

Navigating the Unprecedented Migration Crisis in the Americas: an urgent call for international protection and humanitarian assistance in the region

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The Americas region is currently experiencing an unprecedented and deeply concerning surge in migration flows, particularly in the border areas of multiple South and Central American countries, such as Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, with the aim of reaching Mexico's southern border, travel across the country and reach their final destination: the United States. This dramatic escalation in migratory movements represents not only a complex challenge but also a humanitarian crisis which demands immediate attention.

Of great concern is the exorbitant increase in the number of families and children, including unaccompanied and/or separated children, who continue to cross borders irregularly in search of international protection. In South America, more than 400,000 people have crossed the perilous Darién jungle¹, of which 21% are boys and 10% are girls².

In Central America, the situation is no less dire, with approximately 2,500 to 3,000 people entering daily through Paso Canoas in Costa Rica³, around 4,000 arriving at El Paraiso in Honduras⁴, and between 3,000 and 6,000 individuals arriving daily in southern Mexico⁵. This surge has resulted in bottlenecks and overcrowding in transit shelters and assistance points, many of which lack optimal conditions of sanitation and care, as well as sufficient resources to feed and support the people who desperately need it. The response capacity of states and local authorities is heavily overstretched, with Mexican shelters operating at a staggering 95-110% capacity.

It must be better acknowledged and addressed that most people on the move are escaping violence in their countries of origin. The majority are not leaving their homes in search of economic opportunity. Alongside Mexicans who have been forcibly displaced, nationalities on the move in the Americas through Mexico include people from South America (Ecuador and Venezuela), Central America (Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua), the Caribbean (Haiti and Cuba), as well as some African and Asian countries.

Extra-continental mixed migration has become more complex in recent years. Many people are escaping situations of conflict, violence, insecurity and persecution. This is forcing many to undertake dangerous journeys, which may lead them across oceans, through the Darién Gap, and up through Central America to Mexico and the United States.

As this crisis unfolds, there is also stark evidence of a drastic increase in the demand for basic services, including food, clean water, medical attention, as well as legal counselling and accurate information on their rights to apply for asylum, as well as other legal pathways available to them, such as humanitarian parole or labor mobility programs.

¹ Latest data reported by the National Immigration Service of Panamá as of September 2023.

² Latest data reported by UNICEF (2023).

³ Latest data reported by the General Directorate of Migration and Foreigners (Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería- DGME) of the Government of Costa Rica as of September 2023.

⁴ Latest data reported by the National Migration Institute (Instituto de Migración Nacional - IMN)

⁵ Latest data reported by UNHCR Mexico.

Humanitarian agencies and other civil society organizations, which play a crucial role in providing support, also face enormous challenges in responding adequately to the growing level of need.

We at Plan International express our concern about the massive increase in migratory flows and the lack of guarantees for the protection of human rights of people on the move in the region. As a principled humanitarian organization, we are committed to address this humanitarian crisis and advocate for the rights and welfare of those affected, and in particular the most vulnerable, such as children, women and adolescent girls. The gravity of the situation demands a better response from governments, international organizations, donors and civil society.

The ongoing measures announced by governments, including increased border militarization and deportations without providing people the opportunity to apply for asylum, are in violation of their fundamental rights. This not only infringes upon their right to freedom of movement but also obstructs their access to international protection, leaving them in prolonged situations of limbo. Such measures also prompt people to seek other points of entry into the countries, mostly through irregular crossings controlled by armed groups and criminal organizations (e.g., drug and human trafficking), further exposing them to greater risks and human rights violations (e.g., extortion and smuggling).

Moreover, **these conditions represent a critical challenge to the security and well-being of children and women traveling alone, who are increasingly subject to sexual and gender-based violence, sexual exploitation, human trafficking, rape, robbery, and forced recruitment by armed groups within destination countries and during their journeys.** Additionally, the crisis has revealed new and intensified manifestations of xenophobia and discrimination among local communities, further exacerbating the challenges faced by these vulnerable populations.

Misinformation is rampant among those in transit or at destination countries, making it difficult for them to access crucial information about their rights or available protection mechanisms. This heightens their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. We are deeply concerned about discourses that emphasize migration containment, as they often fail to provide protection and obscure the underlying reasons that force people to flee their countries of origin, such as generalized violence, conflict, and persecution. We are equally concerned about the severe underfunding of Humanitarian Response Plans in the region, which threatens to worsen an already dire situation.

We are especially disturbed by governments practicing refoulement – the transfer of people back to their country or another country where they could face arbitrary deprivation of life, ill-treatment, or persecution. The principle of non-refoulement is an obligation for governments under international humanitarian, human rights, refugee, and customary law.

We urgently call upon governments including their security forces, international organizations, and civil society to prioritize the protection of human rights and the welfare of those impacted by this crisis. We must uphold the principles of international law, including obligations under international humanitarian law and refugee law, provide essential services, access to accurate and current information, and ensure that the rights and dignity of all migrants and refugees are respected and protected. It is our collective

responsibility to address this humanitarian crisis and preserve the human rights of those seeking international protection in the Americas.

Contact

Lindsey Hutchison

Head of Global Humanitarian Policy, Advocacy and Diplomacy Unit

E-mail: lindsey.hutchison@plan-international.org

Luisa Barajas

Regional Influencing and Humanitarian Advocacy Specialist for the Americas

Region

E-mail: luisa.barajas@plan-international.org