

## **The Invisible Migrants of the Darién Gap: Evolving Immigration Routes in the Americas**

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### **Introduction**

Since the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, the world has been confronted with the worst humanitarian disaster since the Second World War. The current global refugee crisis, which according to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) includes over 60 million forcibly displaced people, involves refugees from every corner of the world. Since 2011, the international spotlight has primarily remained on the plight of the millions of Syrians, Iraqis, and Afghanis journeying to Europe.<sup>i</sup> By focusing attention and resources on this Europe-bound group, other migrant movements of the world are consequently ignored and have received insufficient support.

For hundreds of years, Central America has provided a land route for Latin American migrants heading north. Recently, the destruction caused by Hurricane Matthew and the reestablishment of Cuban-American diplomatic relations have spurred a record number of Haitian and Cuban refugees to elect to traverse Central America in order to reach the United States.<sup>ii</sup> In recent years, these intra-regional migrants have been joined by thousands of Asian and African migrants, primarily hailing from Bangladesh, Nepal, Nigeria, and Somalia, who seek refugee status in the United States as well.<sup>iii</sup> Products of the global refugee crisis, this eclectic group of invisible emigrants is not as likely to relocate to Europe as their Middle Eastern counterparts, and attempt the perilous journey to the United States instead. Together, the surge in the traditional flow of refugees and the steady stream of non-Latin American migrants have placed mounting pressure on governments of Central America, as well as that of the United States, to protect the human rights and dignity of these stateless peoples. The focus of humanitarian efforts should be providing hard-pressed resources to those currently suffering within the deadliest segment of the route, the Darién Gap, which is a large swath of undeveloped jungle that straddles the border between Southern Panama and Northern Colombia.

## Reaching the Darién Gap

Often relying on smugglers or “agents” to arrange their flight plans, non-Latin American migrants begin their journeys by flying into São Paulo, Brazil or Quito, Ecuador, as both countries have relatively lenient immigration laws.<sup>iv</sup> In fact, in 2008, Ecuador lifted visa requirements for foreigners who arrive for tourist stays, therefore providing migrants an easy access point to the Americas.<sup>v</sup> Ecuador’s loose immigration legislation has drawn international criticism, including from former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, Otto Reich, who suggested that Ecuador’s open-door stance might threaten U.S. national security and Latin American stability.<sup>vi</sup> In response, the Ecuadoran Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade cracked down on illegal immigration: however, the Brazilian Ministry of Foreign Affairs infamously stated in early 2016 that it “is not aware of this human trafficking route.”<sup>vii</sup>

The second access point to the Americas, São Paulo, Brazil, has received a rising number asylum requests, growing from 566 in 2010 to 5,882 in 2013, according to UNHCR data.<sup>viii</sup> After arriving, these migrants usually obtain counterfeit passports and pay to be smuggled through the Amazon Rainforest, en route to Colombia. As it is not a crime to enter Colombia “irregularly”, the worst that can happen to these migrants is deportation to their original point of entry, which is usually Ecuador.<sup>ix</sup> However, Ecuador has recently started to reject the deportees who are not Colombian nationals, leading a Colombian immigration official to admit, “all we can do is drop them (Non-Colombian migrants) off at the bridge at the border and walk away.”<sup>x</sup> The failure of the governments of Colombia and Ecuador to provide sufficient support for those in limbo between their countries has made traversing the Darién Gap and Central America their only means of escaping statelessness. For those lucky enough to reach the Darién Gap, they often arrive nearly penniless, thanks to the high costs charged by smugglers, who are locally called “coyotes”, and the frequent extortion by criminal gangs and policemen at checkpoints. In a September 2016 report, Colombian private investigators estimated that the average price of reaching the United States through Latin America is around \$12,000 USD per person.<sup>xi</sup>

If one were to make an analogy between the US-bound refugees of Latin America and the European-bound refugees, the Darién Gap would be the equivalent to the Mediterranean Sea. Unregulated and isolated, the Darién Gap is the “missing link” of the Pan-American Highway, as road building in the region remains too expensive and environmentally costly.<sup>xii</sup> Consequently, transportation across the Darién Gap is nearly impossible, and this inaccessibility has enabled the proliferation of drug smugglers and paramilitary groups in the region, including the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia

(FARC).<sup>xiii</sup> The combination of the Darién Gap’s natural dangers, such as difficult terrain, dangerous wildlife, and isolation, with the constant threat of being kidnapped, murdered, or robbed has produced a precarious situation for those traveling through the region. Although their calls for assistance have not been heard, these forcibly displaced peoples require international assistance to effectively demand additional support from the involved governments.

The total number of arrivals to the Darién Gap jumped from 3,078 in 2013 to 7,278 in 2014, a startling 236 percent increase.<sup>xiv</sup> From the U.S. perspective, the doubling of the volume of emigrants traveling this land route is a recent phenomenon. As put by Marc Rosenblum, a deputy director at the Migration Policy Institute, “the surge reflects the difficulty of entering the U.S. by traditional paths like arriving on a visa card and overstaying. These people are willing to take this risky and complicated route.”<sup>xv</sup> The increase in activity along this untamed route is also the consequence of the unwillingness by most affected governments to conduct mass deportations and the easing of visa and asylum requirements in some Latin American countries.<sup>xvi</sup>

### **Life in the Gap**

The microcosm of life in the Darién Gap is the port town of Turbo, Colombia, which sits at the northern head of the Pan-American Highway. Serving as the primary jumping-off point for crossings into Panama, Turbo has become the hub for inter-American migration because of its position on the Caribbean Sea and proximity to the Darién Gap. As it is more accessible than Quito or São Paulo for the Haitians and Cubans, these demographics have increasingly migrated to the town by paying smugglers for maritime passage across the Caribbean Sea. Once within the city, many live in makeshift shelters with poor sanitary conditions, resembling a smaller-scale “Calais jungle”, which is another provisional community of thousands of refugees in northern France.<sup>xvii</sup> Despite Turbo’s migrant population swelling to around 4,000 in May 2016, the Colombian government has continually failed to adequately address this rapid influx in foreign population.<sup>xviii</sup>

Intended merely to be a transit city, Turbo has watched its population swell not only due to the growing inflow of migrants, but also because of the anti-immigration measures enacted by Central American countries. Reflective of the xenophobic reactions of many European governments, countries like Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and even Panama, have closed their southern

borders in order to stem the stream of migrants crossing their countries. Instead of simply reacting, it is important that these countries learn from the European mistakes and properly respond to this crisis before it spirals out of control.

Back in May 2016, it appeared that Panama would spearhead the effort to relocate the rising number of refugees when it reached an agreement with Mexico to directly fly 3,800 stranded Cuban refugees to the Mexico-U.S. border.<sup>xix</sup> Unfortunately, with this declaration, Panamanian President Juan Carlos Varela also announced that the key border crossings with Colombia, located within the Darién Gap, would be sealed until further action was taken to counter the inrush of migrants crossing through Panama en route to the United States.<sup>xx</sup> This changed the former policy, which allowed any asylum seeker to continue moving north if they did not appear on any terror watch lists after background checks staged by local border controls. An immediate consequence of his decision was the stranding of over 1,000 Cubans refugees, thereby forcing them to attempt to cross the Darién Gap if they still desired to reach the United States.<sup>xxi</sup>

While Panamanian authorities usually reject anyone who enters their country without a passport, they permit those arriving via the jungle route to enter without documentation because there is no nearby Colombian outpost to return them.<sup>xxii</sup> Once again, this shows the failure of the Latin American governments to collaborate and improve their capacities to handle this spike in immigration. In Central America, the insufficient immigration policies have forced the governments to take action that impedes the free movement of people. Prior to President Varela's closure of the border with Colombia, Nicaragua militarized and sealed its southern border in November 2015, while Costa Rica concluded its "humanitarian act" and shuttered its southern border to Cuban migrants in March 2016.<sup>xxiii</sup> The immigration-obstructive policies, like the closing of borders, implemented by Central American countries will not help alleviate the situation in Turbo and the Darién Gap, but will likely contribute to its continued deterioration instead.

### **Groups in the Gap: The Cubans and Haitians**

According to the Associated Press, the biggest outflow of Cubans since the 1980 Mariel Boatlift occurred in 2015, and consequently, they represent the largest migrant group in the Darién Gap.<sup>xxiv</sup> In recent years, Cubans have increasingly elected to undertake the grueling overland route to the United States, instead of sneaking past the U.S. Coast Guard in the

Caribbean Sea en route to Florida. Coincidentally, the recent thawing of United States-Cuban relations has raised concerns that the so-called “wet-foot, dry-foot policy”, which fast tracks legal residency for undocumented Cubans in the United States as long as they arrive by air or overland, could soon conclude.<sup>xxv</sup> According to the Pew Research Centre, almost 27,300 Cubans entered the United States during the first nine months of 2015, a 78 percent rise as in the same period in 2014, with two-thirds of the migrants now reaching the southern Texas border via the overland route.<sup>xxvi</sup> Reflective of this recent trend in Cuban immigration, Colombia detained 3,194 Cubans living in the country illegally during the first eight months of 2015.<sup>xxvii</sup>

The other group of intra-regional refugees in the Darién Gap is the Haitians, whose numbers in the Darién Gap have rapidly increased since Hurricane Matthew devastated the impoverished island nation in early October. Claiming approximately 1,000 Haitian lives and leaving over 60,000 displaced, Hurricane Matthew has placed the country on the brink of “real famine” and spawned deadly outbreaks of cholera in multiple communities.<sup>xxviii</sup> The confluence of these crises has driven the biggest Haitian exodus since the devastating 2010 earthquake, which displaced 1.5 million citizens.<sup>xxix</sup> By the end of 2015, US border patrol had reportedly encountered about 4,400 Haitians at the United States-Mexican border, compared to around 360 migrants in 2014.<sup>xxx</sup> In response to this surge, on September 12, just a week after Hurricane Matthew pummeled Haiti, US Homeland Security Secretary, Jeh Johnson, announced the restriction of temporary protective status (TPS) for future Haitians refugees and the deportation those living in the United States unauthorized by TPS.<sup>xxxi</sup> This decision comes at a time when the United States needs to express solidarity with the Haitian population, who needs foreign support to recover from another natural disaster once again. Due to the conclusion of TPS for Haitians, another governments’ immigration policies have left a large number of Haitians without any viable locations to seek refuge in the wake of a natural disaster. Consequently, they are forced to sail to Turbo and risk their lives traveling through the Darién Gap and Central America in order to reach the United States.

### **Groups in the Gap: The Non-Latin Americans**

Although Haitians and Cubans constitute a majority of the foreign population traveling through the Darién Gap, the growing numbers of non-Latin American migrants joining them in the dense jungle could eventually upgrade this situation to an international crisis. Fleeing from

problems such as extreme poverty, violence, and religious discrimination, these non-Latin American emigrants are relatively unprecedented in the region, and thus, are products of the current global refugee crisis. According to *Aljazeera America*, 1,003 Nepali migrants, 910 Bengali migrants, and 462 Somali migrants were recorded in the Darién Gap between 2013 and 2015.<sup>xxxii</sup> The steady inflow of additional emigrants has placed a huge strain on the existing smuggling system in the Darién Gap, resulting in the decline of sanitary conditions and an increase in violence. As it is difficult to deport these migrants, Latin American governments must find creative solutions to accommodate for the increase of foreign refugees within their borders.

## **Conclusion**

The silent suffering of the migrants in the Darién Gap, and those throughout Central and South America, demands more attention from the international community. This emerging refugee crisis cannot go unnoticed, and the reluctance of Latin American governments to properly address this situation has created a dependency on foreign pressure to improve the conditions for those traversing the well-trodden path. External entities, such as Pope Francis who called upon “the countries of the region to redouble generously every effort to find a rapid solution to this humanitarian tragedy” in 2014, should continue to increase awareness and demand that governments improve existing immigration policy.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Over time, migrant routes and flows will change, but it is the responsibility of the affected governments to adapt to the situation and provide sufficient resources to those seeking refuge. As it is estimated that over 25,000 total migrants entered Panama in the past year, it is pertinent that the governments of Latin America, especially those of Colombia and Panama, take decisive action to quell this situation while it is still manageable.<sup>xxxiv</sup> While the inflow of refugees will not necessarily change, Latin American immigration policy must stabilize before displaced population enters extreme distress.

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