Filling the Gap: Humanitarian Support and Alternative Pathways for Migrants on Colombia’s Edge

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Cover Photo: Due to a lack of private spaces, migrants rest, cook, and care for their children near this trash heap by the water in Necoclí. Photo by Refugees International.
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Introduction

Migrants are increasingly making a perilous journey north through the Darien Gap, a dangerous 100 km stretch of dense jungle between Colombia and Panama. The journey can be deadly. But visa restrictions, increased border security, economic uncertainty, difficulty accessing opportunities in host countries, and a lack of alternative legal pathways have all led to an uptick in displaced people making their way through the Darien in search of safety. In the first three months of 2022, 13,425 people crossed through the Gap—at a rate of more than double when compared with the 5,622 people who crossed in the same period of 2021. This report will especially focus on Venezuelans, given their notable increase in crossing the Gap this year, the scale of Venezuelan displacement in the region, their relative poverty compared to other migrants, and their qualification for international protection under the Cartagena Declaration.

To better understand why migrants were making this crossing, in April 2022, Refugees International visited Necoclí and Capurganá, Colombia—two critical junctions in the journey to cross the Gap—to observe the conditions there. In Necoclí, migrants lack access to shelter, information, healthcare, and water. There is no special support for women and children. In Capurganá, Refugees International witnessed a very well-organized smuggling operation that whisks migrants away from public spaces and pushes them underground, where it is difficult for authorities or humanitarian organizations to access them.

Local and Colombian authorities, with help from the United States and international organizations, must address the immediate humanitarian needs of migrants in Necoclí and Capurganá. But policies are also needed to reroute people away from the Gap altogether, including the establishment of legal pathways that would allow migrants to fly directly to countries where they can seek regularization. Recent commitments stemming from the Summit of the Americas begin to address humanitarian needs, but countries in the Americas must do more to share the responsibility to protect and to uphold the dignity of people on the move through the region.

Background

The entry point to the Darien Gap on the Colombian side is in the Gulf of Urabá, in the states of Antioquia and Chocó. This area of the country is home to Indigenous, Afro, and Ladino populations. Afro populations are represented by Community Councils (or Consejos Comunitarios) that give them jurisdictions over their own lands. There are two prominent Community Councils in the Gulf, known as Consejo Comunitario de la Cuenca del Rio Acandí y Zona Costera Norte (COCOMANORTE) and Consejo Comunitario De Communidades Negras De La Cuenca Del Rio Tolo Y Zona Costera Sur (COCOMASUR). This part of Colombia also has a strong paramilitary presence.
called the Gulf Clan (Clan del Golfo), also known as the Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia. Gulf Clan forces move cocaine through Latin America and distribute it to countries in North America and Europe. They have become increasingly violent and repressive in the area since their leader was arrested in October 2021 and extradited in April 2022. These groups are involved with the smuggling of migrants through the Darien.

Of the 13,425 people who crossed the Darien Gap by April 2022, 31 percent were Venezuelans. Venezuelans in Colombia have access to a form of temporary protection known as the Estatuto Temporal de Protección para Venezolanos (ETPV), which provides ten years of legal residency status, access to work, healthcare, and other services and a pathway to permanent residency. But the nearly 2 million displaced Venezuelans in Colombia are there while the country is facing increasing economic uncertainty, including high levels of labor informality and the highest levels of inflation in more than two decades. Millions of people in Colombia will likely find themselves in need of humanitarian assistance in 2022. Among them will be the many Venezuelans who lack the documentation, including passports, needed to access the ETPV, and those who cannot access dignified work.

Refugees International interviewed 25 Venezuelans in Colombia, most of whom had recently arrived. None expressed a desire to stay in the country even though they can access regularization. While all 25 Venezuelans interviewed expressed a desire to go to the United States, some stated they would be open to living in another country in the region like Panama or Costa Rica if they could obtain work permits there. Those who
had lived in Colombia or Ecuador for a few years described a lack of job opportunities and low wages as a reason to try to go to the United States.

Venezuelans tend to be the most visible and the least resourced displaced population in Necoclí. Refugees International observed this directly, and several interviews with local residents, humanitarian aid workers, and municipal officials corroborated this observation. An official from Migración Colombia said that most recent Venezuelan arrivals were poorer than migrants from other countries, although there is no official data on the scope of vulnerability or needs of different nationalities. Xenophobia against Venezuelans is also seemingly on the rise. Most local people with whom Refugees International spoke said that Venezuelans were criminals and caused frequent public disturbances, though they did not provide specific examples or data. Reports generally show that Venezuelans commit lower levels of crime than local populations.

Refugees International met a group of 20 Venezuelans in Necoclí who were hoping to make the trip through the Gap so that they could reach the United States. The research team interviewed five members of the group. They had had four children with them, all under the age of six. Their experience highlights the inability of Venezuelans throughout the region to find security or dignity such that they feel bound to make the dangerous journey north. They had first traveled together from Venezuela to Peru, where they said they experienced extreme discrimination, including threats and robbery—likely a reflection of increasing xenophobia against Venezuelans in the country. They then traveled quickly to Ecuador, where they stayed about a month before deciding to move north to Colombia. They did not have documents for any of the countries through which they transited, nor did they wish to obtain the Colombian ETPV. The trip cost them most of their resources, so they were staying in Necoclí for the time being until they could earn enough money to pay for the boat trip across the Gulf and a smuggler fee to get through the Gap. They did not have a plan for how to make money and complained the boat companies were charging them full price for the young children. One of the women Refugees International spoke with had a brother in Miami, which was the group’s destination. They had been in contact with several Venezuelans from their home region who had already crossed the Gap and had made it to the United States.

Migrants from other parts of the world are also increasingly coming to the Gulf of Urabá. A significant portion of them are Cubans who cannot afford to fly to Nicaragua, where visa restrictions for Cubans were lifted in late 2021. They travel to Suriname, Guyana, or Brazil and then make the trek by land through Colombia to reach Necoclí. While Haitians continue to cross the Gap, they are a much smaller population now than they were in 2021. People from Congo, Ghana, Senegal, and Bangladesh, as well as increasing numbers from Uzbekistan, are also making the crossing. Many have trouble communicating with humanitarian groups and local authorities because of language barriers.
Necoclí: Sleepy Beach Town Turned Migrant Point of Arrival

Most displaced people now arrive in Necoclí by bus from other areas in Colombia. The local economy in Necoclí is now set up to cater to migrants. Vendors sell goods like boots, animal repellent, gas stoves, tents, and other materials needed for the journey north. Refugees International learned through interviews that migrants rent rooms in hotels, sometimes after obtaining the funds to do so by paying local residents a small fee to facilitate wire transfers, since most migrants do not have access to bank accounts or debit cards. Residents and officials stated that the local economy had turned to the U.S. dollar (“se dolarificó”) because of the migrants, and most businesses charged migrants in dollars rather than Colombian pesos, which made costs significantly higher for displaced people due to inflated exchange rates.

There are two boat companies that exist in Necoclí to take migrants to Capurganá, the town across the gulf from which people enter the Darien Gap. One boat company is mainly used for migrants and the other more typically for Colombian tourists, though it does take some migrants as well. In Necoclí, one Migración Colombia official takes the information from the private boat company and uses this information to officially register migrants and pass the data on to Panamanian officials. Venezuelans waiting to board the boats told Refugees International that migrants are typically charged
Luis sells snacks to migrants waiting to board the boat to Capurganá.
Photo by Refugees International.
$50 compared to the $30 rate that Colombians and tourists are charged. Those who choose to take clandestine routes on boats—which leave at night to avoid the authorities—are sometimes charged less. Other clandestine routes are more expensive, between $200 to $400, because they avoid the Darién Gap, usually going to Carreto in Panama, making it a more attractive option for those who are willing and able. These trips are higher risk and have led to fatal boat crashes.

Those who can afford the boat fare will only stay one to two days in Necoclí. But there are many who arrive in Necoclí with no money and stay longer, for up to weeks at a time. Residents stated it was common to see Venezuelans picking up and trying to sell recycled bottles in exchange for small amounts of change to put towards the boat ticket. Others assisted in beach cleanup or domestic work to earn some money. Refugees International also witnessed Venezuelans working in construction to make money for the boat and smuggler fees.

Refugees International interviewed a man named Luis from Venezuela who was stuck in Necoclí for nearly a month trying to earn money. Luis left Venezuela in March 2022 with his wife because they could not get medical treatment for their disabled son. Luis’s goal was to eventually bring his son to the United States so he could get this needed care. Luis sold small goods daily in an attempt to raise money while also sending a small stipend to his mother in Venezuela to care for his son. He and his wife went without food on some days. Luis wants to go to the United States and knows people who crossed the U.S. border and found work. He told Refugees International that he does not want to stay in Colombia even though he knows he could obtain regularized status.

In Necoclí, migrants have difficulty accessing shelter, clean water, food, and bathrooms. There are currently no shelters available for displaced people to stay in Necoclí. Those who cannot afford a hotel or rented room (costing around U.S. $7 to $10 per night) sleep on the streets or in tents on the beach and in public hammocks set up for tourists. Some residents allow migrants to stay in their homes or sleep on the floor of their beach front restaurants. The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) has set up several water tanks that displaced people can use to fill up water bottles. Refugees International witnessed three Venezuelan women using these water tanks to bathe as well, as they did not have access to a shower.

The inability of displaced people in Necoclí to find private spaces to sleep, bathe, or store their things leaves them vulnerable to robbery, sexual assault, and other crimes. While residents stated the paramilitary organizations in Necoclí ensure that order is kept in the town, displaced people still are at risk because of their exposure, lack of support, or lack of access to authorities.

Women face significant risks because of the lack of private spaces. Refugees International met Vanessa, a 25-year-old Venezuelan woman with four children all under the age of six. She left Venezuela with her partner 18 months ago. Though her two younger children were born in Colombia, she did not want to obtain status because of an inability to find work. She lived with her children in a tent surrounded by trash. A restaurant owner nearby said he heard sounds of Vanessa’s partner beating her, but authorities
had not intervened. In Necoclí there is a Comisaria de Familia— a type of family police unit—that oversees provision of specialized care to those at risk of—or victimized by—gender-based violence. But it has limited involvement with migrant women, who may be afraid of reporting violence or crimes committed by their partners because of reprisal from a partner upon whom they may be dependent.

Unaccompanied children are also at risk in Necoclí. It is extraordinarily difficult to identify unaccompanied children and report trafficking cases given how short a time most migrants are in Necoclí and Capurganá. If unaccompanied children are not identified, they may be exploited by locals, fellow migrants, and criminal groups in Necoclí, and may face serious harm once in the jungle. Refugees International interviewed a 13-year-old girl named Daisy who left Venezuela because local gangs threatened her. Her family stayed behind in Venezuela, and she was traveling alone with her 17-year-old boyfriend. Other migrants Refugees International interviewed who knew her stated that her boyfriend was trying to force her into sex work to make money for the trip. Daisy did not have a phone and did not receive any services from humanitarian organizations in the town. She said she feared the jungle so wanted to take a clandestine boat that rerouted her around the Darien Gap. But it was more expensive, and she did not have the money. A local man who provided humanitarian support to some migrants helped her get a birth control implant and suggested that Refugees International contact the Comisaria de Familia to report her situation, but the Comisaria could not locate her. If they could, the Comisaria would place her in the custody of the Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (known as the ICBF, or Colombian family ministry) and take her to a shelter in Medellín while searching for her family because there are none in Urabá. When families are not located in Colombia—as would be true in her case—unaccompanied children remain in the care of the ICBF.

Children who travel accompanied with parents also face challenges in Necoclí and beyond. By October of 2021, almost 19,000 children traveled through the Darien Gap—half below the age of five. Access to adequate nutrition during travel is a major challenge for children and for breastfeeding women. Displaced people told Refugees International that they lacked food. Most school-age children Refugees International met had also not been in school for months or longer and did not have access to toys or books throughout their journey, as they were too bulky to carry.

In Necoclí there is also a lack of information about what is needed to cross. Refugees International interviewed one Colombian man who made the journey through the Darien but was deported back to Colombia by Panamanian authorities. He stated that most people who crossed ended up leaving most of their belongings in the jungle because they were too heavy. Yet Refugees International saw migrants buying gas stoves, heavy tents, and other items that would be difficult to carry on a five-to-seven-day trek through the jungle. Refugees International also interviewed several Venezuelan and Cuban women who were not aware of the high rates of sexual violence in the Darien. Refugees International spoke with several Venezuelans who could not pay for a smuggler and were opting to do the trek through the Gap alone—but were not aware of the dangers of the jungle nor the routes through it. Displaced people who do not speak Spanish are especially isolated and unable to receive information from authorities or humanitarian organizations about services they can access or about the dangers that
await them in the Darien. Refugees International did not observe any humanitarian or government workers who could act as translators for the multiple languages spoken by extra-continental migrants.

**Humanitarian Presence**

Humanitarian aid in Necoclí is limited, albeit expanding. The local government established a [Puesto de Mando Unificado (Unified Command Post or PMU)](https://www.refugeesinternational.org) in March 2020 that brings together government institutions (from the city and from the department of Antioquia) for a monthly meeting to discuss how to manage the number of migrants coming into the town. The government of Antioquia has also supported the municipality since it declared the arrival of thousands of migrants each day a “public calamity.” A municipal official told Refugees International that the town did not have an interest in opening a public shelter or establishing other institutions designated for migrants but were open to NGOs taking on that responsibility. He also said that “private interests were against opening a shelter,” referring to hotel owners. The main concern with migrants, he said, was that they were affecting tourism in the town.

There are several international humanitarian organizations that operate in Necoclí, but their work must be scaled up to meet the needs of displaced people. The government

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1. International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, *Information Bulletin no. 5 Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Peru, Chile: Population Movement*
UNICEF hydration points. Photo by Refugees International.
of Antioquia deployed the Red Cross to Necoclí as part of an emergency temporary response. The Red Cross provides migrants in Necoclí with health services (including psychological support and medication delivery), battery charging stations, translation services, and orientation about the area. Several UN organizations operate in Necoclí, including UNICEF and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). UNICEF’s primary function is to provide water and hygiene services. The agency has set up potable water stations and a solid waste management system. UNICEF is also working with local authorities to identify unaccompanied and separated children through mobile units, according to a 2021 press release. The IOM does not have a permanent presence in Necoclí but does partner with Colombian health organizations to bring mobile clinics to Necoclí. IOM also provides migrants with Wi-Fi stations and backpacks filled with hygiene items.

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) is based in Apartadó, a bigger city about two hours away from Necoclí and works throughout the Gulf. It focuses on registering and providing case management to Venezuelans with ETPVs and those in need of international protection and to internally displaced people in recurring emergencies. UNHCR did not have a representative in Necoclí when Refugees International visited, although the UN interagency group on mixed migration flows known as the GIFMM installed two permanent staff in Necoclí at the end of May 2022. It is worth noting that when Refugees International visited Necoclí, there was a visit from the U.S. Embassy and Colombian officials for the installation of the new GIFMM office. While all the organizations mentioned were present at the time of the visit, locals noted that this was not the norm and that typically only a few organizations, mostly the Red Cross, were present on a given day.

Local churches also provide some support to migrants. One provided snacks for children and occasionally food or clothing to migrants. UNCHR and the municipality stated that the Adventists had given cash directly to migrants, but that they stopped doing so because migrants were using it to pay the smugglers. The Pastoral Social, a Catholic organization that provides humanitarian support to migrants in Colombia and throughout the region, is not active in Necoclí. According to interviews in Capurganá, the existing church in town does not provide support to migrants in Capurganá.

The lack of permanent staff from most of the humanitarian organizations inhibits consistent support to migrants. There is no referral mechanism for migrants to be channeled to humanitarian organizations when they arrive in Necoclí, and many displaced people that Refugees International interviewed stated they had not gone to the stations set up by humanitarian organizations to receive support. Migrants were also required by the IOM to show their boat tickets in order to receive backpacks with medicine and other goods. This limits services that displaced people who cannot afford a ticket can receive.
Capurganá: Tourist Paradise and Smuggler Haven

Once displaced people cross the Gulf by boat from Necoclí or Turbo (another port city further south), they arrive in a small town called Capurganá. Capurganá is a tourist town with little humanitarian aid available for migrants. Migración Colombia has an office near the pier, but interviews with staff revealed that its main function is to help tourists.

What exist for migrants in Capurganá are well-organized smuggling operations. Once migrants disembark from a boat at the pier, they are whisked away by smugglers in a matter of minutes. Refugees International witnessed this firsthand. When a boat arrived in Capurganá, smugglers waiting at the pier walked migrants quickly to a side street filled with moto-taxis waiting to take migrants to what one smuggler described as a “shelter” where migrants stayed for the night before departing into the jungle. Migrants were reportedly charged U.S. $50 a night to stay at the shelter, a cost most were unaware of.

The smugglers are often members of, or closely tied to, the paramilitary organizations in the area, as the same routes used to smuggle drugs are used to smuggle people. The Consejos Comunitarios control routes through the jungle, as this area is under their jurisdiction, and work closely with paramilitary groups in facilitating the smuggling of migrants to the Panamanian side. COCOMANORTE, the Consejo Comunitario whose land is in the Darien Gap, has facilitated the routes for guides that take migrants through the Darien. Interviews from the UNHCR revealed that the Consejos Comunitarios typically charge U.S. $30 to 60 to cross the routes.

Migrants told Refugees International that smugglers themselves will charge between $100 to $400 per person to get to the Panamanian side of the Darien. The price depends on the route taken and which country a migrant is from. For example, Refugees International heard from a group of Cuban migrants in Capurganá that they were being charged $400 per person to cross. Colombian officials stated that smugglers often charged Cubans and other populations more because they believed these populations had more money to spend. Routes, prices, and modes of transport are tightly and solely controlled by a few actors, and the police in Capurganá do little to interfere.

Once migrants enter the Darien, there are no authorities to protect them, and people are at the mercy of the harsh jungle terrain and smugglers. There are more than 50 recorded deaths so far in 2022, 288 cases of rape in 2021, and many more crimes that go unreported. One Cuban man interviewed by Refugees International after he crossed the Darien stated he saw three dead bodies of Haitians decomposing in the jungle.
Management of Mixed Migration Flows in Colombia

The Colombian government has made a significant and commendable effort to provide regularization and integration options for millions of Venezuelans in the country. But there is still a long road ahead to ensure that all Venezuelans can find protection and work opportunities in Colombia. Colombia is still in the initial stages of rolling out the ETPV program. The rollout of the program has three phases: pre-registration; biometric registration where fingerprints, photos, and signatures are collected; and finally the provision of a Permiso por Proteccion Temporal (Permission for Temporary Protection, PPT), the identification card that grants the owner access to civil rights (except the right to vote), services, and integration. As of May 2022, 2,278,491 Venezuelans have pre-registered, 1,717,899 provided the biometric data, and 1,180,558 PPTs have been approved by the government. But integration in Colombia is still lacking. PPT documents are not recognized fully by employers. Lack of information and access to technology prevent Venezuelans in rural areas from applying for the ETPV. Work in the informal labor market remains a huge barrier to Venezuelan integration in Colombia. Many of these challenges can be resolved with time and resources. But until then, Colombia may not be a permanent refuge for Venezuelans, particularly those who have difficulty finding meaningful work opportunities in the country or who work in exploitative industries due to lack of other opportunities. For those who have family ties elsewhere, Colombia may never be an option. For non-Venezuelans, there are very
few regularization options in the country, and most migrants from other countries that Refugees International interviewed did not wish to stay in Colombia.

While Colombia’s response to Venezuelan migration is robust, its policies towards migrants of different nationalities and of people in transit is underdeveloped. The government of Colombia does not typically detain or deport irregular migrants in the Gulf of Urabá. But it registers only those who board private boats in Necoclí, not all migrants. Further, Capurganá is where border functions in the Urabá region should be carried out, especially given that only one boat company in Necoclí tracks migrant flows, but migrants arrive to Capurganá via the other routes. (Currently only two officials work at the Migración Colombia office in Capurganá and primarily provide services to tourists). The Capurganá office should be registering migrants to better capture how many are going through the Gap each day. This would allow for better assessment of migration and improved coordination with the Panamanian government. In August 2021, the governments of Panama and Colombia reached an agreement: Colombian authorities would register the people taking boats from Necoclí, and Panama would accept up to 500 migrants per day—although currently the number is lower. However, there are some discrepancies in the numbers of people leaving Necoclí and those who are registered in Panama. Rights organizations report that, in Panama, roughly 300 to 500 people arrive through the Gap daily. These numbers are much higher than the numbers reported leaving Necoclí. While there could be several reasons for the discrepancies, it is clear that Colombian officials are not capturing the full scale of the migration flows through the Gap.

Regional Outlook

Colombia-Panama-U.S. Coordination

Panama and Colombia, with U.S. support, should work together to reroute migrants away from the Gap and towards safer routes.

Currently, migrants are forced to go through the jungle due to Panamanian policies limiting where migrants can enter and receive humanitarian support. In the past, migrants took a route through the border area controlled by Panama’s border agency, SENAFRONT, but many were deported by the Panamanian migration authority. Now migrants must go through the jungle to reach the Estaciones de Recepción Migratoria (ERM) sites in Bajo Chiquito and Lajas Blancas, where migrants are registered by SENAFRONT and the Servicio Nacional de Migración (National Migration Service) and receive humanitarian aid. Migración Colombia told Refugees International that the maritime route to enter Panama would be much faster and safer if managed well. Migrants could register at La Miel port of entry or Puerto Obaldia and then take boats to

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2. International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, *Information Bulletin no. 5 Colombia Panama Costa Rica Ecuador Peru Chile: Population Movement*
another point in Panama to avoid the Darien. However, Panama will not receive people through La Miel or Puerto Obaldia or through other maritime entry points. According to interviews with rights organizations, this is because the Panamanian government lacks the funding or capacity to do so. This is a policy change that would require, and should receive, support from the U.S. government and other donors.

The United States provides training and millions of dollars a year to SENAFRONT. These funds mostly pay for equipment and the collection of biometric data. In 2021, Panama created a humanitarian arm of SENAFRONT known as the Humanitarian Border Security Unit (USFROH). Among other things, this unit is tasked with providing first aid and humanitarian assistance to people lost in the jungle. However, the United States recently signed two bilateral arrangements with Costa Rica and Panama, the contents of which have not been made public, though securing borders is mentioned in the language of press statements about them. Trying to prevent migration through border security efforts and visa controls will only further strand and endanger migrants or push displaced people into the hands of smugglers.

In May of 2022, Refugees International spoke with two Venezuelan women who were detained at an immigration checkpoint on the Panama-Costa Rica border and were not allowed to cross into Costa Rican territory. Panamanian officials also refused to let them return into Panama. Others slept on the streets in Costa Rica as they were unaware of shelters in the country or had few funds to travel through Nicaragua or northern Central America and Mexico.

There is also a larger question of what happens to people once they have crossed the Darien Gap. Follow up interviews with people who crossed revealed most people did not have information regarding shelters or humanitarian support along the migratory route north, and many were fearful of authorities and deportation while traveling through Central America and Mexico.

**Visa Controls**

Most countries in the region are party to the Cartagena Declaration, under which Venezuelans should qualify for refugee status. But visa controls in the region prevent Venezuelans from accessing this protection.

In 2021, under pressure from the U.S. government to stop the flow of Venezuelans coming to its southern border, Mexico implemented visa restrictions for Venezuelans. This prevented many Venezuelans from flying directly into Mexico, where the broadened Cartagena standard is used to evaluate their asylum applications.

Indeed, visa controls currently in place prevent Venezuelans from accessing safer migration routes and protection in Panama and Costa Rica, both party to the Cartagena Declaration. Panama has a visa requirement for Venezuelans; to acquire a Panamanian visa, Venezuelans must pay $60 for an appointment through the Consulate. At the appointment, they must have a passport valid for at least three months, proof of airline
reservation, proof of economic solvency, proof of residency, proof of employment, and hotel reservations. These requirements are impossible for most Venezuelan to meet and push Venezuelans into the hands of smugglers. Migrants who enter Panama by land can access the Panama–Costa Rica joint policy that allows for safe passage of migrants from Panama to Costa Rica, but they must pay for the bus fee and cannot remain in Panama for the short or long term without a visa. Further, while Costa Rica has a special temporary complementary protection status for migrants from Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba, as of February 21, 2022, Costa Rica imposed a visa requirement on Venezuelans as well.

Towards Regional Responsibility Sharing

The signing of the Los Angeles Declaration for Migration and Protection and related Summit of the Americas policy announcements signal that countries in the region are committed to working together to protect migrants in places like the Darien, help them integrate in host countries like Colombia, and provide them with alternative legal pathways to other countries. For example, the United States committed to resettle 20,000 refugees from the Americas during Fiscal Years 2023 to 2024, to provide additional support for a crisis response mechanism on migration, and to fund $314 million in new U.S. State Department Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) stabilization efforts in the Americas.

Refugees International has long recommended increased funding to support integration in Colombia. However, what is clear from the interviews conducted in Necoclí and Capurganá is that some people feel they cannot survive or thrive in Colombia and plan to go to the United States or other countries in the region to reunite with family or to find dignified work. Providing more money to Colombia can help Venezuelans integrate but will not halt migration of Venezuelans through the Gap entirely and will not have any impact on migrants from other countries. More importantly, funding for migration management in Colombia should not inhibit people from leaving for other countries—which have taken in far fewer Venezuelans.

Commitments from other countries in the region at the Summit of the Americas are a positive indication of more responsibility sharing. Ecuador issued an executive decree that creates a path to a regular migration status for Venezuelans who entered the country regularly via an official port of entry, but who are currently out of status. Costa Rica committed to renew the special temporary complementary protection for migrants from Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba who entered before 2020. Mexico will integrate 20,000 recognized refugees into the Mexican labor market over the next three years. These policies will help protect and integrate Venezuelans already in Ecuador, Costa Rica and Mexico. But they are not enough to address the migration of people in the Darien. Safe transit programs and additional legal pathways are crucial components to a regional response to Venezuelan displacement and migration from non-Venezuelan countries. Countries in the region, including the United States, must also end problematic policies like visa regimes and restrictions on access to asylum.
Recommendations

To improve the humanitarian conditions for migrants in the Gulf of Urabá:

- The municipality of Necoclí should utilize the Puesto de Mando Unificado (Unified Command Post or PMU) to arrange agreements with hotels for short-term stays for migrants. The municipality should also work with local church organizations and the international humanitarian community to establish a public shelter for migrants.

- UN organizations and the municipalities of Necoclí and Capurganá must coordinate with the local churches in the community to provide robust humanitarian support to migrants.

- UN organizations must provide more training and capacity support to the municipality of Necoclí to be able to respond to the humanitarian needs of displaced people. In the meantime, UN organizations must scale up support to migrants, especially for nutrition and child protection. Once properly trained, the municipality of Necoclí must work to develop its own response to migrants apart from relying on international NGOs to shoulder the responsibility.

- The government of Colombia should set up a referral mechanism from Migración Colombia to the Comisaria de la Familia, UNHCR, and UNICEF in cases of unaccompanied children registered at the pier before boarding the boat to Capurganá. UNICEF must install permanent staff in Necoclí to identify and support unaccompanied children there.

- The Comisaria de Familia should expand its functions to include a representative for migrant families to intercede in cases of gender-based violence and family violence.

- The U.S. State Department's Bureau for Population, Refugees, and Migration should put part of its newly committed humanitarian funding towards international humanitarian organizations working in the Gulf of Urabá and include more support for nutrition and health.

- Migración Colombia should increase its operations in Capurganá so it can register all migrants, provide them with information regarding the dangers of crossing the Darien Gap, and better coordinate with the Panamanian authorities.
To expand protection and create alternative pathways for migrants in the region:

- The Panamanian government should set up Estaciones de Recepción Migratoria (ERM) sites at La Miel and Puerto Obaldia and work with the IOM to provide humanitarian transport through Panama to the Costa Rican border.

- The U.S. government should utilize the funding it provides to SENAFOUNT and the government of Panama to support the set up an ERM closer to the Colombian border and facilitate direct transport from there to the Costa Rican border.

- Panama, Colombia, and the United States must work together to provide justice for migrants who are victims of a crime while crossing the Gap. Panama’s USFROH and Colombia’s Migración Colombia should set up mechanisms through which migrants can report crimes and channel them through justice systems. The U.S. government should continue to fund the USFROH to search in the Gap for disappeared migrants and migrant remains.

- Governments in the region should end visa requirements for Venezuelans as most will not be able to qualify because of an inability to access viable Venezuelan documents (i.e. a passport) or apply at consulates in Venezuela.

- Panama and Mexico should provide Venezuelans with temporary residence similar to Colombia’s ETPV. This would reduce irregular migration and exploitation of Venezuelans in Central American countries and Mexico.

- Governments across the region, including the United States, should agree to resettle larger numbers of displaced people from countries in the region such as Cuba, Nicaragua, and Haiti. They should also create labor pathways (that move migrants out of irregularity and allow them to contribute to the economies in the region) and family reunification programs (so that migrants from the region can unite with relatives).
About the Author

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About Refugees International

Refugees International advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises around the world. We do not accept any government or UN funding, ensuring the independence and credibility of our work.
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