

**Forum:** International Organization for Migration (IOM)

**Issue #1:** Addressing the Darien Gap migration crisis

**Student Officers:** Ria Harten and Salvador Miotti

**Position:** Chair of the International Organization for Migration

---



## Introduction

The Darien Gap, a dense region between Panama and Colombia, is a known and challenging path for migrants and refugees traveling between North and South America. Consisting of 5,000 square kilometers of tropical wilderness, steep mountains, and rivers, this remote and roadless 'gap' is the only part of the

North and South American continents that is not connected by the Pan-American Highway, which stretches from Alaska, USA, to Ushuaia, Argentina. Its thick rainforests, mountains, and swamps create a natural barrier that prevents the construction of roads. This area is also occupied by armed groups and deadly animals, making the crossing of the Darien Gap an extremely dangerous and extreme route. However, it is a critical pathway thousands of individuals take daily to migrate.

Experts classify Push factors for migration in Latin America as economic instability, government corruption, crime, and violence. This can be seen in many countries in Latin America, where experts stated how the shortages in food and medicinal supplies firmly pushed people to migrate. Pull factors can also be seen in striving for economic and work opportunities, the possibility of being reunited with family members, and a better quality of life. Migrants in the area have often either been forced from their homes by “armed conflict or persecution or are on the move in search of a better life” (UNHCR, 2016).

In the case of the Darien Gap, argued as the current epicenter for migration in the region, migrant families with children “are particularly exposed to violence, including sexual abuse, trafficking, and extortion.” In addition, due to the illegal nature of migrant smuggling, migrants sometimes need to pay with their bodies to continue their journey.

## Definition of Key Terms

**Darien Gap:** Geographical region located in the isthmus of Panama, connecting North and South America, containing a dense, mostly uninhabited, and uncontrolled rainforest.

**Human Trafficking:** Illegal transportation of any person with the intent to exploit

their services and/or capabilities, typically forced labor or sexual exploitation.

**Human Smuggling:** The transportation, assistance, or entry of a person or persons via an international border in breach of a country's laws.

**Socioeconomic Factors:** Social, economic, educational, infrastructural, and/or safety factors concerning this issue might cause one to migrate.

**Paramilitary Forces:** Forces with military organizations that do not pertain to any country.

**Migrant Route:** The path many migrants cross to migrate away from a country and/or into another country. Geographical characteristics are crucial points of information in these routes.

**Human Rights:** Rights belonging to all human beings regardless of race, ethnicity, sex, nationality, religion, or other factors.

**International Cooperation:** Cooperation between countries to work towards a shared goal or tackle a collective issue.

## General Overview

### Magnitude of Migration

The Darien gap is unavoidable for those immigrating by foot when trying to get from South America to North and Central America. Last year alone, around half a million people crossed the border between Panama and Colombia, embarking on a treacherous journey through uncontrolled territory in which many criminal gangs and paramilitary forces reside, as well as dangerous fauna and geographical challenges. Most of these migrants come from Venezuela, Ecuador, Haiti, India, and China in smaller amounts. Due to strict Visa policies in countries such as the US and Mexico, many migrants from all around

the world fly into Colombia to embark on a journey through the perilous Darien gap. 2023 saw more migrants crossing the gap than ever before, and numbers will continue to rise if no preventive measures are taken.

### **Risks & Criminal Activity**

Little to no state presence and proper infrastructure have made the Darien gap one of the most risky migration routes in the world, where migrants face not only the challenges of nature but also the possible encounters with criminal gangs and paramilitary groups in the area. On Colombia's side of the gap, the Gaitanista drug syndicate controls migrant smuggling operations, taking a percentage of what is made through the business. Panama's side, however, is much less organized, and multiple smaller criminal gangs often assault migrants, stripping them of all their money and food. Sexual violence in the Darien gap is also on the rise; in 2023, 676 cases of sexual violence were recorded by Doctors Without Borders, and in the first two months of this year, 328 had already been recorded. Even if migrants avoid these groups, nature poses a challenge none can avoid. The rugged terrain, lack of roads, dangerous wildlife, and exposure to diseases such as yellow fever all contribute to the risk migrants place themselves in when crossing the gap. Crossing the Darien gap is extremely dangerous, and death is an ever-glooming outcome. Still, migrants cross the gap every day in search of a better life. Addressing this issue properly will most likely save lives and provide a much safer route in the migrant's search for a better life.

### **Driving Causes**

Migration through the Darien gap has exponentially increased over the last decade. The main causes for this surge are economic collapse, such as in Venezuela, political instability, as seen in Haiti ever since President Jovenel Moïse

was murdered in 2021, and rising violence, which Ecuador has seen in the increased presence and power of criminal gangs. The increased insecurity present in many countries in South America is one of the many causes of this issue. As families and individuals choose to migrate in hopes of safety and economic stability, another driving cause is made evident. Lack of accessibility for legal migration, movement restrictions, and slow processing rates often obligate people to journey through the Darien gap. The Darien gap is often the last route a migrant is willing to take to reach North America. Still, as violence and instability are on the rise, current migration policies and methods cannot keep up with the influx of people desperate to escape the dangers they are facing. Addressing stability and policy factors will possibly solve the migration crisis and improve migration pathways for anyone looking for a better life.

### **International Action**

International cooperation and aid to protect migrants have been insufficient with the current flux. The lack of investigation, proper information, and reports regarding crimes committed in the gap has provided a haven for criminals. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has reported 245 disappearances between 2021-2023, highlighting the danger of the route. Panamanian and Colombian authorities are failing to effectively manage the large amount of migrants arriving at their borders. Doctors Without Borders, which had been working in Panamanian refugee camps, has been suspended this March, which not only limits migrants' access to health treatment but also places more responsibility on the Panamanian government. Amidst the complex situation, the IOM believes that the best approach to solve the crisis is collaboration in addressing the causes of irregular migration and displacement.

## Major Parties Involved and Their Views

### Panama and Colombia

The Colombian and Panamanian governments play a critical role in managing the Darien gap, focusing on migration control, border security, indigenous rights, and environmental protection. Both governments have to balance between the control of illegal activities, including human trafficking and human smuggling, and the humanitarian assistance to migrants and refugees traveling through the gap. Both governments should protect the right to life and physical integrity of people in their territory, including transiting migrants and asylum seekers, and investigate violations effectively, promptly, and thoroughly, as seen under the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the American Convention on Human Rights (ACHR). However, according to Human Rights Watch, "Colombia and Panama are failing to effectively protect the international human rights of migrants and asylum seekers transiting through the Darién Gap."

### Panama

The Panamanian government's "controlled flow" policy at the Darién Gap aims to limit migrant movement, prioritizing their quick departure to the Costa Rican border over humanitarian needs, with indigenous communities and migrant reception centers receiving minimal support. Additionally, Panama suspended Médecins Sans Frontières' operations, a key organization assisting migrants, including sexual violence victims, arguing that their agreement with the humanitarian group had ended in December.

### Colombia

Colombia's half of the Darien Gap lacks government presence, which ultimately affects the safety of asylum seekers and migrants currently in the area. Making them an easy target for armed groups such as the Gulf Clan, a

group in drug trafficking. Groups like those control the movement of migrants and asylum seekers and take advantage of their vulnerability and desperation. This led to the lack of help the Colombian government provided to meet humanitarian needs.

## **Venezuela**

is the highest nationality to have crossed the Darien gap, with 440,000 people since January 2022. That meant that for every hour, 37 Venezuelans crossed the border in 2023. This is due in part to the imposition of visa requirements by Mexico and Central American governments, which have pushed migrants and asylum seekers to take the dangerous route through the Darién Gap instead of flying directly to the U.S.-Mexico border. In general, more than 6.1 million refugees and migrants have left Venezuela as a result of the political turmoil, socio-economic instability, and the ongoing humanitarian crisis. Seventeen countries host around 80 percent of Venezuelans (more than 5 million) throughout Latin America and the Caribbean (“Venezuelan Refugee and Migrant Crisis”).

## **United States of America**

The United States of America is the number one destination for migrants, with, according to the IOM, nearly 51 million migrants. According to reports by Human Rights Watch, the United States, along with other governments in the Western Hemisphere, has implemented policies restricting movement from South American countries to Mexico and Central America, which have inadvertently led to sharp increases in the number of people crossing the Darién Gap. These restrictions, often promoted by the United States, have pushed migrants and asylum seekers to take the dangerous journey through the Darién Gap, exposing them to abuses, including sexual violence.

## Mexico

Mexico has been impacted by the increased migration through the Darién Gap, as many migrants travel through Mexico to the United States. Riding atop these freight trains exposes migrants to numerous dangers, including falls from the moving train, which can result in severe injuries or death. Additionally, the journey on "La Bestia" makes migrants targets for robbery and violence, as criminal elements often exploit their vulnerability. Also, encounters with immigration authorities can lead to raids and deportations, adding a layer of legal risk to the physical dangers.

## Ecuador

Ecuador currently hosts over 800,000 migrants, including 475,000 Venezuelans and 203,000 Colombians, according to UN data. These communities face challenges integrating and securing their livelihoods, with crime and violence directly threatening their safety and public perceptions of widespread criminality indirectly impacting them. With President Daniel Noboa declaring a state of emergency for "internal armed conflict," many migrants and Ecuadorians have left the country, with the U.S. being their destination. With 57,250 Ecuadorians crossing the deadly Darién Gap in 2023, a 95% increase from 2022. Additionally, 125,259 encounters of Ecuadorians were recorded at the US-Mexico border in 2023, with an unknown number (less than 3,600) entering the US since November 2023 under a new humanitarian family reunification parole program.

## Timeline of Events

Date	Description of Event
Pre-Columbian period	The area was inhabited by indigenous groups such as the Kuna, Embera, and Wounaan.



- 1501 First reached by Spanish explorers, including Christopher Columbus, Rodrigo de Bastidas and Vasco Núñez de Balboa.
- 1936 The Pan-American Highway was developed to connect North and South America but remained incomplete through the Darien Gap due to environmental, political, and economic challenges.
- 1989 Panama's military forces were dissolved following the US invasion of Panamá, which removed military dictator Manuel Antonio Noriega.
- 1994 Panama amends its constitution to permanently ban the establishment of a standing army, reflecting a commitment to peace and democratic governance.
- 1990 - 2000 Due to the absence of a formal military, FARC and other armed groups used the Darien Gap as a way to transit. Including drug trafficking.
- 2008 Almost two-thirds of the Darien Province was under the control of FARC, Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia.
- August 20, 2008 The creation of Servicio Nacional de Fronteras (National Border Service, or Senafront), a specialized force aimed at boosting security in border regions, particularly the Darien Gap. The force is in charge of controlling illegal activities such as drug trafficking and unauthorized migration and monitoring the

activities of armed groups crossing from Colombia.

2017-2018

Venezuela's political and humanitarian crisis intensifies, leading to a significant increase in emigration.

2020

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in border closures, travel restrictions, and economic disruptions worldwide. Leading to a decrease in migration flows. However, the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic, including job losses and increased poverty, have contributed to migration causes in the region, affecting migration patterns through the Darien Gap in the future.

April 16, 2021

The creation of the Humanitarian Border Security Unit (USFROH). Offers security to migrant people, preventive patrolling, first aid, rescue and localization of missing people in the jungle, and humanitarian assistance. ("Panama expands its border security services to guarantee the rights of the migrant population")

April 2023

The United States, Colombia, and Panama launched a 60-day campaign to halt illegal migration through the Darien Gap.

2023

More than half a million people crossed the Darien Gap

## UN involvement, Relevant Resolutions, Treaties, and Events

The UN's stance when pertaining to the issue of the Darien Gap migration crisis has already been made clear, seen as the UN and IOM have emphasized the need for regional solutions in managing the high transit present on the route, combating the root causes of displacement in the region, and expanding accessible legal pathways for migration. Treaties addressing the migration crisis in the Darien Gap have not been signed or ratified by the UN or any organization pertaining to the UN system. Organizations like the IOM have involved themselves in the crisis through different mediums. In 2022, the IOM and UNHCR provided shelters, mattresses, lamps, and hygiene kits in Panamanian refugee centers, aiding those in need and the Panamanian government as it tried to manage the influx of migrants. Working alongside the Panamanian government, IOM also successfully created the Humanitarian Border Security Unit as a wing of Servicio Nacional de Fronteras (SENAFRONT), which IOM capacitated in the humanitarian aspects of their duty to ensure the proper treatment of migrants. While the lack of long-term agreements and treaties regarding the crisis sparks concern, there is also a window of opportunity to address this issue from a new angle.

## Past Action

In the past, both Panama and Colombia have increased border patrols and implemented security measures to prevent the migration of undocumented migrants through the Darien Gap. However, those measures are not always followed through. Deals have also been created between the US, Colombia, and Panama, proposing a sixty-day plan to shut down the Darién Gap route as part of a broader effort to stem an expected surge in illegal migration on the

U.S.-Mexico border. Yet, migrant numbers have increased immensely, reaching 520,000 in 2023 (Mohor), with higher numbers expected in 2024.

## Possible Solutions

1. International Aid: Direct participation and constant support from an outside state can be excellent tools to distribute the burden of managing increased migration. Providing the Panamanian government with medical supplies, food, and beds is a great way to relieve the economic burden of providing a home for migrants and refugees.
2. Facilitating regular migration: Addressing the issue by attempting to facilitate regular migration can provide a much safer route for migrants and asylum seekers, allow countries to record individuals migrating properly, and facilitate criminal investigations.
3. Combating the root causes of the issue: Efforts to combat the root causes of the crisis, such as inflation, corrupt governments, or increasingly present organized crime, have the opportunity to solve the crisis at hand and subsequently improve the economy, government, and safety of a country or region.
4. Training personnel: Training personnel to combat this issue, such as the Humanitarian Border Security Unit, can prove to be an optimal approach that can allow the affected parties (Panama and Colombia) to improve their response to the issue, fully investigate crimes being committed in the gap, and properly provide water, food, and medical assistance for migrants in need.

## Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)

Sustainable Development Goal 3 aims to ensure healthy lives and promote

well-being for all ages. This goal is crucial to remember when addressing the Darien Gap crisis since people crossing it face serious health risks, including diseases and a lack of clean drinking water, putting their health at risk. The journey through the jungle often leaves them needing urgent medical care once they reach Panama, emphasizing the critical health needs of travelers. Unfortunately, many do not survive the long weeks of travel, which goes against global goals to reduce preventable deaths and ensure everyone lives healthy lives. To achieve SDG 3, nations can focus on public health to protect the health of those taking on this dangerous trek.

## Bibliography

“Américas: Abusos contra Migrantes no Estreito de Darién.” Human Rights Watch, 9 November 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/09/americas-migrants-pushed-cross-darien-gap-abused>. Accessed 8 April 2024.

“Americas: Migrants Pushed to Cross Darién Gap, Abused.” Human Rights Watch, Human Rights Watch, 16 Nov. 2023, [www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/09/americas-migrants-pushed-cross-darien-gap-abused](https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/09/americas-migrants-pushed-cross-darien-gap-abused).

“Bottleneck of the Americas: Crime and Migration in the Darién Gap.” Crisis Group, Crisis Group, 26 Feb. 2024, [www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia-central-america/102-bottleneck-americas-crime-and-migration](https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/colombia-central-america/102-bottleneck-americas-crime-and-migration).

“Colombia, Panama Fail to Protect Migrants in Darién Gap.” Human Rights Watch, 3 Apr. 2024, [www.hrw.org/news/2024/04/03/colombia-panama-fail-protect-migrants-darién-gap](https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/04/03/colombia-panama-fail-protect-migrants-darién-gap).

“Crossing the Darién Gap: Migrants Risk Death on the Journey to the U.S.” Council on Foreign Relations, Council on Foreign Relations, 1 Feb. 2024, [www.cfr.org/article/crossing-darién-gap-migrants-risk-death-journey-us](https://www.cfr.org/article/crossing-darién-gap-migrants-risk-death-journey-us).

“How the Treacherous Darién Gap Became a Migration Crossroads of the Americas.” Human Rights Watch, 10 October 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/10/10/how-treacherous-darién-gap-became-migration-crossroads-americas>. Accessed 8 April 2024.

“Los problemas del país sin ejército que le hace frente a las FARC.” BBC, 27 May 2015, [https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/05/150526\\_panama\\_darién\\_frontera\\_colombia\\_farc\\_paz\\_wbm](https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2015/05/150526_panama_darién_frontera_colombia_farc_paz_wbm). Accessed 14 April 2024.

Maizland, Lindsay. “Crossing the Darién Gap: Migrants Risk Death on the Journey to the U.S.” Council on Foreign Relations, <https://www.cfr.org/article/crossing-darién-gap-migrants-risk-death-journey-us>. Accessed 8 April 2024.

Martínez, Kathia. "US, Panama and Colombia aim to stop Darien Gap migration." AP News, 11 April 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/darien-gap-panama-colombia-us-migrants-cf0cd1e9de2119208c9af186e53e09b7>. Accessed 14 April 2024.

"Migration and the SDGs: Measuring Progress." IOM Publications, <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/SDG-an-edited-volume.pdf>. Accessed 10 June 2024.

"The migratory implications of Ecuador's crisis." Americas Migration Brief, 30 January 2024, <https://www.migrationbrief.com/p/the-migratory-implications-of-ecuadors>. Accessed 8 April 2024.

Mohor, Daniela. "The Darién Gap migration crisis in six graphs, and one map." The New Humanitarian, 15 January 2024, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/maps-and-graphics/2024/01/15/darien-gap-migration-crisis-six-graphs-and-one-map>. Accessed 14 April 2024.

Moench, Mallory. "Migrants Crossing the Darién Gap Hit Record High in 2023." Time, Time, 22 Dec. 2023, [time.com/6547992/migrants-crossing-darien-gap-2023/](https://time.com/6547992/migrants-crossing-darien-gap-2023/).

“Number of Venezuelans Crossing the Darien Gap Soars.” International Organization for Migration, International Organization for Migration, 22 Mar. 2022, [www.iom.int/news/number-venezuelans-crossing-darien-gap-soars](http://www.iom.int/news/number-venezuelans-crossing-darien-gap-soars).

“Panama.” ACAPS, <https://www.acaps.org/en/countries/panama>. Accessed 8 April 2024.

“Panama expands its border security services to guarantee the rights of the migrant population.” OIM Panama, <https://panama.iom.int/en/news/panama-expands-its-border-security-services-guarantee-rights-migrant-population-0>. Accessed 14 April 2024.

“Panama (Global) Administrative Centre.” International Organization for Migration, International Organization for Migration, [www.iom.int/panama-global-administrative-centre](http://www.iom.int/panama-global-administrative-centre). Accessed 12 May 2024.

Reid, Kathryn. “Venezuela crisis: Facts, FAQs, and how to help.” World Vision, 21 September 2023, <https://www.worldvision.org/disaster-relief-news-stories/venezuela-crisis-facts>. Accessed 14 April 2024.



“Risking It All Crossing the Darien Gap, a Treacherous Trek No One Should Tackle.” OIM Panama, OIM Panama, 14 Jan. 2022, [panama.iom.int/en/news/risking-it-all-crossing-darien-gap-treacherous-trek-no-one-should-tackle](https://panama.iom.int/en/news/risking-it-all-crossing-darien-gap-treacherous-trek-no-one-should-tackle).

“Riding 'The Beast' With Mexico's Train-Hopping Migrants.” VICE, 16 November 2023, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/88xeq3/migrants-beast-train-hopping-mexico-border>. Accessed 14 April 2024.

STEVENSON, MARK. “Wave of migrants that halted trains in Mexico started with migrant smuggling industry in Darien Gap.” AP News, 21 September 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/mexico-migrants-darien-gap-trains-7fa1f413f816d036ed06f0ef7c5d05b1>. Accessed 14 April 2024.

Taylor, Luke. “Panama orders MSF to stop treating people who crossed Darién Gap.” The Guardian, 8 March 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/mar/08/panama-darien-gap-doctors-without-borders-msf>. Accessed 8 April 2024.

Turkewitz, Julie, and Federico Rios. “Sexual Assault of Migrants in Panama Rises to Level Rarely Seen Outside War.” The New York Times, The New York Times, 4 Apr. 2024, [www.nytimes.com/2024/04/04/world/americas/migrants-sexual-assault-dari](https://www.nytimes.com/2024/04/04/world/americas/migrants-sexual-assault-dari)

en-gap.html.

“UN Calls for Regional Solutions to Curb Record Migration through Darien Gap | Reuters.” Reuters, 2 Aug. 2023, [www.reuters.com/world/americas/un-calls-regional-solutions-curb-record-migration-through-darien-gap-2023-08-02/](https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/un-calls-regional-solutions-curb-record-migration-through-darien-gap-2023-08-02/).

“Venezuelan Refugee and Migrant Crisis.” International Organization for Migration, <https://www.iom.int/venezuelan-refugee-and-migrant-crisis>. Accessed 14 April 2024.

“WORLD MIGRATION REPORT DATA SNAPSHOT - Top origin and destination countries.” World Migration Report, <https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11691/files/documents/WMR-Data-Snapshot-Top-Origin-and-Destination-Countries.pdf>. Accessed 8 April 2024.

Yates, Caitlyn, and Juan Pappier. “Article: How the Treacherous Darien Gap Became a M..” Migration Policy Institute, 20 September 2023, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/dari%C3%A9n-gap-migration-cross-roads>. Accessed 8 April 2024.

Youkee, Mat. “The Darien Gap's Fearsome Reputation Has Been Centuries in the Making.” Americas Quarterly, 17 October 2023, <https://www.americasquarterly.org/article/the-darien-gaps-fearsome-reput>

ation-has-been-centuries-in-the-making/. Accessed 14 April 2024.

## Appendix

- I. IOM strategic plan outlining objectives in order to tackle the areas of growth in migration.  
<https://www.iom.int/iom-strategic-plan-2024-2028>
- II. IOM's global administrative center in Panama, vision, mission, and departments.  
<https://www.iom.int/panama-global-administrative-centre>
- III. CIA fact book on net migration rates.  
<https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/field/net-migration-rate/country-comparison/>
- IV. HRW article on the pushing factors of the Darien Gap migration crisis.  
<https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/09/americas-migrants-pushed-across-darien-gap-abused>
- V. Servicio Nacional de Fronteras (SENAFRONT) home page, all about the organization and what it is doing (source is in Spanish).  
<http://www.senafront.gob.pa/>
- VI. Informative video showcasing the challenges of crossing the treacherous Darien Gap.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMPX1547Pss&ab\\_channel=PBNewsHour](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XMPX1547Pss&ab_channel=PBNewsHour)

