

GENERAL ASSEMBLY

Addressing the mass migration through the Darién Gap

Research Report by Michelangelo De Luca and Eleonora Seghezze

Index

1. Definition of Key Terms	1
2. Introduction	1
3. Background Information.....	1
4. Major Countries Involved	2
5. UN Involvement.....	2
6. Bibliography	3

1. Definition of Key Terms

Migrant: A person who moves from one place to another, especially in order to find work or better living conditions.

Mass migration: The migration of large groups of people from one geographical area to another.

Darién Gap: The Central American region connecting Panama and Columbia. It is the natural border between Central and South America and is inhabited by several indigenous communities.

Indigenous Community: Culturally distinct ethnic groups whose members are directly descended from the earliest known inhabitants of a particular geographic region and, to some extent, maintain the language and culture of those original peoples.

Pan-American Highway: A 48,000 km road linking Alaska to Argentina. It is only interrupted once in the Darien Gap.

IOM: International Organization for Migration

ERMs: Migration Reception Stations

2. Introduction

The Darién Gap is an enormous and critical obstacle and one of the most dangerous migration routes. It is the only overland path connecting Central and South America, specifically between Colombia and Panama.

Over the past few years, it has become an inevitable path for migrants searching for better living conditions in the United States. Despite this, it is estimated that in 2022, 250.000 migrants crossed the Darién Gap while being exposed to many diseases, dangerous regions and criminals.

3. Background Information

Among many other promoters, the Smithsonian Institution was one of the first to attempt a postcolonial expedition in 1924.

The first vehicle crossing into the Darien Gap started its journey in 1928 and arrived in the USA ten years later.

There have been many attempts in order to build a road in the Darien Gap. Nevertheless, none of them has been accomplished for many reasons: political upheavals, prohibitive construction costs on such difficult terrain and the willingness to protect the rainforest environment. Moreover, the indigenous groups of Embera-Wounaan and Kuna have led numerous protests in defence of their traditional cultures. In conclusion, sanitary reasons have prevented the construction of a road. As a matter of fact, the Darien Gap is a biological barrier, protecting cattle farms from foot-and-mouth disease (FTM).

Nowadays the Darien Gap is the only overland path connecting South and Central America and the only escape route from political persecution.

4. Major Countries Involved

Venezuela

Venezuelan migrants make up the majority of people who annually attempt to cross the Darien Gap. The government of Panama declared that around 150,392 Venezuelans attempted to cross the gap in 2022, a significant increase from 66 in 2020, and 1629 in 2021. Migration has been directly linked to the Venezuelan crisis and the humanitarian issues the country is currently facing.

Panama

Panama's National Migration Service has been tracking the number of migrants crossing the Darien Gap. With increasing awareness that this number is increasing, the Panamanian government has employed several methods to assist with the crossing. Under the assistance of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), two ERMs have been stationed in the gap to help house migrants, offering food, water, and sanity, although local officials say that the assistance offered is currently insufficient to support the growing numbers of migrants. The lack of law enforcement, aside for national border control, has made it difficult for the government to control the inflow of trafficked goods at the Colombian border.

Haiti

In 2022, roughly 22,454 of the migrants originated from Haiti. Prior to 2021, Haitians made up the majority of people aiming to cross the gap. Many Haitians had emigrated to the country for a wide range of reasons, most notably the several earthquakes that have affected the nation. Poor living conditions in South America have incentivized many to cross the gap and reach the US.

Colombia

The Darien Gap is situated at the Colombia-Panama border, so many Colombian border towns, like Turbo and Necocli, act as transit points for migrants. Almost none of them, however, hail from Colombia.

United States of America

Most of the migrants that cross the Darien Gap aim to reach the United States. Over the years the US government has imposed policies to restrict immigration across the US-Mexican border. These efforts contributed to the Mexican government increasing its VISA requirements. This made entering the US directly from Mexico unfeasible for migrants, explaining why many start their journey in South America instead.

5. UN Involvement

The United Nations is aware of the current dramatic situation involving thousands of migrants traversing the Darién Gap. As a matter of fact, UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) support the Government of Panama's efforts to ensure assistance and reaffirm their willingness to provide access to aid and protection to all those who need it, including the host communities.

According to statistics from the Panamanian authorities, 2021 marked a record in the number of people trying to cross the Darién Gap. Around 133.000 migrants made the journey in 2021 and some 250.000 in 2022, the large majority of whom were Haitians, followed by Cubans, Venezuelans and people from other countries such as Angola, Bangladesh, Ghana, Uzbekistan and Senegal.

As a result of the increasing number of people crossing the Darién Gap, UNHRC, IOM and partners are intensifying the response in Panama, ensuring temporary shelters at government-run reception centres for people on the move, as well as assistance for local communities.

Furthermore, both agencies coordinate closely with government institutions throughout the region to provide access to regularization programmes, such as the asylum system. Moreover, they call for additional support in host communities in order to reinforce services assisting both refugees and migrants as well as the host community.

6. Bibliography

- *More than 91,000 Migrants Have Crossed Darien Gap on Way to North America This Year - Panama / ReliefWeb*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/panama/more-91000-migrants-have-crossed-darien-gap-way-north-america-year>. Accessed 27 Jan. 2023.
- 'Crossing the Darien Gap: Migrants Risk Death on the Journey to the U.S.' *Council on Foreign Relations*, <https://www.cfr.org/article/crossing-darien-gap-migrants-risk-death-journey-us>. Accessed 27 Jan. 2023.
- Reuters. 'Migrants Arrive in Record Numbers in Panama in 2022, Data Shows'. *Reuters*, 1 Jan. 2023. [www.reuters.com](https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/migrants-arrive-record-numbers-panama-2022-data-shows-2023-01-01/), <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/migrants-arrive-record-numbers-panama-2022-data-shows-2023-01-01/>.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "Number of Venezuelans Crossing the Darien Gap Soars." *UNHCR*, UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/press/2022/3/6243298f4/number-venezuelans-crossing-darien-gap-soars>.
- 'Silent Darien: The Gap in the World's Longest Road'. *BBC News*, 14 Aug. 2014. [www.bbc.com](https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-28756378), <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-28756378>.