



Getting it together:

Extra-regional migration in South, Central and North America and the need for more coordinated responses

MMC Research Report,
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About MMC

The Mixed Migration Centre (MMC) is a global network consisting of six regional hubs (Asia, East Africa and Yemen, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, North Africa & West Africa) and a central unit in Geneva. The MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise on mixed migration. The MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based protection responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. The MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

The MMC is part of, and governed by, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). While its institutional link to DRC ensures MMC's work is grounded in operational reality, it acts as an independent source of data, research, analysis and policy development on mixed migration for policy makers, practitioners, journalists, and the broader humanitarian sector. The position of the MMC does not necessarily reflect the position of DRC.

For more information on MMC visit:
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List of acronyms

CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
COESPO	Consejo Estatal de Población de Chihuahua (Chihuahua State Council for Population and Attention to Migrants)
COMAR	Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados (Mexican Refugee Aid Commission)
DIF	Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia (National System for Integral Family Development)
DRC	Danish Refugee Council
GACA	Guatemala Asylum Cooperation Agreement
INM	Instituto Nacional de Migración de México (Mexico's National Migration Institute)
IFRC	International Federation of the Red Cross
MPP	Migrant Protection Protocols (also known as "Remain in Mexico")
MRS	Migrant Reception Station
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
PIT	Permiso de Ingreso y Tránsito (Permit of Entry and Transit)
SEGOB	Secretaría de Gobernación de México (Mexico's Secretariat of the Interior)
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
IOM	International Organization for Migration
JRS	Jesuit Refugee Service

1. Executive summary

This study aims to provide a comprehensive and detailed analysis of mixed migration movements from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean across South, Central and North America — often referred to in the region as “extra-regional migration flows”. Through a combination of key informant interviews and desk research, this report offers information on: the profiles of extra-regional people on the move; the extent of their access to adequate information before and during their journey; the migration routes and means they use; the smuggling economies and dynamics connected to these movements; the impacts of COVID-19 on migration trends and on the experience of people on the move along this route; the risks and needs that extra-regional refugees and migrants face; the humanitarian response they can rely on; the national and regional migration policies and legal frameworks that apply to these migration flows; and the changes they are likely to undergo in the near future.

In recent years, the journey of extra-regional refugees and migrants across the Americas has started to attract more attention. While there is some literature on their profiles and routes, it does not allow for a comprehensive understanding of these mixed migration movements. The analysis included in this report aims to complement existing knowledge and understanding of extra-regional migration and to contribute to better responses by authorities and humanitarian actors.

Key findings

- **The economic impact of COVID-19 led to an increase in the desire to migrate**, as there are now fewer economic opportunities in many countries of origin. Smugglers have taken advantage of the rise in demand by raising prices.
- **Similarly, thousands of Haitian, Cuban, and African refugees and migrants are leaving first destination countries in South America** — primarily Brazil, Chile and Uruguay — due to deteriorating economic conditions and are engaging in onward north-bound journeys.
- **While extra-regional people on the move consider it easy to obtain information about smuggling services, this is not the case for practical information that would allow them to move across countries in a safer way and with less reliance on smugglers.** Language is also a significant barrier to receiving information linked to access to services, humanitarian assistance, asylum procedures as well as legal counselling, making those on the move even more dependent on smugglers.
- **The Darien Gap, a wild forest area between Colombia and Panama, remains the most challenging part of the journey:** it is a particularly hostile environment to cross, rife with dangers such as robberies, rapes, killings, dangerous wildlife, and a difficult terrain of mountains, valleys, swamps, and rivers.
- In the first months of 2021, with frequent and extended pandemic-triggered suspensions of boat travel to reach the main departure point into the Gap, **thousands of extra-regional refugees and migrants remained stranded for weeks and months in Colombia's western Caribbean region**, waiting to continue their journey.
- After managing to depart from Colombia, **large groups of several hundred extra-regional refugees and migrants have been arriving at the migrant reception stations on the Panamanian side of the Darien region** in short periods of time. Responses by the authorities have fallen short of needs.
- **Extra-regional people on the move also face significant protection risks beyond the Darien region and in general along their journey through the Americas.** Such risks include extortion and kidnapping, often linked to corruption networks that involve smugglers, police officials and immigration officers.
- **Changing policies and border closures amid the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in longer journeys and severer economic hardship due to increased smuggling prices.**
- **Many different actors are involved in the facilitation of irregular journeys across South, Central and North America**, including transnational criminal networks, local criminal groups, and members of local communities in transit locations looking for a source of livelihood.
- **Coordinated efforts among countries in the region to adequately manage these mixed migration flows are still at a very incipient phase**, with only one joint program currently operating between Panama and Costa Rica. Recent regional policy conversations seemed to focus on combating smuggling rather than responding to the needs of extra-regional people on the move.
- **The limited assistance available to extra-regional refugees and migrants is largely provided by humanitarian organisations and other civil society actors, but needs greatly outweigh resources and capacity.**
- **Extra-regional people on the move, especially Haitians, report discrimination and racism by authorities and the host society in Mexico.** Mexico is, at the same time, the transit country in which they stay for longer but also more and more often their final destination.

Key recommendations

For national and local authorities

Recommendations applying specifically to extra-regional refugees and migrants:

- Create clear information tools on the asylum and immigration frameworks and access to rights and make them accessible to extra-regional people on the move. Information should be presented in different formats and languages and be adapted to different literacy levels.
- Provide immigration officers with training and other resources to adequately engage with extra-regional refugees and migrants.
- Make sure asylum and immigration proceedings guarantee the translation services necessary for extra-regional refugees and migrants to navigate them.
- Develop greater institutional capacities to adequately manage mixed migration movements from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean.
- Engage in coordinated regional efforts to adequately respond to extra-regional mixed migration flows. Build a regional migration response that is not only sustainable, but adaptive and flexible and that includes comprehensive assistance and protection based on human rights, humanitarian principles, and solidarity among states, rather than focusing on restrictive policies aimed at curbing and preventing migration.

Recommendations also applying to refugees and migrants from the region:

- At the national level, enhance access to regular status and social protection to guarantee refugee and migrant rights, including by amending immigration laws where necessary. For those with international protection needs, ensure adequate access to the asylum system with due process guarantees.
- Ensure the adequate functioning of asylum and immigration proceedings, including during the pandemic, and a timely delivery of decisions.
- In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, ensure that national strategies for disease prevention and control include migrants and refugees, and identify ways to reach marginalised or hard-to-reach groups amongst them. Additionally, guarantee access to essential non-COVID health services.

For humanitarian actors

- Facilitate regional and national dialogue with all relevant actors to ensure a coordinated response to extra-regional mixed migration flows that is aimed at avoiding exposure to protection risks.
- Strive to adequately include extra-regional refugees and migrants in programming and cater for their specific needs, even though their numbers are lower and thus attract less attention and funding compared to other mixed migration flows in the region.
- As a priority, improve outreach and communications at strategic locations along the routes used by extra-regional refugees and migrants on their way to North America, including by providing posters, pamphlets, maps, and interactive information boards. Additionally, plan information campaigns on social media and mobile apps to fill in information gaps related to shelters, access to health services, and legal counselling, among others.
- Train staff to prevent discrimination and eliminate organisational and individual bias against extra-regional people on the move.
- Hire Creole-speaking interpreters and/or staff members. In addition, interpreters who speak French and English can be useful to attend to people on the move from Asia and Africa.
- Increase field presence to strengthen assistance delivery, coordination, and technical support at strategic transit locations, especially those commonly used by extra-regional refugee and migrants, including the Darien region (Panama), Tapachula (Mexico), and Ciudad Juárez (Mexico).
- Strengthen existing complaint and feedback mechanisms, provide hotlines and other mechanisms in languages relevant for extra regional migrants and refugees to report abuse, and promote awareness of these hotlines among people on the move.

2. Introduction

This report examines mixed migration movements from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean across the Americas with the principal aim of shedding light on the profiles, motivation and experiences of those who are part of them. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these movements will also be analysed.

The report begins by looking at the national and regional policies that are relevant to the response to extra-regional mixed migration movements and the room that exists for strengthening them. Next, the report assesses available data and information on extra-regional mixed migration movements, developing an overview of the regional migration context in South, Central, and North America and focussing on the routes used and the factors that influence the movement. It then analyses the risks that people are exposed to during their journey, as well as the current gaps in the protection and assistance they receive, with the aim of informing more effective protection-based programming in the Americas.

3. Methodology

A first research phase included desk research followed by in-depth qualitative interviews with stakeholders as well as extra-regional refugees and migrants.

Secondary sources

Secondary data collection was carried out through a review of existing literature including: studies and reports on extra-regional refugees and migrants in South, Central and North America; migration dynamics in the region; legal and policy frameworks relevant to mixed migration; and issues related to protection and assistance. Secondary data sources included media reports, official documents, publications from international organisations and NGOs.

Qualitative data

Field work was carried out during the first months of 2021. The author collected primary data by traveling to seven different locations, four of which are known as hubs for extra-regional migrant and refugee populations (both in transit or at their temporary or final destination). These locations include the beach area of Necoclí, migrant reception centres in the Darien, the Parque Central Miguel Hidalgo in Tapachula, and the Solus Christus and Frontera de Gracia migrant shelters in Ciudad Juárez. Qualitative in-depth interviews were held with three different profiles of respondent: 38 refugees and migrants, one migrant smuggler, and 14 mixed migration actors (working with international organisations, NGOs, faith-based organisations, government agencies, etc.).

Interviews were carried out in French and Spanish. With regard to refugee and migrant respondents, 21, including five women, were interviewed in Necoclí; four (all identifying as male) in San Vicente, Panama; six (including one female) in Tapachula; and six (including two females) in Ciudad Juárez. Five interviewees identified as LGBTI. The distribution of respondents' nationalities was as follows:

- Fourteen Cubans
- Fifteen Haitians
- Three Guineans
- Three Somalis
- One Angolan
- Two Bangladeshis

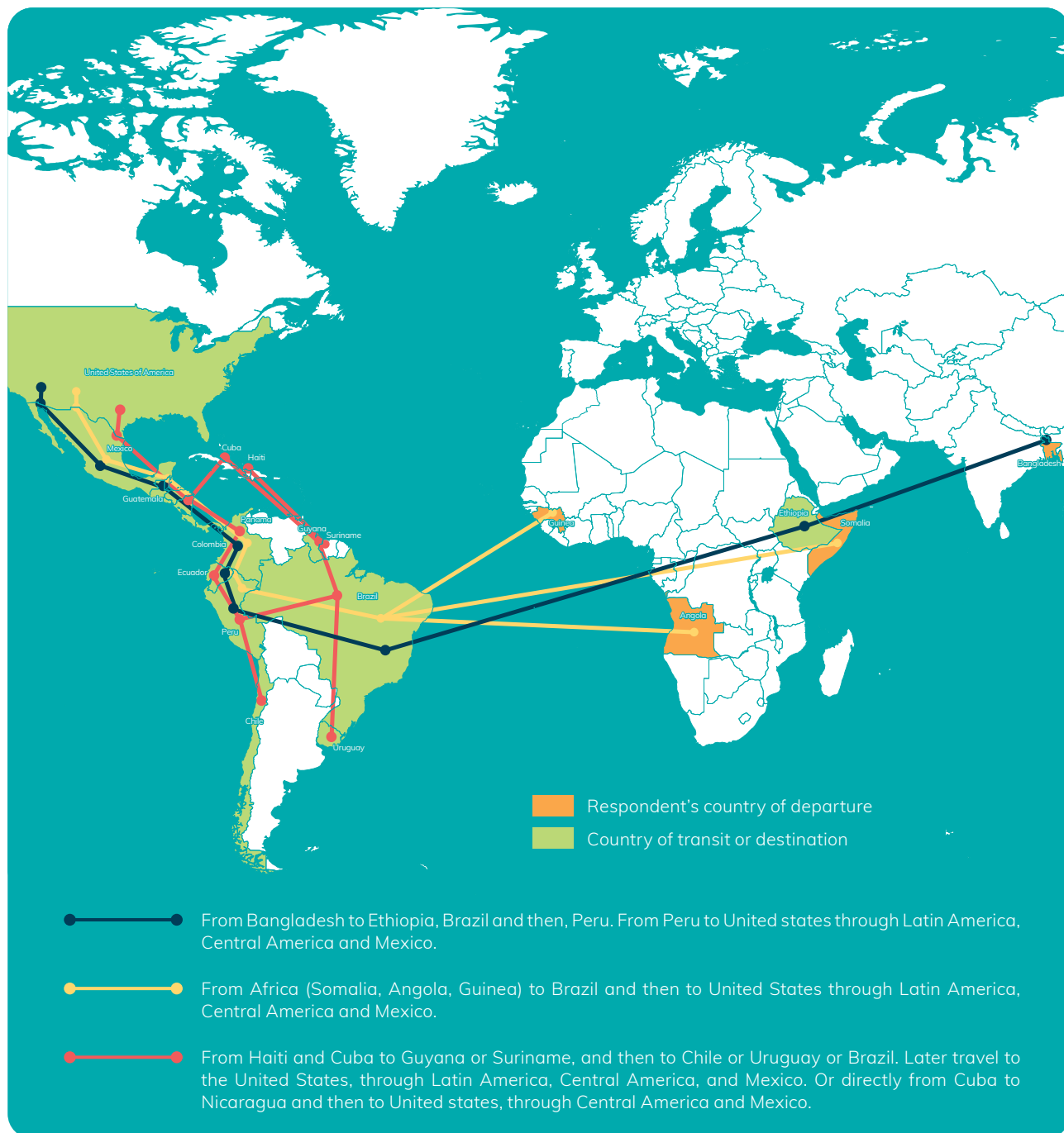
Limitations and ethical considerations

The pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns and mobility restrictions significantly impacted the logistics of in-country research and necessitated many — often last-minute — changes to planned travel arrangements, field visits and interviews. One limitation to accessing respondents was restricted access to the migrant reception station (MRS) in the Darien region of Panama, which meant fewer interviews than planned were conducted there. Additionally, dynamics in transit and destination hubs other than the data collection locations might differ from those described in the report.

Results from interviews with people on the move should not be considered representative of the entire extra-regional refugee and migrant population. Findings in general can only be considered as indicative and pertinent to the time when field work was conducted, as the situation on the ground is volatile and can change quickly. Moreover, field work was conducted before US government suspended its Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) programme in January 2021, and changes occurred after that are not reflected in this report.¹

Respondents received no compensation for their participation. Informed consent and anonymity were communicated to participants and agreed upon.

Figure 1. Routes taken / planned by people on the move interviewed for the study



Source: Respondents to study on extra-regional migration towards North America, MMC, 2021.

1 Under the MPP programme certain foreign nationals entering or seeking admission to the US from Mexico — irregularly or without the required documentation — could be returned to Mexico and forced to wait outside of US territory for the duration of their immigration or asylum proceedings. Mexico is expected to provide those affected with appropriate protection for the duration of their stay in the country. See: US Dept of Homeland Security (2019) [Migrant Protection Protocols](#). On the suspension, see: Reuters (2021) [U.S. ends program sending asylum seekers to Mexico to wait for court hearings](#).

4. Background

While intra-regional mixed migration flows — primarily out of Venezuela and Central America — have attracted more political, media and public attention in the last few years, the Americas also witness significant extra-regional migration movements. The Darien region between Colombia and Panama in particular has seen extra-regional migration flows at least since 2009. The number of people on the move from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean crossing parts of South and Central America in their journey towards North America has consistently increased in recent years, with the exception of 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a study conducted in Panama in 2019, the number of Asian, African and Caribbean nationals in irregular transit across the Darien border area had increased by 703 percent since 2014.² Some 23,698 people on the move from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean were reported entering Panama in 2019, with a rise in migrant children, according to UNICEF.³ In January 2020 alone, 1,547 extra-regional refugees and migrants were reported to have crossed the Darien Gap, most of whom were Haitian (1,141).⁴ In Mexico, the apprehensions of extra-regional people on the move also heavily increased since 2014, by 550 percent.⁵

This increase is connected to several elements, including changes in migration policies in other parts of the world. Since 2015, irregular migration has become a pervasive topic in European politics, with the European Union adopting measures to externalise its migration management and prevent people on the move from reaching its territory.⁶ This has had an impact on migration routes, with some refugees and migrants from Africa and Asia choosing to travel to the Americas instead of heading toward Europe (a trend explored in more detail below in section 5b on migration drivers).⁷ Additionally, the presence of diasporas in the U.S., Canada and – to a lesser extent – Mexico is might also be playing a role in the choice of destination for many refugees and migrants.

Despite their growing numbers, the response to extra-regional mixed migration movements has not developed at the same pace. The stance of authorities in South and Central America ranges from turning a blind eye to these movements to adopting basic measures to facilitating quick transit through their territory. Additionally, although the measures adopted by the United States to curb migration and externalise its borders mainly target mixed migration movements from Central America, they also affect extra-regional refugees and migrants, further exacerbating a journey characterised by violence, discrimination, and exclusion.

5. Legal and policy framework

5.1 National

Latin American countries have historically had a progressive approach to migration and displacement. Almost all are parties to the 1951 Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees and/or its 1967 Protocol,⁸ whose legal standards they domesticated into their national immigration and/or refugee laws. Additionally, some countries in the region also adopted the broader definition of “refugee” contained in the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees⁹ in their national legal framework, making it legally binding. Most Latin American countries also provide forms of complementary or humanitarian protection, as well as alternatives for temporary or permanent residence for migrants. The continent, however, has recently shown a shift towards managing migration through a national security lens, with more countries tightening control over their borders and criminalising irregular migration.¹⁰

2 IOM (2019) [Migration Trends in Central America, North America and the Caribbean](#).

3 UNICEF (2020) [Panama sees more than seven-fold increase in number of migrant children crossing through the Darien Gap](#).

4 ECHO (2020) [Panama - Population movement \(DG ECHO, UNICEF, IFRC, government, ECHO partners\) \(ECHO Daily Flash of 23 March 2020\)](#).

5 IOM (2019) [Migration Trends in Central America, North America and the Caribbean – November 2019](#).

6 Davitti, D. & Ursu, A-E. (2018) [Why Securitising the Sahel will not stop Migration](#).

7 Yates, C. (2019) [As more migrants from Africa and Asia arrive in Latin America, Government seeks orderly and controlled pathways](#). Migration Policy Institute.

8 United Nations Treaty Collection (2021) [Convention relating to the Status of Refugees](#).

9 UNHCR (1984) [Cartagena Declaration on Refugees](#).

10 Global Asylum Governance and the European Union’s Role (ASILE) (2020) [South America and the Cartagena Regime: A comprehensive approach to forced migration responses](#).

Very few governments have developed immigration policies specifically aimed at extra-regional mixed migration flows. People on the move from almost all African and Asian countries need a visa to enter and transit Latin American states. The same applies to Haitian and Cuban nationals in most countries in the region. Due to a lack of agreements on repatriation to countries of origin and the cost of a transcontinental deportation, however, such persons are unlikely to face deportation back to their place of origin from any country in South and Central America. Of approximately 34,000 extra-regional people on the move apprehended in Mexico between 2013 and 2018, only 3.3 percent were deported.¹¹ Deportation policies in Central America entail, if anything, returning extra-regional refugees and migrants to the country previously crossed, and in such instances most people on the move just find a way to recross the border. Additionally, with many countries in South America witnessing a strong influx of Venezuelan refugees and migrants, and the United States and Mexico focusing on mixed migration flows from Central America, extra-regional refugees and migrants are mostly off the radar.

Some South American countries offer — or at least used to offer — extra-regional refugees and migrants avenues for regular migration or transit. In Brazil, many Haitians benefited from the country's extensive demand for cheap labour prior to the 2016 summer Olympic Games, when Haiti was still recovering from the 2010 earthquake.¹² Similarly, Uruguay has offered Cuban refugees and migrants a right to stay, work, and access visas, and Chile has adopted similar measures, albeit not as inclusively, for Haitian nationals. By comparison, Colombia only allows extra-regional refugees and migrants to transit the country if they have a passport and report to immigration offices upon entry into the country to have their personal data registered, whereupon they receive a five-day transit permit, or *salvoconducto*.¹³

The *flujo controlado*, or “controlled flow” programme (explored in greater detail below) jointly operated by Panama and Costa Rica facilitates the transit of people on the move through the territory of the two countries, as long as they have valid passports, clear security and biometric checks, and receive vaccines (not yet applicable to COVID-19 when this report was drafted). Refugees and migrants who enter Panama through the Darien Gap must stay in one of three reception stations where they receive basic food and medical care and wait until they are transported to the Costa Rican border. In order to enter Costa Rica, refugees and migrants must undergo a second series of checks and receive clearance, upon which border police officers register them and issue them with an entry-and-transit permit, or *permiso de ingreso y tránsito* (PIT). The PIT guarantees access to, healthcare, and temporary migrant shelters known as *centros de atención temporal a migrantes*. This temporary permit provides people on the move with an alternative to irregular transit.¹⁴

While Panama is predominantly a transit country for extra-regional people on the move, some do apply for asylum in the country. In 2019, Panama received 2,292 asylum applications from Cuban nationals. In comparison, only five Haitians and five Nigerians applied for asylum in the country. The asylum recognition rate for Cubans, Haitians, and Nigerians in 2019 was however zero, and access to rights and durable solutions for asylum seekers is equally limited.¹⁵

Nicaragua also has a comprehensive legal asylum framework in place, with previous practice on refugee status determination and high recognition rates. Since 2015, however, the asylum system in Nicaragua has been suspended, significantly reducing protection space for asylum seekers and refugees in the country. No official information is available about access to the territory for people on the move who are not asylum seekers or about policies on those only in transit, but news sources report that the Nicaraguan government charges \$150 to every foreigner to be granted a transit permit to cross the country.¹⁶

El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala have historically been countries of origin for refugees and migrants, rather than destinations. Consequently, immigration authorities in the three countries are under-resourced and enforcement has largely been left to the national police and military.¹⁷ These countries do not foresee specific transit or regularisation options for extra-regional refugees and migrants, who do everything they can to avoid immigration controls and do not stay longer than strictly necessary.

11 Rodrigues, G. (2019) [As more Migrants from Africa and Asia arrive in Latin America, Governments seek orderly and controlled pathways](#), Migration Policy Institute.

12 BBC News (2013) [Brazil issues work permits for Haitian migrants to Acre](#).

13 Ocampo, M. & Arboleda, S. (2016) [Colombia y los flujos mixtos de migrantes en el derecho internacional de los refugiados](#).

14 Winters, N. & Mora Izaguirre, C. (2019) [Es cosa suya: entanglements of border externalization and African transit migration in northern Costa Rica](#), Comparative Migration Studies.

15 World Data (2019) [Asylum applications and refugees in Panama](#).

16 Esquivel, N. (2020) [Clandestine trails between Guanacaste and Nicaragua](#), The Voice of Guanacaste.

17 Selee, A. et al (2021) [Laying the Foundation for Regional Cooperation](#), Migration Policy Institute.

By contrast to Central America, Mexico has increasingly become a destination country for migrants and asylum seekers in the last few years.¹⁸ This includes a proportion of extra-regional refugees and migrants — especially Cubans and Haitians — who are now deciding to settle in Mexico rather than continue their journey to the US: according to Jesuit Refugee Service/Danish Refugee Council (JRS/DRC) protection monitoring data, a majority of respondents from both countries expressed a desire to settle in Mexico.¹⁹ This is partly due to Mexico's increased border control efforts, resulting from pressure from the United States, and the difficulty of entering the US itself. Mexico has quite an elaborate asylum framework, under which those entering by land must initiate a claim with the *Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados* (COMAR — Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance) or the *Instituto Nacional de Migración de México* (INM — National Migration Institute) within 30 business days of entering the country.²⁰ Both the INM and COMAR are under the authority of the *Secretaría de Gobernación* (SEGOB — Secretariat of the Interior) as the frontline actors in the country's immigration and asylum system. Those who are granted refugee status become permanent residents with the right to stay indefinitely and access employment, healthcare, and education. After four years, refugees can apply for naturalisation. If an asylum seeker is not granted refugee status, they can be granted complementary protection due to a risk of torture, cruel or inhumane treatment. Migrants with a high risk of vulnerability can also request a humanitarian visa, which is valid for one year with the possibility of renewal. It is granted to the following profiles: victims or witnesses of a crime in Mexico; unaccompanied children; and asylum seekers waiting for a final decision by COMAR.

According to key informants, most of those who obtain a humanitarian visa are indeed asylum seekers who already filed an application for international protection. In such cases, the humanitarian visa cannot be renewed beyond the first year and, if the asylum application is rejected, the visa loses its validity. Additionally, the humanitarian visa is in practice used as the only available regular immigration status for asylum seekers because the application receipt they get upon applying for asylum does not confer legal status.

Humanitarian visas offer the possibility to live and work in Mexico for one year. Additionally, an exit permit called the *oficio de salida del país* was once provided to individuals in Mexico who faced obstacles to being returned to their country of origin. The *oficio de salida* is a temporary permit that only grants a person the right to be present on Mexican soil for a short period until they leave the country. In the past, extra-regional refugees and migrants would present themselves to the INM upon entry into Mexico, possibly spend weeks in a detention centre, and then receive an *oficio de salida*, which enabled them to travel regularly in Mexico for 20-30 days and reach the US border.²¹ This use of the permit was however suspended in 2019, leading groups of extra-regional people on the move to remain stranded in southern Mexico for extended periods.²² A key informant indicated that the way these permits are issued varies between different INM offices.

5.2 Regional

Efforts to develop regional frameworks for migration and asylum are recent and limited, with most aiming to prevent or curb migration rather than manage it. US policies towards countries in the region aimed at externalising its border control exemplify this trend. These included pressuring Mexico and Guatemala to strengthen border militarisation and deter migrant caravans, implementing the MPP, and invoking a section of US health legislation — Title 42 — for an emergency regulation to prohibit the entry and permit the expulsion of people at the US-Mexico border.²³ With no developed coordination mechanisms for migration management among countries in the region, policymaking and response are largely ad hoc and often depend on external factors or pressure that force states into action.

Operación Flujo Controlado

As noted above, in 2016, Costa Rica and Panama established a policy to facilitate orderly and controlled transit through their territories in recognition of the fact that most refugees and migrants on the move in these countries are not interested in settling there. The only joint program focusing on the management of extra-regional mixed migration flows, *Operación Flujo Controlado*, or Operation Controlled Flow, was created after Nicaragua closed its borders to extra-regional migration, causing a chain reaction in Costa Rica and Panama, with large numbers of extra-regional people on the move stranded across their territories with high visibility. The sustained flow of refugees and migrants

18 Selee, A. et al (2021) op. cit.

19 JRS/DRC (2021) [Monitoreo de Protección: México](#)

20 Law on Refugees, art.18

21 Meyer, M. & Isacson, A. (2019): [The 'Wall' before the Wall: Mexico's Crackdown on Migration at its Southern Border](#). WOLA

22 Tuckman, J. (2019): ["We've been taken hostage": African migrants stranded in Mexico after Trump's crackdown](#). The Guardian.

23 During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Trump administration invoked section 265 of US Code Title 42 – legislation covering public health – to empower US Border Patrol and Customs agents to prohibit the entry of noncitizens who potentially pose a health risk without any procedural protections, such as the right to seek asylum and other forms of humanitarian protection. The stated rationale behind the policy was the need to protect immigration officers from COVID-19 and to minimize the number of persons in congregated settings, such as immigration detention centres. See: American Immigration Council (2021) [A Guide to Title 42 Expulsions at the Border](#).

challenged the institutional reception and response capacity of Panama and Costa Rica and led to temporary but repeated border closures in the region.²⁴ Consequently, MRS were created in Panama, near the borders with both Colombia and Costa Rica, to register and hold refugees and migrants and organise their movement north. The registration process uses the US's Biometric Identification Transnational Migration Alert Program and automatically provides all biometric data to the US Department of Homeland Security to identify people on the move who have been previously flagged for criminal records or connections to terrorist groups.²⁵ During the process, refugees and migrants are not allowed to leave the MRS, and transportation is only provided from one MRS to another. At the Panamanian-Costa Rican border in Paso Canoas, Panamanian border police and Costa Rican migration police escort migrants from the Panamanian to the Costa Rican side. Those who require additional support are transferred to a Costa Rican migrant centre. The rest receive a 25-day transit permit to travel onwards.²⁶

Under Operation Controlled Flow, both countries strive to curb smuggling networks and human trafficking inside their territory, monitor refugee and migrant movement, and, during the coronavirus pandemic, limit health risks for local populations. While Panama and Costa Rica have strengthened their capacity to manage the transit of people on the move, in both countries refugees and migrants try to avoid the controls imposed by the program, increasing the influence of smugglers, while the states' capacity to return refugees and migrants to their countries of origin remains weak.

"If you want to move outside of these systems, you have to look for ways. There are always possibilities. Sometimes it's better to trust them (the smugglers) instead of the police."

Male, 30, Cuban, interviewed in San Vicente (Panama)

The program has elicited fierce criticism for not giving people on the move the option to stay in Panama and because of the poor reception conditions in the MRS, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁷ Additionally, although the MRS are called "reception stations", some human rights organizations consider them as *de facto* detention centres, as refugees and migrants are not allowed to leave them.²⁸ A key informant also mentioned that people on the move need to pay for their transportation from the MRS onward to the border with Costa Rica and, if they do not have the money, they cannot leave – lack of resources being one of the reasons behind extended stays. Finally, the program is limited to only two countries, meaning that extra-regional people on the move are once again on their own from the southern border of Nicaragua onward.

Regional conferences addressing extra-regional mixed migration movements

While the response to extra-regional mixed migration movements has been the focus of several regional meetings in the last two years, no concrete action has yet ensued. In 2019, shortly after a boat capsized close to Capurganá, on Colombia's Caribbean coast, with a loss of more than 24 lives, the country's director general of migration initiated a series of meetings with local and regional authorities. One of these meetings focused on tackling transnational smuggling networks and creating shared data systems about extra-regional refugees and migrants entering and leaving the Darien Gap and was attended by immigration authorities from Colombia, Brazil, Ecuador, Panama, Mexico and Costa Rica but led to no reported concrete actions, conclusions or agreements.²⁹

On 28 and 29 September 2020, Mercosur's Specialized Migration Forum held a virtual working session on the impact of migration in the region, the exchange of good practices in migration management, and the design of agreements that allow for coordination on migration-related issues in the region. Colombia, additionally, as the coordinating country of the Pacific Alliance Working Group on Movement of Persons and Facilitation of Migratory Transit, together with Mexico, Chile and Peru, presented the progress made on an information-sharing platform created by immigration authorities in the region as an example of good practice in the management of migratory flows in the region.³⁰ In 2021, the Central American Commission of Migration Directors held a virtual meeting on 22 February, led by Guatemala, to present a plan in the face of rising numbers of Haitians, Cubans, Africans, and Asians on the move toward North America. The proposed action plan comprised three points: safeguarding security in the region, offering responses

24 Morales, L. (2016) [Border closures strand migrants in Colombia](#). The New Humanitarian.

25 Schlabach, C. (2020) [Torn between humanitarian ideals and U.S. Pressure, Panama screens migrants from around the world](#). Cronkite Borderlands Project. Cronkite News.

26 Winters, N. & Mora Izaguirre, C. (2019) op. cit.

27 Inter-American Court of Human Rights (2020) [Resolución de la Presidenta de la Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos de 26 de mayo de 2020 - Adopción de medidas urgentes - Caso Vélez Loor vs. Panamá](#).

28 See CEJIL (2020) [Ref. Reporte: El impacto del COVID-19 sobre los derechos humanos de los migrantes](#); Inter-American Court of Human Rights (2020) Op. Cit.

29 Tamayo Ortiz, H. (2019) [Piden plan de choque para migrantes que arriesgan sus vidas en Urabá](#). El Tiempo.

30 Cancillería Colombia: [Alianza del Pacífico](#).

and attending to possible mass movements, and considering solutions at a regional level. No information was found on concrete steps taken as part of the action plan.

Other regional frameworks

In 2017, six countries from the Mesoamerican region – Panama, Costa Rica, Honduras, Guatemala, Belize and Mexico – committed themselves to a Comprehensive Regional Framework for Protection and Solutions (MIRPS for its Spanish acronym) as a regional contribution to the development of the Global Compact on Refugees, adopted the following year by the UN General Assembly. The MIRPS aimed at strengthening regional cooperation and responsibility sharing between countries of origin, transit and destination for refugee flows in the region. Each participating country drafted a national plan that included policy proposals and concrete actions to strengthen refugee reception and protection, prevent displacement, and promote durable solutions. Such plans were developed collaboratively by national governments, the Organization of American States (OAS), UN agencies and civil society actors, with inputs from refugees, IDPs and returnees. While extra-regional people on the move are expected to indirectly benefit from a general strengthening of the protection and solutions environment, their specific needs risk being overlooked or left unanswered by policies and programmes developed with intra-regional migration in mind.

6. Extra-regional mixed migration flows

6.1 Profiles

Who is on the move?

The main nationalities of extra-regional people on the move have varied over time. Arrivals of refugees and migrants from Asia — particularly from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Nepal — increased since 2016,³¹ with more new arrivals into the US now coming from Asia than any other region apart from Latin America.³² In 2019, 7,675 Indian nationals were caught and detained at the US-Mexico border, more than twice as many as in 2017.³³ As for Africans, while the US registered just 222 apprehensions for financial year 2018, according to the Migration Policy Institute, apprehension figures for nationals of African countries in Mexico are likely more representative: Mexico “recorded more than ten times that number, at 2,699, for the same year”.³⁴ Refugees and migrants from Africa include nationals of Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Ghana, Kenya, Togo, Ivory Coast, Guinea, and Egypt.³⁵ The presence of Cameroonians has increased in the last few years, as violent tensions erupted in their country of origin.³⁶ As for refugees and migrants from the Caribbean, Cubans and Haitians represent the main nationalities of people on the move who have been traveling across the Americas: in January and February 2021, for instance, 56 percent of those hosted in the first MRS in Panama were Haitian and 15 percent Cuban.³⁷ Cubans also represented 20 percent of those interviewed by the JRS/DRC protection monitoring project in Mexico between October 2020 and April 2021.³⁸ While the share of Haitians is lower, at 7.5 percent of interviewees, the organisations stated that this does not reflect the size of Haitian presence in the data collection locations, as their ability to reach Haitians depends upon the availability of Creole interpreters.

Additionally, both primary and secondary sources suggest that, since the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, there have been increasing numbers of refugees and migrants — especially Haitians and Cubans — leaving their first country of migration in South America to head to North America.³⁹

What are their socioeconomic profiles?

According to the interviews with people on the move conducted for this study, education levels vary among nationalities. Most Haitians (15 out of 38 interviewees) reported to have finished high school, while Cubans (n=14) had professions ranging from teachers to hair stylists and dentists. Interviewees from African states (n=7) received higher education and were professionals in their home country, similar to respondents from Bangladesh (n=2).

31 IOM (2017) [Recent Extra-regional, intra-regional and extra-continental migrations trends in South America](#).

32 Migration Policy Institute (2021) [Frequently requested statistics on immigrants and immigration in the United States](#).

33 U.S. Border Patrol (2020) [U.S. Border Patrol Nationwide Apprehensions by Citizenship and Sector \(FY2007 – FY 2019\)](#).

34 Rodrigues, G. (2019) op. cit.

35 IOM (2021) [Emergency Tracking: COVID19 Pandemic Migrant Receiving Stations \(MRS\) Situation Report #15](#).

36 Rodrigues, G. (2019) op. cit.

37 IOM (2021) [Emergency Tracking: Migrant Reception Station \(MRS\) COVID-19 Pandemic - Special Report: Statistical Assessment of the Migrant Population Sheltered in Darién, Panama September 2020-February 2021](#).

38 JRS/DRC (2021) op. cit.

39 Abdaladze, N. (2020) [Haitians make long continental transit in hope for a better future](#). Cronkite News.

Secondary data indicates that most refugees and migrants in Latin America are single, working age men traveling in groups or individually.⁴⁰ In line with this, most interviewees for the study were men between 22 and 37 years of age, although several Cuban nationals were above 50 years of age. Despite the larger share of men, however, there has been an increase in the presence of female refugees and migrants, families and children in these migration flows. Refugees and migrants from Cameroon and the DRC often travel with families,⁴¹ similar to Haitians and Cubans. These groups include children and often pregnant women, who have been arriving at MRS in Panama in considerable numbers.⁴²

What languages do they speak?

Most extra-regional refugees and migrants have very limited knowledge of Spanish, with Cuban nationals being the exception. The Haitian nationals interviewed for this study (n=15) spoke French, although the majority stated their language of preference was Haitian Creole. Most interviewees from African and Asian countries spoke English and/or French, although not necessarily fluently. The three Haitian nationals interviewed in Ciudad Juárez showed a higher knowledge of Spanish due to their extended stay in the region bordering with the US, although they were not fluent.

6.2 Migration Drivers

Reasons for leaving

People on the move from Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean leave their countries of origin and decide to head to North America for a wide array of reasons. According to secondary sources, nationals of Asian countries using this route are most likely to be heading to the US looking for economic opportunities, while reasons relating to violence and insecurity seem to carry more weight for those from Africa.⁴³ These broad trends were confirmed in the interviews carried out for this study with people on the move from Asia (n=2) and Africa (n=7), although their narrative often pointed to a combination of several migration drivers for each person.

Interviews conducted with refugees and migrants from the Caribbean also made it difficult to isolate a single reason for leaving their country of origin. Factors mentioned by Haitian interviewees (n=15) for leaving, either recently or several years ago, included political violence, insecurity and crime, gender-based violence, political instability, family reunification, poor standard of living, and a desire for better economic opportunities. This was in line with JRS/DRC protection monitoring data from interviews conducted with Haitians in Mexico.⁴⁴ As for the drivers behind onward movement from a country of first migration within Latin America, high living expenses and scarce job opportunities in Brazil led Haitian refugees and migrants to decide to move further north.⁴⁵ Additionally, the current president of Brazil also made extremely negative comments about people on the move in the past, arguing that “the scum of the world is arriving in Brazil” and accusing Haitians of bringing diseases to the country.⁴⁶ This, together with economic instability, affects opportunities for and attitudes towards refugees and migrants in Brazil and consequently their desire to leave the country and move further north. Similarly, the Haitian interviewees who had initially settled in Chile had come to live in situations of economic instability and with the constant fear of being deported, but also suffered racism and discrimination.

“My only wish is to be with my family again. I will do what it takes to arrive safely in the US.”

Male, 43, Haitian, interviewed in Necoclí (Colombia)

The number of Cubans traveling to the US increased until 2016 in anticipation of the end of the US policy that facilitated Cubans to attain permanent residency once in the US. Additionally, after 2016, economic conditions in the country pushed more people to migrate.⁴⁷ The Cuban nationals interviewed for this study (n=14) mentioned the current political regime and the desire for better economic opportunities as reasons for leaving, together with the wish to reunite with family members who are already in the US. As with Haitians, JRS/DRC protection monitoring data confirms the finding that Cubans leave their country of origin for a combination of reasons, including insecurity, fear of persecution and economic factors.⁴⁸

40 Rodrigues, G. (2019) op. cit.

41 Ibid.

42 UNICEF (2019) [Increased migration flows in Panama – Flash update](#).

43 Gopalakrishnan, M. (2019) [Entering US via Mexico – why are so many Indians risking their lives?](#) Deutsche Welle; IOM (2020) [Extraregional Migration in the Americas: Profiles, experiences and needs](#).

44 JRS/DRC (2021) op. cit.

45 Selee, A. et al (2021) op. cit.

46 Romero, S. (2016) [Conservative's Star Rises in Brazil as Polarizing Views Tap Into Discontent](#) The New York Times

47 Selee, A. et al (2021) op. cit.

48 JRS/DRC (2021) op. cit.

"I know I am older than most people here, but I cannot live in Cuba anymore. My family is waiting for me in the US and I will wait here until I can enter the country legally."

Female, 51, Cuban, interviewed in Ciudad Juárez (Mexico)

7. Migration routes and means

7.1 From Asia

The main point of entry into the Americas for Asian refugees and migrants is through Brazil, primarily due to the country's relevance as a migrant smuggling hub.⁴⁹ Their journey is usually facilitated by smugglers, with some people on the move purchasing an "all-inclusive package" and others organising and paying their journey step by step.⁵⁰ For instance, Asian respondents to this study (n=2) contacted smugglers prior to leaving their country of origin through friends, family members, or acquaintances who had already made the journey. They were then provided with visa paperwork and flight tickets into Brazil upon paying smuggling networks in their country of origin. They flew from Dhaka (Bangladesh), via Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) to Sao Paulo (Brazil). Onward travel was then facilitated by smuggling groups inside Brazil who arranged for plane travel to the border region with Peru and into this country.

7.2 From Africa

Europe's crackdown on mixed migration movements trying to reach its territory by crossing the Mediterranean Sea has prompted some African refugees and migrants to rather travel to Brazil (and previously Ecuador) to begin a journey to the US. Brazil, once a destination of choice for Africans due to its lax immigration laws and growing economic opportunities,⁵¹ has mostly morphed into a transit country.⁵² A smuggling network operating between Brazil and South Africa, uncovered in 2016, used to issue fake visas to Africans entering Latin America and facilitated flights between the two continents.⁵³ In line with general trends indicated by secondary sources, the African refugees and migrants interviewed for this study (n=7) travelled from their country of origin or a neighbouring country in Africa to Sao Paulo by plane, the majority of them entering with fake visas provided by the smugglers before the journey initiated. One respondent entered Brazil with a scholarship, overstayed his visa and remained in the country.

7.3 From the Caribbean

Due to their lax visa requirements, Guyana and Suriname are the main entry points into South America for Cuban and Haitian nationals before they travel onward, either to countries in the region with strong diasporas such as Chile, Uruguay and Brazil, or toward North America.⁵⁴ Overland travel from Guyana to other South American countries is usually facilitated by smugglers.

In the years after the 2010 earthquake, tens of thousands of Haitians entered Brazil, many becoming part of the temporary workforce mobilised for construction projects related to the World Cup and the Olympic Games. In 2017, as recession began in Brazil, nearly 30,000 Haitians left and many of them sought opportunities in Chile.⁵⁵ The current Chilean government, however, implemented more restrictive immigration policies. This, together with high levels of xenophobia and racism, led many Haitians to decide to move onwards to Mexico and eventually the US.⁵⁶

During the Trump administration, Cubans preferred to travel to South America instead of the US due to the prospect of remaining stranded at the US-Mexican border under the MPP. Consequently, many Cubans travelled through

49 Rojas, R. et al. (2020) [A Cruel Business](#). Migrantes del otro Mundo.

50 Migration Policy Institute (2019) [op.cit.](#)

51 Cowie, S. (2014) [Brazil: Destination of choice for Africans](#). Al Jazeera.

52 Nwoye, C. (2020) [Rising migration restrictions are driving African refugees into the hands of Latin American smugglers](#). Quartz Africa.

53 Ibid.

54 Pentón, M. (2020) [Thousands of Cubans in South America planning caravans to U.S. border to seek asylum](#). Miami Herald.

55 Phillips, N. et al. (2021) [The Invisible Wall](#). Haitian Bridge Alliance/Quixote Center/UndocuBlack Network.

56 Milesi, O. (2018) [Chile, an Oasis for Haitians that Has Begun to Run Dry](#). Inter Press Agency.

Guyana and Brazil to reach Uruguay: between January and October 2019 alone, 10,042 Cubans entered Uruguay with around 9,000 of them seeking asylum, over 50 percent more than in 2018.⁵⁷ When unemployment started to increase in the country and decent living standards became difficult to afford, many Cubans decided to travel onwards toward North America.

A minority of Cubans heading toward the US do not cross South America, but rather fly from Cuba to Nicaragua and then travel north from there. This recent trend is connected to the fact that in January 2019 Nicaragua eased visa requirements for Cubans, who now use the Central American country as a stepping-stone to the US.⁵⁸

7.4 Across South America

For extra-regional people on the move travelling north through South America, the overland route usually starts in Guyana, Brazil, or Chile. According to the key informants and the refugees and migrants interviewed for this study, smuggling networks are commonly used to facilitate and speed up movement between and inside Peru, Ecuador and Colombia, at least for part of the journey.

Interviewees considered Ecuador and Peru to be harder to cross compared to Brazil or Colombia, as there were several checkpoints along the route where they were forced to pay bribes to police officers in order to continue their journeys. Those traveling in private cars, rather than by bus, were however able to avoid such checkpoints.

The most common entry points into Colombia are Pasto and Ipiales, at its southern border with Ecuador, in the department of Nariño. Since 2019, people on the move must report to immigration offices upon entry into Colombia to have their biodata, fingerprints and iris scans registered. They then receive a five-day transit permit, or *salvoconducto*, to cross the country.⁵⁹ From Pasto or Ipiales, people on the move travel to Medellín, Apartadó, and Necoclí by bus. Some refugees and migrants interviewed for this study used public transportation, following instructions from smugglers or people who made the journey before them, while others mentioned that smugglers provided private buses especially for them. While there are checkpoints along the route across Colombia, interviewees did not report having problems with the authorities nor having to pay any bribes at checkpoints, as they had received a *salvoconducto* in Pasto and were thus in a regular situation. Once they reach the border area between Colombia and Panama, on the western end of the Colombian Caribbean coast, they wait to be able to get on a boat from Capurganá to the Panamanian side of the Darien Jungle.

In the specific case of the Bangladeshi nationals (n=2) interviewed for this study, after flying from Sao Paulo to the border region between Brazil and Peru, they were received by smugglers who took them over the border. Once in Peru, the group of six men in which they were traveling was transported by car to Ecuador and handed over to other smugglers who then transported them up to the border with Colombia. At the border, they were again transferred to other smugglers who facilitated the border crossing close to the Rumichaca international bridge and transportation into the city of Pasto, in the Nariño department of Colombia. Once in Pasto, the group stayed in a hotel for two days and was then instructed by smugglers to take a bus to Medellín and onwards to Apartadó and Necoclí. The group of men stayed in Necoclí for two days, then made contact with local smugglers and travelled by boat to Capurganá at night.

57 Urwicz, T. (2019) [Contra todo pronóstico, a Uruguay llegan más cubanos que venezolanos](#). El País.

58 Quintana, R. (2019) [Nicaragua: trampolín para cubanos que viajan a la frontera de EEUU](#). Radio Television Marti.

59 Rojas, R. (2020) [Migrants from Another World: Part 5 - A cruel business: Investigations on human trafficking and drug cartels along the migrant route through the Americas](#). The Caravan.

Figure 2. Journey across South America for Bangladeshi respondents



Source: Bangladeshi respondents to study on extra-regional migration towards North America, MMC, 2021.

After arriving in Panama, Asian refugees and migrants usually move swiftly through Central America to reach Mexico with the help of smugglers, who charge them high prices. One humanitarian worker stated that Asian refugees and migrants are the most invisible and hard to reach group among extra-regional people on the move, with fewer Asians accessing legal advice or assistance in comparison to those from Africa or the Caribbean.⁶⁰ Their absence in public spaces could be due, among other things, to the deportation of 310 Indians from Mexico in 2019, which led Asian refugees and migrants to keep a lower profile out of fear of meeting a similar fate.⁶¹ Moreover, Asian refugees and migrants often have more economic resources to pay higher smuggling fees, translating into better “service”, compared to people on the move from Africa or the Caribbean.⁶² According to an investigation by the Latin American Center for Investigative Journalism, migrant smuggling has grown as new routes to and through the Americas emerge, especially from countries such as Nepal, India, and Bangladesh.⁶³

7.5 Across Central America

The Darien jungle between Colombia and Panama

Once people on the move reach Capurganá, they begin their journey on foot through the Darien jungle. Unregulated and isolated, the Darien Gap is the “missing link” of the Pan-American Highway. Transportation through the Darien Gap is nearly impossible, and this inaccessibility has enabled the proliferation of drug trafficking and armed groups.⁶⁴ In this region, refugees and migrants face abuses that include extortion, robbery, rape, kidnapping, human trafficking, forced disappearance, and execution.⁶⁵ There are no comprehensive and reliable statistics on the number of people who try to cross the border between Panama and Colombia, or the number of those who go missing while attempting

60 Interview with humanitarian actor in Tapachula, February 2021.

61 Al Jazeera (2019) [Mexico deports 311 Indian migrants to New Delhi](#).

62 Rodrigues, G. (2019) op. cit.

63 Rojas, R. et al. (2020) op. cit.

64 Londoño Paredes, J. (2021) [El “Topón del Darién”: una azarosa ruta](#). Semana.

65 Zamorano, J. (2019) [Migrants traverse the deadly last stretch of Darien jungle](#). AP News.

to do it.⁶⁶ According to the people on the move interviewed for this study, the journey across the jungle took four to seven days on average, with refugees and migrants travelling in groups that ranged from 20 to 60 people and accompanied by smugglers. While groups were quite big when they began their journey, they then tended to split up along the way, leaving behind those who could not keep up with the group. At one point, after about one day of walking through the jungle, the groups were left on their own after their smugglers turned back. The groups of refugees and migrants then relied on footpaths for orientation to find their way out.

Once refugees and migrants manage to exit the jungle in Panamanian territory, they arrive in the small village of Bajo Chiquito, the site of the first state-run camp for people on the move: an MRS which is located in territory inhabited by the indigenous Emberá Wounaan people.⁶⁷ At the MRS, authorities provide food and there is a health centre where people on the move can receive first aid. Refugees and migrants are supposed to stay at this station only for a couple of days, before being moved to the MRS in Las Lajas or the recently opened MRS in San Vicente. People on the move interviewed for this study reported having spent two to three weeks in the MRS in the Darien region before being transported by the Panamanian authorities to the MRS in Los Planes, about 70 kilometres from the border with Costa Rica.

Costa Rica and Nicaragua

Once Costa Rican authorities allow people on the move to continue their journey they are put on a (free) bus to Paso Canoas, an international city straddling the Panama-Costa Rica border. After traveling through Costa Rica, extra-regional refugees and migrants arrive at the border town of La Cruz, in the north-western Costa Rican province of Guanacaste, some 20 kilometres from Peñas Blancas, the only official migration checkpoint between Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Close to this checkpoint, there are numerous blind spots, not monitored by state authorities, which are used by smuggling networks to facilitate irregular border crossings. Extra-regional migration is not new to Peñas Blancas and gained more attention when an irregular route into Nicaragua was suddenly blocked in 2015, after Costa Rica's border police accused several people of being involved in migrant smuggling because they were allowing people to cross their land to enter Nicaragua.⁶⁸

According to key informants, refugees and migrants move from Peñas Blancas into a forest and, once in Nicaragua, they turn themselves in to the authorities and pay \$150 each to receive a permit to transit through the country. Those who cannot afford the transit permit must opt for other more remote paths to enter Nicaragua irregularly.⁶⁹

The Northern Triangle of Central America

Honduras is the next country on the route taken by extra-regional refugees and migrants, after Nicaragua. Interviews conducted with refugees and migrants indicated that border crossings into Honduras were facilitated by smuggling groups, especially along the route to Choluteca, the main city in the south of the country. Those who could afford it then cross Honduras by car; other refugees and migrants are forced to travel on foot and are likely to pay bribes to police on their way across the country to Guatemala.

Travel across Guatemala is facilitated by smugglers from the Honduran border town of Copán, mostly heading to the city of Tapachula, in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. The refugees and migrants interviewed for this study were transported in cars across Guatemala and accompanied by smugglers. Under pressure from Washington, the Guatemalan government has recently adopted a harder line towards refugees and migrants passing through its territory, including by deploying the military, thereby shifting the increasingly externalised US border further south.⁷⁰ While this strategy is mainly aimed at curbing migration from Central America, it equally creates obstacles for extra-regional people on the move. As a caravan with between 7,000 and 8,000 mostly Honduran refugees and migrants left Honduras in January 2021, there were reports of extra-regional refugees and migrants joining the caravan in the hope of crossing Guatemala and entering Mexico.⁷¹ Guatemalan President Alejandro Giammattei's administration declared a state of emergency in January 2021 to confront and dismantle the caravan.⁷² The hard-line approach has translated into more clandestine smuggler-assisted travel in the country, as several Cuban nationals explained in their interviews. Travel without a smuggler was not considered an option, given the current crackdown by Guatemalan and Mexican authorities.

66 IOM (2017) [Migrant deaths and disappearances worldwide: 2016 analysis](#). Global Migration Data Analysis Centre.

67 Zamorano, J. (2019) *op. cit.*

68 Esquivel, N. (2020) [Migrants from Another World: Part 3. Forbidden Passages: Human smuggling along the migrant route through the Americas](#). The Caravan.

69 Esquivel, N. (2020) [Clandestine trails between Guanacaste and Nicaragua](#). The Voice of Guanacaste.

70 Abbott, J. (2021) [Guatemala takes hard line against Migrants – with US support](#). The Nation.

71 Swissinfo.ch (2021) [Guatemala se prepara ante posible nueva caravana migrante a finales de julio](#).

72 Abbott, J. (2021) *op. cit.*

7.6 Across North America

Extra-regional refugees and migrants predominantly cross the border between Guatemala and Mexico by boat or zipline crossings.⁷³ These are often facilitated by locals for a fee in several locations across the 400 kilometres of the border marked by the Suchiate, El Naranjo, and Usumacinta rivers. Many of these border crossings are used to enter Mexico through the city of Tapachula, in the state of Chiapas. Tenosique, in Tabasco, and Chetumal, in Quintana Roo, are also relatively common as first transit and reception cities along the Mexican border region with Guatemala. The most used border crossings vary over time, depending on where authorities increase efforts to block migration. Recently, for instance, 1,200 refugees and migrants crossed from La Técnica in Guatemala to Frontera Corozal, across the Usumacinta river, after Mexico imposed new measures to shut down migrant crossings at its southern border.⁷⁴

Some Cuban (n=6) and Haitian (n=6) nationals interviewed expressed their preference for Tapachula as an entry point into Mexico due to the presence of fellow nationals who could offer support and solidarity in the city. While detentions by the National Guard are common upon entry into Mexico, the refugees and migrants interviewed for the study all managed to avoid detention with the help of smugglers.

Refugees and migrants with more limited resources usually apply for asylum or humanitarian visas to avoid detention and deportation while in Mexico. After more than 13,000 humanitarian visas were issued in a three-week period in 2019, the Mexican government stopped issuing the visas in such high numbers.⁷⁵ Tapachula is one of the most important reception centres for asylum applications in Mexico, and asylum seekers are required to wait for a decision on their application inside the territory of the state of Chiapas. Waiting periods can extend to up to twelve months.⁷⁶

New routes are being taken by refugees and migrants who want to skip the wait for asylum or immigration proceedings but also avoid detention. Once they arrive to Tuxtla Gutierrez, the capital of Chiapas state, some of them take the highway to Veracruz or Pichucalco. Another option that was mentioned by interviewees was entering Mexico by boat from Guatemala's San Marcos department at the mouth of the Suchiate river, or in Puerto Chiapas. In a series of short trips, refugees and migrants travelled in boats close to the shoreline, making their way up Chiapas' Pacific coast. The journey ended in Salina Cruz, in the state of Oaxaca.

After leaving the border regions in the south of Mexico, extra-regional refugees and migrants continue their journey further north across the country, often passing through Mexico City. Those who have obtained refugee status or a humanitarian visa can travel through the country using public transportation. If they want to avoid detection, people on the move who do not obtain a regular status remain dependent on smuggling networks to facilitate travel through Mexico. There are three broad routes onwards: the Gulf Route for those who want to cross the border in eastern Texas; the Pacific route for those who want to cross into Arizona or California; and the Central route for those who want to cross into western Texas or New Mexico.⁷⁷

The vast border area between Mexico and the US offers a variety of regular and irregular border crossings, the ones near Ciudad Juárez and Tijuana being the ones that extra-regional refugees and migrants use more frequently.

Tijuana, home to around 4,000 Haitian refugees and migrants, has been hailed as a model of local integration. The majority of those currently settled in the city have established their own businesses and even rent apartments, thanks to work permits obtained through humanitarian visas. A Haitian NGO — the Association for the Defense of Haitian Migrants — supports newcomers in securing documents and work permits.⁷⁸ Information shared by Haitians interviewed for this study indicated that Tijuana was their location of preference because of the established diaspora in the city and the economic possibilities associated with it.

Similarly, Ciudad Juárez has become home for thousands of Cubans who have been waiting in a limbo under the MPP. While many — including all the Cubans interviewed for this study — do not want to remain in Ciudad Juárez, state officials and civil society organisations state that the numbers considering residency are increasing. Some people on the move interviewed for this study at the southern Mexican border said their next stop would be Ciudad Juárez because the city offers job opportunities. Many considered it an option before entering the US, once the asylum cases

73 Romo, R. (2021) [Migrants use zip line to cross Guatemala-Mexico border](#). CNN.

74 Verza, M. (2021) [Business as usual: Thousands cross Mexico's southern border](#). AP News.

75 García, A (2019) [Tarjetas de visitante por razones humanitarias](#). El Economista.

76 Schmidtke R. (2020) [A New Way Forward: Strengthening the Protection Landscape in Mexico](#). Refugees International.

77 Dominguez, R. (2014) [Central American Migrants and 'La Bestia': The Route, Dangers, and Government Responses](#). Migration Policy. See section on smuggling below for more details.

78 Solis, G. (2018) [Tijuana's Haitian immigrants seen as role model for other newcomers](#). Los Angeles Times.

pending under the MPP decrease. Although Ciudad Juárez offers economic opportunities, it is still perceived as a very dangerous city. One interviewee said “We are not used to this kind of violence in Cuba. Here, we cannot go out at night because it’s so dangerous”.

Along the US-Mexico border, the number of refugees and migrants trying to enter the United States is increasing, while most are still — despite the change of administration in Washington — being turned away under Title 42.⁷⁹ While Cuban refugees and migrants are now waiting for asylum processes to re-open after two years of near suspension,⁸⁰ reports indicate that the US authorities have invoked Title 42 to block and expel back into Mexico families and individuals from Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cuba, Ethiopia, Ghana, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Mexico, Nigeria, Russia, Somalia, Venezuela, and Yemen.⁸¹ Black refugees and migrants from Africa and the Caribbean are reportedly in a particularly vulnerable situation in Mexico’s northern regions, suffering racist violence and discrimination.⁸²

7.7 Reasons for choosing the route

Some extra-regional refugees and migrants from Africa and Asia are increasingly finding migration routes to Europe too expensive and risky due to the continent’s ever-tougher responses to irregular mixed migration flows since 2015, which are based on containment and externalisation.⁸³ With journeys made more difficult, growing numbers of Asian and African refugees and migrants are traveling through the Americas to reach the US or Canada.⁸⁴

African interviewees (n=7) believed that traveling through Latin America would be less dangerous than traveling through Libya toward Europe; they emphasised their fear of death at the hands of the Libyan coastguard or being held in prisons in that country. Stories of fellow Africans who had passed through Libya fed these fears and led to decisions to take routes through the Americas as an alternative. “I don’t want to die before I reach my destination” was a common statement among African respondents when referring to the possibility of migrating to Europe through Libya. Additionally, one Somali respondent in Necoclí explained that, although Europe was much closer, getting there alive was also more expensive due to smuggling prices.

Migration routes often change and adapt depending on obstacles that arise. Until recently, most extra-regional people on the move would enter Latin America through Ecuador, as it did not require a visa, which made their movement easier. In 2019, Ecuador added 11 new countries to its visa requirement list, making it harder for many people to access its territory.⁸⁵ Since then, Brazil has become a more frequent option for entry into the Americas, although it has more stringent visa requirements.⁸⁶ Interviewees from Asia (n=2) and Africa (n=7) reported that they boarded planes with fake visas to enter Brazil. This trend may be influenced by the strong presence of smuggling networks in Sao Paulo.⁸⁷

Some Cubans and Haitians choose to travel through South and Central America, instead of trying to reach North America by sea, due to the relative facility to move across the region compared to the dangers and higher risk of interception by the authorities they would face if they tried to reach their destination by boat.

In most cases, the specific routes and means are not chosen by refugees and migrants, but by their smugglers. People on the move, however, often compare the prices and safety risks offered by different smugglers, trying to choose the most convenient option. Those with greater resources tend to opt to pay higher prices and travel with larger smuggling networks that can ensure connections across countries.

As for the choice of the specific destination, respondents to this study mostly pointed to the expectations regarding the economic opportunities they would find and the quality of life they would enjoy. Some of them also mentioned the presence of relatives or friends in the country of destination. While the presence of a wider diaspora was not specifically cited by respondents, its role in influencing the destination choice for (prospective) extra-regional refugees

79 O’Toole, M. (2021) [Biden promised change at the border. He’s keeping Trump’s Title 42 police to close it and cut off asylum](#). Los Angeles Times.

80 Kocher, A. (2021) [Biden ends policy forcing asylum-seekers to ‘remain in Mexico’ – but for 41,247 migrants, it’s too late](#). The Conversation.

81 Human Rights First (2021) [Failure to Protect: Biden Administration continues illegal Trump Policy to Block and Expel Asylum Seekers to Danger](#). Ibid.

83 Yates, C. (2019) op. cit.

84 Lawal, S. (2019) [For African migrants trying, and dying, to reach north America, the Darien Gap is the ‘New Mediterranean’](#). Equal Times.

85 Namely: Angola, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, India, Iraq, Libya, Sri Lanka, and Syria. See BAL (2019) [Ministry cancels visa exemptions for 11 nationalities](#).

86 Ministério das Relações Exteriores (2020) [Quadro Geral de Regime de Vistos para a Entrada de Estrangeiros no Brasil](#).

87 Interpol (2019) [People smuggling networks hit hard in Operation Turquesa](#).

and migrants would deserve further exploration,⁸⁸ as most of the nationalities of those on the move count with existing diaspora communities in the US⁸⁹, Canada⁹⁰ and, since more recently and in smaller numbers, Mexico.

8. Smuggling

8.1 Dynamics

Entering South America

Smugglers play a central role in facilitating the movement of refugees and migrants through most migration corridors, and South and Central America are not exceptions. Despite the illicit nature of their activities, smugglers are often seen by people on the move as service providers who help them achieve their goal. At a small scale, smugglers are often local individuals who guide refugees and migrants through areas they know, or are taxi drivers or boat owners providing transportation over land or water. At a larger scale, some smugglers are part of transnational networks that produce false documents, bribe officials, and facilitate mobility that span across continents and countries.⁹¹ Since the COVID-19 pandemic started, information related to costs and routes has changed, and often changes mid-journey as a consequence of unforeseen pandemic-related border closures. These changes translate into higher prices for smuggling services or longer routes to reach intended destinations.

As previously mentioned, people on the move from most countries in Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean need a visa to travel regularly and safely into the US or across the Americas. As obtaining such visas is often impossible, most resort to traveling irregularly, by land.

The use of false documents issued by smuggling groups is common for people from Africa and Asia. According to an investigation carried out by the Latin American Center for Investigative Journalism between 2019 and 2020, most smuggling operations connected to extra-regional mixed migration flows are coordinated in Sao Paulo.⁹² This information is in line with statements made by Bangladeshi (n=2) and Somali (n=3) interviewees. While Haitian and Cuban nationals can enter South America without a visa through Guyana, those of them who intend to travel onwards also need to rely on smuggling networks to remain unseen during their journey.⁹³

In some cases, beyond merely facilitating entry into South America, smuggling networks offer “comprehensive packages” to transport refugees and migrants across the Americas all the way up to the US-Mexican border, thanks to their contacts and connections in other countries.⁹⁴ On other occasions, people on the move only rely on smugglers to facilitate their irregular migration at specific points of the journey.

Colombia

Travel through Colombia is at times facilitated by smuggling groups, but there are also groups of refugees and migrants who travel through the country independently. There are buses that specifically provide transportation for refugees and migrants from the border with Ecuador onwards to Medellín or Necoclí, although there have been arrests of smuggling groups transporting large groups of Haitians through Colombia, the most recent in which 97 Haitians were detained by immigration officials.⁹⁵ Once refugees and migrants reach northern Colombia, they begin what is considered the most difficult part of the journey — across the Darien Gap — with the assistance of local smugglers

88 Research on the role of diasporas in mixed migration movements has focused on Europe as a destination. See REACH and Mixed Migration Center (2019) [Outspoken but unheard: Exploring how diasporas in Europe shape migration along the CMR](#); Mixed Migration Center (2018) [Diaspora, transnational networks and migration among Syrians and Iraqis](#); Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat (2017) [Split Loyalties: Mixed Migration and the Diaspora Connection](#).

89 See Pew Research Center (2017) [African immigrant population in U.S. steadily climbs](#); Migration Policy Institute (2019) [Sub-Saharan African Immigrants in the United States](#); Migration Policy Institute (2020) [Cuban Immigrants in the United States](#); Migration Policy Institute (2020) [Haitian Immigrants in the United States](#); Migration Policy Institute (2021) [Immigrants from Asia in the United States](#).

90 See Statistics Canada (2021) [Asian Heritage Month... by the numbers](#); Statistics Canada (2007) [The Haitian Community in Canada](#); Statistics Canada (2007) [The African Community in Canada](#); Gutiérrez, I. (2015) [Immigration and Population in Canada: A Dependent Relationship Case Study of Cuban Immigration](#); Statistics Canada (2019) [Diversity of the Black population in Canada: An overview](#).

91 For discussions of the complexities of human smuggling around the world see, for example: Frouws, B. & Horwood C. (2018) [Both angels and demons? The role and nature of migrant smugglers](#). Mixed Migration Centre; Golovko, E. (2018) [Players of many parts: The evolving role of smugglers in West Africa's migration economy](#). Mixed Migration Centre; and Gilardi, J. (2020) [Ally or Exploiter? The Smuggler-Migrant relationship is a complex one](#). Migration Policy Institute.

92 Rojas, R. et al. (2020) op. cit.

93 Guyana Times (2021) [Haitians, Cubans travelling from Guyana arrested in Brazil for illegal entry](#).

94 Rojas, R. et al. (2020) op. cit.

95 Infobae (2021) [Descubren a 97 migrantes haitianos viajando en dos buses en carreteras el Valle del Cauca](#).

who self-identify as “guides” and who must be hired in order to cross into the jungle. The community council enforces the obligation to travel with guides, although there have been cases in which community council members have made exceptions, according to some sources.⁹⁶

“No one enters the jungle without our permission. We control and we guide people into the jungle, but you cannot just enter and begin the journey on your own. That is not allowed.”

Colombian smuggler, 39, interviewed in Capurganá (Colombia)

The smuggler interviewed for this study emphasised the organisation involved in transporting and guiding people into the Darien Gap, noting that the region is controlled by armed groups that operate on the Colombian side but also those that are farther into the jungle. After approximately one day of walking, smugglers return to Capurganá and leave the groups on their own for the rest of the journey.

“Thank goodness we made it through the Darien! We are now on a bus through Costa Rica. It is much easier than the jungle. We were robbed and the journey was very difficult. But they did not steal everything. I still have my phone for communication.”

Male, Somali, 22, interviewed on the Costa Rica

Services provided by smuggling networks abound at the border between Panama and Colombia in the Darien Gap.⁹⁷ “Guiding” people on the move through the jungle is considered as reputable a job as any other: in Capurganá — like many other border locations across the world — smuggling is seen as one of the very few activities that can provide a livelihood in the community.

Central America and Mexico

Along the route through Central America, most smuggled refugees and migrants travel by land, although there has been evidence of sea routes between Costa Rica and Nicaragua.⁹⁸ Respondents alluded to a wide variety of services being provided by several different actors, some of whom were locals who offered their driving services after being connected with people on the move by a smuggler, or offered accommodation and food against small fees.

Border crossings into Mexico are usually facilitated by local people, who help refugees and migrants cross the river between Guatemala and Mexico by boat or zipline. Tapachula, near Mexico’s southern border, is considered the centre of operations for local smugglers in Mexico and offers a wide array of possibilities for onward travel, such as counterfeit resident cards (for \$500) and work permits facilitated by ghost companies and public officials.⁹⁹

Overland travel in cars, vans, or trucks is another way to travel through Mexico irregularly without being detected. People on the move can also take an overland bus and bribe police officers and migration officials at the checkpoints. The cheapest route across the country goes from the southern Mexican border to Tamaulipas and accounts for more than 50 percent of irregular crossings into the U.S.¹⁰⁰

Tamaulipas is however only one of the many areas used by people on the move to cross into US territory. In Ciudad Juárez, humanitarian actors stated that smugglers openly advertised their border-crossing services into the US on social media.¹⁰¹ According to one key informant, smugglers have been tricking refugees and migrants into thinking that, with the new Biden administration, entering the US had become easier, convincing them that now was the time to migrate and to hire their services.¹⁰² The continued implementation of Title 42, however, still prevents people on the move from requesting asylum at the US border. Closing the border to those seeking regular avenues to enter the US has increased demand and profits for smuggling organisations.¹⁰³

96 Rojas, R. (2020) [Latin America’s Lucrative People-Smuggling Networks](#). OCCRP.

97 Rojas, R. (2020) *op. cit.*

98 Esquivel, N. (2020) [Clandestine Trails To Nicaragua](#). Migrantes de Otro Mundo.

99 Rojas, R. et al. (2020) *op. cit.*

100 Verza, M. & Sherman, C. (2019) [What crackdown? Migrant smuggling business adapts, thrives](#). AP News.

101 Interview with key informant in Ciudad Juárez, February 2021.

102 Interview with key informant in Ciudad Juárez, February 2021.

103 Gottesdiener, L. and Kinosian, S. (2020) [Migrant smugglers see boost from U.S. pandemic border policy](#). Reuters.

8.2 Actors involved

Smugglers have multifaceted relationships with refugees and migrants, ranging from beneficial and lifesaving to dangerous or even deadly: some of them effectively make the journey safer for people on the move; others abuse and exploit them in a variety of ways. This can sometimes depend on the type of actor they are interacting with. Very little data is however available regarding the profiles of smugglers in the Americas and how the different actors involved in smuggling are connected.

Respondents' accounts pointed toward heterogeneous connections and interactions between local actors and transnational networks, information that was supported by key informants interviewed across the region. A humanitarian worker in Colombia, for instance, linked the movement of extra-regional refugees and migrants to smuggling networks in the Nariño department that include the armed groups that operate in the area, who have controlled border crossings since the border between Colombia and Ecuador was closed during the pandemic.¹⁰⁴ In 2020, 17 people were arrested for migrant smuggling in Nariño, including the secretary of the department's risk management office and the manager of a transportation terminal who allegedly coordinated refugee and migrant transit in the country.¹⁰⁵

Many of those involved in facilitating irregular migration are local residents who consider smuggling as a legitimate source of income like any other. This is the case, for instance, in Capurganá, a village in the border region between Colombia and Panama with very limited economic resources and employment opportunities. News reports indicate that smugglers are elected by the Acandí community council in the region.¹⁰⁶ In an interview from 2019, the leader of the community council said he would continue to receive extra-regional refugees and migrants, not because he is a smuggler, but because he is the representative of the community and people on the move deserve someone who guides them.¹⁰⁷

Extra-regional refugees and migrants are accompanied by guides from Capurganá up to a certain point in the Darien jungle, which is commonly known as Mata de Mango ("mango bush"). The smuggling fees are paid to representatives of the community council, who then redistribute the money between the guides, the community council and the *Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia* (AGC) — aka the Gulf Clan — the country's most powerful paramilitary group that is said to control much of the illegal drug trade in Colombia.¹⁰⁸ The AGC prohibits the passage of people on the move along drug-trafficking routes, as well as the harming or theft against people on the move at the hands of smugglers. While the group does not directly guide people through the Darien, it does benefit from the smuggling and authorises it in the territory under its control between Colombia and Panama.¹⁰⁹

In some cases, smugglers and people on the move have the same nationality. Key informants in the Darien region, for instance, mentioned anecdotes of so-called "leaders" among Haitian nationals who, while identifying as refugees or migrants, had some sort of connections with the smugglers and took a leading role in a group of people on the move.¹¹⁰ In the case of people on the move from Bangladesh, secondary sources report that Bangladeshi smugglers sometimes accompany groups of refugees and migrants along the route and frequently make the journey to North America themselves, to become familiar with locations and networks.¹¹¹ In 2019, a Bangladeshi citizen was arrested in Sao Paulo on charges of operating an extensive money laundering network and smuggling fellow nationals into the country. He would charge Bangladeshi refugees and migrants \$11,000 for the journey from Bangladesh to the US, \$6,000 of which was for the trip into Brazil, plus a foreign resident card and other false documentation. Court documents detailed money transfers to people in Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, and Peru, proving transnational connections with smugglers across all countries that people on the move "assisted" by him would cross.¹¹²

In Central America, investigations have revealed elaborate networks of people with different profiles and from different backgrounds involved in the facilitation of irregular migration. According to the cross-border journalistic

104 Interview with key informant, Bogota, January 2021.

105 Fiscalía General de la Nación (2020) [Judicializados 17 presuntos integrantes de estructuras delincuenciales dedicadas al tráfico de migrantes en el departamento de Nariño](#).

106 Lopera, S. (2019) [El llo fronterizo que resolvió el Clan del Golfo \(por ahora\)](#). La Silla Vacía.

107 Ibid.

108 Colombia Reports (2019) [Gaitanista Self-Defense Forces of Colombia \(AGC\) / Gulf Clan](#).

109 Lopera, S. (2019) op. cit.

110 Interviews with humanitarian actors, Panama City, February 2021.

111 Rojas, R. (2020) [Migrants from another World: Part 5. A cruel business: Investigations on human trafficking and drug cartels along the migrant route through the Americas](#).

112 Rojas, R. (2020) [Migrants from another World: Part 5. A cruel business: Investigations on human trafficking and drug cartels along the migrant route through the Americas](#).

alliance Migrants from Another World, there are several women linked to extra-regional migrant smuggling networks in countries such as Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Mexico, dubbed “Mama Africa”.¹¹³ Although police have detained and convicted several people involved in this network, interviewees indicated having received information about similar ones in Costa Rica and Guatemala. At the border between Honduras and Guatemala, smuggling groups offer different prices for different packages: the quickest routes are the most expensive, and are often considered the safest as smugglers can pay larger bribes to migration officials and police to move forward with the journey. According to interviews with key informants in Mexico, women traveling alone or with children usually seek smuggling services because it is considered the quickest and safest way to reach the US.

“[Extra-regional] families and individuals are becoming very desperate in the border region with the US. Many have been waiting for years and are ready to hire the services of smugglers to enter the US.”

Humanitarian worker, Ciudad Juárez (Mexico)

8.3 Costs

Smuggling costs vary according to the services provided, which range from limited support for individuals or small groups at specific points along the route to “all-inclusive” packages that cover refugees’ and migrants’ travel from point of origin to final destination. Respondents to this study (n=35) mentioned different services available and related costs, from \$70 for the boat trip between Necoclí and Capurganá in Colombia to \$15,000 for a complete journey from Bangladesh via Brazil to the US. New sources also reported smuggling networks charging 6 million Colombian pesos (roughly \$1,300) in 2020 to reach Northern Colombia from Brazil.¹¹⁴ Several sources, including respondents, mention that smuggling fees paid by Asian refugees and migrants are often higher than those paid by people on the move from Africa and the Caribbean, possibly because of the common perception that Asian refugees and migrants have more economic resources.¹¹⁵ Indian nationals who were deported back to their country from Mexico in 2019 said they had paid between \$28,000 and \$77,000 to smuggling networks for the entire journey from India to the US (which they never reached) demonstrating the wide variety of prices that people on the move can be confronted with.¹¹⁶ Fees for travelling from Somalia, according to Somali respondents (n=3), were estimated at around \$4,000 and included flight, a counterfeit visa, and transportation services provided by smugglers to enter Brazil. These figures are in line with research conducted in the Darien Gap in 2019 on refugee and migrant mobility.¹¹⁷ Cuban respondents (n=14) spent around \$5,000 to travel from South America (in most cases Uruguay) to the southern border of Mexico. Haitian respondents (n=15) estimated having paid around \$9,000 to reach the Mexico-US border from Chile or Brazil. In Guatemala and Honduras, some respondents paid between \$250 and \$400 to cross the country with a smuggler. Prices paid by some respondents to move across Mexico from its southern border and enter US territory ranged between \$4,000 and \$6,000. According to interviewees, the price included a network of private cars, minibuses, houses to hide, bribes and payments made to armed groups as well as police officers. Respondents also mentioned having heard of smuggling fees only for crossing the US border that ranged from hundreds of dollars to more than \$1,000.

According to respondents, some smugglers were more generous with women travelling alone with children, sometimes allowing them to travel or cross for free, while men traveling on their own were charged high fees. Some news reports indicate that smugglers in Central America charge less than half the price if a minor is traveling because “less work is required”: several countries, including the US, apply more generous immigration policies to people on the move traveling with children.¹¹⁸

8.4 Impact of COVID-19 on the journey

Migrating during a pandemic

COVID-19 had a severe impact on extra-regional refugees’ and migrants’ ability to move across Latin America. Border closures in several countries in South and Central America and in the US due to the pandemic have contributed to leaving groups of people on the move stranded, intensifying the precarious situations and vulnerabilities they experienced.

113 Ibid.

114 Infobae (2020) op. cit.

115 Frayer, L. (2020) [The long, perilous route thousands of Indians have risked for a shot at life in the U.S.](#), NPR; Rojas, R. et al. (2020) op. cit.

116 Gopalakrishnan, M. (2019) op. cit.

117 Rodrigues, G. (2019) op. cit.

118 Partlow, J. & Miroff, N. (2018) [For Central Americans, children open a path to the U.S. – and bring a discount.](#) *Washington Post*; Gilardi, J. (2020) op. cit.

Colombia, for instance, closed its borders with Venezuela on March 14, 2020.¹¹⁹ On April 1, 2020, Colombia also militarised its border with Ecuador (in the departments of Nariño and Putumayo) to increase control over more than 40 irregular border crossings and prevent refugees and migrants from entering the country. Colombia's border closures were then extended to Panama, Peru and Brazil with air, land, and river frontiers closed. Panama did not close its borders but restricted the entry of foreigners and non-residents until October 12, 2020.¹²⁰ Costa Rica closed its borders due to the declaration of a national emergency related to COVID-19 from March 18, 2020, until November 1, 2020. On March 16, 2020, Guatemala's President Giammattei announced a 15-day closing of the country's borders and the cancellation of all international flights.¹²¹ Borders ended up staying closed for six months, until September 2020.¹²² On March 15, 2020, Honduras also closed its air, land, and sea borders for a week¹²³ but, similarly to Guatemala, such closures were then extended until October 2020.¹²⁴

As a result of border closures, around 2,500 extra-regional refugees and migrants remained stranded in the MRS in Panama¹²⁵ spending between six and eight months in the camps.¹²⁶ Authorities and humanitarian organisations in the Darien region mentioned that, for this reason, extra-regional refugees and migrants had started attempting new routes to avoid entering the MRS, especially during the dry season, when paths are easier to cross.¹²⁷ Key informants also indicated that some refugees and migrants have been traveling up by boat along the Pacific coast in Colombia and arriving in Jaqué, Panama, where immigration control is laxer.

Others were blocked in Honduras: on June 3, 2020, a group of around 300 refugees and migrants from African countries, Cuba, and Haiti were offered voluntary return to their countries of origin by the National Migration Institute, as they could not continue their journey and enter Guatemala. This group had spent months in shelters in Choluteca while waiting for borders to re-open in other Central American countries. The offer was not accepted, and the group was forced to wait until borders re-opened.¹²⁸

Extra-regional people on the move also found themselves blocked at the border between the US and Mexico due to the pandemic. Cubans — the only nationality among extra-regional migration flows that was included in the MPP — were affected by the suspension of all immigration courts hearings. While other extra-regional people on the move were not affected by the MPP, they were still prevented from entering the US due to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention orders. Overall, 25,000 asylum seekers have been trapped at the border for months,¹²⁹ including a high number of extra-regional people on the move.¹³⁰

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a loss of livelihoods among local populations, which in turn translated into higher insecurity, as well as limited access to health services and social security. Throughout the Americas, media outlets have sometimes associated migration with the spread of COVID-19, leading to an increase in xenophobia against people on the move. In Mexico, humanitarian organisations indicated a general distrust between the host society and people on the move, with prejudice shown towards refugees and migrants as carriers of COVID-19. The pandemic built on already rising levels of discrimination, stigmatisation, racism and xenophobia against refugees and migrants, with attitudes towards people on the move worsening.¹³¹ Refugees and migrants interviewed for this study reported increased verbal abuse against people from Haiti and African countries. At the same time, governmental responses to the crisis have often deepened inequalities and gaps between people on the move and host societies regarding access to health, housing, and livelihoods, with refugees and migrants excluded from or unable to access the relief programmes created in response to the pandemic. In addition to this, smugglers have raised their prices and gang and drug cartels are charging higher fees to pass through territories they control due to the pandemic.¹³² This information was confirmed by humanitarian organisations as well as authorities, who stated that COVID-19 has caused tighter immigration enforcement and, in turn, an increase in smuggling prices.¹³³

119 IFRC (2020) [Colombia, Ecuador, and Venezuela: Population Movement in the COVID-19 context Information Bulletin no. 1](#).

120 Jaramano, J. (2020) [AP Explica: Latinoamérica blindada fronteras por el COVID-19](#). AP News.

121 AFP (2020) [Cordón Sanitario. Guatemala Cierra Fronteras](#).

122 García, F. (2020) [Guatemala abre sus fronteras luego de seis meses de cierre](#). AA.

123 Deutsche Welle (2020) [Coronavirus, minuto a minuto: Honduras decreta estado excepción](#).

124 La Vanguardia (2019) [Honduras abre fronteras con El Salvador. Guatemala y Nicaragua pese a covid](#).

125 IOM (2020) [Panama Prepare COVID-19 Response for 2,500 Migrants stranded at borders](#).

126 Interview with people on the move in Tapachula.

127 Interviews with state and humanitarian actors, Panama City and Metetí, February 2021.

128 EFE (2020) [Honduras Ofrece Retorno Voluntario Asistido a Migrantes Varados por COVID-19](#).

129 Spagat, E. (2021) [Biden to slowly allow 25,000 people seeking asylum into US](#). AP News.

130 Dwyer, M. (2021) [As Biden winds down Mexico program, many migrants on U.S. border left in limbo](#). Reuters.

131 Vera, M., Zapata, G. & Gandini, L. (2020) [Mobility in immobility: Latin American migrants trapped amid COVID-19](#). Open Democracy.

132 Mar, M. (2019) [Trump's tough border policies are actually helping human smuggling business, experts say](#). Insider.

133 Interviews with humanitarian and state actors, Bogotá, Metetí, Panama City, Tapachula, Ciudad Juárez, February 2021.

9. Access to information

9.1 Prior to traveling

What information is available to people on the move before they start their trip?

Extra-regional refugees and migrants often have limited information concerning immigration procedures and conditions along the route and at destination before travelling, which limits their ability to make informed decisions. This is especially true for asylum seekers fleeing persecution, whose circumstances in countries of origin further complicate access to adequate information.

Interviews with key informants as well as with people on the move indicate that, prior to migrating, information is mostly obtained through social media — mainly WhatsApp and Facebook groups — which offer a relatively cheap and easily accessible way of communicating. Information shared on social media includes not only official information, but also practical advice on successful border crossings and how to contact smugglers. While specific dynamics can differ depending on nationality, many obtained information from strangers but also from friends or family members who had already migrated. Cuban (n=14) and Haitian (n=15) respondents, for instance, mentioned they received a lot of information about the migration routes towards the US through WhatsApp and Facebook groups created by and for fellow nationals. Posts in such groups explained the journey and often offered contacts of smuggling networks.

Being connected to social media does not however guarantee that people on the move are sufficiently or adequately informed. Doubts about the trustworthiness of sources, clarity of messages, and truthfulness of information were repeatedly mentioned in interviews. Interviewees also mentioned smugglers making false promises and the circulation of rumours among people on the move, even more so amid the COVID-19 pandemic, including house remedies to avoid contagion.

Overall, people on the move were informed prior to traveling that the most difficult part of the journey would be the Darien Gap, but they were not adequately warned about the types and seriousness of the dangers they would face.

9.2 During the journey

Lack of access to interpretation or information offered in languages other than Spanish

Accessing information during the journey was a significant challenge for respondents due to language barriers, except for Cubans: the little information available was only provided in Spanish and very few people among the authorities, humanitarian actors, and the local population spoke a language they understood. Refugees and migrants interviewed for this study showed very little knowledge of the different countries in South America, let alone Central American countries. While one Cuban national had a map on his phone and tracked movements and analyzed routes, the others trusted the word-of-mouth information they received from family members and friends or other refugees and migrants they met during their journey, and the information provided by smugglers. An over-reliance on the support and information provided by smugglers and the extent of the misinformation faced by people on the move along the journey exacerbated the risks for many of them.

Most respondents mentioned they would not have gone through the Darien Gap if they had the knowledge and experiences they had after crossing. Many stated that they would not choose that path again if they were sent back to their home countries. Some Indian refugees and migrants interviewed by a journalism project after being deported from Mexico to India went so far as to say they would never try the journey through South, Central, and North America again.¹³⁴

Adequate access to information or legal counselling in the MRS in Panama was often difficult or even impossible in practice, as field workers did not speak any language aside from Spanish. When language barriers were overcome, the information extra-regional refugees and migrants received once they arrived at the MRS was not consistent with the information they had received prior to starting their journey, in particular about the mobility restrictions within Panama and the mandatory registration into the *flujo controlado* system upon arrival at the first reception camp in Bajo Chiquito.

134 Gopalakrishnan, M. (2019) op. cit.

While traveling across Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala, respondents mostly accessed information through social media and by talking to friends and family, and also encountered inconsistencies between information received prior to and during the journey. Although some refugees and migrants consulted internet content on a daily basis, information on migration routes was absent, according to interviewees, just like COVID-19 related information.

Limited access to lawyers or legal advice in the preferred language

Accessing information on immigration policies and practices is also extremely difficult as it is only offered in Spanish. Haitians (n=3) interviewed in Tapachula emphasised their lack of understanding relating to legal procedures in Mexico and waiting times for immigration and asylum processes. There was also a general lack of knowledge about their right to a lawyer during their eligibility interview with the COMAR because this information was not communicated in their language of preference or not communicated at all.¹³⁵ With the COVID-19 pandemic, many of the legal counselling programmes offered to those who wished to apply for refugee status or other immigration status in Tapachula were shifted to online platforms, forcing refugees and migrants to connect via a smartphone and have an email address in order to register and follow through with their application. People mentioned that the shifting to digital platforms further isolated those who did not have the economic means to access the internet. Additionally, people on the move often do not trust information coming from official sources: according to Doctors Without Borders, high levels of distrust are registered among refugees and migrants towards local authorities and police officials.¹³⁶

10. Protection and assistance

10.1 Main risks

Extra-regional migrants and refugees travelling through the Americas face a wide range of protection risks. These include extortion, physical and sexual violence, kidnapping, and death.¹³⁷ In 2019, at least 380 people on the move lost their lives in the Americas, compared with 241 in 2018.¹³⁸

Travel through the Americas en route to the north can take months or, in some cases, years. Refugees and migrants interviewed for this study described how travel at night was frequent to avoid checkpoints and police confrontations as payments to corrupt officials were pervasive, especially in Peru, Ecuador, and Mexico. The gravest risks were mostly reported for some specific areas along the migration route, including the Darien Gap and Mexico, especially at its northern border with the US.

The Darien Gap and the perils of the jungle

Refugees and migrants are at risk of robbery, homicide, forced disappearance, human trafficking, and being forced to transport drugs on their journey through the jungle, all at the hands of unidentified armed groups. There have also been cases of shootings and sexual violence in the Darien Gap, mostly at the hands of armed groups who were not identified as smugglers.¹³⁹ According to humanitarian organisations in Panama, these groups have not been identified although it is assumed that they are linked to the drug trade. In addition, the general environment of the Darien Gap is very hostile presenting dangers such as wild animals, snakes, perilous river crossings, fatigue, thirst, and hunger. The relatively positive picture painted by smugglers and the community council of Acaandí in Capurganá about the jungle crossing is at odds with the accounts shared by refugees and migrants in the MRS in Darien (n=4) including incidents of sexual violence, robbery and death. Such accounts were in line with the information shared by humanitarian organisations in the Darien region, which emphasised the need for psychosocial support due to trauma caused by the journey through the jungle. Interviews with refugees and migrants, the head of the Ombudsperson's office for the Darien region (hereinafter Darien ombudsperson),¹⁴⁰ government officials, and humanitarian organisations in Panama all indicated that deaths and disappearances in the jungle are not uncommon.

135 Harrison-Cripps, A. (2020) [Mexico's hidden barriers to asylum seekers a successful deterrent](#), Mexico Daily News.

136 Medecins Sans Frontieres (2019) [Mexico is not an option for my family to stay](#).

137 IOM (2020) [Extraregional Migration in the Americas: Profiles, experiences and needs](#).

138 IOM (2019) [IOM Laments Wreckage of ships, disappearance of more than 80 Venezuelans in the Caribbean](#).

139 IOM (2020): [Extraregional Migration in the Americas: Profiles, experiences and needs](#).

140 The Office of the Ombudsperson (Defensoría del Pueblo) is Panama's national human rights institution. It has regional delegations, including the one in Darien.

“When we were in the jungle, many of us did not have enough to eat. But they (Haitians) shared their food with us. We were a community and tried to stick together. Sometimes we helped carrying children, sometimes we carried water. But the jungle makes you a bad person. You have to fight for your life and make sure you survive. That makes you lose your humanity and forces you to move on leaving people behind.”

Male, Angolan, 27, San Vicente (Panama)

Onwards through Central America

Once out of the Darien Gap, extra-regional people on the move mostly manage to transit across Central America relatively quickly and safely — even if some are subject to extortion and bribes — thanks to the help of smugglers. Exceptions do exist, however: one respondent stated that he and his wife were repeatedly kidnapped for ransom in Costa Rica, Honduras, and Guatemala. At one point, the couple managed to escape from captivity in Guatemala and continue their journey to Mexico. While the Darien Gap is commonly portrayed as the most dangerous part of the journey, lethal incidents also occur in other parts of the route. In 2021, for instance, a boat was found off the coast of Nicaragua with the bodies of six Guinean nationals who had died of dehydration and sunstroke.¹⁴¹

Crossing into Mexico

Refugees and migrants interviewed in Mexico all mentioned high exposure to rape, kidnapping, extortion, assault, and trauma in the country. At times, smugglers detained refugees and migrants to extort money from their relatives and friends. Cubans (n=6) interviewed in Mexico felt particularly vulnerable and felt that smugglers were especially exploitative towards them, since they are often seen as having more economic resources compared to other nationalities. All the refugees and migrants interviewed in Mexico also said that Mexican police, immigration officers, and armed criminal groups targeted people on the move for extortion. Cuban asylum seekers that were interviewed in Ciudad Juárez reported they had been stopped by the authorities in the city and at border crossings and were threatened due to their immigration status, in an attempt to intimidate them into paying bribes. According to a pastor who runs a shelter in the city, extortion as “protection payments” to immigration officials and police were common in Ciudad Juárez among asylum seekers waiting in Mexico for their court hearing under the MPP. In one incident in 2019, police officers entered a migrant shelter and robbed refugees and migrants hosted there.

High levels of violence made respondents feel very unsafe in the northern border region of Mexico. Ciudad Juárez is considered one of the most dangerous cities in Mexico, with refugees and migrants vulnerable to criminal groups.¹⁴² Kidnappings for ransom are also frequent, especially in the downtown area and near the pedestrian bridge between Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, according to a key informant.¹⁴³ A Cuban couple interviewed in a shelter in the city stated they refused to let their children outside the shelter for fear that they could be kidnapped or become a possible target for extortion. A recent report by a human rights NGO, however, shows that Ciudad Juárez is not the only dangerous location on the US-Mexico border: its research tracked at least 492 attacks and kidnappings suffered by refugees and asylum seekers turned away or stranded at or near the border only between mid-February and mid-April 2021.¹⁴⁴

10.2 Specific needs and vulnerabilities

Women and children

Women and girls on the move face a high exposure to sexual and gender-based violence while on their journey across the Americas, especially while crossing the Darien Gap. Sexual violence against children has also been reported during the journey through the jungle.¹⁴⁵ Additionally, according to the Darien ombudsperson, cases of gender-based violence in the MRS increased during the coronavirus pandemic, with regular interventions necessary inside the camps. Other identified vulnerabilities for female refugees and migrants included exposure to survival sex, sexual exploitation, and sexual violence, and lack of access to sexual and reproductive healthcare, including help with unwanted pregnancies.

141 IOM (2021) [Missing migrants](#).

142 Abi-Habib, M. (2021) [On Mexico's Border with the US, Desperation as Migrant Traffic Piles Up](#). New York Times.

143 Interview with humanitarian actor in Ciudad Juárez, February 2021.

144 Human Rights First (2021) [Attacks on Asylum Seekers stranded in Mexico during Biden Administration](#).

145 UNICEF (2021) [Fifteen times more children crossing the Panama jungle towards the USA in the last four years](#).

Children on the move are highly exposed to health problems on the migration route, especially in harsh environments such as the Darien Gap. In such mobility contexts, moreover, children and adolescents are at risk of being denied access to education.¹⁴⁶ There has been a 15-fold increase in the number of children entering MRS in the Darien Gap since 2017, accounting for more than 25 percent of refugees and migrants in MRS.¹⁴⁷

LGBTI people on the move

LGBTI refugees and migrants face intersecting forms of discrimination: as people on the move, and due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Because of prior experiences during migration, LGBTI respondents (n=5) stated that they felt exceptionally vulnerable to suffering sexual violence by other refugees and migrants or state officials. On two occasions, Cuban respondents were stopped in Mexico City by police officials and sexually abused; they believed they were targeted because of their homosexuality. A recent report by three NGOs highlighted how LGBTI people on the move stranded in Mexico while trying to seek protection in the US are particularly at risk of rape, human trafficking, and kidnapping.¹⁴⁸

10.3 Main actors delivering services to people on the move and assistance gaps

The current response to extra-regional mixed migration flows in the Americas is framed around a humanitarian approach, with several limitations even when providing emergency assistance. The list below is not exhaustive but highlights some of the most important actors and initiatives that are part of such response.

Limited support in South America

States along the routes most commonly used by extra-regional refugees and migrants in South America at best limit themselves to not creating obstacles to their movement. Colombia has no policy set in place to respond to these flows beyond granting a transit permit. At the border region between Colombia and Ecuador, NGOs and local authorities have offered humanitarian assistance to extra-regional people on the move in the past but, as most of them are only in transit, they are not a prioritised population for humanitarian response and assistance for them is scarce and irregular. In the northern region of Colombia, extra-regional refugees and migrants acquired high visibility in January 2021 as hundreds of them remained stranded in Necoclí for weeks without receiving assistance or health checks during the pandemic.¹⁴⁹

Humanitarian response mechanisms running thin in Panama

By comparison, Panama offers a basic humanitarian response in the MRS provided by state authorities, international organisations, and NGOs, including UNICEF, UNHCR, IOM, IRC, Asylum Access, HIAS, NRC and IFRC. Such assistance includes food, accommodation, legal advice on the asylum process in Panama, WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) programmes, food kits and hygiene kits including soap, diapers, sanitary napkins, toothpaste, and toilet paper.¹⁵⁰

While there have been advances in the MRS to meet refugees' and migrants' needs, such as the construction of a new camp in San Vicente, there remain significant challenges to catering to large groups of people on the move with diverse cultural backgrounds and different languages. Some secondary sources point to a situation of overcrowding and insufficient response.¹⁵¹ The Darien ombudsperson noted precarious living conditions, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic started, with insufficient human resources and medicine to properly attend and treat refugees and migrants who arrive in high numbers. These comments were in line with the overview NGOs offered on the situation in the camps, including a lack of safe distribution of water and inadequate waste and sanitation management and hygiene services. Additional psychosocial assistance was considered necessary by employees working for humanitarian organisations¹⁵² following the journey through the Darien Gap, while LGBTI refugees and migrants expressed a need for tailored health information, including on the interactions between COVID-19, HIV, and hormone treatment. Pregnant women are also of particular concern after traveling through the Darien jungle, according to a key informant. While there are paramedics deployed at the first reception site in Bajo Chiquito, given the increasing demand, attention and treatment for all refugees and migrants are insufficient.

146 Interview with UNICEF, Panama.

147 UNICEF (2021) op. cit.

148 Human Rights First (2021) op. cit.

149 Panesso, S. (2021) [No habrá apertura de frontera para migrantes varados en Necoclí: Migración Colombia](#). Blu Radio.

150 United Nations COVID-19 Response (2020) [Quarantine halts migrants in Panama](#).

151 IOM (2020) [Emergency tracking: Covid19 pandemic Migrant Receiving Stations \(MRS\) – Situation Report #2](#); Inter-American Court of Human Rights (2020) [Resolución de la Presidenta de la Corte Interamericana de Derechos Humanos de 26 de mayo de 2020 - Adopción de medidas urgentes - Caso Vélez Loor vs. Panamá](#).

152 Interviews held in Panama City, February 2021.

Central America

Costa Rica offers humanitarian services in its border areas and in Temporary Attention Centres for Migrants that allow refugees and migrants to rest, cook, and receive healthcare and assistance for children.¹⁵³ In Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala, the response from state authorities is once again absent. At the same time, NGOs and international organisations in the three countries focus their activities on other population groups, including internally displaced people and returnees, and struggle to provide any support to extra-regional people on the move.¹⁵⁴

Assistance falling short in Tapachula

In Tapachula, as in other southern border towns of Mexico, humanitarian response to people on the move is largely supported by UNHCR, either directly or through local implementing partners. When field work for this report was conducted, this included a program offering a cash-based assistance of 2,500 Mexican pesos (\$140) per month for up to three months for each person who applied for asylum, including children. Immigration and asylum procedures, however, tend to exceed this time period, with support and resources running out quickly. Although people on the move can access local health centres for basic medical care, they face difficulties in accessing specialised healthcare and affordable medication. The lack of interpretation services is another serious obstacle in accessing adequate care, especially when it comes to mental health. Médicos del Mundo and MSF offer additional healthcare services, but needs greatly outpace supply. In particular, cases of post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and trauma receive insufficient attention, according to humanitarian actors interviewed in Tapachula.

There are three main migrant shelters in the city: *Belén*, *Jesús el Buen Pastor del Pobre y Migrante* and *Hospitalidad y Solidaridad A.C.* The latter is a recently inaugurated shelter exclusively for refugees and asylum seekers, with a capacity to host 300 people and offering legal aid, medical counselling, labour market orientation and psychosocial support. *Belén* has capacity for 250 people, while *Jesús el Buen Pastor del Pobre* can house several hundred and offers medical care to refugees and migrants. While these numbers might seem high, they fall very short of the shelter needs of people on the move transiting through Tapachula or settling in the city: to put things into perspective, more than 21,000 people applied for asylum in the city in 2020 (and this figure does not include those who are only in transit or decide not to apply for international protection).¹⁵⁵ Additionally, the pandemic has also prompted shelters to limit the number of new entries, forcing many refugees and migrants to pay for private accommodation or live on the streets. At the same time, according to a key informant, many extra-regional people on the move in fact prefer renting private accommodation due to the freedom and independence that it gives them and the perceived lack of cultural sensitivity in shelters.

Quickly running out of space at Mexico's northern border

The humanitarian response along the US-Mexico border is stretched thin with the continued expulsion of all people on the move trying to enter the US.

In Ciudad Juárez, the Chihuahua State Population Council (COESPO, a state agency), migrant shelters, churches, and other civil society organisations offer services to people on the move. COESPO staff are located next to international bridge that connects Ciudad Juárez to El Paso in Texas and monitor the movement of refugees and migrants on a daily basis. A service centre —the *Centro Integrador Leona Vicario*— was opened in 2019 in Ciudad Juárez by the federal government within the framework of the MPP to provide WASH facilities, food, healthcare, legal assistance, psychosocial support, and formal education for children. While several actors in the city offer assistance to people on the move, key informants indicated that civil society organisations struggled to meet demand.¹⁵⁶

In Ciudad Juárez, there are more than 20 migrant shelters and other temporary hosting spaces, mostly run by churches. One shelter, *Casa de los Colores*, specifically hosts LGBTI asylum seekers. Mexican authorities, together with IOM and NGOs, have also established so-called “filter hotels”, which offer spaces for people on the move who recently arrived in the city to quarantine before being accepted in shelters. Despite efforts by several stakeholders, access to adequate housing for refugees and migrants in Ciudad Juárez remains challenging, especially in the winter, according a key informant. Another key informant highlighted that most of these spaces do not comply with legal or humanitarian standards for shelters. Many are homes or other spaces that have been adapted to host people on the move, but without having the necessary infrastructure of proceedings in place.

153 Drohtbohm, H. & Winters, M. (2021) [A shifting yet grounded transnational social field: Interplays of displacement and emplacement in African migrant trajectories across Central America](#). Population, Space and Place; MIRPS (2020) [Hacia la implementación del MIRPS en Centroamérica y México](#).

154 Selee, A. et al (2021) op. cit.

155 UNHCR (2020) [Albergue en Tapachula abre sus puertas a personas refugiadas y solicitantes de asilo](#).

156 Interview with CSO in Ciudad Juárez, February 2021.

US-based organisations also travel periodically to other cities at the border between the US and Mexico, such as Tijuana, to offer legal counselling on US immigration and asylum proceedings, some on a daily and others on a weekly basis. In Tijuana, organisations from the US also offer medical care and food to people on the move, but with the pandemic it has become harder to provide adequate support. The *Asociación de Defensa de los Migrantes Haitianos*, which provides aid to Haitian refugees and migrants, estimated that there were around 4,000 Haitian nationals living in Tijuana in 2020 and another 4,000 to 5,000 living in Tapachula trying to get to the US-Mexico border, greatly exceeding the assistance capacity of the organisation.¹⁵⁷

157 Srikrishnan, M. (2020) [Border Report: Surviving in Tijuana has gotten harder for Haitian Migrants](#). Voices of San Diego.

11. Conclusion

Latin America has seen a surge in the number of extra-regional refugees and migrants travelling through the region on their journey north. Several challenges on the journey through South, Central and North America contribute to the vulnerabilities of extra-regional people on the move, intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges are related to freedom of movement as well as access to: physical protection, both in shelters and along the route; programmes that offer protection to refugees and migrants in vulnerable situations; information on the right to apply for asylum and about shelters, healthcare, legal advice and education in languages other than Spanish.

While there have been some recent efforts among transit countries in Latin America towards managing the flow of extra-regional refugees and migrants on their journey north in a coordinated way, such efforts have been to date very limited and largely ad hoc: a commitment to a comprehensive approach to extra-regional migration aimed at strengthening protection and offering solutions to those on the move seems to be absent. At the same time, these migration flows present specific governance challenges. Most of these people on the move do not want to settle; they want states to facilitate their smooth and quick transit and to help them reach their final destination. Providing such assistance to extra-regional refugees and migrants without constraining them with strict immigration policies is no easy task. Failure to strike that balance, however, risks increasing demand for smuggling services and continuing to expose people on the move to protection risks.

Annex: List of stakeholders interviewed

Informants	Number	Type
People on the move (Interviewed in Necoclí, Capurganá, San Vicente, Panama City, Metetí, Tapachula, and Ciudad Juárez)	35	Extra-regional migrants and refugees
Secretary of Regional Government, Pasto	1	State actors
Darien Ombudsperson	1	
COEPES Ciudad Juárez	1	
UNICEF Panama	1	UN agencies
UNHCR Panama	1	
UNHCR Tapachula	1	
IOM Tapachula	1	
Jesuit Refugee Service Pasto	1	NGOs
Jesuit Refugee Service Tapachula	1	
Jesuit Refugee Service El Paso	1	
Danish Refugee Council LAC	1	
Shelter Coordinator Ciudad Juárez	1	Civil society initiatives
Shelter Coordinator Ciudad Juárez	1	
Smuggler in Capurganá	1	Smuggler



The MMC is a global network consisting of six regional hubs and a central unit in Geneva engaged in data collection, research, analysis and policy development on mixed migration. The MMC is a leading source for independent and high-quality data, research, analysis and expertise on mixed migration. The MMC aims to increase understanding of mixed migration, to positively impact global and regional migration policies, to inform evidence-based protection responses for people on the move and to stimulate forward thinking in public and policy debates on mixed migration. The MMC's overarching focus is on human rights and protection for all people on the move.

The MMC is part of and governed by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). Global and regional MMC teams are based in Copenhagen, Dakar, Geneva, Nairobi, Tunis, Bogota and Bangkok.

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