

Análisis semanal 526: The Darién Region: A growing crisis

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The Darién's Challenges

Located on the border between Colombia and Panama, the Darién region is known for its impenetrable jungle, which has proved resistant to human attempts at intervention. This area is not only teeming with deadly animals, including venomous species, cougars, and alligators, but it also serves as a refuge for drug traffickers and armed group dissidents. Despite these risks, the Darién has gained notoriety as one of the most heavily utilized and dangerous corridors in the world for migrants and refugees.

There are no migration routes that could truly be called safe, but the Darién region presents significant challenges for the people crossing it, requiring them to navigate rugged terrain over extended periods. This includes traversing swampy areas, encountering turbulent rivers, steep hills, and dense vegetation. However, while dehydration, illness, and animals remain pressing concerns, the presence of criminal activities within the region has further complicated the already perilous trek.

Rise of a New “Business”

Migrant flows have become a lucrative opportunity for cartels and criminal organizations operating in the area. This has been further facilitated by the lack of governance on either side of the border. On the Colombian side, the *Clan del Golfo* maintains a stronghold around the Darién, exerting control by imposing their own version of governance; they have subverted existing governance and instituted their own flawed version of justice, imposing rules, and restrictions, among other actions. Hence, the *Clan del Golfo* remains as one of the main actors present in the movement of migrants through the Darién. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the internal conflicts among many armed groups in the region have influenced migration routes, with dissident factions creating their own pathways. Regardless, the *Clan del Golfo* still remains the strongest presence.

Taking advantage of the inherent dangers of the jungle, these armed groups employ deceptive tactics to manipulate vulnerable individuals to start the trek; they make false promises, downplay the difficulty of the journey, and even offer the illusion of a safe passage guided by their assistance. On many occasions, the very guides who promised assistance and protection are often robbers, kidnappers, and even perpetrators of sexual violence against the migrants who entrusted them.

Furthermore, these criminal groups have established various stalls at the beginning of the trail, where they sell goods and services. For a lot of people, these initial supplies may be the last opportunity they have to obtain water and food before venturing deeper into the unforgiving wilderness of the Darién. Upon reaching the border between Colombia and

Panama, migrants often find themselves abandoned, left to face the daunting challenges of the jungle alone.

Hazardous Journey Continues in Panama

Unlike the ELN faction, which has extended its control to the Ecuadorian border, the *Clan del Golfo* has refrained from expanding its influence into the Panamanian side. This has resulted in the second part of the journey becoming particularly hazardous, with an increased risk of robbery, kidnapping, and sexual violence. The proliferation of criminal gangs on that side has escalated the levels of violence and insecurity faced by migrants in the region.

Similarly, things don't seem to improve once migrants make it through the jungle. Upon surviving the challenging trek, they are taken to overcrowded immigrant reception centers on the Panamanian side, which struggle to handle the large waves of people. Furthermore, there have been multiple reports of misconduct by SENAFRONT, the Panamanian national border force, allegedly engaging in exploitative practices such as offering sexual favors in exchange for passage on a bus to the next border. These bus tickets are often unaffordable for most migrants, exacerbating their already precarious situation.

Regardless of these factors, the social and political crises in several countries have compelled individuals to embark on the perilous journey through the Darién region. Although a significant number of immigrants come from Venezuela, Cuba, and Haiti, the route has also attracted migrants from Asia and Africa who arrive to South America and seek a path to the north. However, it's important to note that many are unaware of the true dangers of the jungle. As a result, it's not surprising that numerous migrants express regret, saying they wouldn't have undertaken the journey if they had known the risks involved.

An Increasing Humanitarian Crisis

Due to the lack of reporting on those who perish or go missing during the trek, it is challenging to determine the precise number of individuals who ventured through the Darién in 2022. However, estimates suggest that approximately 248,000 people successfully crossed the Darién, marking an 85% increase from the previous year. It is crucial to highlight that while there are numerous accounts of bodies strewn along the paths, only 30 deaths were officially documented in 2022.

The surge in immigration has prompted various institutions, including the International Red Cross, to classify it as a humanitarian emergency. Despite the efforts of NGOs, the UN, and the IOM, among others, to enhance humanitarian assistance in these areas, the lack of effective governance on either side of the border hampers these relief efforts and the flow of migrants keeps growing.

The combination of natural hazards, criminal activities, and governance deficiencies significantly contributes to the severity of the humanitarian crisis in the region. With the

continuous influx of immigrants, it has become imperative to proactively manage the crisis before it worsens. To tackle this issue effectively, it is important to address a key problem: lack of awareness. By spreading clear and reliable information and making people more aware of the dangers and potential consequences of the migration route, individuals can make informed choices and potentially reconsider embarking on such a hazardous journey. By actively promoting awareness, we can help alleviate the difficulties faced by migrants and foster a more compassionate response to the crisis.

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