



### KEY FIGURES

60%

PROJECTED INCREASE  
OF PEOPLE CROSSING  
THE DARIEN GAP  
IN 2023

100,000

PEOPLE CROSSING THE  
DARIEN GAP BETWEEN  
JANUARY-APRIL 2023

9,700

CHILDREN CROSSING  
THE DARIEN GAP FROM  
JANUARY-FEBRUARY 2023

1 out of 5

PEOPLE CROSSING  
THE DARIEN GAP  
ARE CHILDREN

### CRISIS IMPACT OVERVIEW

The Darien Gap is a swampy jungle area that connects Urabá region in Colombia with the Panamanian province of Darien. The Darien Gap is the only land connection between South and Central America. It has historically served as a transit zone not only for migrants from Latin America but also for those from African and Asian countries trying to reach the US. Recently, the number of people crossing from Latin American countries has increased considerably (Minsalud 08/2021).

In 2022, 250,000 crossed through the Darien gap, which is the highest year recorded in history. In 2021, more than 125,000 people passed through this route, which represented more than the previous ten years combined (WOLA accessed 18/04/2023). The peak of people passing through the Darien Gap was reached in October 2022, with nearly 60,000 people crossing during this month alone. Although this number drastically reduced to less than 20,000 people in November, in 2023 the number of people crossing the Darien Gap has been increasing slightly, reaching just under 40,000 in March. As at 13 April 2023, around 100,000 people have crossed the Darien Gap so far in 2023 (IOM & UNHCR 14/04/2023).

Similar to the patterns recorded in 2022, the majority of people crossing the Darien Gap in 2023 are Venezuelan nationals (30%) and Haitians (23%). The remaining people mainly come from Ecuador (14%) and China (4%) (WOLA accessed 18/04/2023; IOM & UNHCR 14/04/2023).

Crossing the Darien jungle involves walking over 100km through more than 575,000 hectares of vegetation. People crossing this path are exposed to animals and insects, putting them at risk of animal-borne diseases and attacks, high temperatures and humidity, severe weather (especially during the rainy season), a lack of food, and infection from contaminated water (The Guardian 13/10/2022; VOA 19/08/2022). The presence of armed groups in the jungle put them at risk of exploitation, robbery, violence, and human trafficking (R4V 7/12/2021; Insight Crime 24/11/2022).

### Location of the Darien Gap



Source: CFR (22/06/2022)

Please note that this is an update of a report ACAPS published in November 2022 about the migrant situation in the Darien Gap.



## ANTICIPATED DEVELOPMENTS

Between January and 13 April 2023, an estimated 100,000 people crossed the Darien Gap. This figure represents about six times the number of people who crossed during the same time period in 2022 (TRT World 14/04/2023; VOA 29/03/2023). If this trend continues, UNHCR and IOM estimate that by the end of the year, around 400,000 people would have passed through this region, representing a 60% increase compared to 2022 (IOM/UNHCR 14/04/2023; AP News 14/04/2023).

Besides the increase in the number of migrants, the proportion of children crossing the border has also risen in recent months. Currently, one out of every five people crossing the Darien Gap is a child. Of this ratio, at least half are under five years of age. Between January–February 2023, 9,683 children crossed the Darien Gap, of which at least 200 were unaccompanied minors, i.e. children who had been separated from their parents or relatives and were travelling alone (UNICEF 30/03/2023 a; El Colombiano 31/03/2023). The group of unaccompanied and separated children has grown the most among the population on the move in 2023 compared to 2022 (UNICEF 30/03/2023 b; Al Día Dallas 22/03/2023). If the trend continues, more children (alone or accompanied) will be crossing the Darien Gap in the coming months (CNN 13/04/2023).

One of the factors that led to the increase of migrants in 2022 was the imposition of visas for Venezuelans in several Central American countries, including Belize, Costa Rica, and Mexico. Migrants tended to arrive in a Central American country, especially Mexico or Guatemala, as tourists, and began their journey to the US from there. With increased restrictions on formal entry, many migrants have opted for informal routes to transit to Central America and subsequently to the US (HRW 05/07/2022 and 27/09/2022; Gobierno de Mexico 04/03/2022; BBC 28/02/2023). Title 42, a provision that the US has used to expel migrants and asylum seekers to their countries of origin or to Mexico (citing public health protection as the rationale for expulsion), is scheduled to end in May. This could encourage more migrants to transit to the US through irregular crossings, owing to the restrictions in Central America, to seek asylum (LA Times 13/04/2023; DHS 05/01/2023).

The Colombian, Panamanian, and US Governments have announced a plan to dismantle human smuggling networks in the Darien Gap and create legal migration routes to reduce the illegal movement through that route. This would include security coordination and cooperation, measures to combat disinformation spread by migrant smuggling networks, and measures to regulate migration at the Colombia-Panama border. However, there is no short-term plan to suggest that this objective will be achieved quickly (VOA 11/04/2023).

## CRISIS IMPACTS (CURRENT AND ANTICIPATED)

### Protection

Migrants have two options for crossing the Darien Gap. The first is to pay for boats to take them to the border area. Migrants who start their journey by boat will have to walk for two to three days. The second option is to walk through the jungle. For those who decide to take the route on foot, the walk can take up to ten days (MSF 21/06/2022).

The presence of armed groups that control part of the trafficking network poses protection risks, such as disappearances, sexual violence, human trafficking, and migrant smuggling (El País 11/10/2022; France 24 20/10/2022; The Clinic 01/10/2022). Between January–October 2022, at least 30 people died or disappeared in the Darien jungle (The Clinic 01/10/2022). Armed groups and the army have also placed antipersonnel mines in the Darien Gap (Procuraduría General de la Nación 22/03/2023).

Sexual violence is another major protection risk for migrants. Médecins Sans Frontières reported 420 cases of sexual violence, most of them against women, between April–May 2022 alone (MSF 21/06/2022). Women are mainly exposed to sexual violence, including the risk of trafficking, prostitution, or sexual abuse, inside the jungle. There are also reports of sexual abuse in migrant reception stations in Panama (France 24 15/02/2023). According to IFRC estimations, 10–15% of the migrants crossing the Darien Gap become victims of sexual violence during the journey (VPItv YouTube 18/07/2022; La Prensa 19/07/2022).

The journey through the Darien jungle involves overcoming several natural dangers. It is a very wet area that experiences between 5,000–10,000mm of rainfall per year. The rainiest months are from May–September, which pose the greatest risk of accidents for migrants (Weather Sparked accessed 14/04/2023). Drowning while attempting to cross rivers is one of the main risks. Navigating and getting lost in the jungle is a risk in itself, especially for people without a local guide (VOA 19/08/2022; GIFMM/R4V 14/10/2022; The Guardian 13/10/2022).

Even paying to be transported in boats is not necessarily a guarantee for safety. Many boats are in poor condition, and in the absence of regulation, they usually do not have adequate safety conditions, such as life jackets and emergency protocols. As a result, shipwrecking is common, regularly leading to people drowning or being injured with long distances to health centres (GIFMM/R4V 29/09/2022 and 14/10/2022; EE 14/10/2022). Some buses carrying migrants to Panama have also crashed or burned on the way. In February 2023, at least 37 migrants died when a Panama-bound bus fell off a cliff. This has led, on some occasions, to the Panamanian authorities suspending the transport service for migrants between the exits of the Darien jungle and the shelters (El País 28/02/2023).



## Health

Migrants are often exposed to various health risks during their journey while they are far from health centres. The distance limits their access to immediate care and can affect their health situation. A lack of roads in the jungle also delays transportation in the event of an accident (HRW 27/09/2022; Vanguardia 10/10/2022).

Migrants are exposed to harsh environmental conditions during their journey. The Darien jungle is home to several dangerous animals and insects (El País 13/03/2020). There are also mosquitoes that can transmit malaria and dengue fever (MSF 21/06/2022; BBC 28/07/2022). Besides skin lesions from bites, sprains and fractures have also been reported from the extensive treks through the jungle. Migrants are also exposed to high temperatures and suffer from dehydration, food deprivation, and cardiorespiratory failure. The humidity of the climate also tends to foster illnesses (VOA 19/08/2022; La Nación 13/10/2022).

Some of the migrants have chronic illnesses, and some of the women are pregnant. In a survey conducted by the Interagency Group on Mixed Migration Flows (GIFMM) on the Colombian side of the border in September 2022, about 47% of the people interviewed reported not having access to health services (GIFMM/R4V 29/09/2022; Health Cluster et al. 22/09/2022). Given the conditions they face during their journey, several migrants suffer from acute stress, anxiety, and depression and report needing mental health assistance (Health Cluster et al. 22/09/2022).

## Livelihoods

By the time people arrive at the Darien Gap, they have spent most of their savings paying for the journey or have their money earmarked to pay for guides or transporters to Panama. This means that many of them have no more money when they enter the Darien jungle (GIFMM/R4V 26/09/2022). Although some of them work in the informal sector of the municipalities they reach, the increased number of migrants also makes it more difficult to obtain informal jobs (El País 11/10/2022; The San Diego Union Tribune 18/10/2022).

On the Panamanian side of the border, many migrants have no way to continue onwards to other Central American countries or to return home. Humanitarian flights to return to Venezuela cost around USD 280, which is unaffordable for most migrants and leaves them trapped with no way to return (France 24 23/10/2022; Semana 24/10/2022). Migrants are also exposed to theft during the journey, which further increases the risk of arriving in Panama without money (ALnavío 03/08/2022; El País 09/08/2021).

## Children

Between January–February 2023, nearly 10,000 children crossed the Darien Gap. On average, five unaccompanied children arrive in Panama daily after having crossed the Darien jungle (VOA 22/03/2023; UNICEF 30/03/2023 b). Children transiting through the Darien Gap are mostly exposed to protection risks and deteriorating health given the climatic conditions in the jungle. They are exposed to the increased risk of recruitment, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, and human trafficking, as well as the increased likelihood of dehydration and waterborne diseases. There is evidence that some children have died along the journey (RTM 09/11/2021; El Tiempo 13/07/2022). Crossing the jungle may also involve witnessing violence or people getting hurt along the way. Consequently, many children who cross the Darien Gap are in need of psychosocial care upon arrival in Panama (La Prensa 24/03/2023; VOA 22/03/2023).

## COMPOUNDING/AGGRAVATING FACTORS

### Rainy season (May–September)

The rainy season is expected in the Darien rainforest between late May and mid-September. August is usually the wettest month (Weather Spark accessed 14/04/2023). During the rainy season, migrants face weather-related dangers, such as landslides and flooding. River levels during the rainy season often rise, putting migrants at risk of being swept away by the current, especially those who cannot swim. Migrants have to cross high hills, which, during the rainy season, become muddy, making the journey longer and increasing the risk of accidents (CFR 22/06/2022; Sky News 14/11/2022). In the Darien rainforest, rainfall increases the temperature and humidity, owing to the vapour generated by the trees, increasing the need for water consumption and proportionally increasing the risk of dehydration (The Manual 30/07/2022; CFR 22/06/2022).

### Political and economic instability

Inflation, the growing economic crisis, and political instability in South America have increased the number of migrants using the Darien route to enter Panama. Although the majority of migrants crossing the Darien Gap are still Venezuelan, other nationalities, such as Ecuadorians, Colombians, and Peruvians, have begun to increase in numbers (El País 13/01/2023; NYT 07/10/2022; VOA 17/01/2023; BBC 28/02/2023; El País 13/01/2023).



## DRIVERS OF THE CRISIS

### Humanitarian crises outside Panama

Given that the majority of people who have crossed the Darien Gap recently are Venezuelans or Haitians, the way humanitarian crises are unfolding in these countries contribute to the movement of people through Panama.

Haiti faces a crisis of gang violence. During March, around 195 people were killed in the country and 400 were kidnapped. The number of deaths tripled between February and March (The Haitian Times 05/04/2023). At least 160,000 people have been displaced in Haiti by criminal violence (Ebony 06/04/2023). The gangs' expanding territorial control reduces citizens' access to jobs, food and livelihoods, exacerbating other crises in the country, such as food insecurity (UNHR 10/02/2023; WFP 24/03/2023). Nearly half of the country is projected to be in acute food insecurity (IPC3 and above) between March and June 2023 (IPC 23/03/2023).

Venezuela is in the midst of a protracted crisis because of the collapse of its economy as a result of, among many factors, the international decline in oil prices, on which the country was largely dependent (CFR 10/03/2023). Around seven million people have already left Venezuela because of the crisis (R4V accessed 17/04/2023). By 2023, Venezuela is beginning to show signs of a slow economic recovery. However, inflation remains at over 200% according to official figures, and more than half of the population lives in poverty (BBC 04/02/2023; AP News 17/03/2023). Rural areas are particularly hard hit by poverty and lack of electricity (Bloomberg 24/03/2023). Given that the economic crisis is one of the main reasons most migrants report leaving, it is expected that migration will continue at least in the short and medium term (MMC 12/2022).

## HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE

### Humanitarian constraints

People on the move have reported experiencing difficulties in accessing accurate and reliable information in key decision-making moments, both at places of origin and along the route. The lack of access to information leads them to rely on often unreliable third parties (IRC 09/12/2021). Some non-Spanish-speaking migrants have reported the lack of translators in the Darien Gap, leaving them with even less access to information (HRW 27/09/2022).

The capacity of institutions to collect information on migrants' needs is limited. This is resulting in large information gaps on the needs of people on the move, including the numbers of people in each municipality and the type of assistance they are receiving (MSF 21/06/2022; HRW 27/09/2022).

There are no roads in the Darien Gap, meaning migrants often travel by foot through the jungle or by boat (MSF 21/06/2022). Given these conditions, it is difficult for assistance to be available the entire journey, leaving migrants exposed to diseases, violence from armed groups, and accidents without access to humanitarian assistance for parts of the journey (Blu Radio 22/06/2022; VOA 23/06/2021).

### Funding and response capacity

In Panama, the National Migration Service, the National Secretariat for Children, Adolescents, and the Family, the National Civil Protection System, and the Ministry of Health, in coordination with UNICEF and the Red Cross, are carrying out humanitarian response activities to rescue, transport, and search for migrants crossing the Darien jungle (UNICEF 10/03/2023 and 29/03/2022).

The Colombian and Panamanian Governments are jointly analysing the migration phenomenon along the Darien route through fieldwork, interviews, and permanent surveillance. That said, the response of both Governments is limited owing to the territorial control of armed groups, the rise in the number of criminal groups focused on human trafficking, and the increase in migration. The Darien Gap also lacks infrastructure, such as roads and communication networks, making it difficult to provide humanitarian assistance in the area (Defensoría del Pueblo de Colombia 12/04/2023; Semana 12/04/2023).

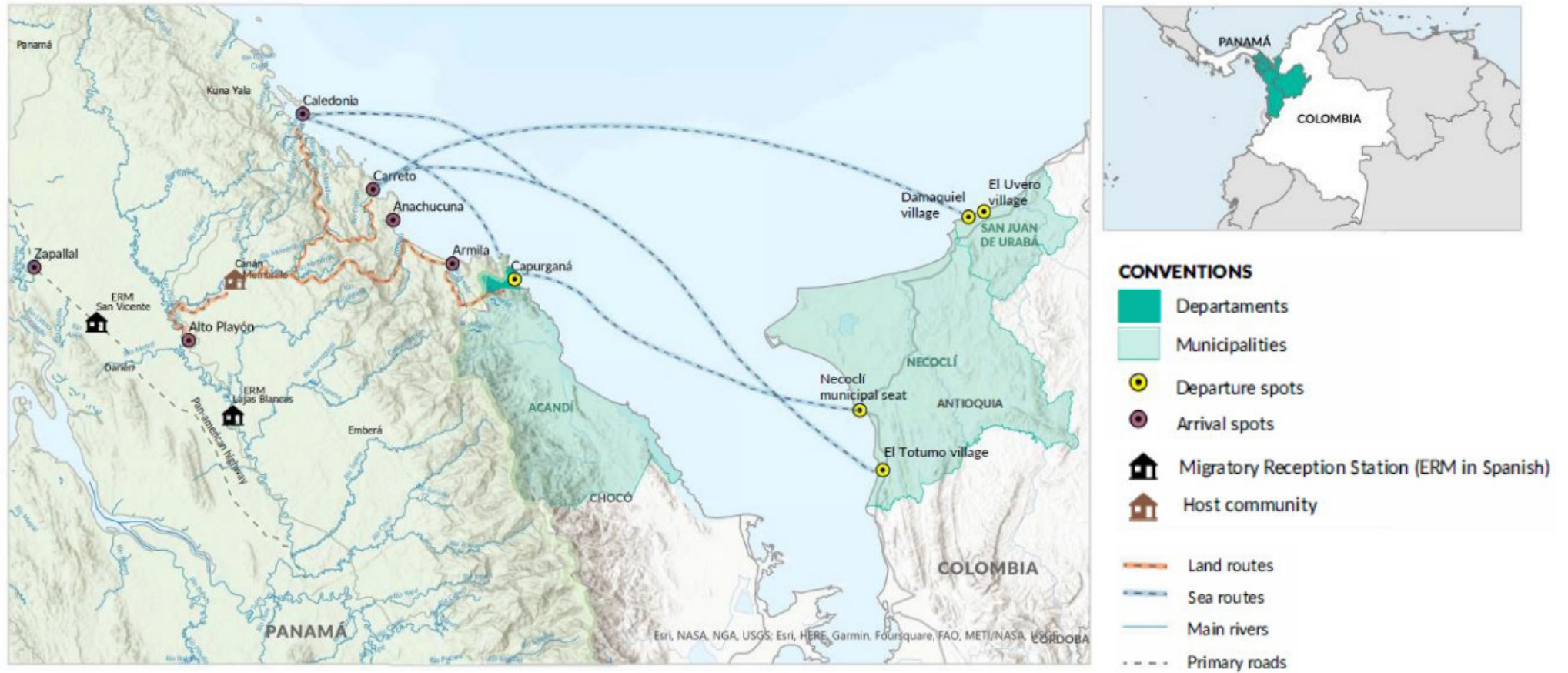
## LESSONS LEARNT

Strengthening policies to ensure regular migration between Panama and Colombia may reduce the use of the Darien Gap as an alternative route. As the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration notes, improving regular migration pathways reduces protection risks, strengthens access to livelihoods, decreases negative coping mechanisms to food insecurity, and reduces the use of dangerous migration crossings (IOM accessed 15/04/2023).

Given that at least a third of the people crossing the Darien Gap are non-Spanish speakers (Haitians, Chinese or people from other Asian and African countries), the lack of translators has limited their access to humanitarian assistance. The presence of translators (mainly into French, as most of them are Haitian) could contribute to making assistance more accessible to migrants (El País 23/09/2022).

When people arrive at the Panamanian border, many are dehydrated or have suffered injuries along the way. Although there are medical facilities there, as at September 2022 there were insufficient staff and medical supplies to treat the people arriving (El País 23/09/2022; Chicago Tribune 19/05/2022).

# MIXED MOVEMENTS THROUGH DARIEN, PANAMA, MARCH 2023

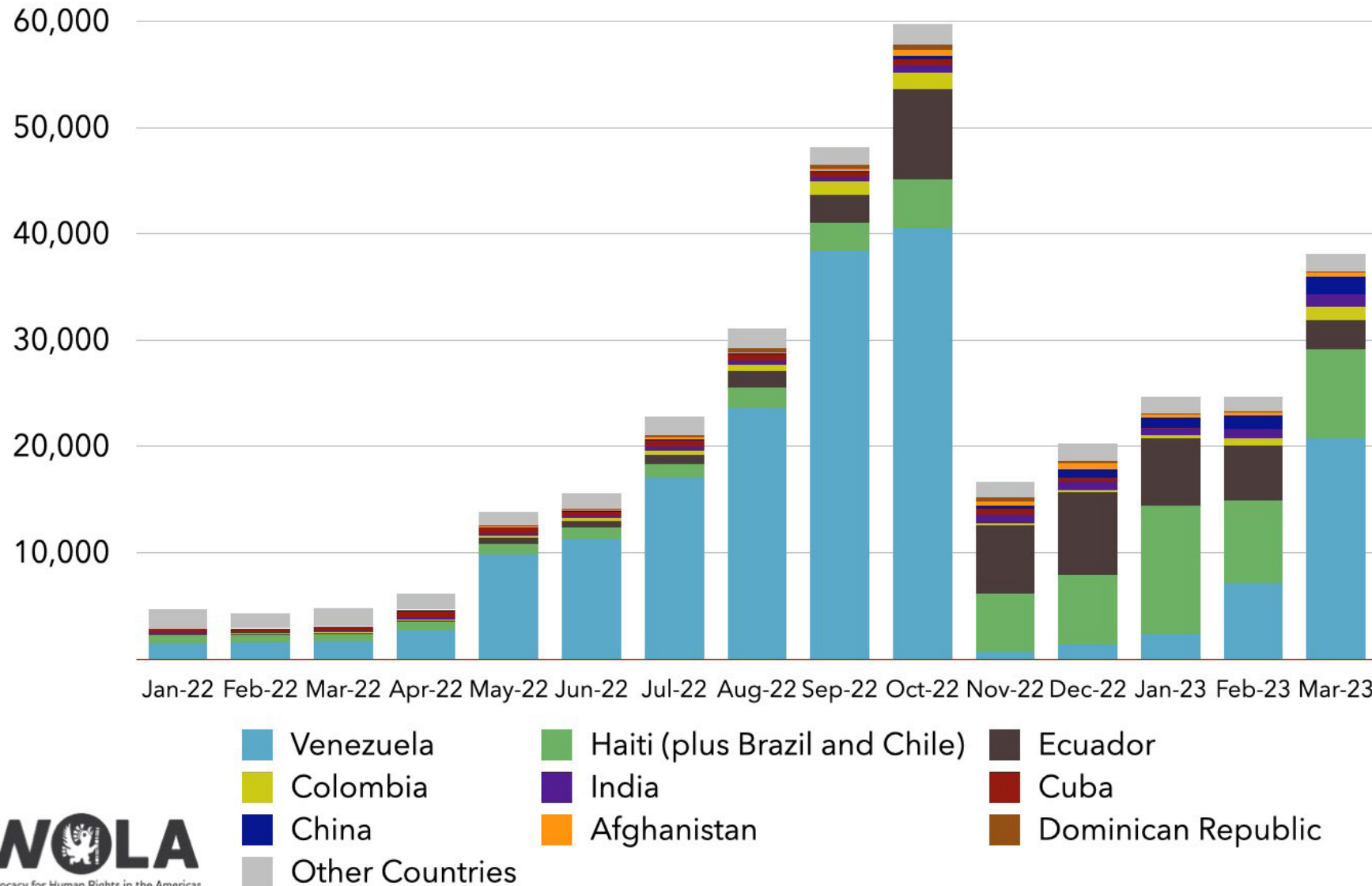


Source: GIFMM/R4V (29/09/2022)

## MONTHLY MIGRATION THROUGH PANAMA'S DARIEN GAP

**March 2023:** Venezuela 55%, Haiti (plus Brazil and Chile) 22%, Ecuador 7%, China 4%, Colombia 3.3%, all others <3%

**Since January 2022:** Venezuela 54%, Haiti (plus Brazil and Chile) 17%, Ecuador 13%, Colombia 2.2%, India 2.0%, all others <2%



Source: WOLA (accessed 18/04/2023)