

HUMANITARIAN REPORT 2024

PANAMA

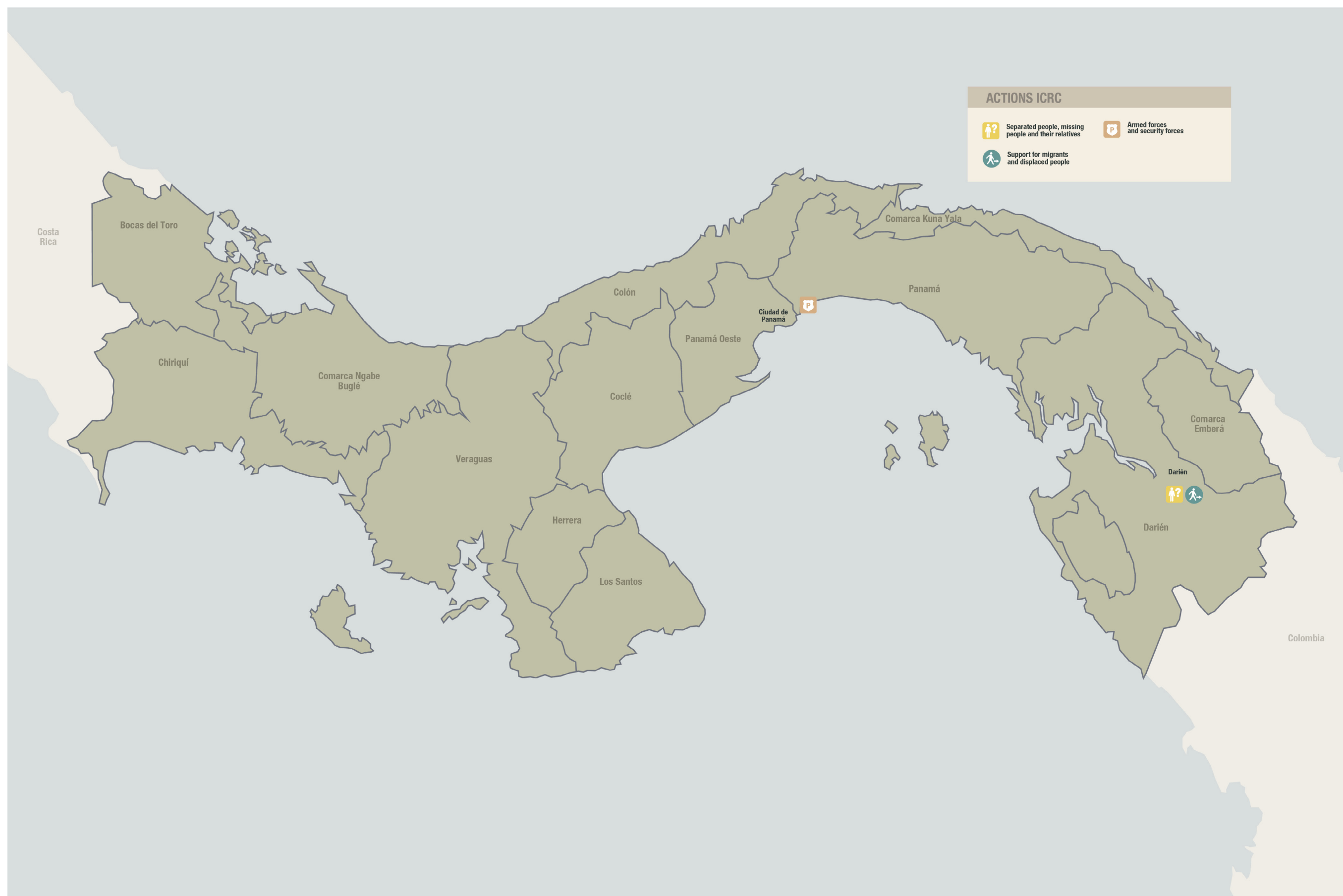




A phone call can restore hope. Our Restoring Family Links services help migrants get in contact with their loved ones so they can let them know where and how they are.

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INTRODUCTION

MEXICO AND CENTRAL AMERICA: THE URGENT NEED
FOR A COORDINATED RESPONSE TO SILENT VIOLENCE

By Olivier Dubois, head of the ICRC's regional delegation for Mexico and Central America

A young man disappears on the migration route almost without a trace. A teenage girl survives a sexual assault and is too afraid to seek help. A family suddenly decides to leave their home to flee from violence. The common denominator: silence.

It is this silent violence that worries us the most, because whole families and communities are no longer able to live in peace and follow their dreams, but this violence may go unnoticed. Only those who sit at a comfortable distance can act like nothing is happening and convince themselves that this silence is peaceful rather than fearful.

In Mexico and Central America, where thousands of people suffer every day from the visible and invisible consequences of constant violence, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) strives to listen to and support victims of this violence and work with them to best respond to their needs and ultimately protect them. Our mission is unwavering: to do everything in our power to alleviate and prevent human suffering.

We know that to be effective in supporting people affected by violence, the humanitarian response must be coordinated. It is the obligation of governments, the international community and society as a whole to try to understand what these people go through, to recognize and make their needs visible, and to make every effort to alleviate their suffering. Regardless of their origin, gender, sexual orientation or migration status, all those affected by the human consequences of violence must be protected and treated with respect.

Diplomacy and international cooperation are key to putting effective measures in place to protect these people. The human cost of violence must not go unnoticed, and the stories of thousands of people must not be forgotten. The region must raise awareness of this violence, rather than becoming indifferent to or accustomed to violence and its consequences. Treating victims with respect is one way of helping to find solutions to the humanitarian problems affecting the region; problems such as migration, disappearances, forced displacement and deprivation of liberty.

As a neutral party, we get involved by promoting and supporting humanitarian actions that allow us to address key issues of protection and we encourage regional cooperation to respond to them.

We work with the region's governments to develop or strengthen protection mechanisms, build and implement regulatory frameworks in accordance with international law and standards, and promote international humanitarian law and international human rights law. In a turbulent, increasingly fragmented world, it is crucial that we protect these actions, because in doing so we are protecting humanity itself.

We get involved in initiatives that bring hope. In 2023, alongside the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Search Commission and Mexican, Honduran, Salvadoran, Guatemalan and Panamanian authorities, we held a regional forum to explore how information could be legally exchanged to support the work of searching for, locating and identifying missing migrants.

The systematic exchange of standardized information is a step forwards in the search for missing people, and gives us a better chance of locating and identifying them if they have passed away. We are convinced that this significant regional effort is a big step in supporting the thousands of families who are searching for their loved ones.

These actions are key to continued protection of the rights of missing and deceased people and their relatives.

The suffering of all those affected by violence should not be ignored. We cannot afford to be indifferent to the pain and uncertainty faced by those who are deprived of their loved ones, their homes, their safety and their peace of mind.

EDITORIAL

THE DARIEN GAP: A JUNGLE OF HOPE, PAIN AND UNCERTAINTY



By Alexandre Le Breton, head of the ICRC's mission in Panama

Nobody is ready to cross the Darien Gap. Nobody is ready to trek through the jungle for days, facing unavoidable dangers and finding dead bodies along the way. Nobody is ready to cross rivers with the very real fear of losing their children. Nobody.

The Darien Gap is a dense and dangerous jungle that lies between Colombia and Panama and an area that is rife with humanitarian challenges. It is sometimes referred to as a “green hell”. Amidst the lush greenery, desperate and dangerous situations unfold for people fleeing violence and persecution. Hope and fear drive these people to cross borders in search of a better future.

In 2023, a record number of migrants – [over 500,000](#) people from around 30 different nationalities – crossed the Darien Gap. The number of people using this jungle as a migration route has increased significantly in recent years. Last year's figure is almost [double the number of people](#) that made the crossing in 2022 and less than a decade ago, that figure was as low as just a few thousand.

This testimonial from Joel, a Venezuelan migrant, sheds some light on the traumatic situations that people experience when crossing the Darien Gap:

To tell you the truth, 80% die and 20% live. I'm not going to say that it's easy and that everyone should do it, but if I could do it, then so could they. It is really dangerous though. I swear, it's the worst thing I've been through in my life – something I'll never forget. It's awful. I almost drowned and so did my daughter. If somebody hadn't helped me, I would have drowned. In the jungle, my friend had his bag stolen, which had his money and his phones inside. There is nothing here, absolutely nothing. There's nothing until you get here [Bajo Chiquito]. The rest is just water and rainforest.

Our teams in the field hear many heartbreaking accounts from migrants about the dead bodies they come across along the way, which are sometimes in an advanced state of decomposition. Parents have told us that the most difficult part of their journey has been walking past these bodies while carrying their children in their arms.

Some children are really affected by what they have seen and smelt along the way, so much so they do not speak for days or even weeks on end. Meanwhile, for every migrant that dies or goes missing, there are relatives suffering from the emotional turmoil of not knowing where their loved ones are or what has happened to them.



In their journey through the Darien Gap, migrant individuals face multiple risks. We work to identify and prevent them. Our mission is strictly humanitarian.

Given these circumstances, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is working to prevent people from going missing and we are giving authorities forensic advice to help them recover remains, which is not an easy task given the Darien Gap's harsh environment. We are also helping organizations to ensure the remains of individuals who have died are handled with dignity and properly managed. This work is really important in helping to identify the deceased and to potentially return their remains to their loved ones.

We are working with the Red Cross Society of Panama to help migrants get in touch with their relatives when they have lost contact with one another. When migrants make it out of the Darien Gap, a simple message can provide real relief to people who haven't heard from their loved ones for several days. This is part of our work to keep families together and prevent people from going missing.

The scale of the humanitarian crisis – in terms of both the number of people and the severity of the risks they face – means that an urgent response is required. It is really important that migrants' countries of origin, transit and destination allocate the necessary resources on a national level to prevent migrants from going missing or dying in the Darien Gap. These countries also need to cooperate with one another in order to find missing people systematically, effectively and quickly.

We are working to strengthen the process of searching, identifying and safeguarding the remains of deceased migrants so that they can be returned to their families in coordination with the authorities of other countries.

In accordance with their international obligations and commitments, states must protect migrants and they must find, recover, identify and manage remains in a dignified and professional way, using best forensic practices and internationally accepted standards. Every person that dies or goes missing in the Darien Gap is a reminder of the immense challenge we are facing and the need for a humanitarian response to protect the lives and the dignity of migrants.

In 2023, more migrants than ever before risked their lives to cross the Darien Gap. Therefore, it is really important we remain focused on our shared responsibility to protect migrants, respond to their humanitarian needs and treat them with dignity. The humanitarian challenges are significant and all the different people involved need to work together to overcome them. We are committed to helping victims and authorities address the complex issues of migration and to ensure that every person is treated in a humane, dignified and safe way.

MIGRANTS, THE MISSING OR DECEASED AND THEIR FAMILIES

According to official figures, over 500,000 people crossed the treacherous Darien Gap in 2023. These migrants face multiple life-threatening risks along the way, from spending days without any food, having no access to basic services and getting injured because of the jungle's harsh conditions, to being robbed, blackmailed, sexually assaulted or even losing their lives.

For many people, crossing the Darien Gap is just one part of a longer journey and so their humanitarian needs are going to keep increasing. We try to prevent and mitigate the challenges that they will face.

Our work is strictly humanitarian; we neither encourage nor discourage migration, but rather help people to become more resilient and to prevent and mitigate the risks that they face. We work with the Panamanian Red Cross, other international organizations and host communities to protect the lives and dignity of migrants. We also engage in direct and confidential dialogue with authorities that help migrants.



Migrants face many risks when they cross the Darien Gap. We are working to identify and prevent these risks. Our work is strictly humanitarian.

It is really important that migrants stay in contact with their families, not only because it improves their well-being, but also because it makes it easier to trace them if they were to go missing or in the event of an emergency.

Considering the unprecedented numbers of people – including from outside the Americas – that crossed the Darien Gap last year, we did a lot of work with the work with the Panamanian Red Cross to help relatives stay in contact with one another. We provided migrants with free connectivity and tracing services, such as phone calls, battery charging points and internet access. We also worked with the Panamanian authorities to manage search reports that we received from families.

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement – which the ICRC and the Panamanian Red Cross are part of – helps migrants to stay in contact with their loved ones so that they can regularly update them as to their whereabouts and their well-being.

The Movement therefore works to protect people who have been separated from their family or who are at risk of being separated. To do this, the ICRC and the Red Cross Society of Panama work together to provide [Restoring Family Links \(RFL\) services](#) to migrants, such as phone calls, battery charging points and internet connections.

One of our most pressing concerns is the number of reports we receive of migrants dying in the Darien Gap. Recovering remains from the Darien Gap is extremely difficult given the harsh conditions, but when migrants' remains are not recovered or identified and when relatives are not informed of their death, these migrants become missing people, and their families are left with the pain of not knowing what has happened to them.

More and more of the migrants crossing the Darien Gap are from countries outside of the Americas, which makes the process of identifying dead bodies and of notifying and returning the remains to relatives more complex. It requires better coordination and identification systems between states.

In 2023, we focused on providing answers to people who had been separated from their families or to people whose loved ones had gone missing in the Darien Gap. We received tracing requests and reports of migrant deaths, and we worked with the relevant authorities to help find these missing people.

Through our humanitarian forensic work, we helped authorities to scientifically identify individuals and we promoted projects and procedures on the dignified treatment and storage of remains, ensuring they can be individually traced so they can then potentially be returned to their families. In cooperation with the municipality of Pinogana and the Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences (IMELCF), we funded the construction of a Humanitarian forensic mortuary, a building with 100 individual chambers where the remains of unidentified or unclaimed migrants can be stored temporarily or permanently.

Local organizations and authorities need to work together closely and states need to coordinate effectively in order to identify migrants who have died or to find out what has happened to missing people and inform their families. We therefore promote a bilateral and confidential dialogue, set up roundtable discussions to encourage cross-organizational cooperation and strengthen countries' medicolegal systems and their professionals' skills by implementing best forensic practices.

Last year, we organized a discussion on “the search for missing people and the comprehensive approach to managing the dead in Panama: inter-agency responses from a humanitarian perspective”. It brought together 30 representatives from eight government organizations and public bodies, including IMELCF, the Public Prosecutor’s Office and the Ministry of Public Security.

We also worked to raise awareness of international standards to protect vulnerable migrants among academics and with the authorities, covering topics such as international protection, sexual violence and the rights of missing migrants and their relatives.

In order to raise awareness of the challenges mothers face on these migration routes and highlight the contribution mothers make as part of host communities or as volunteers for the Movement, we launched a photo exhibition called “[Mothers’ Stories](#)” at Tocumen International Airport to celebrate International Women’s Day.



Humanitarian forensic mortuaries, built in the Darien Gap, consist of individual chambers where the bodies of identified and unidentified migrants, and those that are waiting to be returned to their relatives, can be stored with dignity.

ACTIONS TO PROMOTE AN ENVIRONMENT THAT IS MORE RESPECTFUL OF LIFE AND HUMAN DIGNITY

The ICRC works closely with the Panamanian Red Cross, national authorities and academics to promote and raise awareness of international humanitarian law (IHL) and international human rights standards as they apply to our mandate and our work in Panama.

In 2023, we worked with the Panamanian authorities to reactivate the national IHL committee. Our regular coordination enabled the committee to take part in international forums on the subject. We also worked with the security forces to promote the integration of international human rights standards into law enforcement operations.

In the academic sphere, we helped the Santa Maria La Antigua Catholic University (USMA)’s law and political science faculty to incorporate a [course on IHL](#) into its curriculum. This course played an important role in promoting IHL in Panamanian academic circles, as it was the first of its kind at undergraduate level in the country’s history. It came about thanks to several academic exchanges and cooperation between the ICRC, the Red Cross Society of Panama and USMA.

REGIONAL PROTECTION FOR PEOPLE DEPRIVED OF THEIR LIBERTY

Prison systems in Latin America face many humanitarian challenges, from overcrowded prisons to inadequate conditions and limited resources. In response to these challenges, we promoted the [Criteria for Technical Standards for Prison Infrastructure \(CETIP\)](#) project, which aims to support countries in the region in developing architectural models that will result in suitable, functional and dignified prisons for people deprived of their liberty.

The CETIP project also aims to ensure that this infrastructure responds adequately and effectively to the needs and possibilities of each situation, and therefore takes important aspects into consideration, such as procedures, the movement of people, and staff management in the prison system.

Last year was an important year for the CETIP project, with the conclusion of the discussion phase, which included eight regional workshops and 11 countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Peru and Dominican Republic. Now, in 2024, a new phase is underway that aims to raise awareness of and gradually implement the results gathered during this process, which are included in the “Technical guide to prison infrastructure”.

COOPERATION WITH THE PANAMANIAN RED CROSS

The huge increase in the number of people crossing the Darien Gap in 2023 required an effective and coordinated response from all the relevant parties to address the needs of these migrants. We worked with the Red Cross Society of Panama to develop RFL activities in the Darien and Chiriqui regions.

At the end of 2023, we also worked with volunteers from the Red Cross Society of Panama, in coordination with the authorities, to help people affected by internal protests in the country and to establish safe corridors for vulnerable people during these protests.

As part of our cooperation, we also helped to strengthen the Panamanian Red Cross organizational setup by implementing and providing training in the Safer Access Framework, an approach that aims to help National Society volunteers improve their ability to respond to humanitarian needs and mitigate the risks they face in sensitive and dangerous situations.

We continued to support the Panamanian Red Cross in strengthening knowledge of IHL across the organization, through training on current challenges and international human rights standards on the use of force in law enforcement. Our work with the Red Cross Society of Panama, in coordination with the authorities, has been instrumental in addressing humanitarian challenges in Panama and in ensuring an effective and coordinated response to people in vulnerable situations.

In Panama, as in the rest of the region, the ICRC, National Societies and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) – the three components of the Movement – are working together to increase the impact of our response to people most in need of humanitarian assistance.



We work closely with the Red Cross Society of Panama to help migrants in the Darien Gap. We are a neutral, impartial and independent organization.

OUR WORK IN NUMBERS



OUR WORK IN NUMBERS

ACTIONS TO PROMOTE AN ENVIRONMENT THAT IS MORE
RESPECTFUL OF LIFE AND HUMAN DIGNITY

Over

50 members of the
security forcesreceived training on international
human rights standards as they
apply to restoring public order.

More than

60 civil servantsreceived training on international human rights
standards as they apply to tracing missing people
and helping their relatives.

Over

150 university
studentstook part in activities to raise awareness of IHL and
international human rights standards as they apply
to protecting migrants.**15** members of the
Panamanian Red Cross
were trained as IHL specialists.

COOPERATION WITH THE PANAMANIAN RED CROSS

**190** volunteers at the
Panamanian Red Cross
took part in workshops on risk management
and operational security in order to provide a
safer service.

PERSONAL STORIES

Joel, a Venezuelan migrant.
Village of Bajo Chiquito in the Darien Gap.

"To tell you the truth, 80% die and 20% live. I'm not going to say that it's easy and that everyone should do it, but if I could do it, then so could they. It is really dangerous though. I swear, it's the worst thing I've been through in my life – something I'll never forget. It's awful."

I almost drowned and so did my daughter. If somebody hadn't helped me, I would have drowned. In the jungle, my friend had his bag stolen, which had his money and his phones inside.

There is nothing here, absolutely nothing. There's nothing until you get here [Bajo Chiquito]. The rest is just water and rainforest".

**Jennifer, a Venezuelan migrant.**
Village of Canaan Membrillo in the Darien Gap.

"I am a single mother to two children. My eldest is 16 years old and my youngest is 14. I'm a manager in HR administration. I've faced many challenges since the beginning. The first was having to leave my children [...] to be able to migrate and embark on this journey that is completely unknown. Nobody knows what to expect. Neither my boys nor me and the people I was with knew what was in store for us. It's even worse than people make out."

I think it's the worst thing anyone can experience in their life. I can't even find the words to describe it.

I think if you spoke to everyone who has been through it, you'd see that people have had very different experiences; some people have had it worse. We may complain but we made it out safely. There are some who had it worse. There are people who died, mothers who came with their children, who took risks and lost their children or their husbands along the way. There was a woman whose husband died in a swamp, and she was left alone. We don't know if she made it out because she stayed with her husband.

I decided to migrate because I want a better life. God willing, I want to raise my children in the United States and give them a better quality of life – that's the goal".

Yesenia, person deprived of their liberty.

"I'm Yesenia. I'd say that I'm a strong, determined, humble and modest woman. I'm a mother to four children, but only three of them are still with us. Three months ago, my only daughter passed away, and I hadn't been able to see her since

I came here. I have three boys on the outside, one is still a minor and he's having a hard time because, with me being here, he doesn't want to continue studying, but I can't help him because I'm here.

My plan is to get out of here and to keep fighting for my children. I want to give them my best. I want them to see that, despite my mistake, I can keep going and I can provide for them in a different way, a better way".



Yeni, from a host community in the Emberá-Wounaan Comarca.

Village of Canaan Membrillo in the Darien Gap.

"I am a single mother to four children. I am a strong Wounaan woman.

I was born here and this is my home. I cook here, so I leave my children at home. I cook and I start to welcome migrants. I also serve in the shop. Sometimes migrants come but they haven't got any food, so I give them some. They tell us that they haven't got any money to buy a drink, and I give those that have nothing some items from the shop.

Sometimes mothers come with their babies, but they haven't got any money to eat, so I give them some food from the kitchen.

Gabriel, a Venezuelan migrant.

"My journey started in 2016 in Venezuela. I left for Peru, then went down to Chile and then on to Argentina. I then went back up to Bolivia, and from there I made my way up through Peru, Ecuador and Colombia, and now I'm here in Central America. It's crazy.

I've walked a lot and my life has changed a lot. I've gone from having a home to living on the streets. A lot of the time, I've had to live in difficult but not impossible conditions. My main goal is to settle down and live in peace and for everyone to be united".






MISSION

We help people around the world affected by armed conflict and other violence, doing everything we can to protect their lives and dignity and to relieve their suffering, often with our Red Cross and Red Crescent partners. We also seek to prevent hardship by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and championing universal humanitarian principles.

People know they can count on us to carry out a range of life-saving activities in conflict zones and to work closely with the communities there to understand and meet their needs. Our experience and expertise enable us to respond quickly and effectively, without taking sides.

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