

Mind the Darién Gap, Migration Bottleneck of the Americas

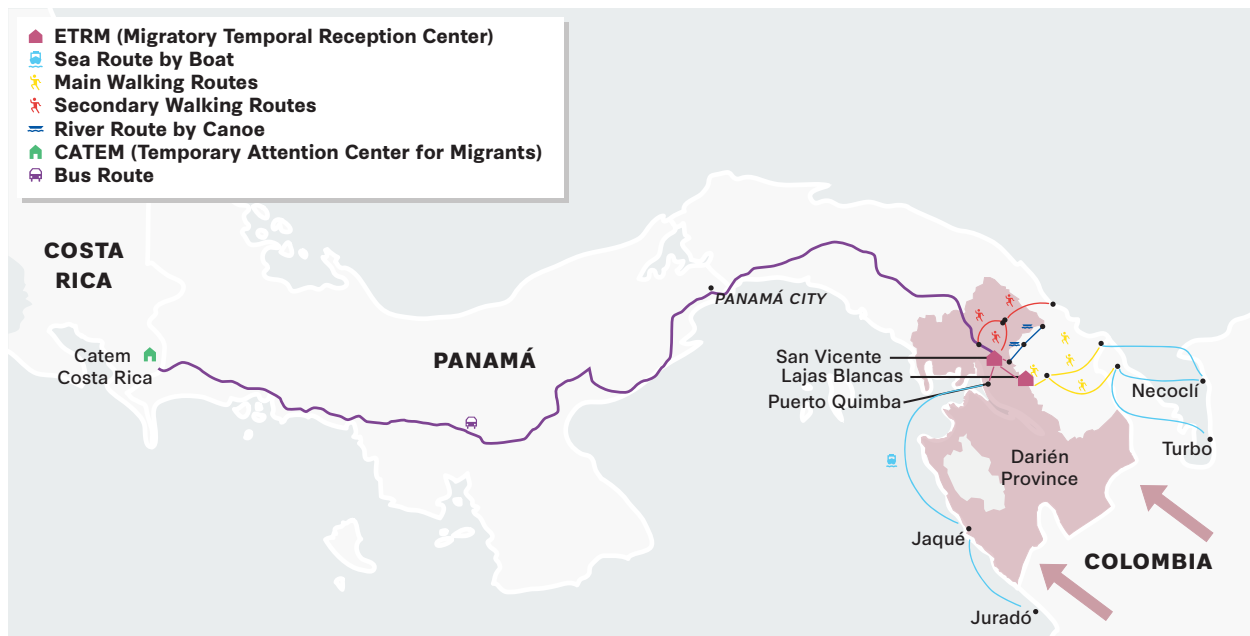
By Dan Runde and Thomas Bryja

Background

The Darién Gap, a **roadless, 60-mile stretch** of rainforest straddling the Colombia-Panama border, was named for being **the only break** in the Pan-American Highway, a **19,000-mile-long** network of roads that otherwise runs uninterrupted from Alaska to the southern tip of Argentina. Steep mountains, muddy swamplands, dense forests, turbulent rivers, dangerous wildlife, and high levels of humidity and precipitation make the landscape **too hostile** for infrastructure and immensely difficult to police. For these reasons, the Darién jungle has long held a reputation for being impenetrable. But as the only land bridge connecting South and Central America, this remote, treacherous terrain has become **a major route** for irregular migration as the only corridor to the United States for desperate asylum seekers traveling on foot.

A **decade ago**, only several thousand people dared to cross the Darién Gap each year. Today, this once inaccessible jungle has become a traffic jam. A “**perfect storm**” of economic insecurity, political upheaval, rising violence, climate change, and region-wide crackdowns on immigration pushed a stunning **133,653** migrants to cross in 2021. This figure has continued to **double** annually, jumping to **248,284** in 2022 and a record **520,085** migrants in 2023—more than 40 times the annual average between 2010 and 2020. According to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), **one in five** of these migrants is a child and one in ten is under the age of five. As of 2023, around **84 percent** of those crossing the gap are from Venezuela, Haiti, and Ecuador, where catastrophic combinations of economic collapse, political dysfunction, and violent crime have forced thousands of families to flee. Although Venezuelans remain the most represented nationality for the past two years by a wide margin, with **328,667** individuals crossing in 2023, there has also been an **unprecedented surge** in extracontinental migrants from Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, who travel to South America in the hope of reaching the

Figure 1: Movements and Routes through the Darién Gap



Source: Daniela Mohor, "The Darién Gap Migration Crisis in Six Graphs, and One Map," The New Humanitarian, January 15, 2024, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/maps-and-graphics/2024/01/15/darien-gap-migration-crisis-six-graphs-and-one-map>.

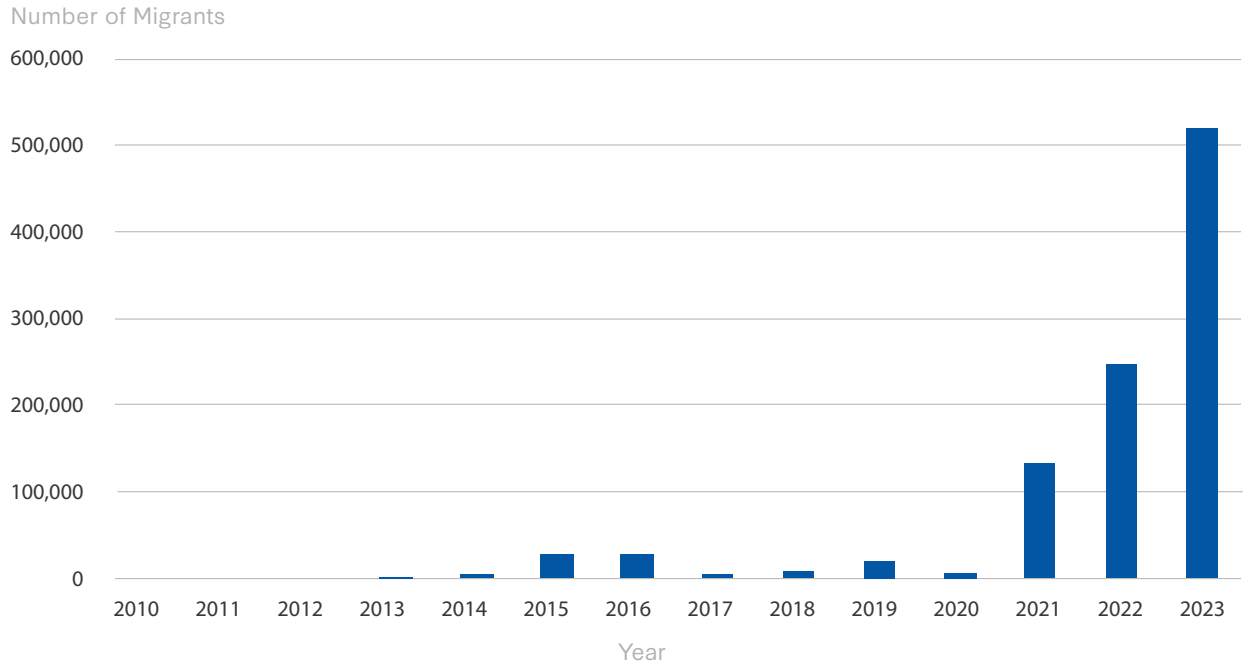
U.S.-Mexico border via the Darién Gap. According to a **November 2023 report** by the Crisis Group, an estimated 97 different nationalities crossed through the Darién in the first seven months of 2023, including significant numbers of Chinese migrants and Afghan refugees.

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The transit of hundreds of thousands of people through a largely ungoverned zone in an inhospitable tropical habitat has been a recipe for humanitarian and environmental disaster. The Darién Gap is one of the most dangerous and physically daunting migration routes in the world. In treks that last **7-15 days** and cost \$100-\$1,000 per person, migrants face natural hazards; exposure to disease; deprivation of food, water, and sleep; physical and sexual abuse; and criminal predation by armed groups exploiting human desperation and the absence of state authority. The **toll of mass migration** on local Indigenous communities and the rainforest itself is no less devastating. As a long-time haven for paramilitaries, drug traffickers, and criminal organizations operating on both sides of the border, the Darién Gap has become a lucrative site for **migrant smuggling**, disrupting traditional livelihoods in border villages and imperiling one of the planet's richest ecosystems. Colombia's Gulf Clan (Gaitanistas), the country's largest drug cartel and neo-paramilitary group, has been the main overseer of a thriving migrant-smuggling racket from the Colombian side, netting an estimated **\$57 million** from "crossing

fees” in the first 10 months of 2023—not to mention profits gained from “tax” hikes on the citizens of border towns, such as Necoclí and Turbo, and broader windfalls linked to servicing migrants in transit.

Figure 2: Migrants Recorded Crossing the Darién Gap, 2010–2023



Source: Data taken from “Estadísticas, Tránsito Irregular por Darién” [Statistics, Irregular Transit through Darién], Servicio Nacional de Migración (SNM) [National Migration Service], <https://www.migracion.gob.pa/estadisticas/>.

The Colombian ambassador to the United States has **described** the exponential increase in the number of migrants traversing the Darién Gap as an “unsustainable crisis.” To put the scale of this population displacement into perspective, the 520,085 people who funneled into Panama last year—a country of **4.4 million** people—would be roughly on the scale of 40 million migrants crossing the southwest border of the United States.

This enormous flood of irregular migration is also fueling a growing political crisis at the U.S.-Mexico border, where U.S. Customs and Border Protection encountered more than **2.4 million** people in 2023—including legal crossings, arrests, and expulsions—the highest figure ever recorded. This crisis will only worsen: the number of migrants passing through the gap this year is on track to exceed last year’s total. Panamanian authorities **registered** more than **73,000 crossings** in January and February 2024, a 52 percent increase from the same period in 2023.

With 2024 being an election year **in at least 64 countries** across the globe, including the United States, Mexico, Panama, and Venezuela, the insecurity and uncertainty associated with electoral outcomes and anticipated policy changes could become push or pull factors for potential migrants. In both the United States and Panama, there is an opportunity to capitalize on increased political attention as **anxieties around border security** grow. Panama is already bracing for a dramatic shift in immigration policy following the **May 5th election** of José Raúl Mulino, who campaigned on a pledge to seal the border with Colombia and has since reiterated his intention to “end the Darién odyssey” and deport migrants

back to their countries of origin. The immigration crisis is also quickly becoming a dominant issue in U.S. politics. With thousands of monthly arrivals spilling beyond southwest border states and straining the budgets of cities such as **Denver, Chicago, and New York**, the Biden administration has found itself under immense pressure from both **Republicans** and a growing number of Democrats **sounding the alarm** on unmanageable migrant inflows.

As political contests intensify in the lead-up to the November U.S. presidential elections, the Darién Gap itself has become a battleground for the immigration debate and a lightning rod for **U.S. journalists, media personalities, and politicians**. In October 2023, New York City mayor Eric Adams **visited** the Darién region to dissuade migrants from journeying to the United States, signaling a growing political awareness of the crisis that may encourage other U.S. policymakers to follow suit. Others, particularly social media activists, are using the humanitarian and security dysfunction in the area to advance partisan agendas and influence immigration discourse at home. According to a recent *New York Times* **report**, right-wing content creators have flocked to Panama’s migrant reception centers to document the impending “invasion” and ambush migrants with loaded political questions, paying special attention to those from Africa, China, and the Middle East. As the situation in the Darién Gap continues to deteriorate, distorted social media coverage may push U.S. public opinion in an increasingly hostile direction.

Although there are already international efforts underway to provide greater protection and humanitarian relief to migrants and expedite their transit, these responses have been too limited and disjointed, and progress has been too slow. Balancing migrant safety, Indigenous rights, border security, and environmental concerns is an immense challenge with no single or sweeping solution. Given the multiplicity of factors and the urgency of the situation, stakeholders should prioritize coordination across local, national, and international levels and explore strategies to alleviate immediate suffering, relieve pressure on the most affected areas, improve conditions in countries of origin, and create secure, sustainable, and diverse migration pathways. All of these efforts must be geared towards finding solutions that account for humanitarian assistance, environmental and local impacts, enforcement, and regional implications.

Humanitarian Assistance

The situation in the Darién Gap is undoubtedly a humanitarian crisis. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), at least **312 migrants** have been reported missing or dead on the route between 2015 and 2022, with at least **229 disappearances** between January 2021 and September 2023, including 146 in 2022 alone. **Médecins Sans Frontières** (MSF) treated 676 victims of sexual assault in 2023—with December cases constituting a sevenfold increase from the monthly average for the rest of the year—and has already recorded at least **233 cases** in the first two months of 2024. Because migrants are only registered once they exit the Darién Gap and many assault cases go unreported, these numbers likely represent only a fraction of gender-based violence and death in the region.

The Panamanian Human Rights Ombudsman, the United Nations, and NGO personnel with a permanent presence in the area **have reported** “dreadful hygiene and safety conditions” at the two **overcrowded** migrant reception centers jointly operated by Panama’s National Migration Service (Servicio Nacional de Migración, or SNM) and border patrol (Servicio Nacional de Fronteras, or Senafront). With severely

limited resources—including shortages of clean drinking water, foreign-language interpreters, food, shelter, and medicine—these facilities struggle to cope with the huge number of migrants, who often exit the jungle exhausted, hungry, sick, injured, or traumatized. Panamanian officials have minimal capacity to reunify families or investigate disappearances, and humanitarian workers can offer only basic first aid and psychological services. Although Panama and Costa Rica have implemented a joint plan to **bus thousands of migrants** directly to the Costa Rican border **in the hope** of reducing overcrowding and disrupting smuggling networks, those without money for the next leg of their journey northward—or who are too injured or sick to continue—often end up stranded for days or months.

Social media-fueled misinformation has compounded the growing problem, with thousands of posts—notably on TikTok, WhatsApp, and YouTube—advertising the jungle as a viable migration route to global audiences. Viral videos of migrants crossing the gap, often promoted by human smugglers, have downplayed the financial, psychological, and physical toll of the journey, racking up millions of views with the help of aggressive engagement algorithms. In 2023, Panamanian authorities attempted to regain control of the narrative by launching **an educational campaign** called “Darién is a jungle, not a road,” but its reach has been negligible relative to the oversaturated social media platforms with which it competes.

For public authorities grappling with the human cost of mass migration through the Darién Gap, a primary challenge is how to reconcile the imperative of protecting refugees and migrants with the broader objective of stemming migrant flows. Panama’s government has at times **resisted** help from civil society actors, accusing certain aid agencies of **fueling migration numbers**. In early March, Panama **suspended** the MSF’s permission to operate in the gap, which MSF officials attributed to their criticism of government inaction against rising sexual violence, warning that the decision “sends [the international aid community] a clear message not to speak publicly about human rights violations and sexual assaults.” Proposals to build infrastructure that would enable safer migration through the region have been highly controversial for the same reason. The governments of Panama, Colombia, and the United States are all opposed to any measures that could open up the Darién Gap as a more viable migration route, fearing that accommodation efforts will backfire by making the passage even more enticing.

Navigating these conflicting interests requires stakeholders to embrace an approach that is as balanced as possible in the various goals it serves. This can include developing more effective communication campaigns, urging social media giants to flag migrant smugglers’ posts, encouraging Panama to be more receptive to NGO support, and boosting external humanitarian assistance in conjunction with deterrence strategies, all to ensure that measures taken to protect and support those en route do not encourage others to follow.

Impact on Local Communities and the Environment

Beyond the plight of the migrants themselves, the mass movement through the Darién Gap—which encompasses **1.4 million acres of protected land** within the Darién National Park—is creating an environmental disaster in one of the **largest expanses of intact rainforest** in the world. The region’s transformation into an increasingly well-established migrant pathway is causing potentially irrevocable damage to the Western Hemisphere’s “**most important ‘natural lung’ after the Amazon**” and

putting incredible strain on the locals who inhabit it. Villages of only a few hundred people are swamped by daily inflows of over 2,000 migrants who trample wildlife and leave heaps of garbage and waste in their wake. The scale of pollution is extreme: on top of corpses and bodily waste, the jungle is now littered with plastic bottles, empty food tins, and dirty diapers, contaminating the soil and water with disease and parasites. Aid officials have issued **warnings** about sanitary conditions in local villages, where outbreaks of cholera have become a major threat to locals and migrants alike. The Panamanian government has collected **over 60,000 tons** of litter from area rivers that Indigenous communities depend on for bathing, commerce, fishing, and transport. As migrant crossings grow at an exponential rate, Darién locals and Panama’s Ministry of Environment (MiAmbiente) have also expressed **fears** that “the rough tracks trodden through the jungle by migrants will open the forest up” to unlicensed logging, cattle ranching, and gold mining.

For the three major Indigenous groups who inhabit the Darién—the Emberá, Wounaan, and Gunadule—mass migration has **dramatically altered** their way of life. Pollution has disrupted traditional livelihoods, which have increasingly been supplanted by more lucrative activities linked to irregular migration and organized crime. With the migration economy replacing tourism and subsistence agriculture as residents’ main source of income, **locals** are abandoning farming and schooling in favor of bartering their services as “guides” and hosts to migrants in transit. As communities become less self-sufficient and more enmeshed in human-smuggling chains, they increasingly find themselves divided over environmental conservation and at odds with Colombian and Panamanian security forces. While lawlessness is **significantly more pronounced** on the Panamanian side of the border, the difficulty of the problem on the Colombian side owes in large part to the prevalence of corruption and the Gulf Clan’s **considerable influence** over local society, politics, and business. The informal inclusion of locals in migrant-smuggling networks complicates law enforcement strategies, which are already hampered by legal constraints that limit state intervention in protected Indigenous land. Efforts to sever border communities’ linkages to organized crime could now be met with fierce resistance from residents with a vested interest in the continued flow of migrant traffic.

Any effort to police criminal groups and create a safe, legal pathway through or around the Darién therefore requires collaboration with locals, offering them incentives that include the provision—not merely the promise—of public services and alternative sources of income.

Although there have been efforts to alleviate migrants’ suffering and expedite their transit, there have been few direct efforts to address the parallel environmental catastrophe unfolding in lockstep with the humanitarian catastrophe. Progress on environmental conservation depends on weakening border towns’ reliance on migrant smuggling, which has been fueled by the **lack of job opportunities**, “decent health and education services,” road access, and internet connectivity. Any effort to police criminal groups and create a safe, legal pathway through or around the Darién therefore requires

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Enforcement

Improvements in law enforcement are central to resolving the crisis. Without efforts to close off the route and crack down on the criminal groups overseeing the mass transit, increases in humanitarian aid will only enable additional migrant smuggling and further accelerate rising migration levels.

The Darién Gap’s relatively small geographic size and location on the narrow isthmus of Panama make it a natural chokepoint to control migration flows. Despite the difficulties of penetrating and administering the region’s interior, the jungle pathway has only a handful of entry and exit points, although smugglers are constantly opening new ones. The firm grip of criminal organizations on border communities, whose residents have become economically dependent on migrant smuggling, is an equally significant obstacle. Observers and “coyotes” have warned that if governments take greater measures to close the existing pathways, human smugglers will seek out more clandestine—and more dangerous—routes. For Colombia in particular, which shares **large, permeable borders** with Venezuela and Ecuador, policing efforts may also be deterred by the domestic implications of obstructing the outward flow. Neither Panama nor Colombia has sufficient resources or the political will to permanently resettle or temporarily accommodate the vast numbers of arrivals who would instead accumulate—and languish—in their countries if the routes were blocked.

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Recent efforts to ramp up law enforcement have been mixed. In April 2023, Panamanian, Colombian, and U.S. officials announced a **60-day campaign** to “end the irregular movement of goods and people through the Darién.” Colombia subsequently launched **Operation Darién**, sending 3,000 security personnel to regain border territory controlled by the Gulf Clan. Panama followed with **Operation Chocó**, dedicating 1,200 immigration agents, border police, and naval air service members to confront transnational organized crime “**head on.**” These operations have done little to slow migration or dislodge criminal actors, partly because the Gulf Clan and other transnational criminal organizations are so entrenched and partly due to **coordination** issues between Panama and Colombia. Panamanian leaders have repeatedly **expressed frustration** with the failure of Colombian authorities to prevent migrants from entering the Darién Gap or to crack down on those facilitating the movement of migrants within Colombia. Given their limited ability to physically police the Panama-Colombia border, the head of Panama’s SNM **has emphasized** that the most Panamanian authorities can do is “manage the flow and permit [migrants] to keep traveling north and try to minimize the damage to Panama.”

A recent incident highlighted the challenges and opportunities associated with a more robust law enforcement strategy. In mid-February, Colombian officials **arrested** two boat captains ferrying

migrants across the Gulf of Urabá, the entry point for most migrants traversing the Darién Gap. The boat companies they worked for then **suspended their services** for five days while they appealed to the government for assurances against a broader crackdown, leaving thousands stranded and bringing daily border crossings through the gap to an abrupt halt. The episode testified to the potential to seal off the route, but it also highlighted the predicament Colombian and Panamanian officials face. Unless accompanied by effective measures to cope with daily arrivals and weaken migrants' motivation to reach the Darién Gap, coercive measures or physical barriers aimed at reducing migration could instead create new humanitarian emergencies as rising numbers of people overrun municipalities that have **no capacity** to accommodate them. The rapid build-up of **around 8,000 migrants** in two small border towns during the five-day break in boat services produced a bottleneck that officials feared could spiral into a major public health emergency. This situation was similar to an earlier crisis in 2021, when a sudden influx of Haitian migrants left about **19,000 people** stranded in the Colombian town of Necoclí while locals struggled to obtain enough boats to transport them, putting **immense pressure** on the town's 20,000 residents.

Neither greater enforcement nor increased humanitarian assistance can fully mitigate a crisis on this scale. Managing the substantial numbers of migrants will require more resources and capacity than Colombia or Panama alone can provide, even with increased financial assistance from the United States and the broader international community.

Regional Implications

While Colombia and Panama have borne the brunt of the crisis, the situation in the Darién Gap is a transnational problem that requires a transnational solution. The long-term effectiveness of humanitarian, environmental, and enforcement strategies depends on broader regional cooperation to address the root causes of mass emigration and provide viable alternative avenues for refugees and migrants.

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A critical factor driving the Darién crisis is the paucity of safe, legal migration pathways that diffuse the burden of mass displacement across the region. The tightening of immigration policies across South and Central America in the past few years is correlated with the sudden surge in crossings. Several countries **imposed new visa and asylum restrictions** for Venezuelans, Haitians, and Ecuadorians in 2021 and 2022, and some (notably **Chile and Peru**) even militarized their borders, thus closing off safer routes and leading migrants to resort to the Darién Gap in massive numbers. Many of the migrants traversing the passage are also on the move for a second time. The **lack of adequate integration policies** in other South American countries has pushed Venezuelans, Haitians, and Ecuadorians to the Darién Gap after facing xenophobia, minimal economic opportunity, and obstacles to regularizing their status in places such as Brazil and Chile.

There have been various multilateral government and civil society initiatives aimed at coordinating regional responses. The 2022 **Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection**—endorsed by 21 states in the region, including Colombia and Panama—affirmed that migration is a shared hemispheric challenge. It promotes cooperation in ensuring “safe, orderly, humane, and regular migration,” developing lawful pathways, strengthening enforcement, mobilizing resources to assist recipient countries, helping migrants gain access to employment and essential services, and coordinating responses to disasters. These objectives were reiterated in the trilateral U.S.-Panama-Colombia **60-day campaign**, which included pledges to: (1) “end the illicit movement of people and goods through the Darién,” (2) expand regional migration pathways, and (3) increase public service delivery and promote sustainable economic opportunities for Darién residents. Beginning in **April 2023**, the **Biden administration** introduced **Safe Mobility Offices (SMOs)** in **Colombia, Guatemala, Costa Rica, and Ecuador** to offer “**informational counseling**” on humanitarian parole, family reunification, and labor pathways, as well as to provide alternative migration tracks for people who might otherwise continue as irregular migrants across the Darién Gap. In the realm of civil society, the **Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)** and the IOM established the **Regional Interagency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V)** in 2018, launching a \$1.6 billion **Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RMRP)** to support the growing needs of the estimated 6.8 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants who are either settled in or will journey to or across 17 host countries in South and Central America by the end of 2024.

Although the Los Angeles Declaration, SMOs, and the RMRP were promising first steps, their impact has been mixed. While millions of Venezuelans have found some degree of stability in the region and not moved northward, irregular migration through the Darién Gap has nonetheless **remained high** since April 2023, and no concrete action has been taken to increase services or promote economic development in border communities. The SMOs have a limited presence in the region and **struggle to cope** with the overwhelming numbers of applications; some of them have raised **concerns about accessibility**, citing obstacles such as the private locations of offices, strict eligibility requirements, and the need to register through an online portal. R4V has faced similar challenges. The RMRP’s **implementation** has suffered from a lack of reliable funding; low donor engagement; the ongoing fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic across the region; difficulties with transnational cohesion and cooperation; and insufficient incorporation of local expertise to better promote migrant integration and respond to diverse migrant needs.

Even if expanded, dynamic policy tools such as SMOs will remain ineffective without more substantial regional coordination and domestic capacity building. Efforts to reroute Darién-bound migrants to neighboring countries require boosting these countries’ long-term ability and willingness to absorb and integrate them. Initiatives such as the **HUGE Business and Investment Council**, which aims to forge transnational public and private sector partnerships to increase foreign investment and economic opportunities in the Northern Triangle (Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador), can serve as a model for region-wide sustainable development initiatives that complement more flexible immigration policies. The international community should make similar efforts to temper the humanitarian emergencies and development challenges in countries that have become the main sources of migrants. At the top of this list, Venezuela, Haiti, and Ecuador are all facing **entrenched crises** with major

economic, political, and structural obstacles, but achieving even a small degree of stabilization in these countries would help reduce migrant flows.

Conclusion

The fact that the perils of the Darién Gap are no longer a deterrent to mass migration is revealing of the conditions that migrants are fleeing and the shrinking options available to them. Public calls for border controls, the economic stagnation exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the sheer scale of human displacement across the Americas and the globe make any attempts to develop humane, sustainable, and coordinated migration policies intensely difficult. The mass movement through the Darién Gap has become at once a humanitarian emergency, an environmental disaster, a criminal racket, and a high-stakes political crisis on an international scale.

None of these challenges can be addressed in isolation. Short-term increases in humanitarian aid and policing are necessary but insufficient to alleviate the region's mass human suffering and environmental damage, which grow worse by the day. Efforts to close the Darién Gap by force may only push vulnerable migrants to more perilous routes, and increasing humanitarian aid may make the passage even more attractive as a migration pathway—to the benefit of criminal actors and at the continued expense of the environment, locals, and the migrants themselves. Longer-term strategies are necessary to enable people to either remain in their home countries or safely relocate to neighboring countries with the capacity to integrate them and offer a better quality of life. Doing so will involve increasing economic opportunities and security through transnational initiatives and sustainable development projects. If deterrence policies are undertaken alongside efforts to share the burden of migrant reception and provide targeted humanitarian support, governments across the Americas might begin to craft a responsible policy toward a problem that is likely to persist for years to come. ■

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