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Forum: ACT Forum Colombia

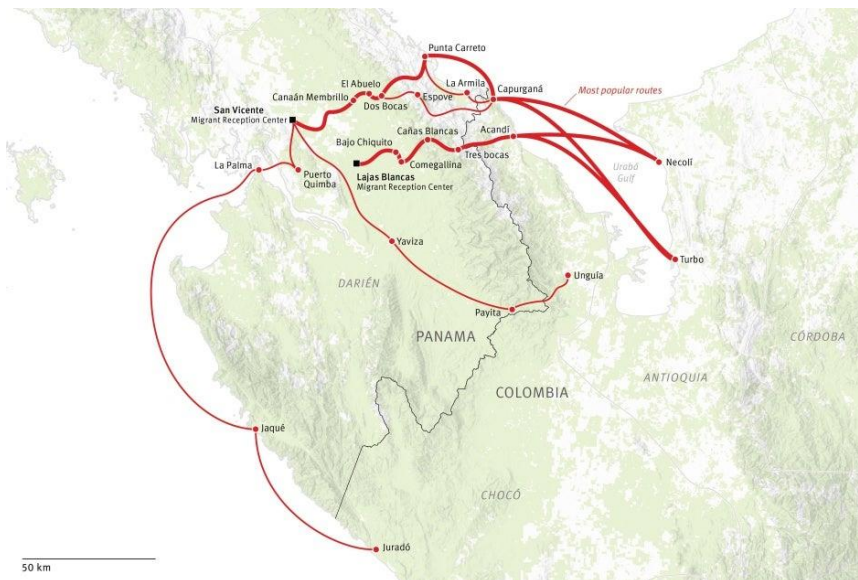
Type of emergency: Migration crisis

Date of emergency (if rapid onset):

1. The nature of the emergency

Colombia hosts almost three million Venezuelan migrants as of February 2024, making it the largest recipient of Venezuelan migrants and refugees (IDB – OECD, 2024)¹, which is one of the largest displacement after Syria. About 7.7 million people have left Venezuela after its economy collapse. South America has also seen an increasing number of Haitian migrants since the 2010 earthquake, which displaced an estimated two million people. More recently, Haitian migration has been driven by violence and poverty. Ecuadorians form the second-largest group of migrants and refugees after Venezuelans, migrating primarily to Central America and the United States, mainly for economic reasons (IDB – OECD, 2024).

Colombia has become a transit country for irregular migration for people aiming to move northward, most of whom have left their countries due to conflict, natural disasters, or a lack of opportunities for a dignified life in their places of origin. In 2023, almost 540,000 people crossed the Darién Gap (the border between Colombia and Panama), with the majority coming from South America, followed by the Antilles and Asia. Migración Panamá reported 263,296 people have crossed the Darién Gap by in September 2024. The border zone spans from the Chocó region in Urabá, particularly Acandí, to areas in Antioquia such as Necoclí, Turbo, Carepa, Chigorodó, and Apartadó. The map below shows the migration route used to cross the Darién:



Source: Human Rights Watch (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2024/04/03/neglected-jungle/inadequate-protection-and-assistance-migrants-and-asylum-seekers>)

The context of internal conflict in Colombia exacerbates the risks faced by migrants in transit. According to the NRC in the Cross-Border Protection Monitoring: Colombia and Panama (2025), ports on the Colombian side, particularly in Turbo and Necoclí, are dominated by an "economy based on migrants,"

¹ <https://publications.iadb.org/es/flujo-migratorio-en-america-latina-y-el-caribe-estadisticas-de-permisos-para-los-migrantes>

controlled by armed and organized illegal groups that have historically maintained power in the Urabá region.

2. The impact and scale of the emergency

Addressing lifesaving needs is critical for transit migrants since they arrive in Urabá with little resources. Most of them live in tents that they buy with their own money, and which they need to pack up every early morning based on the local government's regulations². It is difficult to find safe spaces for family members during the day, especially those providing care for children, where there are high cases of human trafficking especially children and women. There is also a high incidence of minors recruited by criminal groups. With their little resources, they must pay for showers, drinking water, food and temporary living spaces during the day.

The migrant and refugee population also drives significant strain on local communities and the basic services provided by the government. Urabá is one of the poorest regions in Colombia yet holds a significant number of transient migrants waiting to cross to Panama, stretching local government capacity limits. A local government official informed us in an interview in September that they need to prioritise residents rather than the transient migrants. With limited job opportunities, locals are competing with migrants for jobs where they try to raise enough funds to pay for exorbitant boat fees to cross Panama.

The interagency coordination platform, Grupo Interagencial sobre Flujos Migratorios Mixtos (GIFMM) reported over half of those migrating through the Darién Gap are women and girls, and 75% of migrants cannot afford their journey, with 55% walking long distances and 68% subsisting on just 1-2 meals daily, underscoring the urgent need for basic sustenance. The primary nationalities³ among the 263,296 migrants crossing the Darién Gap were Venezuelan (178,482), Colombian (16,028), Ecuadorian (15,304), Chinese (12,194), and Haitian (11,654), with the migrant population including 134,281 men, 73,206 women, 29,637 boys, and 26,172 girls. Nearly half of the women surveyed by UNHCR-WFP-UNICEF⁴, said they experienced or witnessed sexual violence.

The lack of access to healthcare is also critical, with 46% of migrants unable to obtain medical assistance. While Colombia provides emergency care to irregular migrants, this is far from adequate, with international agencies attempting to fill the gap. Alarming, 46% of migrants report serious safety concerns due to prevalent theft and extortion along their route⁵.

Migration flows in Colombia, especially those coming from Venezuela are affected by the political climate of the country and inflation fluctuations,⁶ with 60% of those transiting in Urabá is Venezuelan. New migration policies across the region, involving mass deportations and tighter border controls, are factors that slows down exits from Colombia which increases the urgency for immediate, holistic intervention.

3. Local and national capacity

Urabá, Antioquia, and Chocó have 23 care points for migrants. These are staffed by both government entities, such as regional hospitals, and a larger number of non-governmental organizations, which primarily serve people in transit, stranded, and temporarily settled. GIFMM, where IELCO is a member, oversees interventions in Antioquia. Although UN agencies and international organizations are present, critical life-saving needs, such as food, remain unmet. IELCO is the only organization currently providing meals in the afternoons and weekends in Turbo.

The Department of Antioquia has established a Unified Command Post (PMU) to support both migrant and host communities, while the Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar (ICBF) provides essential services for migrant children in the region. Despite these efforts, the situation remains critical: resources and infrastructure are overwhelmed in high-demand areas like Necoclí. Additionally, municipalities such as Turbo, Mutatá, Carepa, Chigorodó, and Apartadó face severe resource shortages and insecurity due to

² Focus group discussions with migrants, September 2024

³ Migración Panamá data as of September 2024

⁴ [Mixed Movements Monitoring Q2 2024 - UNHCR-WFP-UNICEF.pdf](#)

⁵ GIFMM - EHP.pdf

⁶ GIFMM interview, Sept 2024

illegal armed groups. High demand from both migrant and host communities, compounded by corruption and safety concerns, has further strained the region’s response capacity.

Local governments are making efforts to support the migrant population, though significant gaps persist due to the limited state presence. Both the Ombudsman’s Office and the Attorney General’s Office have urged municipalities to address the urgent needs of migrants and reactivate Migration Governance Roundtables. For example, the Secretary of Social Inclusion in Turbo stated that local government resources are fully stretched, prioritizing residents and urgently requiring external support for transit migrants.

IELCO is currently implementing a holistic programme to address the basic needs of migrants, offering food, pastoral support, safe spaces, hygiene facilities, recreational activities, and opportunities for mutual support. This approach provides critical support for extremely vulnerable migrants in transit, including women with children, unaccompanied minors, and men travelling by themselves—groups often overlooked by humanitarian services in the region. IELCO also provides lifesaving information on the route and available humanitarian services, enhancing safety and access to essential resources. This effort is further strengthened through partnerships with regional churches, many of which are actively engaged in assisting the migrant population.

4. Key needs and gaps

The **Urabá region’s border municipalities are overwhelmed by the influx of migrants**, leading to the collapse of basic services yet low humanitarian support. Immediate, coordinated efforts are needed to provide urgent relief, focusing on food, safety, and essential services.

Protection remains a top priority with vulnerable populations requiring immediate assistance especially the need for safe spaces. The **lack of facilities for victims of trafficking and gender-based violence** also calls for urgent attention, particularly for women, children, and adolescents. Armed groups control border areas, increasing **the danger of sexual violence, forced labour, forced recruitment and human trafficking**. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), 536 migrant deaths have been reported in the Darién Gap between 2015 and 2024, with 172 of these occurring in 2024 alone. Reports from those who have crossed the jungle suggest there may be underreporting of deaths and disappearances.

Host communities benefit from higher incomes due to the influx of foreign currency resulting from the increase in migrants. However, this has led to **rising costs for supplies and services, creating further barriers for migrants in transit and limiting their access to basic needs**, including affordable shelter. Basic needs, such as showers, can cost as much as USD 5 per person.

Both migrants and the local Colombian community face **critical barriers to healthcare**, including a shortage of medical professionals, dispersed health centres, and discrimination based on language and migratory status.

Please indicate whether you are considering:

	Indicate your intention with an X below
Rapid Response Fund (<i>intended for small and medium scale emergencies</i>)	X
Appeal (<i>intended for large scale emergencies</i>)	

5. Forum Capacity and members intention to respond

ACT Member	Geographical focus	Sectors of expertise and experience
IELCO	Necoclí, Turbo, Carepa, Chigorodó and Apartadó.	Protection: Emergency case management (accommodation, transportation), delivery of protection kits, hygiene

		kits, food and GBV care, life-saving information on safe routes, psychosocial accompaniment, safe space for children.	
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6. Potential responses

Since 2019, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Colombia (IELCO in Spanish) has carried out various emergency projects in response to the massive influx of Venezuelan migrants. These projects have included:

- Psychosocial support and accompaniment, along with cash assistance and the provision of hot meals and non-perishable food supplies.
- Protection services, covering case management for gender-based violence, health emergencies during travel, and cases related to child protection.
- Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) initiatives, including hygiene training, the formation of an environmental committee, and the distribution of water filters and hygiene supplies.
- Livelihood support, offering training in recycling, beauty, food handling, and other productive activities.
- Legal assistance and support for the regularization of documentation related to education and health.

Since November 2023, IELCO has been operating in the Urabá region of Antioquia, specifically in Turbo. Through a partnership with the local Presbyterian Church, IELCO has served 4,017 people—2,202 men/adolescents/boys and 1,815 women/adolescents/girls—highlighting the significant needs in this region. IELCO aims to continue providing lifesaving support to this population. With the activation of the Rapid Response Fund (RRF), IELCO aims to provide protection services to 4,000 migrants over a five-month period. These services include emergency case management (such as shelter and transportation), distribution of protection kits (including hygiene, food, and GBV response supplies), life-saving information on safe routes, psychosocial support, and safe spaces for children and adolescents.