



© UNICEF/Panama/2023/Urdaneta– Nexus, Water for communities impacted by migration flow.

# Panama CO

## Situation Report Children on the move

31st of January 2024



## Highlights

- In 2023, Panama registered **113,180 children and over 1,000 pregnant women** who transited through the Darien jungle and the country, out of a total of 520,085 people on the move. This represents a tripling of the number of children compared to 2022 (40,438 children).
- **3,300 unaccompanied and/or separated children** were registered in 2023, which is three times higher than the number registered in 2022 (1,067 cases). Unaccompanied adolescents made up 60% of the total, with children from 6 to 12 years old representing 30% and children under five representing 10%. Gender-based violence, particularly sexual violence affecting women and girls increased significantly during the year.
- In October, the Governments of Panama and Costa Rica signed an agreement to provide direct bus transport for migrants from the Darien to Costa Rica, leading to the closure of the Temporary Migrant Reception Station (TMRS) of Los Planes de Gualaca in the Province of Chiriquí at the border with Costa Rica.
- In the Darien, the main community affected by migration remained the village of Bajo Chiquito, which received up to 4,000 migrants a day, followed by Canaan Membrillo. The two TMRS continue to host far more migrants and refugees than their official capacity.
- In October and November, nationwide protests and the blockage of roads affected the migration flow, hindering overall mobility throughout the country, forcing hundreds of migrants and refugees to continue on foot due to blockages along the route.
- With the financial support of the US Government, the European Union, the UN Central Emergency Response Fund and with its own resources, UNICEF increased its support to the Government's response, scaling up its presence and provision of services at different points along the migration route. [UNICEF provided lifesaving services in water, sanitation, and hygiene \(WASH\), child protection, case management, child and maternal health, and Gender-Based Violence \(GBV\) in the communities affected by migration and all the TMRS in Panama.](#) UNICEF maintained protection through presence actions every day of the year and continued to support ten communities affected by migration, with a focus on children.
- UNICEF continued to work closely with the national authorities who lead and coordinate the humanitarian response, such as the border police, the migration services, the National Child Protection Authority, the Ministry of Health, and the local authorities. UNICEF was an active member of the UN Working Group on Migration and collaborated closely with several NGOs. Through its permanent Office in the Darien and its implementing partners, UNICEF ensured the presence of over 100 professionals for the provision of essential services to children and their families.

## Situation Overview

In 2023, the number of migrants and refugees transiting through the Darien gap and Panama reached a historic record, with 520,085 migrants crossing, of which 113,180 were children, accounting for 22% of the total. The yearly total more than doubled those of last year, with children representing three times those that crossed during 2022. Pregnant women in transit increased to over 1,000 during the year. People from Venezuela accounted for 63% of the flow, followed by Ecuador (11%), Haiti (9%), China (5%), and Colombia (3%). Over 100 nationalities were identified that year.

## Numbers in 2023

**520,085**

Number of people on the move through the Darien Jungle in 2023 (Source: National Migration Service of Panama).

**113,180**

Number of children in transit through the Darien Jungle in 2023 (Source: National Migration Service of Panama).

**3,300**

Unaccompanied and/or separated children identified in 2023 in the Darien. (Source: UNICEF based on data from local authorities).

## Numbers in 2022

**248,284**

Number of people in transit through the Darien jungle in 2022 (Source: National Migration Service of Panama).

**40,438**

Number of children and adolescents in transit through the Darien jungle in 2022 (Source: National Migration Service of Panama).

**1,067**

Number of unaccompanied and separated children in transit through the Darien jungle in 2022 (source: UNICEF based on data from local authorities).

During the transit through the Panamanian Darien Jungle, children are exposed to multiple hazards and vulnerabilities, including dangerous terrain and accidents, family separation, animal attacks, crime, sexual violence and abuse, and lack of access to food and water. In 2023, 3,300 unaccompanied and/or separated children and adolescents of more than 33 nationalities were registered transiting through the Darien, of which the main nationalities were Venezuela (62%) and Ecuadorian (22%). Children aged 0 to 5 made up 14% of the cases, followed by children from 6 to 12 years (23%), and adolescents from 13 to 17 years old (56%) with boys adolescents representing more than half. The number of unaccompanied and/or separated children in 2023 was three-fold compared to 2022. Some 16 cases of stateless children were identified during the year and supported through UNICEF funded services. According to Doctors without Borders, gender-based violence, particularly sexual violence affecting women and girls as young as 10 years of age, increased significantly during the year with more than 600 survivors identified by the NGO. Nearly 9% are children under 18, the vast majority of them girls. When children and families arrive at the TMRS in Darien, they require protection services, medical attention and basic food items and water to survive, access to sanitation (shower and toilets, hygiene items) psychosocial and mental health support.

In February 2023, the most tragic bus accident in the history of Panama occurred, leaving 16 surviving children (5 girls, 4 boys, 1 female adolescent, and 6 male adolescents). UNICEF and its partners RET and HIAS accompanied the rehabilitation process of the surviving boys and girls and their families in coordination with national authorities to guarantee their access to documentation, physical and mental health treatments, family tracing and reunification, psychosocial, recreational, and educational activities.

From July to October, the number of migrants and refugees through the dangerous jungle of Darien increased dramatically, reaching a peak of 81,946 people transiting in August alone. During this peak, the authorities registered the arrival of up to 5,000 people a day. This led to the overcrowding of the TMRS and host communities and exceeded the capacity of the Government and humanitarian actors on the ground to provide basic life-saving services, including health services (particularly for survivors of sexual violence), the provision of safe drinking water, and protection services. At the same time, while migration has become a significant source of income, the unprecedented number of people on the move negatively impacted the small communities on the route in the indigenous territory of the Embera-Wounaan, especially children. Their access to basic services, including water, sanitation, health, and education, was significantly hampered.

In October, the Governments of Panama and Costa Rica signed an agreement to provide direct bus transportation for migrants from the TMRS in Darien to the Temporal Migration Center (CATEM) in Costa Rica. This led to the closure of the TMRS of Los Planes de Gualaca in the Province of Chiriqui, forcing several families to leave the Station without the resources to continue. Additionally, the change implied a sudden increase in the cost of bus transportation, increasing from \$40 to \$60 per person, including children above 5 years old. As a result, several families were unable to continue their journey and had to stay more than 7 days in the TMRS in the Darien. This increased the risks for migrants and refugees, especially women and adolescents girls, with cases of sexual exploitations reported by NGOs. In 2023, with UNICEF's technical and financial support the Panama's Ombudsman Office issued the [Human Rights Report on the Rights of Children on the Move through Panama and Border Zones](#) highlighting the risks children are facing as they cross the jungle and the negative impact local children are experiencing.

In 2024, given the needs, UNICEF continues to provide greater humanitarian assistance to children and families on the move and calls for countries of origin, transit, and destination to strengthen the protection systems to ensure that every child is protected from all forms of violence and has access to their basic rights.

## Humanitarian Needs

The substantial rise in the number of people on the move in Panama in 2023, and particularly the increase in the protection needs of children, made the delivery of humanitarian assistance on the ground, including for women and children and families in local host communities, more essential than ever. The primary humanitarian needs of children and their families identified were:

- Increased delivery of basic life-saving services in the sectors of water, health, protection (including child protection), food security, justice, and shelter at the TMRS in the Province of Darien and Chiriqui and the host communities impacted by migration.
- Continued monitoring of the situation of children on the move and children in local host communities and provision of services to address their protection needs. Particularly the provision of case management and basic services to the most vulnerable children – e.g., unaccompanied and separated children, stateless children, survivors of sexual violence, and children with disabilities.
- Technical support to the State's child protection authorities in the creation and sustainable of mechanisms for the care of unaccompanied and separated, especially for adolescent boys.
- Due to the increase in the identification of survivors of sexual violence, provision of health services is critical and advocacy efforts with the Government to increase security measures during the transit and/or create safe pathways for migrants and refugee seekers.



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- Technical Assistance to the authorities to develop and implement health and justice services to survivors of sexual violence, including children in border areas (in line with a 2022 Concluding Observation of the CEDAW Committee).
- Implementation of mitigation actions to address the impact of host communities in close coordination with local community and government authorities.
- Support to the State to strengthen preparedness to ensure an adequate response to an increasing migration of people through Panama.
- Support to the Government with the creation of contingency plans for potential crisis. This allows Panama to respond better to road blockages during nation-wide protests, including through the provision of information and orientation services for people at the TMRS and on the route, increase in health services, water production, sanitation and hygiene, access to food and protection services in host communities and at the TMRS in Darien.
- Strengthen cross border mechanisms to improve coordination, particularly with Colombia and Costa Rica.



## Summary Analysis of Humanitarian Response

In Panama, UNICEF coordinates its humanitarian response with the National Border Service (SENAFRONT), the National Migration Service (SNM), the National Secretariat for Children, Adolescents and Family (SENNIAF), Civil Protection (SINAPROC), and the Ministry of Health (MINSAs). As part of the coordination Human Mobility Group of the United Nations, UNICEF implements services in the sectors of WASH, Child Protection, GBV, and child and maternal health, through its implementing partners RET International, Global Brigades, the Panamanian Red Cross, and Organizacion de Ayuda Integral para el Desarrollo (ODAID). On the ground, UNICEF collaborates closely with Doctors Without Borders, the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC), and the Pan American Development Foundation (PADF) and other humanitarian actors.

Given the increase in the number of migrants in 2023, UNICEF scaled up its humanitarian response in five hotspots: Bajo Chiquito, Canaan Membrillo, Migration Reception Stations of San Vicente, Lajas Blancas, and Los Planes de Gualaca, as well as in 12 communities affected by migration, with the following specific interventions:

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provision of live-saving services through implementing partners with a team of 100 staff on the ground, delivering services in the sectors of WASH, Child Protection, Gender-based violence, and Nutrition.</li> <li>• Coordination of the WASH group under the local coordination mechanism led by the Human Mobility Group of the United Nations.</li> <li>• Participation in the Protection group, leadership of the Child Protection and co-leadership of the GBV component. Technical assistance to the Child Protection Roundtable led by child protection entities in Panama and Costa Rica.</li> <li>• Permanent presence and close collaboration with government counterparts, implementing partners and humanitarian actors in the Province of Darien and Chiriquí with 9 UNICEF staff members, including 8 on the ground.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provision of WASH technical assistance to government institutions, including the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of the Environment.</li> <li>• Production of safe-drinking water and construction, maintenance, and repair of WASH infrastructure – including bathrooms, showers, installation of hand and foot washing points, and hydration points, reaching more than 315,000 beneficiaries in 2023.</li> <li>• <a href="#">Technical and operational support to the Rural Water Committees in 12 communities affected by migration.</a></li> <li>• Delivery of adapted hygiene kits for babies, children, adolescents, and women in the TMRS of San Vicente, Lajas Blancas and Los Planes de Gualaca reaching more than 20,400 people.</li> <li>• Delivery of hygiene supplies for women and survivors of sexual violence through the Safe Spaces at the TMRS – using the humanitarian store<sup>3</sup> strategy.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provision of child and health services, as well as nutrition follow-up to more than 30,330 children, adolescents, and pregnant women at the TMRS and the host communities.</li> <li>• Delivery of medicine, including PEP Kits for survivors of sexual violence, and supplies for wound dressing to the Ministry of Health.</li> <li>• Technical and financial support to the Ministry of Health in the construction of a nutritional care guide for children in emergencies.</li> <li>• <a href="#">Capacity building and training to local health teams providing child and maternal health services.</a></li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 82,345 children and caregivers received psychosocial services through Child-Friendly Spaces in 5 TMRS and host communities along the route.</li> <li>• <a href="#">Provision of alternative care to more than 330 unaccompanied and separated children</a>, as well as to local children under protection measures in the Province of Darien.</li> <li>• Implementation of activities reaching 2,926 parents and children to build protective environments for children in ten communities impacted by migration in the Embera-Wounaan Indigenous territory.</li> <li>• Provision of case management support for 5,707 cases of children at risk of statelessness, survivors of sexual violence, unaccompanied and separated children, and families with specific needs. This included the 3,300 unaccompanied and separated children who received case management support.</li> <li>• Technical and financial support to the state authority in the creation of the Protocol for the Care of Unaccompanied and Separated Children in Panama.</li> <li>• Technical support to the state in the creation of a migration category of migrant children under state protection.</li> <li>• Technical and financial support to the Office of the Ombudsman in the revision of the human rights report for children on the move.</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provision of services in the <a href="#">Safe Spaces</a> at the San Vicente and Lajas Blancas MTRS to promote listening, conversation, and self-care for adolescent girls and women in transit and to mitigate the risks and response to gender base violence, reaching a total of 29,277 participants.</li> <li>• Technical support to local authorities in the creation of a referral pathway for survivors of sexual violence.</li> <li>• Creation of the first Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse interagency mechanism to prevent and address cases.</li> </ul>