

CROSSING FOR A FUTURE: CHILDREN MIGRATING THROUGH THE DARIÉN GAP

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The Darién Gap, a perilous stretch of jungle connecting South and Central America, is one of the most traveled migration routes in the world. It is a roadless route filled with threats to human life and well-being, including rape, robbery, trafficking, jungle animals, parasites, diseases, lack of clean water, and fatal falls. Taking this route between the Colombia-Panama border often represents the final hope for these migrants in search of safety and a better life.

The government of Panama released new figures finding over 250,000 people crossed the Darién jungle on foot in the first seven months of 2023, already creating the highest annual figure ever recorded. At current writing, the UN estimates that as many as 400,000 migrants may cross the Gap in 2023.

Among these statistics lies a population far more vulnerable to the hellish realities the jungle contains: children. The United Nations

Children's Fund (UNICEF) reported in the first six months of 2023, over 40,000 children have already made the perilous journey, with half of these children being under the age of five years old.



- Many are crossing unaccompanied or separated. UNICEF estimated that in just the first two months of 2023, an average of five children arrived alone in Panama every day, marking at least 200 (compared to less than 40 in the same period in 2022).
- These children are seeking safety and better futures, fleeing persecution, violence, criminal impunity, extreme poverty, and lack of education and opportunities. Once in transit, children are at high risk for human trafficking and are extremely vulnerable to those seeking to abuse and exploit them.

In 2020, UNICEF established a Child-Friendly Space (CFS) in Lajas Blancas, Panama. They provide children with a space to engage in play, socialization, and educational activities while also receiving emergency medical, psychosocial, and protection services.

RECOMMENDED ACTION STEPS

- All stakeholders must remember that no matter their legal status, country of origin, or host country, children are, first and foremost, children. This means that they are entitled to rights to protection, participation, and inclusion.
- Governments and international partners addressing the evolving migration dynamics in Latin America and the Caribbean should implement a holistic, cross-border, and comprehensive response that ensures the best interests of children are upheld and children's rights are guaranteed.
- Access to and provision of essential services for migrant children should be maintained and improved.
- Governments must urgently establish legal, safe, and child-friendly national migration policies and humanitarian response plans across the region. This includes immediately ending harmful and dangerous border management practices.
- Donors should ensure that flexible funds are designated to ensure reception centers and Child-Friendly Spaces are able to provide immediate care to children in migration and their families.

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