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Information Bulletin no. 3

Colombia-Panama: Population Movement



Information Bulletin N° 3	Date of issue: 31st July 2021
<p>Date of disaster: Ongoing since October 2018.</p> <p>The humanitarian crisis has experienced different peaks of migrant mobilization during the last week.</p>	<p>Point of contact:</p> <p><i>Focal points in Colombia:</i> Juana Giraldo: Migration Operations Manager for Colombia juana.giraldo@ifrc.org</p> <p><i>Focal points in Central America:</i> Gonzalo Atxaerandio, Disaster Management Coordinator Central America and Recovery focal point, gonzalo.atxaerandio@ifrc.org</p> <p>Katherine Fuentes, Migration and social inclusion Coordinator for Central America, katherine.fuentes@ifrc.org</p>
<p>National Society Presence: Colombian Red Cross and Panama Red Cross Society. Click here to view the overall numbers of volunteers, staff, and branches per National Society based on FDRS data. The Colombian Red Cross has a support group in Necoclí with 5 volunteers. The situation is monitored with the Antioquia branch and the national migration team.</p>	
<p>Number of people affected:</p> <p>In Colombia: Around 10,000 migrants are in the municipality of Necoclí waiting for transit to Sapzurro (Chocó), to continue their passage to the north of the continent through the "Darién Gap"¹.</p> <p>In Panama: In the first six months of 2021, 26,008 migrants transited, of which 16% represented children. In the upcoming months, around 8,000 migrants are expected to cross the Darien jungle and reach Bajo Chiquito Community and Lajas Blancas Migrant Reception to continue their journey.</p>	<p>Number of people to be assisted:</p> <p>Colombia: Migrants in transit in the municipality of Necoclí.</p> <p>Panama: around 8,000 migrants² are expected to cross the Darien jungle in the upcoming months and reach Bajo Chiquito Community and Lajas Blancas Migrant Reception.</p>
<p>National Societies currently involved in the operation: Colombian Red Cross and Panama Red Cross Society (PRCS)</p>	
<p>Other partner organizations involved in the operation (if available and relevant): Panamanian government institutions, including: The Ministry of Health (MINSAs), 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), Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), Migración Colombia (National Migration authority), International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).</p>	

¹ Data provided by the National Society in the field.

² Information provided by SENAFRONT and checked with the press articles from Virtual Newspaper: [La estrella de Panamá, July 27th](#) and [La Prensa Panamá, July 28th](#)

This bulletin is being issued for information and reflects the current situation and details available as of July 2021. This document covers the situation and needs of population movement at the border between Colombia and Panama. It does not include information related to the migrant caravans traveling from Central America to North America.

The Situation

Colombia:

Necoclí has been a reception and transit point for transcontinental migrants wishing to reach North America, mainly the USA, via the Pan-American route that crosses Colombia to Panama through the Darien Gap.

It is estimated that more than 46,500 migrants (more than 6,200 children and adolescents) have transited through the Darién Gap during the last 5 years, facing environmental, protection, social (armed and other violent actors), environmental and social risks, and physical and mental health risks³.

According to UNICEF, the number of children transiting has increased from 109 since 2017 to 1,653 in 2020.

On April 30/2021, the governments of Colombia and Panama sealed an agreement for comprehensive and responsible assistance to irregular migrants, with a commitment to share information, response strategies, and joint monitoring.

In the last days, around 10,000 migrants are in the municipality of Necoclí waiting for transit to Sapzurro (Chocó), to continue their passage to the north of the continent through the "Darién Gap", entering Panamanian territory through the village of Las Lajas, in the community of "Bajo Chiquito".



Route of maritime transit from Colombia to Panama

The migratory dynamics in the municipality of Necoclí due to the arrival of the migrant population shows signs of agglomeration and containment currently due to:

- Rainy season in the Colombian territory and the sea level in the Gulf of Urabá, where weather conditions have not allowed the constant and fluid departure of boats, generates a damming of migrants.

³ Data from the last SITREP report of the Colombian Red Cross.

- The departure of boats from the dock is done 3 days a week (Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday) regularly. Irregularly, boats leave at night with undocumented migrants.

On July 26, 2021, 300 people were able to embark on boats set up for the journey, and on July 27, 800 more tickets were sold. However, restrictions on navigation continue.

Migración Colombia is present to regulate the prices of tickets for the boats, using the hotel infrastructure as a channel to guarantee equal treatment for everyone.

Moreover, the mayor's office has scheduled a census exercise in hotels and homes where migrants are staying to assess the municipality's capacity. It has also been registered the presence of migrants and refugees from Venezuela.⁴

Panama:



Figure 1. In the scenario exercise developed by PRCS and IFRC on February 2021, SINAPROC identified the following entry points to Panama: Mirragantí, Nuevo Vigía, La Peñita, Lajas Blancas, Bajo Chiquito, Palmira, Puerto Limón, Barranquillita and Comunidad la 8 in Cañaza. Source: PRCS/ IFRC

So far in 2021, the number of migrants crossing the Darien Gap has increased, alarming institutions and organizations that provide humanitarian assistance in the field. According to the registers of the National Migration Service of Panama (SNM by his acronym in Spanish), between January and June 2021, 26,008 migrants (21,758 adults and 4,250 children)⁵ have arrived in Panama from Colombia after crossing the jungle of Darien, tripling the number of migrants who arrived. During the entire year 2020 (8,594)⁶, the figure from the last six months has also exceeded almost 18% of the total number of migrants registered during 2019 (22,102). See Figure 2 below.

⁴ Data from the last SITREP report of the Colombian Red Cross.

⁵ [SNM](#). Irregular transit of foreigners - June 2021.

⁶ [SNM](#). Irregular transit of foreigners - 2020.

Migrants continue to arrive in Darien, most of them heading to North America, enduring all kinds of risks while crossing the Darien jungle and along all the routes, even those left behind.

According to a situation report from the IFRC and PRCS teams, the scenario has become very dynamic. An estimated 1,108 migrants are hosted at the Lajas Blancas Migrant Reception Station as of July 27. And reported between July 12 and July 21, 5,881 migrants have passed through the communities of Bajo Chiquito and Canan Membrillo. This is concerning considering that Bajo Chiquito and Lajas Blancas ERMs have limited capacity and conditions to receive and assist migrants.

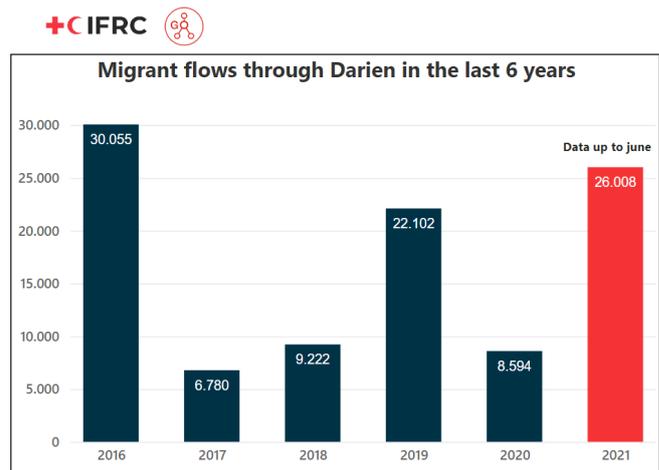


Figure 2. Migrants flow through Darien in the last six years. Source: SNM

According to SNM (figure 3), migrants who arrived in the country come from Antilles (mainly from Haiti and Cuba), South America, Africa, Asia, and Central America. Most of them with destination North America.

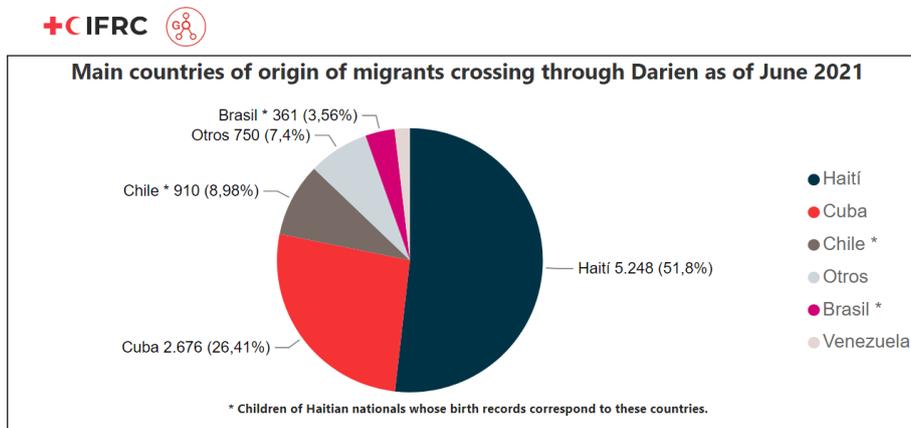


Figure 3. Main countries of origin of migrants crossing through Darien. Source: SNM

IFRC has noted, as a growing concern, the increase of citizens from Venezuela using the Darien crossing route. According to SNM figures, in 2020, only 50 Venezuelan migrants crossed the Darien Gap, and during the first six months of 2021, 258 migrants from Venezuela have already crossed the border.

The increasing flow has exceeded local authorities' response capacity and the humanitarian organizations in the field. Around 10,000 migrants are waiting to cross the Darien Gap from Necocli, Colombia, thus reaching

even higher numbers than in 2016. And according to reports for the last six months, the trend is expected to increase.

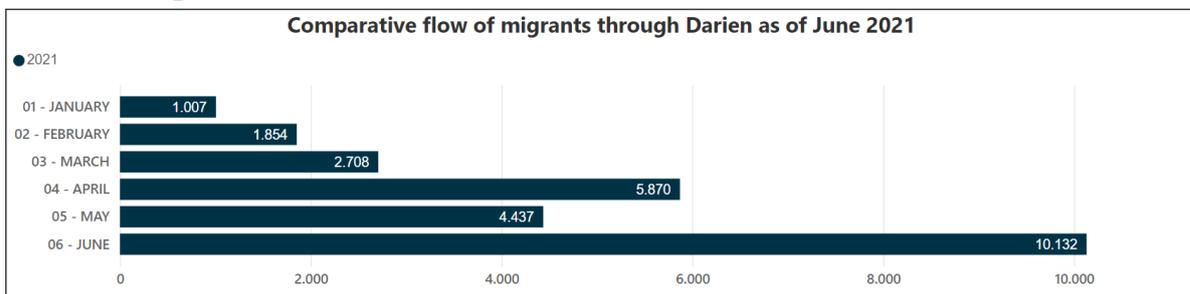


Figure 4. The comparative flow of migrants through Darien as of June 2021. Source: SNM

During the rainy season (June to December), rainfall and the worsening conditions for transit through the jungle are expected.

Since January 2021, Panama authorities have begun to increase the daily transfer of migrants from Darien Province to the ERM of Los Planes de Gualaca, on the border with Costa Rica, to continue their migratory journey and avoid overcrowding in Darien Migratory Reception Stations. According to the same authorities, during July, an average of 500 people per day are being transferred to the ERM of Los Planes de Gualaca.

Many factors in their countries of origin force people to begin their journey to the United States through South and Central America, such as violence, unemployment, racism, inequality of opportunities, increased poverty, and extreme weather conditions.



PRCS providing health services to migrants at the Humanitarian Service Point at the Migrant Reception Station in Lajas Blancas, Darien. Source: IFRC

However, along the migratory route, the needs of migrant families and individuals are diverse in both countries. Host communities as well required support based on their needs.

Below is a summary of the needs that have been identified by sector and in each country:



Shelter

Colombia: No shelter needs have been identified at this time. People have access to shelter through their resources.

Panama: 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, but during the last days of July, despite being in the rainy season; an average of 588 migrants are arriving daily. 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. In order to decrease the migrant population in Bajo Chiquito and continue the controlled flow system, migrants are mobilized to the Reception Station of Lajas Blancas. This facility managed by SENAFRONT urgently improves the infrastructure to provide clean and safe accommodation to migrants.

Based on the analysis on the migrants expected to move in the upcoming months, on July 20th 2021 SENAFRONT delivered a formal letter to the IFRC requesting urgently help and support with tents, beds, latrines, and other implements to increase their shelter capacity and the possible construction of a new Migration Reception Station as a contingency.



Health

Colombia: First aid needs, psychosocial support, access to biosecurity elements due to the crowds, and the risk of contracting COVID-19 and the need for self-care messages have been evidenced.

Panama: 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.



Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)

Colombia: Necloci is an area with a drinking water deficit for migrants and the host population, so access to water is limited. So far, there is no information on needs related to hygiene and sanitation.

Panama: 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 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.

As part of the work and intervention of the Panamanian Red Cross Society, a system for clean water production is under construction in Lajas Blancas. Once the work is completed, the Migration Reception Center will be able to provide clean and safe water to the migrants and SENAFRONT officers.



Protection

Colombia: There is evidence of a need for information with a multilingual approach. People report needing orientation on protection risks along the route, access to available services and connectivity such as internet access and phone calls. Considering the route, risks associated with human trafficking and smuggling have been identified.

Panama: 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 2,878 calls to Restore Family Links. It is necessary to strengthen the connectivity services (phone calls, internet connection, battery charging, etc.) and increase 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 responding to 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 (MINSAs) 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

The auxiliary role of the PRC and the CRC in laws and policies of the NS is currently being examined against the new IFRC benchmark tool “Strengthening the auxiliary role through laws and policies”, to identify gaps and propose recommendations for improvement accordingly.

Colombia:

The Colombian Red Cross has been monitoring the situation through the national migration team and the Antioquia branch. Through this monitoring, the following priorities have been identified.

- Prepositioning and distribution of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).
- Capacity building of the Colombian Red Cross support group in Necocli to facilitate the Red Cross response in the short and long term (Humanitarian Service Point model).
- Training of volunteers in the field on migration, including a Protection, Gender and Inclusion approach in the response and implementation of Community Engagement and Accountability mechanisms with a multilingual approach.
- Comprehensive health and protection actions to assist vulnerable communities settled in the territory.

Panama:

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



18,014 people
reached
through health
services



20,337,500 litres
of water
distributed to
65,793 people



541 people
reached through
hygiene
promotion
activities



16,221 hygiene
kits distributed



256 persons
reached on
PGI activities
and
derivations



815 mosquito
nets distributed

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 April 2021, the Colombian Red Cross has focused on implementing the following activities in Necocli:

- Orientation and access to information.
- Restoring Family Links activities.
- Health care days.

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.)

⁷ Data updated as of June 30, 2021.

- 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 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 the COVID-19 situation, an increase in the migration flow with an improved COVID-19 situation, and increased migration flow, 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.

Moreover, IFRC ARO is continuously monitoring the situation and coordinating with the two National Societies to have a clear scenario and a response plan adapted to the two countries and the capacities in the field.

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.