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Information Bulletin

Panama: Population Movement

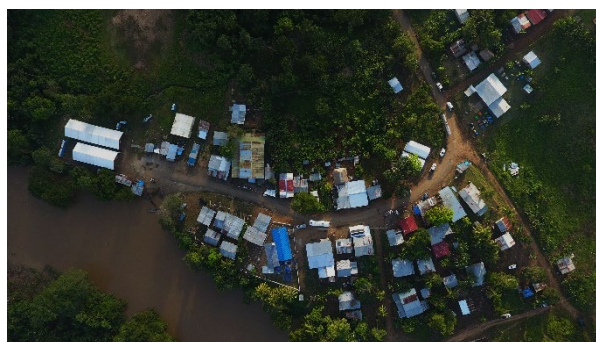
 International Federation
of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

Information Bulletin N° 1	Date of issue: 21 February 2020
Operation start date: 06 September 2018	Expected timeframe: 27 months
National Society Presence (No. of volunteers, staff, branches): Click here to view the overall numbers of volunteers, staff and branches per National Society based on FDRS data.	
Number of people affected: A total of 23,968 migrants arrived in Darien in 2019; 3,450 people arrived in 2020 thus far.	Number of people to be assisted: The migrant community in La Peñita (3,450 people in 2020 thus far).
National Societies currently involved in the operation: Red Cross Society of Panama (RCSP)	
Other partner organizations involved in the operation (if available and relevant): Panamanian government institutions, including: The Ministry of Health (MINSAs), The National Secretary of Children, Adolescents and Family (SENNIAF), The National Border Service (SENAFRONT), The National Migration Service (SNM) and The National Civil Protection System (SINAPROC); The International Organization for Migration (IOM); Global Brigades; United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF); United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA).	

This bulletin is being issued for information only and reflects the current situation and details available as of February 2020. While this document covers population movement in Panama, it does not include information related to the migrant caravans traveling from Central America to North America. For information on that situation, see the [DREF published on 28 January 2020](#). For more information on the Regional Emergency Appeal, see the [Emergency Appeal Revision published on 21 January 2020](#).

The Situation

Panama is both a common place of transit as well as a popular destination for migrants in the Americas. In recent years, the country has become one of the primary receiving nations of Venezuelan migrants, with an estimated population of 94,600 Venezuelans as of February 2020.¹ Most of the refugees and migrants from Venezuela are concentrated in the Provinces of Panama and Panama Oeste, especially in the more urban environments of these provinces.² Although there has been a migratory flow of Venezuelans to Panama for approximately 10 years, the number increased significantly in 2015. The flow of Venezuelan migrants has decreased since mid-2017, however, due to the introduction of a stamped visa requirement. According to a 2019 study by the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the majority of Venezuelan migrants in Panama are adults with a high level of education and strong capacity to contribute to the Panamanian economy.³



An overhead view of La Peñita, the small community in the Darien Province of Panama that currently hosts migrants that have crossed the border with Colombia.

Source: IFRC

In addition to the flow of migrants arriving from Venezuela, Panama experiences a unique migratory situation along its borders with Colombia and Costa Rica – where migrants from a variety of nationalities cross through the country as they travel north. The number of migrants crossing from Colombia into the Darien region in Panama in the last month reached unusually high levels, possibly indicating that migration flows in the region could significantly increase

¹ R4V, "Latin America and the Caribbean: Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants in the Region," 7 February 2020.

² R4V, "Refugee and Migrant Response Plan 2020 for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela," 13 November 2019.

³ IOM, "Situación De La Población Refugiada Y Migrante De Venezuela En Panamá," September 2019.

in 2020. According to Panama's National Migration Service (SNM), 1,547 migrants entered the dangerous, heavily forested and mostly undeveloped border region in January 2020, compared to just 698 in the same month last year. At this rate, more than 36,000 migrants could pass through the region by the end of 2020, while a total of 23,968 entered in 2019. More than 1,100 of those who arrived in January were from Haiti, but the overall migrant community in Darien is very diverse; arrivals in January represented over 27 nationalities from the Caribbean, South America, Asia and Africa⁴⁵⁶

The migrants in Darien—most of whom aim to reach North America—travel through South American countries such as Guyana, Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador and Peru before smugglers guide them through the Gap.⁷ Many endure robberies and/or violence by armed groups as they move through the jungle. The journey can take six to eight days when conditions are good, and ten days or more during the rainy season. Once through the Gap, most migrants pass through the small village of Bajo Chiquito before making their way by foot or by boat along the Chucunaque River to La Peñita, where they are processed by the Panamanian government at a Migratory Reception Station (ERM). Migrants typically stay in Darien anywhere from 4 days to 4 months, depending on their migration status and country of origin.⁸ From Los Planes, migrants are temporarily held in a government run shelter before crossing into Costa Rica on their journey north.

The characteristics of the migrant population passing through Darien have changed in recent months. According to a recent UNICEF report, the migrant profile in the region has changed from mainly extracontinental men seeking economic opportunity in North America to families with children and pregnant women fleeing poverty, exclusion and conflict. A majority of the children and adolescents arriving in Darien are Haitians with Chilean or Brazilian nationality.⁹ The number of children and adolescents crossing through the region increased from 522 in 2018 to 3,956 in 2019. A total of 340 minors were registered in Darien in January 2020, compared to 131 in January 2019.¹⁰¹¹ Based on this pattern, it is estimated that for 2020 there will be an increase in the number of migrant children and adolescents passing through the region.

Several factors—such as civil unrest, tightened entry requirements in South American countries, and changing economic conditions—may contribute to an increase or decrease in the number of people crossing into Panama through the Darien Gap. The primary determining factor, however, is the transition from rainy to dry seasons. During the dry season (from December/January to May/June), decreased rain leads to better crossing conditions in jungle. As water levels in rivers and streams decrease, the journey through the Gap becomes less perilous and the number of migrants passing through the jungle typically increases. Vulnerable groups such as children, infants and pregnant women are more likely to attempt the crossing during this time period. During the rainy season, on the other hand, conditions in the dense rainforest become especially hazardous. As a result, the number of migrants in Darien peaked last year in June and July, as people rushed to get through the Gap before water levels rose due to heavy rainfall. See the table below as a reference:¹²

⁴ [Servicio Nacional de Migración, "Irregulares en Transito Frontera Panamá – Colombia 2019".](#)

⁵ [Servicio Nacional de Migración, "Irregulares en Transito Frontera Panamá – Colombia 2020".](#)

⁶ These figures only represent the number of irregular migrants entering the region. Exact figures of the total number of migrants entering Darien, with regular entries included, are not available at this time.

⁷ [Migration Policy Institute, "As More Migrants from Africa and Asia Arrive in Latin America, Governments Seek Orderly and Controlled Pathways" 22 October 2019.](#)

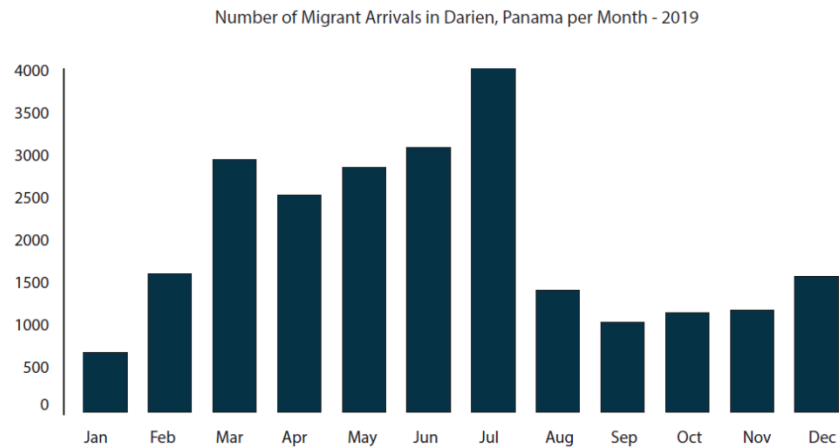
⁸ [ATP, Requisitos de Entrada a Panamá](#)

⁹ [UNICEF, "Panama Humanitarian Situation Report No. 1" 26 December 2019.](#)

¹⁰ [Servicio Nacional de Migración, "Irregulares en Transito Frontera Panamá – Colombia 2019".](#)

¹¹ [Servicio Nacional de Migración, "Irregulares en Transito Frontera Panamá – Colombia 2020".](#)

¹² [Data taken from Servicio Nacional de Migración, "Irregulares en Transito Frontera Panamá – Colombia 2019".](#)



Since 2015, the Panamanian government—in coordination with Colombia and Costa Rica—has utilized a policy known as controlled flow, or *flujo controlado*. This policy limits the number of extracontinental migrants that transit through the country each day. Every migrant that crosses the border with Colombia into Darien must be processed before paying \$40 (USD) for bus transportation to a shelter in Los Planes de Gualaca, Chiriqui, near the border with Costa Rica. There, they experience a waiting process comparable to that in La Peñita.¹³ From the temporary shelter in Gualaca, SNM coordinates with Costa Rica's Directorate of Immigration to send families and single persons to Paso Canoas across the Costa Rican border daily. About 50 to 75 people from nuclear families are typically sent on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, while on Tuesdays and Thursdays SNM sends about 90 individuals across the border.

The dangerous nature of migrants' journey through the Darien Gap, as well as the conditions in La Peñita, lead to number of vulnerabilities and create a variety of needs for both migrant and host communities. Below is a summary of these needs per sector:

Shelter

Migrants in La Peñita currently set up their own individual tents under Rub Hall tents or other open-air structures. Some migrants choose to rent space from locals in the host community as an alternative to sleeping in tents, if they have the necessary resources to do so. La Peñita only has the capacity to hold around 500 migrants on a daily basis, so overcrowding is often a serious issue. In January 2020, for example, an average of 600-700 migrants stayed in the tiny village per day. This number will likely be even higher in the coming dry months, as more migrants are expected to enter. The site is also vulnerable to flooding during the rainy season, which can significantly worsen the already precarious housing conditions.

On 23 December 2019, heavy rainfall led to flooding in La Peñita, damaging shelter facilities in the lower-elevation portion of the village. As a result of this flooding, the Panamanian Government plans to eventually transfer a portion of the migrant community to the neighboring village of Lajas Blancas. Officials from SENAFRONT have already moved two [Rub Halls](#) from La Peñita to Lajas Blancas and are constructing a series of wooden shelters that will have the capacity to hold around 1,000 persons.

Health

Migrants arrive in La Peñita in poor condition, frequently suffering from ailments or conditions sustained in route to Darien including diarrhea, vomiting, skin inflammation, foot mold and dehydration. Continued advocacy is needed to ensure that the health system can meet people's needs through basic health services and the provision medicine and vaccinations. Many of those arriving in La Peñita also have significant needs in terms of psychosocial support, due to trauma experienced during encounters with drug traffickers and smugglers, lost or separated family members, and other stressful circumstances endured as they journey north.

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH)

Considering the common risk of dehydration, and the lack of potable water sources in the remote region, safe drinking water is a primary need for migrants traveling through Darien. Moreover, La Peñita is a small community of 177

¹³ Migration Policy Institute, "As More Migrants from Africa and Asia Arrive in Latin America, Governments Seek Orderly and Controlled Pathways" 22 October 2019. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/extracontinental-migrants-latin-america>

residents and about 55 houses without the sufficient infrastructure to properly host a large population of migrants. As a result, there are several sanitation risks due to a lack of bathrooms and cleaning facilities. Though bathrooms and showers have been provided (see the Red Cross and Red Crescent Action section below), there remains a need for information on proper sanitation practices.

Waste disposal is also a key issue. Disposal services are supposed to come to La Peñita twice per week but have come only once per week as of late. Though SENAFRONT removes waste daily, trash still accumulates in public spaces, presenting several risks to both migrants and host community members. There is also a need for hand washing stations, female hygiene products and hygiene promotion services for migrants in La Peñita.

Protection

Panama's National Secretary of Children, Adolescents and Families (SENNIAF), together with UNICEF, is operating a child-friendly space in La Peñita and Meteti. The conditions in Darien, on top of the dangerous nature of the journey through the Gap, raise a number of protection concerns – especially considering the recent rise in the number of children and adolescent migrants arriving in the region. Given these concerns, IFRC has partnered with UNICEF in Darien to prioritize child protection actions for the migrant community there. UNICEF has identified a need to strengthen capacities to identify child protection cases and establish referral, protection and assistance mechanisms, particularly for cases of unaccompanied and separated children, children with special health needs, gender-based violence victims and violence against children.¹⁴

In addition, many of the women and girls arriving in Darien experience forms of Sexual Violence at some point on their journey, requiring psychological support and a reliable protection system. Information on protection mechanisms, particularly for women and girls, are needed in order to identify potential survivors of human trafficking and sexual exploitation. It is important to mention that young males have also reported being survivors of Sexual Violence during the journey.

Migration

La Peñita is used by SNM and SENAFRONT officials as Migratory Reception Station, where migrants are processed and documented by the Panamanian government. As is often the case in migration contexts, there is a need in Darien for Restoring Family Links services—especially connectivity services (phone calls, internet connection, battery charging, etc.).

Red Cross and Red Crescent Action



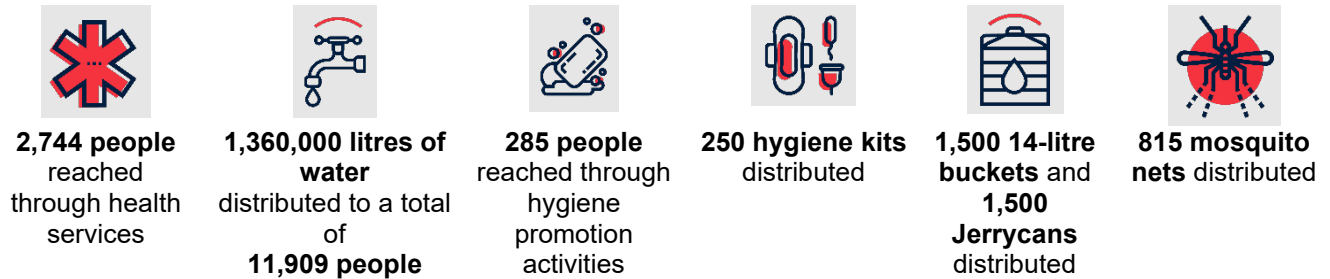
Panama Red Cross Society volunteers assist a migrant in La Peñita. The man's feet had been wounded while crossing through the Darien Gap.

Source: IFRC

As part of the Regional Emergency Appeal for Migration, the operation in Panama has focused primarily on providing a response in Darien, given the highly vulnerable condition of migrants arriving there. In La Peñita, IFRC and Panama Red Cross Society (PRCS) personnel work in coordination with UNICEF and with Panamanian government ministries such as SENAFRONT, SNM, SENNIAF, the Ministry of Health (MINS) and the National Civil Protection System (SINAPROC) to provide services in WASH, Health, and Restoring Family Links (RFL).

¹⁴ [UNICEF, "Panama Humanitarian Situation Report No. 1" 26 December 2019.](#)

Since the start of the project, the following actions have been achieved in Panama through funding from the IFRC's regional Emergency Appeal:¹⁵



PRCS began implementing activities in Darien under the appeal in July 2019, providing first aid and psychosocial support, helping with RFL services and distributing water filters to migrants in the community. Thanks to an in-kind donation from the Norwegian Red Cross, IFRC installed a [KIT5 WASH disaster response kit](#) in La Peñita in August 2019. The kit, which had been held as prepositioned stock at the Humanitarian Hub in Panama City, was used to build a system capable of purifying up to 75,000 litres of water per day.¹⁶

In recent months, IFRC and PRCS have focused on implementing the following activities in Darien:

- The provision of safe water to host community members and migrants.
- Establishing portable lavatories and hand washing stations.
- Community hygiene promotion and personal hygiene sessions.
- The distribution of drums (jerrycans), buckets and mosquito nets (from the Red Cross) and mattresses (from UNICEF).
- The provision of health services and assistance to MINSAs health post.
- Maternal/infant care in coordination with (and through funding from) UNICEF, including the following services:
 - Verifying nutritional conditions in children and infants, referring cases of possible malnutrition to corresponding medical services and providing follow up during their stay in La Peñita.
 - Promotion of proper breastfeeding practices for infants under 24 months.
 - Suggesting complementary feeding in cases of possible malnutrition and to children over 6 months.
 - Monitoring and referring pregnant women to the health post.

On 2 December 2019, members of the Panama Red Cross Society and the IFRC (Migration Cell) met with government actors, UN representatives, and community members impacted by the situation in Darien to conduct a scenario planning exercise. Using the ACAPS scenario building methodology, participants analysed what factors could lead to changes in the migration flow in Darien by mapping variables and creating mini scenarios. The meeting resulted in a document outlining three scenarios: an increase in the migrant flow in the region, a reduction in the number of migrants and a maintenance of the status quo. The document has since been shared with all of those who were in attendance.¹⁷ The Migration Cell team also did a monitoring visit to La Peñita while in Darien, where they observed the response there and interviewed migrants about their experience. Excerpts from those interviews will soon be available in a new podcast series currently under production by the ARO's communication team.

¹⁵ Data updated as of 31 January 2020.

¹⁶ The humanitarian NGO Global Brigades is also working in coordination with the Water Committee of La Peñita to provide a complimentary water purification facility.

¹⁷ See the Darien Scenario Planning document [here](#). The ACAPS scenario building methodology can be found [here](#).

On 11-12 December 2019, after months of preparation, IFRC and PRCS implemented a pilot cash distribution program for migrants in the community of La Chorrera, near Panama City. The distribution was done using the RC2 Relief mobile data collection tool, with technical support from the University of Washington. A total of 40 families were reached during the exercise. After the distribution of the debit cards, an exit survey was applied to 65% of the migrants assisted. This exit survey served primarily to verify recipients' understanding of the information provided verbally and on paper, but also to get a sense of their level of satisfaction with services provided.

IFRC regularly coordinates with host communities and other actors such as UNICEF and OCHA as part of the operation in Panama and is an active participant in the Regional Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela. Moreover, coordination at the RC/RC Movement level has been taking place with the PRCS, IFRC and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to ensure a common approach to the response to population movement in Panama.



A PRCS volunteer assists a migrant during a cash distribution pilot program in December 2019.

Source: IFRC, 2019.

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How we work

All IFRC assistance seeks to adhere to the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Disaster Relief and the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response (Sphere) in delivering assistance to the most vulnerable.

The IFRC's vision is to inspire, encourage, facilitate and promote at all times all forms of humanitarian activities by National Societies, with a view to preventing and alleviating human suffering, and thereby contributing to the maintenance and promotion of human dignity and peace in the world.

The IFRC's work is guided by Strategy 2020 which puts forward three strategic aims:

1. Save lives, protect livelihoods, and strengthen recovery from disaster and crises.
2. Enable healthy and safe living.
3. Promote social inclusion and a culture of non-violence and peace.

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