien in 2019; 6,465 people arrived in 2020 with country borders closed due to COVID-19 and in the first two months of 2021 a total of 2,844 migrants (19% children) arrived.	Number of people to be assisted: The migrant community in Bajo Chiquito (2,413 people in 2021 thus far).
National Societies currently involved in the operation (if available and relevant): Red Cross Society of Panama (RCSP)	
Other partner organizations involved in the operation (if available and relevant): Panamanian government institutions, including: The Ministry of Health (MINSa), The National Secretary of Children, Adolescents and Family (SENNIAF), The National Border Service (SENAFRONT), The National Migration Service (SNM) and The National Civil Protection System (SINAPROC); The International Organization for Migration (IOM); Global Brigades; United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF); United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).	

This bulletin is being issued for information only and reflects the current situation and details available as of March 2021. While this document covers Panama's population movement, it does not include information related to the migrant caravans traveling from Central America to North America. For details on that situation, see the [Emergency Appeal Revision published on 21 December 2021](#).

The Situation

From January 1st, 2019, until March 31st, 2021, 35,905 migrants have crossed the Darien jungle, of a total of 6,610 are children¹. Due to the context of the COVID-19 outbreak, the migratory flow during 2020 was atypical but did not stop.

According to communications and coordination with actors on the ground, from January to date, because of the opening of the borders, more than 7,000 migrants have arrived in the country coming from Antilles, South America, Africa, Asia, Central America, of which 3,400 are still in the country.

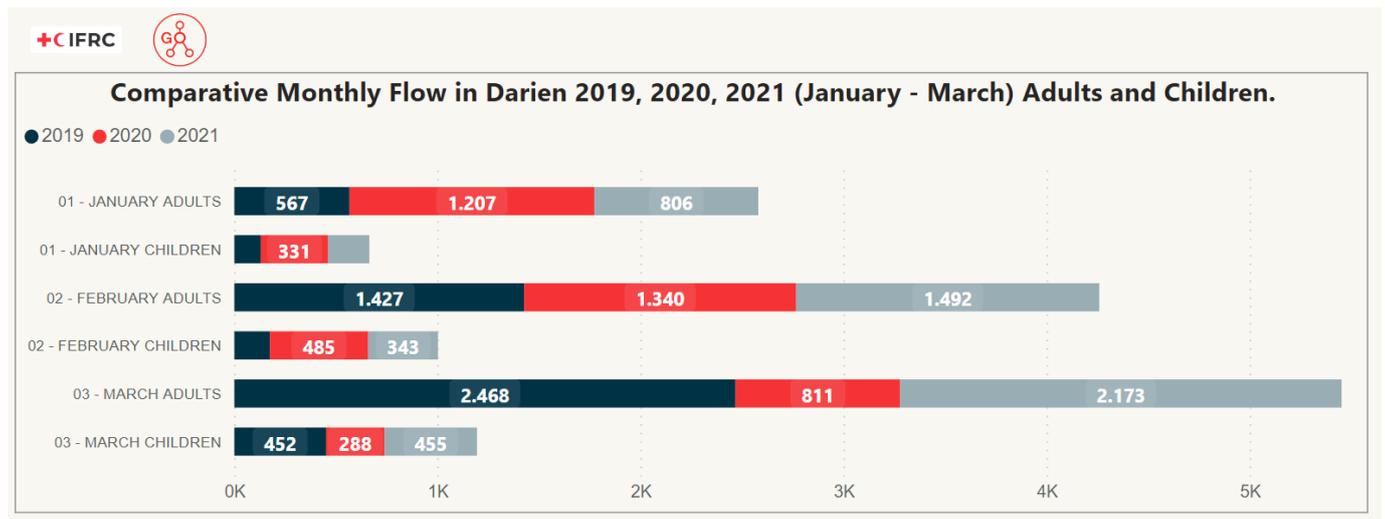
Likewise, according to SENAFRONT (Servicio Nacional de Fronteras by its acronym in Spanish) figures, some 2,800



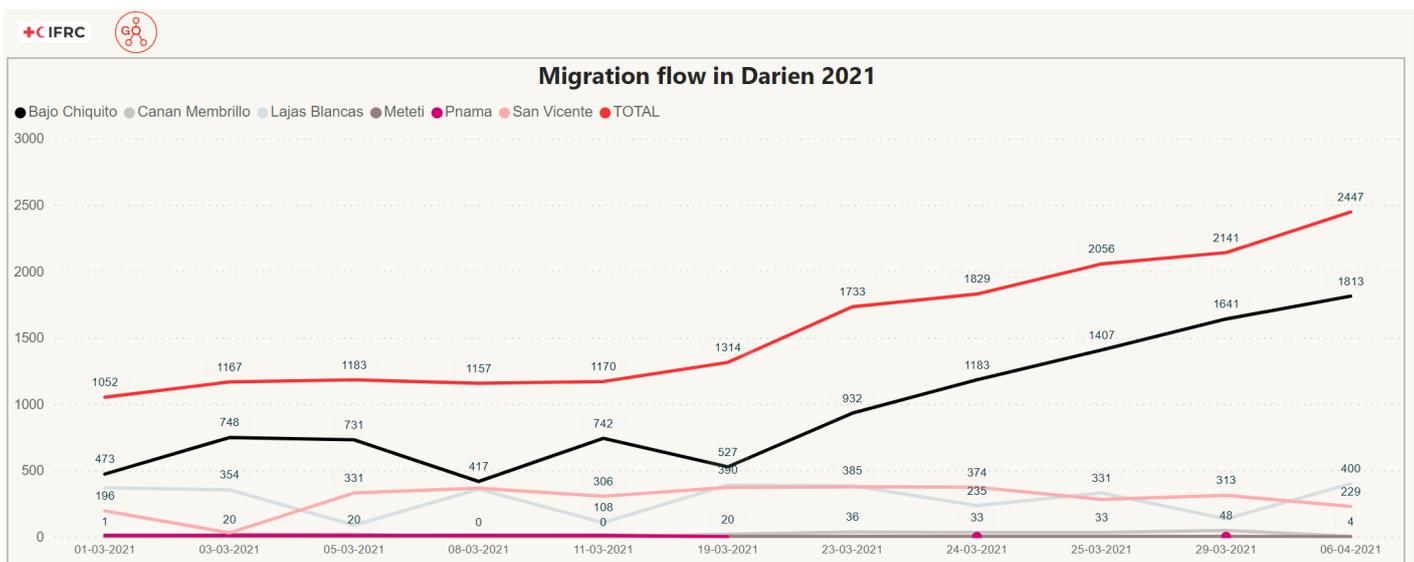
Transfer of hygiene kits from La Peñita to Bajo Chiquito in coordination with the community.
Source: IFRC

¹[SNM](#), March 2021. Figures of migration flows from 2019 to March 2021 in Darien.

migrants entered through Bajo Chiquito in the last two months to continue transit to Central America, in irregular migration, 19% of them were children and adolescents².



Furthermore, as may be observed in Figure 2. according to information collected by the IFRC team in Panama, the last weeks have registered an inflow of migrants received in the ERM (Migration Reception Station by its acronym in Spanish), Bajo Chiquito, Lajas Blancas, Meteti, Canan Membrillo, and San Vicente. This is concerning considering that Bajo Chiquito ERM has a limited capacity and conditions to receive and assist migrants.



Migrants continue to arrive in Darien, most of them heading to North America, enduring all kinds of risks while crossing the Darien jungle and all along the migratory route in Central America and Mexico. Due to the formation of a new government in the United States and the opening of the borders due to the decrease of COVID-19 cases, high expectations have been generated among the migrant population given possible changes in this country's migratory policy³.

² [SENAFRONT](#). February 2021. Transito irregular de extranjeros.

³ Semple, K. (29 de enero 2021). La promesa de Biden de una reforma migratoria despierta esperanzas en América Latina. The New York Times. Recuperado de <https://www.nytimes.com/es>

It is expected that during this year's dry season (January to May/June), the decrease in rainfall will lead to better crossing conditions in the jungle, as water levels in rivers and streams decrease, travel through the jungle becomes less dangerous, and the number of migrants passing through the jungle increases⁴.

Due to the restrictive measures for COVID-19, migrants spend from 14 days to 4 months in ERM and host communities without recurrent health attention, precarious housing conditions, and access to water. The situation created tensions between migrants, local authorities, and host communities, generating violent episodes in 2020.

According to the WHO, as of April 6th, 2021, there are 356,377 accumulated cases in Panama. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the number of cases has been increasing and reports a total of 6,135 deaths⁵. There are no restrictive measures in place. The Panamanian Ministry of Health is focusing all its efforts on implementing the Continuous Vaccination Strategy to reduce the spread of COVID-19⁶.

In January 2021, Panama allowed migrants stranded in the country since 2020 due to restrictive measures to move to the Costa Rica border to continue their migratory journey. There are still many factors in their countries of origin that force more people to begin their journey to the United States through Panama, such as violence, unemployment, racism, inequality of opportunities, increased poverty, extreme weather conditions.

However, along the migration route, the needs of migrant families and individuals are diverse. The conditions mentioned in this bulletin are based on the people on the move, so they all need a migratory approach. However, the host communities also worth to be analysed from their needs. Below is a summary of the needs that have been identified by sector about the migrant population:



Shelter

Migrants in Bajo Chiquito currently have set up individual tents or those with more resources, choose to rent rooms or spaces from locals in the host community as an alternative to sleeping in tents. Bajo Chiquito only can hold around 450 persons daily, including officials from SENAFRONT. During the dry season (January-April), it receives more than 200 migrants per day. Due to the Panamanian Government's controlled flow system, the community can have more than 2,000 persons for periods of 2 weeks more, so overcrowding is often a serious issue. This number will likely be even higher in the coming months, as more migrants are expected to enter. The site is also vulnerable to flooding during the rainy season, which can significantly worsen the already precarious housing conditions.

As part of the next step defined by the controlled flow system, the migrants who arrive in Bajo Chiquito go to the Reception Station of Lajas Blancas after 14 days of quarantine. They will spend another 14 days approximately. This facility is managed by SENAFRONT and has better conditions than Bajo Chiquito. However, the spaces' maintenance is always necessary to provide them with clean and safe accommodation during their stay.



Health

Given that Bajo Chiquito is the first migratory reception point where migrants arrive, after crossing the jungle, the conditions in which they come are poor, frequently suffering from ailments or conditions in route to Darien including diarrhea, vomiting, skin inflammation, foot infections, and dehydration. Continued advocacy is needed to ensure that the health system can meet people's needs through essential health services, medicine, and vaccinations. Many of those arriving in Bajo Chiquito also have significant needs for psychosocial support and protective measures. Due to the trauma, they have suffered from encountering various risks along the way, such as drug trafficking, human traffickers and smugglers, being victims of gender-based violence, the loss or separation of family members, and other stressful circumstances.

Upon arrival at Lajas Blancas and San Vicente, the following stations of the controlled flow system, where migrants spend an average of 14 days each, arrive with significant psychosocial support needs due to the arduous journey services, protection measures, and health care.

⁴ [UNICEF](#), March 2021. Fifteen times more children crossing the Panama jungle towards the USA in the last four years

⁵ [WHO](#). April 2021. Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard.

⁶ [SICA](#). April 2021. Medidas adoptadas por Panamá ante la emergencia COVID-19



Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)

Due to the risk of dehydration, safe drinking water is a current and primary need for migrants traveling through Darien. During the route, people consume water from the river, which increases their risks of health conditions. The Bajo Chiquito community, without sufficient infrastructure it generates spaces of contamination. There are no latrines and showers. In addition to the lack of waste management, create sanitation needs.

Due to Bajo Chiquito's difficult access, disposal services are not frequent, so trash accumulates in public spaces, presenting several risks to both migrants and host community members. There is also a need for handwashing stations, female hygiene products, and hygiene promotion services for migrants in Bajo Chiquito.



Protection

In some ERM, the National Secretariat for Children, Adolescents and the Family (SENNIAF) of Panama, in cooperation with UNICEF, maintains child-friendly spaces, where psychosocial support is provided, child development activities, child self-protection capacities are strengthened, and cases with protection needs are identified. These services are highly needed given the recent increase in migrant children and adolescents arriving in the region (20% of the total).

Also, many LGBTIQ people, women, and girls arriving in Darien experience forms of Sexual Violence at some point on their journey, requiring psychological support and a reliable protection system. The violence against cis and trans women is concerning. Information on protection mechanisms, particularly for all women and girls, is needed to identify potential survivors of human trafficking and sexual exploitation. It is essential to mention that young men have also reported being survivors of sexual violence during the journey. There have been reports of robbery and violence at the ERM that have not been followed up appropriately.

As part of the support provided to migrants in the ERMs, the Panamanian Red Cross Society, jointly with ICRC, has provided a total of 2,163 calls to Restore Family Links. It is necessary to strengthen the connectivity services (phone calls, internet connection, battery charging, etc.) and increase the number of interventions.

Red Cross and Red Crescent Action

As part of the Regional Emergency Appeal for Migration as well as the medium- and long-term programmatic transition process in the migration situation in the region in coordination with the Cluster Country Delegation (CCD), the operation in Panama has focused primarily on providing a response in Darien, given the highly vulnerable condition of migrants arriving there. In Bajo Chiquito, Lajas Blancas and San Vicente, IFRC and Panama Red Cross Society (PRCS) personnel work in coordination with UNICEF and with the Panamanian government ministries such as SENAFRONT, SNM, SENNIAF, the Ministry of Health (MINSA) and the National Civil Protection System (SINAPROC) to provide services in WASH, Health, Migration and Protection, Gender and Social Inclusion.



Humanitarian Service Point of the Panama Red Cross Society volunteers assist a migrant.
Source: IFRC

Since the start of the operation, the following actions have been achieved in Panama through funding from the IFRC's regional Emergency Appeal:⁷



16,869 people reached



19,985,000 litres of water



285 people reached through



12,884 hygiene kits distributed



149 persons reached on



815 mosquito nets distributed

⁷ Data updated as of March 12th, 2021.

through health
services

distributed to
45,354 people

hygiene promotion
activities

PGI activities
and derivations

The International Red Cross Movement, with the support of other actors, continues to provide services and attention to migrants in the Darien region, from 2019 until the present, working as an auxiliary to the public authorities. The PRCS has initiated a process of programmatic actions into the country plan implemented since February 2021, which seeks to continue assisting a medium and long-term approach framed in its Migration Strategy.

Since January 2021, IFRC, ICRC, and PRCS have focused on implementing the following activities in Darien:

- Incidence on Protection with Government Entities.
- Implementation of recurrent multisectoral and interagency coordination meetings.
- Training of mental health professionals and communities on Psychosocial Support Services.
- Provision of mental health and psychosocial support to migrants and host communities.
- Legal services such as counselling and briefings to provide legal information.
- Derivation and follow up of cases requiring urgent attention on PGI and SSP.
- Restoring Family Link services (phone calls, internet connection, battery charging, etc.)
- Distribution of safe water to host community members and migrants.
- Establishing portable lavatories and hand washing stations.
- Community hygiene promotion and personal hygiene sessions.
- Distribution of jerrycans, buckets and mosquito nets (from the Red Cross) and mattresses (from UNICEF).
- The provision of health services and assistance to MINSA's health post.
- In coordination with UNICEF, maternal/infant care continues to be provided, including the following services:
 - Verifying nutritional conditions in children and infants, referring cases of possible malnutrition to corresponding medical services and providing follow up during their stay in Bajo Chiquito, Lajas Blancas and San Vicente.
 - Promotion of proper breastfeeding practices for infants under 24 months.
 - Suggesting complementary feeding in cases of possible malnutrition and to children over 6 months.
 - Monitoring and referring pregnant women to the health post.

A scenario planning exercise was held on February 11th with PRCS and IFRC staff's participation, personnel from government institutions, UN representatives, and members of affected communities in Darien. Using the ACAPS scenario building methodology, participants analysed what factors could lead to Darien's migration flow changes by mapping variables and creating mini-scenarios. The meeting resulted in a document outlining three scenarios: a reduction in the migrant flow in the region with an improvement of COVID-19 situation, an increase in the migration flow with an improvement of the COVID-19 situation and the increase of migration flow with a worsening of the COVID-19 situation.⁸

IFRC and PRCS teams, including CEA, PGI and PSS experts, have made monitoring visits to Bajo Chiquito, Lajas Blancas, San Vicente and La Peñita. During these visits, they had the opportunity to conduct interviews with migrants to obtain first-hand information about their primary needs. Moreover, since January 2021, the technical staff of the IFRC America Regional Office and the PRCS have accompanied, in the areas of CEA, Protection, Communication, PSS, and Coordination.

Due to the increase of migrants in the region, a joint Movement mission with ICRC, Panamanian Red Cross, and IFRC is planned from 8 to April 10th. Likewise, safe water distribution services will be maintained (as they have been in operation), health and psychosocial support services, and protection services provided at the various ERM.

⁸ Darien Scenario Planning document. The ACAPS scenario building methodology can be found [here](#).

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How we work

All IFRC assistance seeks to adhere to the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief and the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response (Sphere) in delivering assistance to the most vulnerable.

The IFRC's vision is to inspire, encourage, facilitate and promote at all times all forms of humanitarian activities by National Societies, with a view to preventing and alleviating human suffering, and thereby contributing to the maintenance and promotion of human dignity and peace in the world.