



© UNICEF-HIAS/2019/AAngulo. CFS atERM of Planes de Gualaca - Chiriquí.

Reporting period: August to December 2019

Panama

Humanitarian Situation Report No. 1



Highlights

- The characteristics of the migrant population in transit through the Darien jungle, at the border between Colombia and Panama, have changed from mainly extracontinental men in search of opportunities in Mexico, the United States and Canada, to families with children and pregnant women fleeing poverty, exclusion and conflict. In 2019, the number of children and adolescents who successfully crossed one of the most dangerous jungles in the world increased six-fold in comparison to the previous year. This meant an increase from 522 in 2018 to 3,540 in 2019. It is estimated that in 2019 more than 500 pregnant women transited through the Darien.
- In 2017, 1% of migrants were under the age of 18, in 2018 it increased to 5% and in 2019 there was a significant increase reaching 15.8%. Based on this pattern, it is estimated that for 2020 there will be an increase in the transit of children and adolescents through the Darien, mainly of Haitian families with children holding Chilean or Brazilian nationality.
- UNICEF Panama, in an effort to expand its programme response, is implementing actions in the sectors of WASH, Health, Nutrition and Child Protection to respond to the needs of children and adolescents as they transit through Panama.
- UNICEF, with implementing partners, installed and operates a water treatment plant to serve the migrant population at the Migratory Reception Station (ERM *for its abbreviation in Spanish*) of Peñitas, and reactivated a water distribution system that provides water to the local community. Through two Child Friendly Spaces, UNICEF provides psychosocial support to up to 70 children and adolescents per day.

Situation Overview and Humanitarian Needs

The jungle of Darien, at the border between Colombia and Panama, is described by the migrant population as one of the most dangerous and difficult transit points towards North America. From August to November 2019, 4,787¹ persons from 44 nationalities transited through the Darien, averaging to 1,197 persons per month.

Between August and November, 1,078 migrants who survived the transit through the Darien were children and adolescents, half of them were in the early stages of childhood. During the same period, 137 pregnant women in their late stages of pregnancy were reported transiting through the same border.

July 2019 witnessed the highest number of migrants entering Panama through the Darien with 3,970 persons, in comparison to the period from August to November where there was a decrease of more than one-third of migrants.

Situation in Numbers

22,394

Number of people entering Panama through the Colombian border (January–November 2019), of which 36.7% are women.



3,540

Number of children and adolescents entering Panama through the Colombian border (January – November 2019).



326

Number of children and adolescents registered at the ERM of Peñitas in November 2019.



206

Number of children and adolescents of Haitians parents holding Chilean nationality (167) and Brazilian nationality (39) at the ERM of Peñitas in November.



54

Number of unaccompanied and separated children assisted by SENNI AF, 50 in Darien and 4 in Chiriquí (Jan–Nov. 2019).



¹ Panama Migration Service, <www.migracion.gob.pa>, 30 November 2019.

At the arrival to the Migratory Reception Station of Peñitas,² children present signs of diarrhoea, vomit, fever, cough, headaches and harsh skin conditions. Pregnant women are at risk of abortion and infections. As of August, basic health services, including vaccination, are provided to migrants five times per week by the Ministry of Health (MINSA *for its abbreviation in Spanish*) in partnership with the Panamerican Health Organization (PAHO).

Between January and November, 50 unaccompanied and separated children and adolescents transiting through the Darien were identified by the National Frontier Service (SENAFRONT *for its abbreviation in Spanish*), out of which 11 (3 girls and 8 boys) were identified in the month of November alone. The absence of documentation, the death of family members, language barriers and the range of ages – ranging from 6 months to 17 years – are some of the major challenges the National Office for Children, Adolescents and Family (SENNIAF *for its abbreviation in Spanish*) face to assist this population.

As a response to the increased migration through the Darien during the first half of the year (almost 4,000 migrants), the Panamanian Government through SENAFRONT, initiated the construction of a temporary shelter in the community of Lajas Blancas. The shelter has an estimated capacity of 1,000³ persons. Nevertheless, the change in government in July placed a halt in the construction leading to a deterioration of the shelter and sanitary facilities already built. Lajas Blancas is not currently operating and no opening date has been set.

Considering the current context, the following humanitarian needs have been identified:

- The Office of the Ombudsman has expressed to national and humanitarian actors the need to increase civil and humanitarian presence at the indigenous community of Bajo Chiquito, the first migrant reception station. Migrants stay a few days at this reception station before transiting by boat to the ERM of Peñitas.
- As accorded by the United Nations Border Coordination Group, continued advocacy is a priority to guarantee that the Ministry of Health maintains the provision of basic health services, including vaccination, to the migrants at the ERMs of Darien and Chiriquí. Continued advocacy efforts are needed to guarantee the availability of medicine, health services and psychological support for victims of sexual violence.
- The Child Protection Working Group, led by SENNIAF, requires technical and financial assistance to strengthen capacities to identify child protection cases and establish referral, protection and assistance mechanisms, particularly for cases of unaccompanied and separated children, children with special health needs, gender-based violence victims and violence against children in Darien and Chiriquí.
- UNICEF, through field monitoring, continues gathering information to understand the root causes of human mobility leading to the increase migration of children and adolescents during 2019. This will support decision-making for the Child Protection Working Group.
- The Water Committee of the Peñitas Community Board requires support in identifying sustainable mechanisms for the operation of the community water purification system, which Global Brigades – an NGO - is installing. This action is complementary to the provision of water through an emergency water treatment plant installed under the agreement between UNICEF and the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC).
- At the ERM of Peñitas - Darien and Planes de Gualaca -Chiriquí, translation and orientation services are needed. In addition, international contact services, information on protection mechanisms and psychosocial support for adult migrants traveling alone, particularly women, is needed. These services would



² The community of Peñitas, located at the Chucunaque river in Pinogana, Province of Darien, is used as a Migratory Reception Station (ERM). Previously it was known as a Temporary Humanitarian Assistance Station (ETAH).

³ This is an estimation of the capacity of the shelter under the “controlled flow operation”. The “controlled flow operation” entails a controlled transit of migrants through Panama, where, once migrants arrive at the indigenous community of Bajo Chiquito they are transported by boat to the ERM of Peñitas. Following administrative processes, which can take several days, the migrants are transported by bus to the ERM of Los Planes de Gualaca in the Province of Chiriqui, where they wait authorization from the Government of Costa Rica to enter the country. Costa Rica allows the entry of approximately 100 persons per day.

allow for the identification and assistance of victims of human trafficking, smuggling and sexual exploitation in transit through Central America.

- UNICEF has identified the need for binational coordination mechanisms between Colombia and Panama that would create a system of alerts to ensure a prompt humanitarian response in the face of an unexpected increase of migrants, particularly of children, adolescents and pregnant women. In addition, there is a need to create referral mechanisms with Costa Rican authorities for special protection cases and special health-related cases.

Summary Analysis of Programme Response

Health and Nutrition

UNICEF, through its partnerships with IFRC and the Panamanian Red Cross, is assisting migrants with wound healing, nutritional screening for children under five to reduce the risks of malnutrition and dehydration, and is conducting medical check-ups for pregnant women. Additionally, UNICEF with implementing partners, is making progress in the implementation of breastfeeding and complementary child feeding counselling.

WASH

Since October 2019, UNICEF - in partnership with IFRC and the Panamanian Red Cross, is providing 15,000 litres per day of safe drinking water through a water treatment plan for use in emergency contexts. At the ERM of Peñitas, the potable water is used by the migrant population for drinking, cooking and personal hygiene. Additionally, water distribution points have been set up to provide water to migrants, the community of Peñitas (157 persons) and to the school (12 boys and 16 girls). The distribution of safe drinking water is complemented with hygiene and hand-washing talks.

During 2019, 1,174 hygiene kits were distributed to individuals, families and women.



© UNICEF/2019/M. Sanchez. Hygiene Kits in Peñita

Child Protection

Since June, UNICEF is guaranteeing the protection of migrant children through the deployment of a permanent field staff in Meteti, Municipality of Pinogana, who provides first-hand monitoring of the situation of migrant children and technical support to local state institutions.

SENNIAF, with the support of UNICEF, established the Child Protection Working Group in Darien with the aim of strengthening referral mechanisms and the creation of protocols for the protection of unaccompanied and separated children and children with special protection needs.

As of October, UNICEF in partnership with Foundation for the Refugee Education Trust (RET) and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) has established two Child Friendly Spaces (CFS) at the ERM of Peñitas and Los Planes de Gualaca in Chiriquí. Psychosocial support, early childhood development (ECD) activities and self-care and self-protection activities are implemented at the CFS, this in addition to, identifying cases that require special protection. Between 24 and 70 children benefit from these spaces on a daily basis. Both Child Friendly Spaces have designated breastfeeding areas.

In November, UNICEF provided technical assistance to state authorities to move towards the implementation of the Protocol for the Identification, Referral and Assistance of Children and Adolescents in need of Refugee Status, Children Seeking International Protection and Unaccompanied and Separated Children.

UNICEF is providing assistance to SENNAF with the implementation of alternative care options for children of Darien and unaccompanied and separated migrant children, aiming at reducing detention.

Humanitarian Leadership, Coordination and Strategy

UNICEF Panama is coordinating its interventions with the National Frontier Service (SENAFRONT), the National Migration Service, the National Office for Children, Adolescents and Family (SENNIAF), the Ministry of Health, IOM, UNHCR, PAHO. In addition, UNICEF Panama works with implementing partners, RET, HIAS, IFRC, and the Panamanian Red Cross in the sectors of WASH, Health, Nutrition and Protection.

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