



# MARITIME INFORMAL MIGRATION ROUTES TRANSITING THROUGH COLOMBIA



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**Action Against Hunger – Colombia Mission.**

Study conducted under the direction and leadership of the Information Management and Monitoring Unit.

March 2025

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# **EXECUTIVE RESUME**

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The study *“Maritime routes of informal migration in transit through Colombia”* results from a joint research process between the humanitarian organizations Action Against Hunger and HEKS-EPER. The main objective is to understand the dynamics associated with the maritime routes of informal migration that pass through Colombia and the specific risks they represent for the population in transit.

The central motivation of this study arises from the need to make visible how the high vulnerabilities of the migrant population, in their transit process, increase exponentially in the framework of the maritime or river movements they make.

The study's conclusions highlight how maritime transit routes through Colombia are relevant and bidirectional, becoming more important as part of the current dynamics related to north-south flows (return or reverse migration) of migrants. Likewise, the impossibility of land transit (related to difficulties, closures, and increased border controls) can generate incentives for more precarious maritime movements with greater exposure to risk.

In addition, the study emphasizes the importance of making visible the different risks associated with this type of maritime travel, among which are not only environmental factors and the type of vessels used, but also the control that Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs) develop over these routes and the critical absence of general information that would allow traceability of the population that uses these forms of mobilization.

In the case of Colombia, three maritime routes were identified:

## CARIBBEAN ROUTE

Connects San Andres Islands (a Colombian archipelago in the Caribbean) with Central America, specifically Nicaragua, reaching areas such as Bluefields or Corn Island. Regarding the risks posed by this route, there are risks due to weather conditions during navigation and the condition of the vessels that cover these routes, which can cause shipwrecks during the journey. Similarly, there have been several cases where migrants are abandoned on keys or islets by those responsible for the boats for various reasons, including the fear of being caught by the authorities for smuggling migrants.

## DARIEN ROUTE

Covers the route that connects the municipalities of Necoclí and Turbo (Antioquia) with Acandí and Capurganá (Chocó), which represents the entrance to El Darien region, and with it the transit to Panama, to areas such as Puerto Obaldía or Carrete, among others. It should be noted that this route has different combinations of land, sea, and river travel. Among the risks for migrants when traveling by maritime routes through El Darien are shipwreck, due to boats that do not have the characteristics for open sea travel, and the strong navigability conditions that exist at times in the area. The risks also include drowning due to accidents or falling off the boats, and abandonment of migrants at the border on jungle beaches with no connection to land transit routes within El Darien jungle.

## PACIFIC ROUTE

This is the least visible of the various maritime routes for informal migration in Colombia. The complexity of this route explains this in terms of security and access. Like other routes, the Pacific route does not exist as a single route. Still, it comprises different types of land, sea, and air routes, which are developed according to the migrants' resources, varying significantly in terms of travel time and risk exposure. Among the key points along the route are different maritime connections along the Pacific coast, such as Tumaco, Buenaventura, Bahía Solano, or Juradó. Among the risks encountered in maritime travel along this route are shipwrecks, vessels unsuitable for open sea travel, the difficult navigability conditions, and territorial disputes between NSAGs.

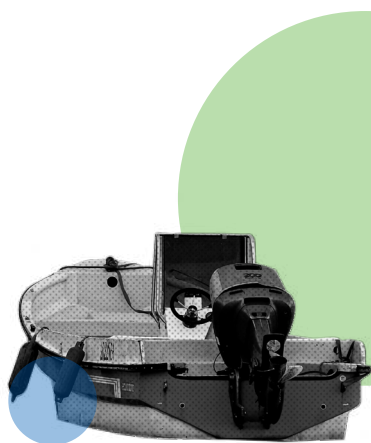
As humanitarian organizations, this type of study allows us to open a dialogue on the different potential interventions that should be carried out by the other actors and areas of action in the face of a highly complex phenomenon such as the maritime routes of informal migration. Within these areas of collaboration, the need to strengthen the continuous production of information is mentioned, allowing for filling gaps in figures and the articulation between actors to establish actions to protect migrants. The recent transformations of the migratory dynamics in the continent, where Colombia is a strategic passage for the population in transit, and where maritime routes increase their flow, force us to foresee the different scenarios and to act on evidence to save lives and allow the dignified and safe transit of people.



# **PRESENTATION**

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*The central motivation of this study arises from the need to make visible how the high vulnerabilities of the migrant population, in their transit process, increase exponentially in the framework of the maritime or river movements they make.*

The study “Maritime Routes of Informal Migration with transit through Colombia” results from a joint research process between Action Against Hunger and HEKS-EPER. The main objective is to understand the dynamics associated with the maritime routes of informal migration that pass through Colombia and the specific risks they represent for the population in transit. The central motivation of this study arises from the need to make visible how the high vulnerabilities of the migrant population, in their transit process, increase exponentially in the framework of the maritime or river movements they make.

The study is built on a mixed methodology, based on collecting qualitative and quantitative information from primary and secondary sources. Regarding primary sources, a triangulation process was established between actors (communities, institutions, humanitarian organizations, among others), where, for their protection, no direct mentions are made that could lead to their identification. The gaps in information on maritime migration and the lack of articulation and underreporting of figures should be identified as findings related to the invisibility and difficulty of generating information due to multiple environmental, social, institutional, and protection factors.

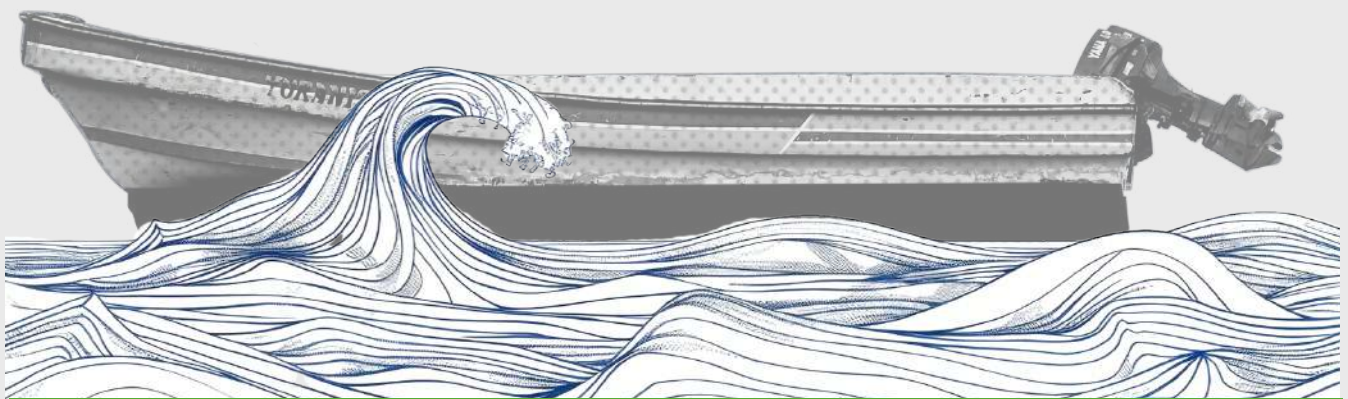
The study's conclusions point out how the maritime transit routes through Colombia are relevant and bidirectional, becoming more important as part of

the current dynamics related to the north-south (return) flows of migrants. Likewise, the impossibility of land transit (related to difficulties, closures, and increased border controls) can generate incentives for more precarious maritime movements with greater exposure to risk. In addition, emphasize the importance of making visible the different risks associated with this type of marine movements, among which are not only environmental factors and the type of vessels used, but also the control that Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs) develop over these routes and the absence of general information that allows traceability of the population that uses these forms of mobilization.

As humanitarian organizations, we consider that this type of study allows us to open a dialogue on the different potential interventions that can be carried out by the various actors and areas of action in the face of a highly complex phenomenon such as the maritime routes of informal migration. Among these possible areas of collaboration is the need to strengthen the production of information, making it possible to fill gaps in figures and the articulation between actors to establish actions to protect migrants. The recent transformations of the migratory dynamics in the continent, where Colombia is a strategic passage for the population in transit, and where maritime routes increase their flow, force us to foresee the different scenarios and to act on evidence to save lives and allow the dignified transit of people.

1.

# INTERNATIONAL MARITIME MIGRATION ROUTES



Transit by sea or river is an element in some primary informal migration routes globally. Maritime routes are part of broader and more complex routes, which integrate land and sometimes air crossings and vary according to the contexts, resources, and characteristics of the population in transit. The main global maritime routes include:<sup>1</sup>

### MAP 1. MAIN GLOBAL MARITIME MIGRATION ROUTES



**1. Mediterranean Route:** This route connects North Africa with Southern Europe. It has specific routes, such as Central (from Libya and Tunisia to Italy and Malta), Eastern (from Turkey to Greece), and Western (from Morocco and Algeria to Spain).

**2. Gulf of Aden and Red Sea Route:** Connects the Horn of Africa region and the Arabian Peninsula.

**3. Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea Route:** Connects the Indian subcontinent with Bangladesh.

**4. West Africa Route:** Connects Morocco and Western Sahara with the Canary Islands.

**5. Caribbean Sea Route:** This route integrates different subroutes connecting the Caribbean Islands, Central America, and North America.

**Elaboration:** Action Against Hunger/HEKS-EPER based on information from MMC (2024) and IOM (2025)

<sup>1</sup> MMC (2024) *Mixed Migration Review*. Mixed Migration Center. Geneva



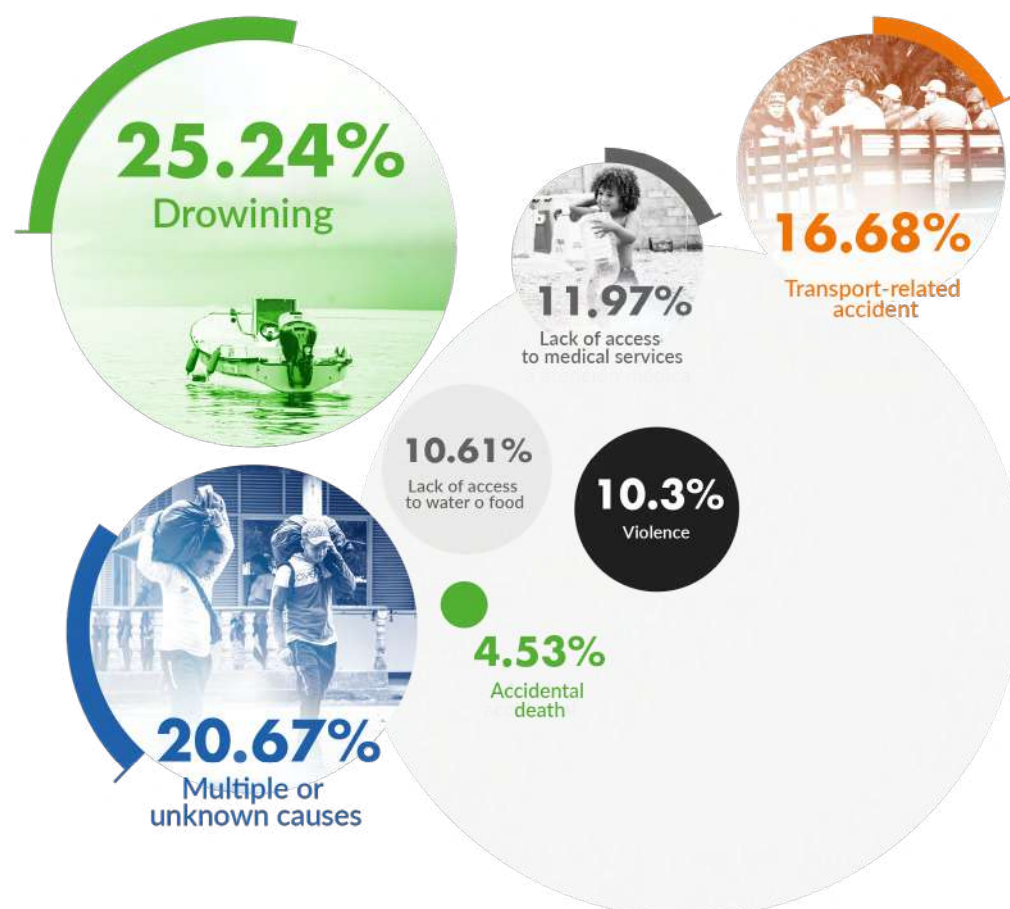
Maritime migration routes, in addition to their importance within the transit of population at a global level, are also the context of the most significant risk in the displacement of migrants. Global figures from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) related to the disappearance and/or death of migrants in transit, between 2014 and 2024, indicate drowning as the leading identified cause of mortality among the population in transit (25.2%), followed by mixed or unknown causes (20.6%) (Figure 1)<sup>2</sup>.

In the case of maritime routes in the Mediterranean (North Africa-Europe), drowning is the cause of 52% of migrant deaths or disappearances. **In the case of El Darien, this percentage is 48.1%.** River crossings also generate multiple disappearances and deaths.

An example of this is the transit through the Rio Bravo: on the border between Mexico and the United States, the death or disappearance of 2,980 migrants has been reported since 2014<sup>3</sup>.

It is worth noting that this mortality figure may be much higher, given the same underreporting that exists due to the precarious conditions and risks in which these displacements take place. Likewise, obtaining information from family members (who often have no specific knowledge of the route) is impossible to recover bodies in maritime contexts. The connection of this type of maritime/river displacement with informal transportation networks or human trafficking networks increases the barriers to the availability of data on flows or accidents.

**FIGURE 1. CAUSES OF DEATH/DISAPPEARANCE OF INFORMAL MIGRANTS IN TRANSIT-GLOBAL, 2014-2024.**



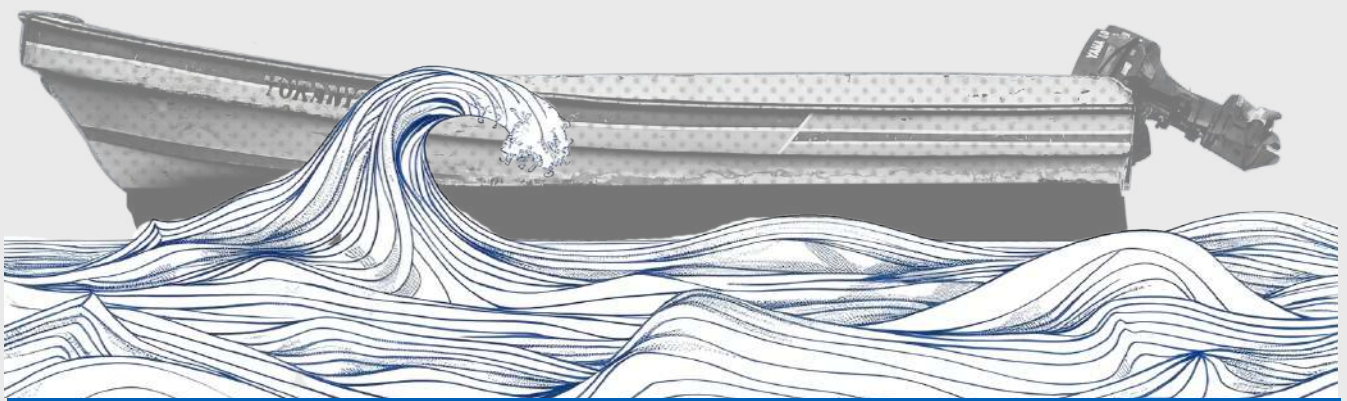
**Elaboration:** Action Against Hunger/HEKS-EPER based on information from MMC (2024) and IOM (2025)

<sup>2</sup> IOM (2025) *Missing Migrant Project*. Database.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

2.

## **CONTEXT OF MIGRATION IN COLOMBIA: FLOWS AND NEW DYNAMICS**



As part of the international political and migratory transformations, there is a recent transformation of the global migratory dynamics, which began in the last months of 2024, and which evidences a decrease in the south-north transit of migrants (Central America destination) and the appearance of a north-south flow (return to South America) that has been growing in intensity. These transformations in global dynamics impact Colombia due to the country's geostrategic role in the connection routes between South and Central America. It is worth noting that between 2012 and 2024, according to Migration Colombia, 1,339,236 migrants have transited through Colombia<sup>4</sup>.

Regarding the south-north flow, the drop in the transit of migrants through Colombia is significant. In January 2025, there was an 83% decrease in this flow, with only 6,921 people passing through, in contrast to January 2024, when 41,527 migrants were registered. Key ports for the transit of migrants on the El Darien route, such as Turbo or Necoclí (Antioquia), experienced a decrease of 96.2% and 95.6%, respectively, in the population in transit through these municipalities in February (Graph 2)<sup>5</sup>.

**FIGURE 2. MIGRANTS IN TRANSIT, FEBRUARY 2024 AND 2025**

**TOTAL MIGRANTS IN TRANSIT  
NECOCLÍ MUNICIPALITY**



**TOTAL MIGRANTS IN TRANSIT  
TURBO MUNICIPALITY**



Each icon represents 2,000 people.

**Prepared by:** Action Against Hunger/HEKS-EPER  
based on information from Migración Colombia  
(2025)

As part of the international political and migratory transformations, there is a recent transformation of the global migratory dynamics, which began in the last months of 2024, evidencing a decrease in the south-north transit of migrants (Central America destination) and the emergence of a north-south flow (return to South America) that has been growing in intensity.

This decrease in the south-north flow can also be observed among the nationalities migrating through Colombia. Between February 2024 and February 2025, the Venezuelan population, the leading population group in transit through the country, decreased by -50.3%. This decrease also occurred in the population of China (-99%), Haití (-99%), Ecuador (-93%), Afganistán (-90.6%), Angola (-84%) y Perú (-84%)<sup>6</sup>.

Parallel to these decreases in the south-north flow, there has been an increase in the gaps in the registration of migrant transit between Colombia and Panama, especially since the last months of 2024. These gaps mean that the numbers of registered departures from Colombia at the Colombian-Panamanian border encounter a difference in inflows. Compared to a 13% gap in registrations in January 2024, January 2025 registered an 86% gap (Graph 3).

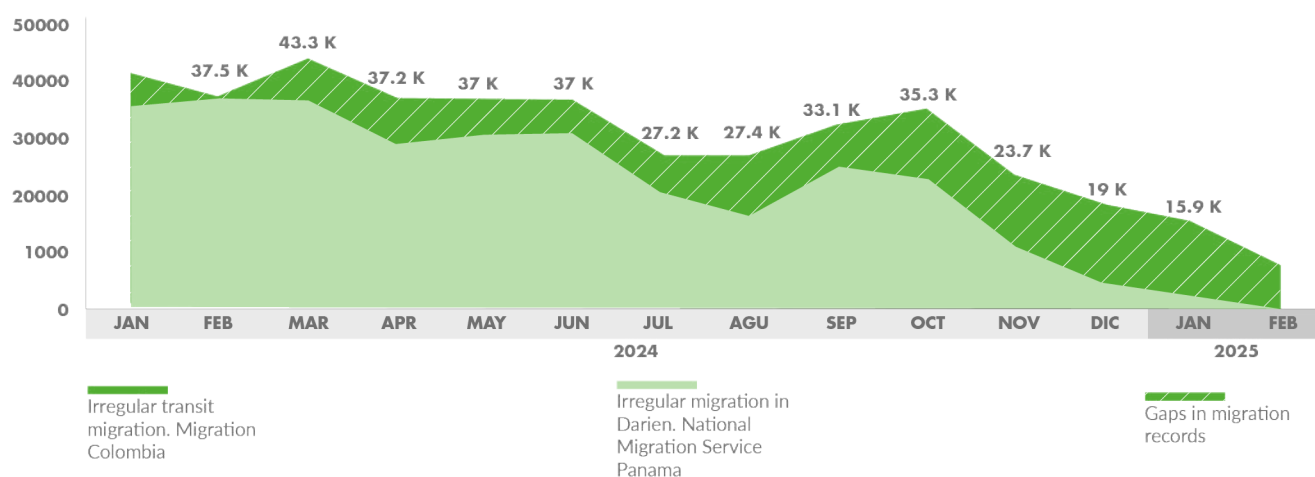
Under-registration is a significant fact in the analysis of migrants' transit. It is related to factors such as border closures, low incentives for migratory registration as part of the changes in transit policies, and the fears that this population perceives about them.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Migración Colombia (2025) *Migrantes Irregulares en Tránsito*. Sistema de Información para el Monitoreo de Fenómeno Migratorio. Corte: febrero 2025

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

**FIGURE 3. MIGRANT REGISTRATION COLOMBIA AND PANAMA, 2024-2025**

**Prepared by:** Action Against Hunger/HEKS-EPER based on information from Migración Colombia (2025) and Servicio Nacional de Migración Panamá (2025).

In contrast to the decrease in south-north flows, the other major recent transformation in the migratory dynamics of transit through Colombia is the emergence and growth of north-south flows (return or reverse migration). Since February 2025, Migration Colombia has begun to identify informal return migration flows as significant elements to monitor. As of February 2025, these figures registered 476

migrants in north-south transit, 20% of whom are children and adolescents. However, these official figures show an underreporting, since, in the same field monitoring in areas such as El Darien, the arrival flows show an upward trend, also showing changes in the forms of transportation, such as increased use of maritime routes about land routes, which in the past were the main ones<sup>7</sup>.



<sup>7</sup>Acción contra el Hambre (2025) *Dinámica migratoria en la región del Darién. Flujo inverso norte-sur*. Región de El Darién-Acandí. Información para la Acción: Análisis humanitario y de nuestra acción. Marzo 2025. Bogotá



The dynamics of the north-south flow pose additional challenges due to the deterioration of the health and food security of the migrant population, which sometimes had to return through the jungle pass of El Darien or other areas of Chocó. In many cases, the north-south return is carried out without the few resources they had for the first south-north transit, so their vulnerability is even greater, and the need for humanitarian assistance is urgent. Protection risks due to re-victimization processes,

where migrants must return to areas where they were victims of violence in the south-north transit.

Likewise, the changes in the flows have meant that the points of arrival of the migrant population have changed, generating bottlenecks due to the absence of resources to continue the journey and thus collapsing the limited local institutional capacities to deal with the attention of a flow of migrant population with high levels of vulnerability<sup>8</sup>.

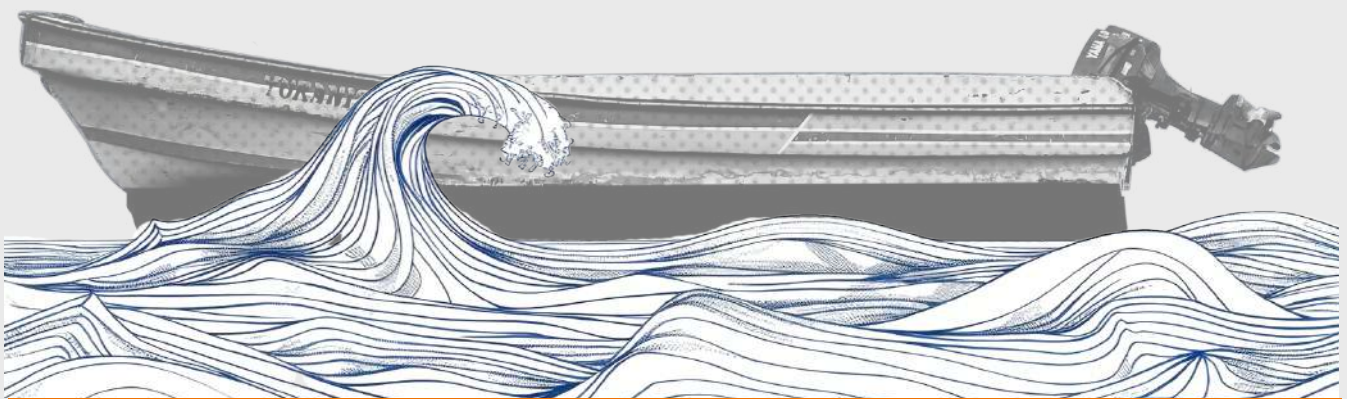


<sup>8</sup> Ibid.



**3.**

# **MARITIME ROUTES OF INFORMAL MIGRATION WITH TRANSIT THROUGH COLOMBIA**



A fundamental element regarding the maritime routes of informal migration through Colombia is that these are not new phenomena. However, with differences in their characteristics and volumes, maritime routes are a central part of the processes of pendular transit of the population in the borders, the Colombian population that took refuge in neighboring countries during the armed conflict<sup>9</sup>, the flow of migrant population in transit, and factors such as drug trafficking and the presence of NSAGs.

Maritime routes have been key to this transit because of Colombia's privileged presence in its connection via the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean with Central America. Colombia is the key point in the south-north migratory movement in the Americas, with obligatory passage to Panama (Darién and Pacific Route) and Nicaragua (Caribbean Route). Within all these routes, there is necessarily transit through maritime routes.

However, it is essential to point out that these maritime routes are not homogeneous and (as will be discussed in more detail in the chapter on the Caribbean, Pacific, and Darién routes) must be understood within the framework of broader routes (land and sometimes air), where the resources and characteristics of the migrants and territories determine the capacities, risks, and particularities of these.

The presence of different types of vessels (from speedboats to artisanal boats and deep-draft vessels) and the particularities of the sea in specific seasons are essential in analyzing these routes. It is also important to point out the differences in the characteristics and methods of the actors involved in the maritime transit of migrants.

The gaps and difficulties in obtaining information are due to the complex characteristics of a phenomenon such as these routes, which are informal and sometimes under the control of NSAGs or related to them, as well as the characteristics of maritime movement, with very high risks due to the vessels

and ways in which this transit takes place. In addition to this, the incentives for reporting accidents, deaths, or disappearances are low, since the development of migrant population transport activities can be classified as a crime under Article 188 of the Colombian Penal Code<sup>10</sup>.

In the face of existing official figures, the risk posed by informal maritime migration routes for the population in transit through Colombia<sup>11</sup> is clear. Between 2015 and 2024, a total of 267 migrants were officially registered as dead or missing due to drowning, which represents 48.11% of the total number of cases of migrants dead or missing in transit through Colombia. It is worth mentioning that this figure is undoubtedly much higher due to underreporting factors or the invisibility of migrants in transit, even more so in the case of maritime routes. Likewise, there has been a progressive increase in the number of reported cases of migrant deaths by drowning. The years with the highest number of reported migrant deaths or disappearances are 2019 (38 cases), 2021 (47 cases), 2022 (39 cases), and 2024 (92 cases)<sup>12</sup>.

*Informal maritime migration routes through Colombia are not a new phenomenon. Although with differences in their characteristics and volumes, maritime routes are a central part of the pendular transit processes of the population at the borders, the flow of migrant population in transit, and factors such as drug trafficking and the presence of NSAGs.*



<sup>9</sup>Comisión de la Verdad (2022) Caso “Desplazamiento forzado transfronterizo, exilio y retorno de comunidades indígenas, afro y campesina de la frontera colombo-panameña”. Comisión para el esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición. Capítulo de Exilio. 2022.

<sup>10</sup> “Article 188 of the Penal Code, Article 188. Whoever promotes, induces, constricts, facilitates, finances, collaborates or in any other way participates in the entry or exit of persons from the country, without complying with the legal requirements, to make profit or any other benefit for himself or another person, shall incur a prison term of ninety-six (96) to one hundred forty-four (144) months and a fine of sixty-six point sixty-six (66.66) to one hundred fifty (150) legal monthly minimum wages in force at the time of the conviction” Source: Código Penal, artículo 188. República de Colombia.

<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that, in these figures, part of the IOM database, when considering the cause of death or disappearance of migrants in transit, includes maritime and river incidents. Likewise, 95% of the reports of cases are documented on the Darién route, with few records on the Pacific and Caribbean routes. Source: OIM (2025) Missing Migrant Project. Database.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

It is worth noting that of the total number of cases of death by drowning, 69% (184 cases) were registered in Panama and 31% (83) in Colombia. This spatial delimitation of deaths or disappearances is complex, especially in the case of maritime routes, since, as reported by primary sources, unidentified corpses that were washed up on certain beaches are recurrently found unidentified by the tide<sup>13</sup>.

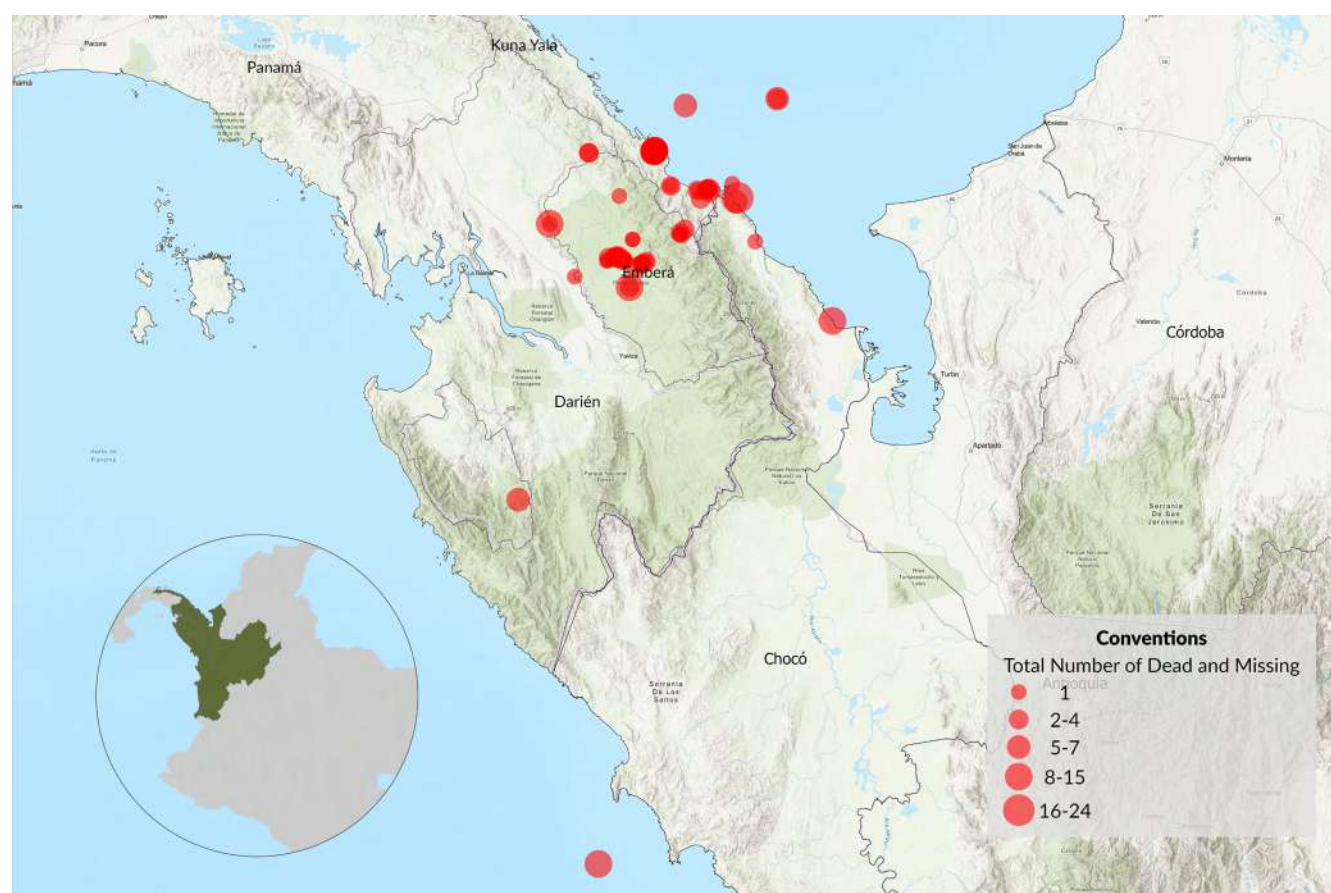
Based on the difficulties and underreporting of figures on maritime migration routes, the nationalities with the highest presence of migrants dead or missing due to causes associated with drowning include: Venezuela (15%), Afghanistan (5%), Haiti (4%), and India (3.4%). It should be clarified that in 34% of the cases, it is impossible to determine the nationality of the migrants. Likewise, among the records of migrants who disappeared or died while passing through

Colombia between 2015 and 2024, 49 children and adolescents died from drowning<sup>14</sup>.

A fundamental element in the operation and recent boom of maritime migration routes is the perceptions and motivations of the transit population that uses them. In general, the risks posed by these routes are invisible, or at least not so clear to many migrants. On many occasions, the central motivation is centered on the possibility of shortening travel time or avoiding passing through specific contexts.

In other cases, maritime routes are considered options for people who cannot travel by land, such as children, the elderly, or pregnant women. In the fieldwork, local actors mentioned the risk that this type of maritime displacement could represent for children and older adults, especially those carried out in speedboats or at night, since sometimes they do

**MAP 2. LOCATION OF MIGRANTS DEAD OR MISSING IN TRANSIT DUE TO DROWNING-RELATED CAUSES- OIM (2025)**



**Prepared by:** Action Against Hunger/HEKS-EPER based on information from IOM (2025)

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> IOM (2025) Missing Migrant Project. Database.

FIGURE 4. CASES OF MARITIME RESCUE OF MIGRANTS IN COLOMBIA, 2024-2025

2024					2025
JUL	AGO	SEP	OCT	DIC	JAN
<b>CARIBBEAN ROUTE</b>  Following the sinking of a boat near Punta Sur, the Navy, in coordination with the Colombian Air Force and the General Maritime Directorate, rescued 15 people.  <b>Among those rescued were citizens of Colombia, Ecuador, Iran, Nicaragua, Kazakhstan, and Venezuela, including minors.</b>	<b>PACIFIC ROUTE</b>  The Colombian Navy rescued 28 migrants from Bangladesh, China, India, and South Africa in the Pacific waters off the Valle del Cauca region.  These migrants were being transported in precarious conditions.	<b>CARIBBEAN ROUTE</b>  <b>Eight Venezuelan</b> migrants (six adults and two children) were rescued by the Colombian Navy on Cayo Pescador Alburquerque Island, 25 nautical miles from San Andrés.  This is the second incident this year in which irregular migrants have been abandoned in this area.	<b>CARIBBEAN ROUTE</b>  In a joint operation with the Colombian Air Force, the Navy intercepted a boat 27 nautical miles southwest of the island of San Andrés.  <b>22 migrants</b> of different nationalities were rescued, including 17 adults and 5 children.  The migrants were from Venezuela, China, Nepal, and Colombia. <b>2 Colombians were detained.</b>	<b>DARIEN ROUTE</b>  In a maritime control operation, the Coast Guard intercepted a boat near Cabo Tiburón (Acandí-Chocó).  On board were 44 people of various nationalities, from Afghanistan, Ecuador, Congo, Eritrea, Ghana, India, Palestine, Peru, Somalia, Togo, Venezuela, and Yemen.	<b>DARIEN ROUTE</b>  The National Navy rescued <b>41 migrants</b> who were in a precarious boat bound for Panama.  Among the group of migrants were 7 children.  Nationalities found: Armenia, India, Iran, Vietnam, Colombia.

**Elaboration:** Based on press review and primary information, Action Against Hunger/HEKS-EPER

not have life jackets or knowledge of swimming. In addition, they also mentioned the risk for pregnant women, where the strong movement of the boats could harm the pregnancy.

The recent boom in the use of maritime routes also has much to do with the perception of the risk that the overland passage through El Darien region embodies. This perception of risk is a common fear when passing through the jungle. It is framed not only by the testimonies but also by the figures that place it as a route with multiple risks regarding the integrity of migrants, among which are deaths, disappearances, robberies, and sexual violence<sup>15</sup>. This fear factor, compared to the land transit through the Darien jungle, positioned the maritime routes of the Pacific or the Caribbean (starting from San Andres Islands) as attractive routes for migrants seeking to reduce the risk in transit and who had greater resources.

It is essential to highlight that, as in the general case of migrant transit processes, the choice of routes and how transit is developed within them is not homogeneous among the different populations, and resources determine, in most cases, the exposure to risks they may face along the way. A clear example is how maritime routes appeared as part of the “VIP Routes” in El Darien, where maritime travel reduced travel times and exposure to the risks of prolonged land transit through the jungle. These maritime routes involved significantly higher costs and were therefore restricted to a smaller number of migrants<sup>16</sup>.

These maritime routes have recently increased their importance within the north-south migration flows. These transformations, framed by the increase in control and deportation operations, the suspension of asylum operations and the revocation of Temporary Protected Status in the United States

<sup>15</sup> Acción contra el Hambre (2023) Darién. Situación de Flujos Migratorios Mixtos. Informe. Bogotá. Septiembre 2023.

<sup>16</sup> “One of the elements identified in dialogue with different actors and travel groups is that, depending on people’s purchasing power, it is possible to take a “VIP route,” which saves eight hours of travel by land and involves less physical effort. The route begins with a river trip by boat from Capurganá (Colombia) to Punta Carreto (Panama); from there, travelers set off on a 2- to 4-day trek through the jungle. They are accompanied by special “guides” on this route. This route is the most expensive option, ranging from \$400 to \$500.” Source: Acción contra el Hambre (2023) Darién. Situación de Flujos Migratorios Mixtos. Informe. Bogotá. Septiembre 2023.



(the leading destination for 96% of the population in transit) have generated the north-south flow from the Mexican border, where a significant number of migrants transit through Colombia.

In the case of migratory transit between Panama and Colombia, the intense pressure that Panamanian authorities have been imposing on the border since the beginning of 2024 has incentivized migrants to use new routes to avoid official controls. In addition to this, the declarations of the official closure of the passage through El Darien<sup>17</sup>, which has led to the closure of the migrant reception camps of Bajo Chiquito and Lajas Blancas, where the few humanitarian organizations that assisted the population that had passed through El Darien have withdrawn. As of March 2025, only the San Vicente camp remains open, which is intended for the deported population or migrants who refuse to leave this space due to fear of returning to their countries of origin because of threats to their lives (Map 3).

Within this new dynamic on the Colombian-Panamanian border, maritime routes are beginning to be used as the official return route from Panama to Colombia, departing from ports in the Caribbean such as Miramar or San Blas. With the land crossing of the border closed in El Darien, maritime transport appears to be the official strategy for returning migrants to Panama. Still, there are problems and barriers in the following points.

First, the costs involved in this transportation for a returning population (north-south flow), which can exceed US\$200 per person to the Colombian border, are often beyond their ability to pay, especially when these migrants return in family groups. This leads to a backlog of migrants in contexts where there is no capacity to provide adequate attention to this population with high levels of vulnerability<sup>18</sup>.

Secondly, there are questions about the conditions of the vessels that carry out this transport, where recently there was a case of the shipwreck of a boat carrying migrants from San Blas to Puerto Obaldía, with the death of a minor girl of Venezuelan nationality<sup>19</sup>. As a result of this event, the Panamanian

government is making changes in the transportation processes. However, there are still questions about the guarantees that such maritime transportation may entail for the integrity of the migrant population.

Third, a scenario may arise in which the Panamanian authorities' controls encourage the development of other maritime routes, such as the Pacific. These routes entail even greater exposure to environmental and security risks for the migrant population. These fears may be justified by the increase in the north-south flow on the Pacific Route, where migrants from Panama are arriving in Colombian municipalities such as Juradó (Chocó).

*A fundamental element in the operation and recent boom of maritime migration routes is the perceptions and motivations of the transit population that uses them. In general, the risks posed by these routes are invisible, or at least not so clear to many migrants. On many occasions, the central motivation is centered on the possibility of shortening travel time or avoiding passing through specific contexts.*



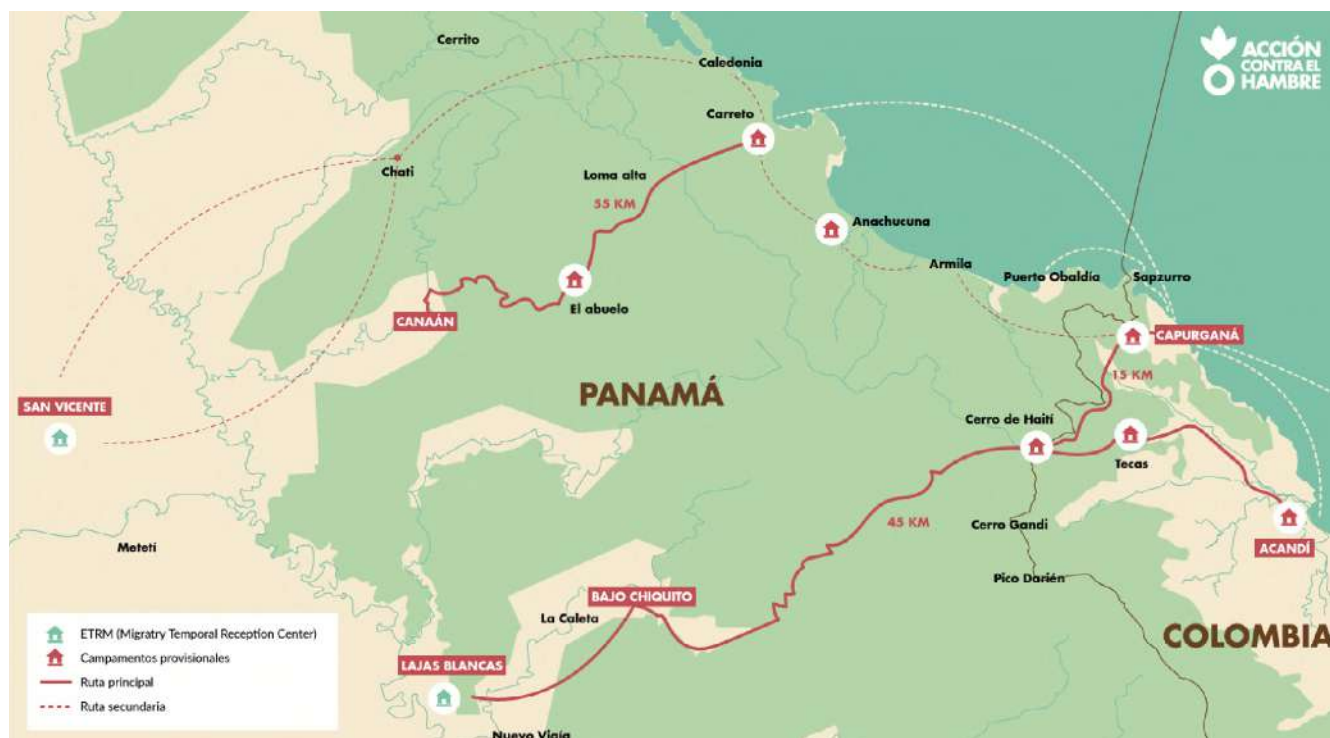
<sup>17</sup> El País (2025) "Panamá anuncia el cierre de la ruta del Tapón del Darién por la que han cruzado más de un millón de inmigrantes camino a Estados Unidos" 13.05.2025.

<sup>18</sup> IOM, UNHCR & UNICEF (2025) SITREP Miramar. Joint report. 11.03.2025.

<sup>19</sup> BBC (2025) "Es mucho peor que cruzar el Darién": las peligrosas rutas marítimas desde Panamá a Colombia que usan los migrantes venezolanos que regresan a su país" 06.03.2025.

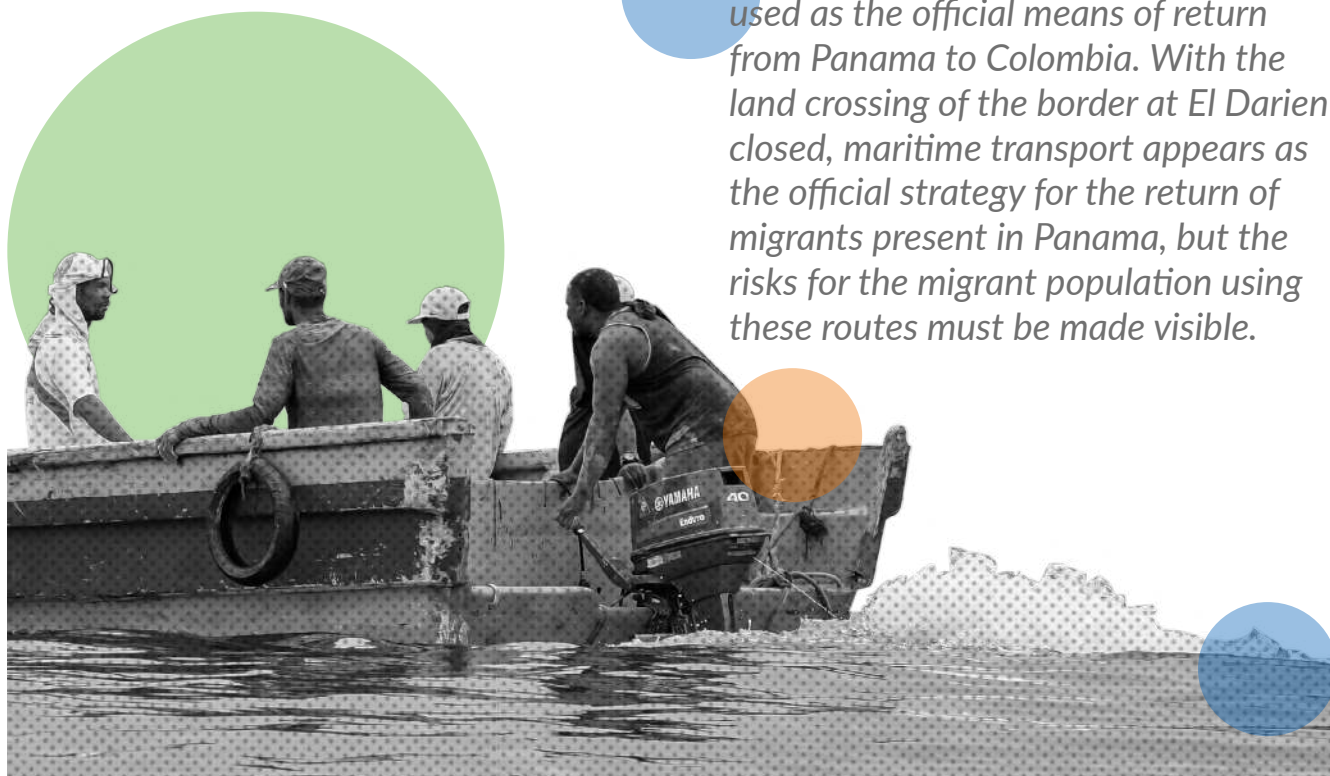


### MAP 3. MIGRATION ROUTES IN EL DARIEN, 2023



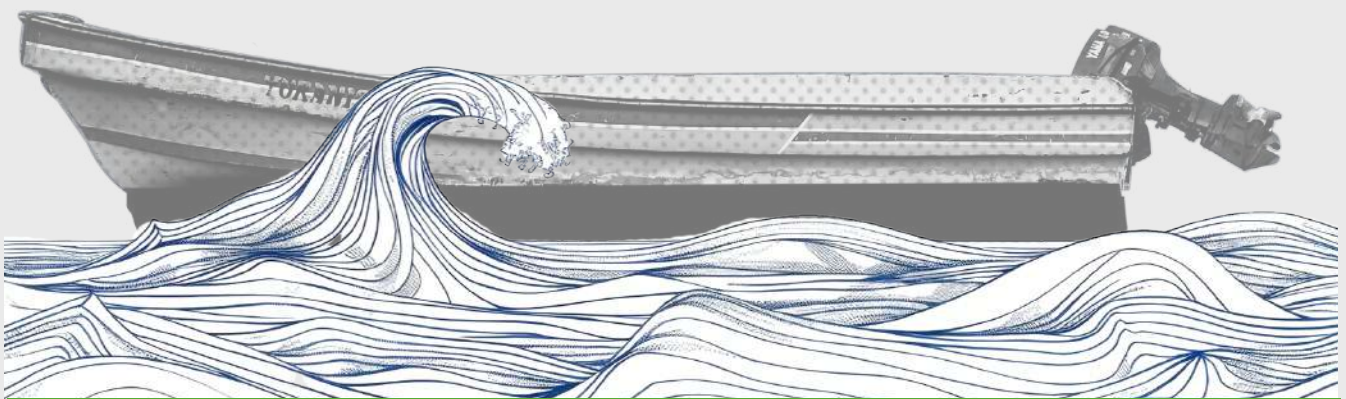
Source: Action Against Hunger (2023)

Within this new dynamic on the Colombian-Panamanian border, maritime routes are beginning to be used as the official means of return from Panama to Colombia. With the land crossing of the border at El Darien closed, maritime transport appears as the official strategy for the return of migrants present in Panama, but the risks for the migrant population using these routes must be made visible.



4.

# **INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITIES, SOCIAL ISSUES AND SECURITY CHALLENGES: KEY FACTORS IN THE ANALYSIS OF MARITIME MIGRATION ROUTES IN**



The development of informal maritime migration routes in Colombia is not only the result of the country's strategic position, such as the transit from South America to Central America, but also of different contextual factors that facilitate the operation of these maritime corridors. These factors include: a) limitations in institutional presence and capacity, b) poverty and social problems, and c) dynamics of the Colombian armed conflict and conflict economies.

Regarding institutional capacities, the presence of state agencies in most of these Colombian coastal or maritime territories is limited, or sometimes non-existent. Colombia has 892,118 km<sup>2</sup> of sea, equivalent to 45% of its total territory, and represents a challenge for a permanent presence<sup>20</sup>. In the case of the Colombian Pacific and coastal areas, the challenges increase due to the obstacles in accessing these territories, which have limited or no road connectivity. In general, the Colombian state has historically allowed the natural flow of migrants in border corridors, in many cases, due to the limited capacity to manage these transits. In addition to these challenges of institutional presence in maritime or coastal areas, there are factors such as the presence and territorial control that, in many contexts, are developed by NSAGs and/or criminal structures.

The areas through which the maritime routes pass also have multiple problems associated with poverty factors and limitations in access and services for local populations. Territories such as the department of Chocó, a key point on the Pacific and Darien Routes, present some of Colombia's most profound poverty and food insecurity indicators. Within these zones, migration, especially in municipalities along the land and/or maritime routes, has become an essential part of the local economy in urban and rural areas<sup>21</sup>.

Recently, the decrease in south-north flows of migrants has generated an economic impact on specific local communities heavily dependent on

migration-related livelihood activities. An example of this is the municipality of Necoclí, a key point at the entrance to El Darien, which in 2024 had the transit of 205,700 migrants, a figure 4 times higher than the municipality's total population (45,503 inhabitants)<sup>22</sup>. The lack of flow has generated the closure of commercial establishments and strongly impacted informal commerce that depended on the population that emigrated to El Darien. This same impact could be documented in municipalities along the Pacific Route, which also generated dependence of these economies on migration in recent years.

Finally, it cannot be overlooked that factors such as the armed conflict and the conflict economies interact directly with these informal migratory maritime routes. Borders and maritime routes have a high geostrategic value for NSAGs, as part of mobility corridors for people and resources. In this case, the overlap between these maritime migration routes and drug trafficking routes is significant; these actors often control the processes and resources derived from the transit of migrants. This is why many of these maritime routes are deliberately made invisible, and access to them is restricted.

Along with the decrease in south-north migration flows and the increase in north-south migration flows (return), changes have been identified in the involvement of these NSAGs in land and maritime migratory routes. From a previous participation in the south-north flows, especially in the Colombian border territory, in the north-south flow, to date, it seems that the involvement of these actors has decreased, and, in the case of Colombia, the regulation of these flows has been stopped or reduced. The closure of camps along the Colombian route from El Darien, in the south-north direction, as well as restrictions on the mobility or expulsion of migrant populations in certain transit territories, show notable transformations underway in the different local contexts.

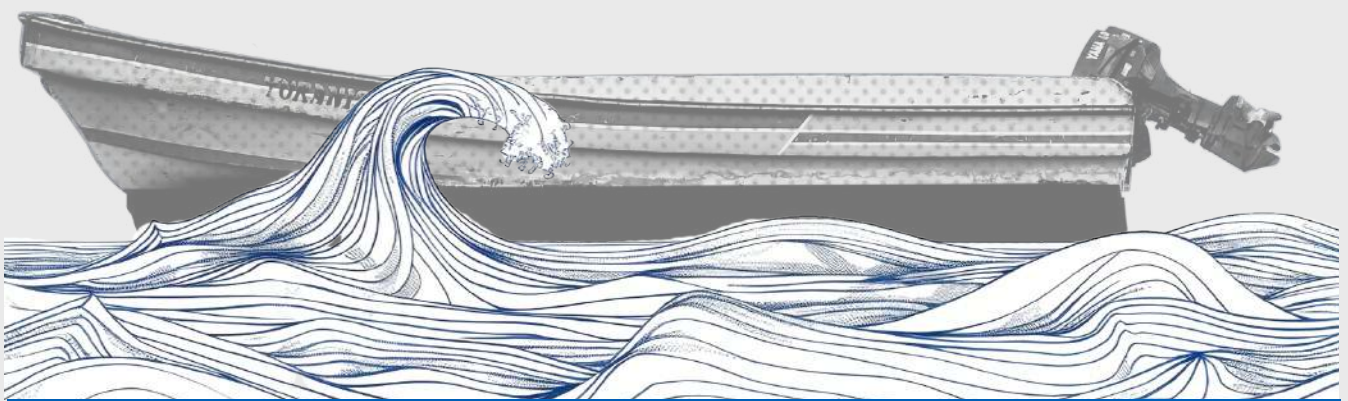
<sup>20</sup> INVEMAR (2022) "Colombia 50% de mar". Boletín. 19.10.2022.

<sup>21</sup> Action Against Hunger (2023) Darien. Situation of Mixed Migratory Flows. Report. Bogotá. September 2023.

<sup>22</sup> DANE (2024) Censo poblacional. 2024. Base de datos; Migración Colombia (2025) Migrantes Irregulares en Tránsito. Sistema de Información para el Monitoreo de Fenómeno Migratorio. Corte: febrero 2025.

**5.**

# **CARIBBEAN, DARIEN, AND PACIFIC: MARITIME ROUTES OF INFORMAL MIGRATION IN COLOMBIA**





From the collection of primary and secondary sources, it can be noted that Colombia currently has three informal maritime migration routes (Caribbean, Pacific, and Darien). These routes arise from the country's strategic location in the transit to Central

America and the possibility of establishing such movement through the Caribbean Sea or the Pacific Ocean. These routes' characteristics vary in visibility, risks, costs, and actors involved in the transit process.

**MAP 4. MARITIME ROUTES OF INFORMAL MIGRATION WITH TRANSIT THROUGH COLOMBIA, 2025**



Prepared by: Action Against Hunger/HEKS-EPER



## CARIBBEAN ROUTE

The Caribbean route is the one that connects the San Andrés Islands (a Colombian archipelago located in the Caribbean) with Central America, specifically Nicaragua, arriving in areas such as Bluefields or Corn Island. It is a historic maritime route not only in terms of the connection and exchange of the local population itself, but also in terms of drug trafficking since the 1980s to date. Regarding the characteristics of the route, this is an air-sea route, since access to the island of San Andres is via commercial flights from cities such as Bogota or Medellin, and then by sea to different points in Nicaragua, which can take from 2 to 4 hours, depending on the boat. Maritime access of migrants directly to San Andres from ports such as Cartagena or Barranquilla is minimal or non-existent, according to those consulted.

The “VIP Route” denomination in the San Andrés-Nicaragua trip derives from the costs of using this route, since air transportation, lodging, and resources for maritime travel are required. The main incentive for using the route has been to avoid transit through El Darien. San Andrés and Nicaragua travel costs are between US\$1,500 and US\$3,000 per person. For these reasons, this route is used by migrants with high financial resources and is heterogeneous in terms of nationality, age, and gender of the transit population.

Although there are official records of identification of informal migration through San Andres since 2014, with some peaks in 2016 (92 people) and 2018 (105 people), the exponential growth in transit through

**MAP 5. CARIBBEAN MARITIME ROUTE OF INFORMAL MIGRATION**



**Elaboration:** Action Against Hunger/HEKS-EPER

<sup>23</sup> Migración Colombia (2025) Migrantes Irregulares en Tránsito. Sistema de Información para el Monitoreo de Fenómeno Migratorio. Febrero 2025.

this route occurs between 2021 and 2022, going from 15 to 568 people, with an increase in that year of 3,820%<sup>23</sup>. The predominant tourist framework of the island makes the migrant population waiting to move invisible, so there may be a significant underreporting. It should be noted that this population was waiting to travel by sea to different points in Nicaragua, the only possible route being from San Andres Islas.

Figures on the rescue of migrants by the Colombian Navy, during maritime operations, reveal even higher numbers of migrant transit. 2022 was the year with the highest number of rescues of migrants in boats, with a total of 711 persons, followed by 2023 (453 persons) and 2024 (273 persons). Among the nationalities of those rescued were Venezuela, Argentina, Ecuador, Cuba, Dominican Republic,

Uzbekistan, Colombia, Chile, China, Azerbaijan, Peru, Vietnam, and India. As of February 2025, there were no records of north-south flows arriving on the island, but this phenomenon is not ruled out in the future.

Among the migrants who disappeared in suspected shipwrecks, 59 cases were recorded in 2022, 38 cases in 2023, and 4 cases in 2024. Of this population, 86% were of Venezuelan nationality, followed by Colombian (7%) and Dominican (2%). Official reports establish a progressive drop in the number of interceptions of boats and the number of migrants rescued, as well as the capture of structures dedicated to these activities. Still, the figures should also be interpreted from the reduction in the operational capacity of Colombian authorities in patrolling the area<sup>24</sup>.

## CARIBBEAN ROUTE CHARACTERISTICS



### KEY POINTS

San Andrés (Colombia), Corn Island y Bluefields (Nicaragua).



### TYPE OF ROUTE

Sea – Air



### PREREQUISITES FOR ACCESS TO THE ROUTE

Air access to San Andrés is a key factor limiting the use of this route due to costs.



### BOAT CHARACTERISTICS

Speedboats, commercial vessels.



### MIGRANT TYPOLOGY

Migrants with greater financial resources, varying in age, gender, and nationality.



### COSTS

\$1,500 to \$3,000 (only sea transport from San Andrés to Nicaragua).



### RISKS

Shipwrecks, vessels unfit for open sea travel, abandonment of migrants in cays.



### BIDIRECTIONAL

For now, there are no reports of this two-way flow, with the flow being more oriented toward Central America.



### CONTROL OVER THE ROUTE

There is territorial control, as it is a strategic drug trafficking route, but not as explicit as in other contexts. There are reports of Nicaraguan structures entering the area and directly offering services to migrants in San Andrés.

<sup>24</sup> Fieldwork information. San Andres Island. February 2025.

Regarding the boats used in the trips, this route has an installed capacity for handling ships and speedboats, which are directly related to tourism exchange and services, as well as illicit economies. There are no regular departures, as these trips are made at night (as in the case of speedboats) and during the day (tourist boats). Likewise, there is no perception of hegemonic control by a specific NSAG or actor on this route. The trip regulation also appears open to continental actors, as in the case of Nicaraguan individuals.

The risks posed by this route include weather conditions during navigation and the condition of the boats that cover these routes, which can cause shipwrecks during the journey. Likewise, there have been several cases in which migrants are abandoned on keys or islets by those responsible for the boats for various reasons, including the fear of being captured by the authorities for smuggling migrants.



## DARIEN ROUTE

The Darien Route covers the route that connects the municipalities of Necoclí and Turbo (Antioquia), with Acandí and Capurganá (Chocó), which represents the entrance to El Darien region, and with it the transit to Panama, to areas such as Puerto Obaldía or Carrete, among others. It is worth mentioning that there are different combinations of land, sea, and river travel along this route. In the various routes, the choice of travel is mediated by the resources available to the migrant. Transportation to Necoclí, the main port, takes place in vehicles from cities such as Montería (with air or land access), as well as from other towns in the interior of Colombia.

Maritime travel plays a significant role in this route since, from Turbo/Necoclí to Acandí/Capurganá, migrant groups, regardless of their resources, necessarily use maritime transport, which costs US\$80. However, for a large number of migrants, the cost of the marine passage is a significant barrier to continuing their transit. It has been one of the causes of previous processes of repression of this population, generating the need to establish humanitarian assistance strategies in these areas.

Upon arrival in Acandí/Capurganá, there is a segmentation between groups of migrants regarding the choice of land or sea routes to cross El Darien. Land

**MAP 6. DARIEN MARITIME ROUTES OF INFORMAL MIGRATION**



**Elaboration:** Action Against Hunger/HEKS-EPER

routes last longer, from 2 to 6 days depending on weather conditions and the route, while maritime routes can reduce transit time to 1 to 2 days. These maritime routes mainly depart from the town of Capurganá or Sapzurro (Colombia), to beaches such as Carrete or Puerto Obaldía (Panamá)<sup>25</sup>.

Within the El Darien route, maritime routes are considered “VIP” because they represent savings in time, travel, and physical wear and tear and limit exposure to the risks involved in overland transit through the jungle. The cost of maritime travel, around US\$1,500 per person, considerably limits access to this type of transportation for most of the

migrant population.

Among the figures for maritime transit of migrant population through El Darien, there is a record of transit between Turbo/Necoclí and Acandí/Capurganá, which is a formal process and monitored by Colombian institutions, and which in 2024 totaled 266,700 migrants moving through this route. Migrants must complete an exit migration registration in these municipalities, without which they cannot embark. However, the numbers of migrants transiting the parallel maritime routes, either directly from Necoclí, Turbo, Acandí, or Capurganá to different locations in Panama, are limited<sup>26</sup>.

## DARIEN ROUTE CHARACTERISTICS



### KEY POINTS

Turbo, Necoclí, Capurganá, Acandí, Sapzurro (Colombia), Puerto San Blas, Carrete y Puerto Obaldía (Panamá).



### TYPE OF ROUTE

Land – Sea – River



### PREREQUISITES FOR ACCESS TO THE ROUTE

This route offers the best access in terms of cost and land access, but there is still the obstacle of sea passage...



### BOAT CHARACTERISTICS

Speedboats, commercial vessels (Necoclí-Acandí, Capurganá).



### MIGRANT TYPOLOGY

A wide range of migrants of different nationalities and financial resources.



### COSTS

80 USD (Necoclí-Acandí), y 1,500 USD (from Capurganá, Colombia to Carrete, Panamá).



### RISKS

Shipwrecks, drowning, abandonment in jungle areas, sexual violence.



### CONTROL OVER THE ROUTE

Territorial control by NSAG, which coordinates the entire route and controls traffic flows.



### BIDIRECTIONAL

Recent trends in 2025 show that this route is also beginning to be used as a return route (north-south). There have already been reports of migrant deaths due to boat sinkings in the north-south flow.

<sup>25</sup> Acción contra el Hambre (2023) Darién. Situación de Flujos Migratorios Mixtos. Informe. Bogotá. Septiembre 2023.

<sup>26</sup> Migración Colombia (2025) Migrantes Irregulares en Tránsito. Sistema de Información para el Monitoreo de Fenómeno Migratorio. Febrero 2025.



Among the figures that can be mentioned regarding maritime routes in El Darien are the migrants rescued by the Colombian Navy, where the highest numbers were found in the year 2021, with 104 people, followed by 2023, 89 people, 2024, 35 people, and 2022, 34 people. Among the nationalities rescued are Cuba, Uzbekistan, Chile, Uruguay, Nepal, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Ecuador, Haiti, Venezuela, Peru, and China. Of the 227 migrants rescued between 2021 and 2024, 13% were children or adolescents<sup>27</sup>.

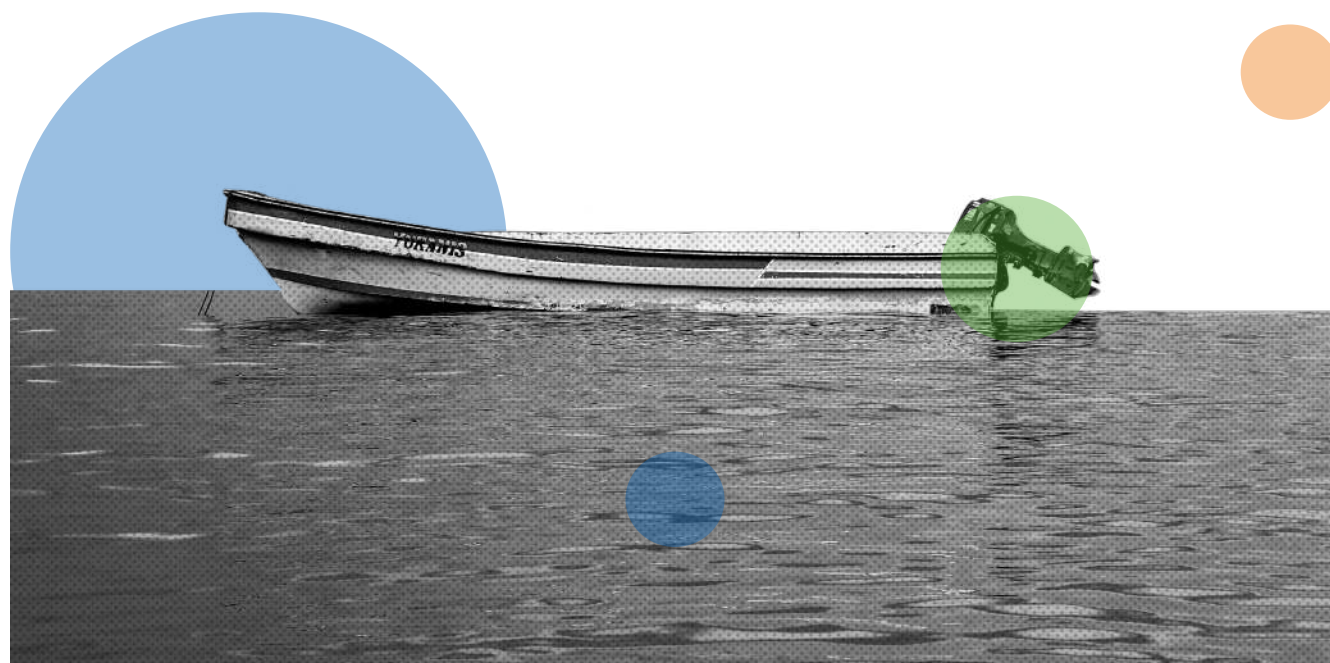
About the dynamics of north-south (return) flows, as previously mentioned, the Darien Route is the one that has seen the most significant growth in this phenomenon. Within this new migratory dynamic on the Colombian-Panamanian border, maritime routes are beginning to be used as an official return route from Panama to Colombia, departing from Caribbean ports such as Miramar or San Blas. With the land crossing of the border in El Darien closed, maritime transport appears to be the official return strategy for migrants present in Panama. Still, problems also arise due to transportation costs and security along the way, which encourages migrants to take other routes due to fear of interaction with the authorities.

Regarding the dead or missing migrant population in this area, according to official IOM figures, between 2015-2024 in El Darien, 250 deaths

related to drowning were recorded, which may be applicable about maritime displacements<sup>28</sup>, but with the clarification that this area may also include events about fluvial (river) displacements through El Darien. It is worth noting that, as is the case with disappearances and deaths of migrants on maritime routes, there is probably an underreporting of figures at the general level.

Among the risks for migrants in their movements along maritime routes through El Darien are shipwreck, due to the use of boats that do not have the characteristics for movement in open sea, as well as the strong navigability conditions that exist at times in the area. The risks also include drowning due to accidents or falling off the boats, and abandonment of migrants at the border on jungle beaches with no connection to land transit routes within the Darien jungle.

The control of the NSAGs over the maritime route of El Darien is marked and is part of their hegemonic territorial control on the Colombian side. The regulation of migration flows in this zone has also been oriented towards obtaining resources, including land and maritime transit. However, as previously mentioned, there are changes in the regulation of north-south flows (return), which raise questions about the level of involvement these groups may have in this new transformation of the migratory dynamics in the area.



<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> OIM (2025) Missing Migrant Project. Database.

## PACIFIC ROUTE

The Pacific route has the lowest visibility among Colombia's maritime routes of informal migration. The complexity of this route explains this in terms of security and access. Like other routes, the Pacific route does not exist as a single route. Still, it comprises different types of land, sea, and air routes, which are developed according to the migrants' resources, varying significantly in terms of travel time and risk exposure. Among the key points along the route are different maritime connections along the Pacific coast, such as Tumaco, Buenaventura, Bahía Solano, or Juradó. However, it is a route with land access to ports such as Tumaco or Buenaventura, allowing entry from the country's south and air access to Bahía Solano from cities such as Medellín or Cartago.

According to official figures, this route is not included in Migration Colombia's monitoring bulletin. However, in its annual report for 2024, this institution mentions the detection of irregular maritime transit by 33 migrants, which represents only 4% of the total detected in this corridor (825 people identified)<sup>29</sup>.

Regarding the figures on dead or missing migrants, the IOM databases only have a record of one migrant from India who died from drowning, an event that occurred in 2021 on the beach of Juradó (Chocó)<sup>30</sup>. However, based on information from primary sources in the field, it is found that, on beaches in the areas above, there may be corpses washed back by the sea, which may be migrants in transit.

**MAP 7. PACIFIC MARITIME ROUTES OF INFORMAL MIGRATION**



**Elaboration:** Action Against Hunger/HEKS-EPER

<sup>29</sup> Migración Colombia (2025) Migración en tránsito irregular en Colombia. 2024. Observatorio de Migraciones, Migrantes y Movilidad Humana. Marzo 2025.

<sup>30</sup> It is also worth noting that the IOM database does not include the Pacific route as such, and this case falls under the Darien route. Source: IOM (2025) Missing Migrant Project. Database.

Although information on the bidirectionality of the migratory flow is limited, the information collected in the field shows that the arrival of population in north-south transit (return) has been registered since the beginning of the year 2025. One of the cases reported by primary sources mentions the arrival of 17 Venezuelan migrants in January 2025 to the municipality of Juradó. It is presumed that all of these arrivals were made mainly through maritime routes from Panama<sup>31</sup>.

One of the differential characteristics of the Pacific route is the combination of the type of vessels used for maritime transit. In addition to the presence of artisanal boats and speedboats, already present in other routes such as the Caribbean or Darien, the Pacific route is also served by vessels that depart

from Buenaventura, which sometimes transfer to small boats on the high seas. These transshipments of migrant population at sea are motivated by the fears that the Colombian population that carries out these transports has of being captured in Panama due to the high sentences for migrant smuggling.

Among the risks encountered in maritime travel along this route are shipwrecks, vessels unsuitable for open sea travel, and the area's difficult navigability conditions. It should be noted that, in this route, the possibility of shortening maritime routes is seen as an essential element due to the risks of mobilization through the Pacific Ocean, avoiding what is called "groundswell", a phenomenon that "generates a movement of the wave system that gradually increases its length and height"<sup>32</sup>. In addition to climate and boat

## PACIFIC ROUTE CHARACTERISTICS



### KEY POINTS

Tumaco, Buenaventura, Bahía Solano, Juradó (Colombia), y Jaqué, Cocalito (Panamá).



### TYPE OF ROUTE

Land – Sea – River – Air



### PREREQUISITES FOR ACCESS TO THE ROUTE

This route allows access by land to Buenaventura from the country's south, but also offers air access to Bahía Solano.



### BOAT CHARACTERISTICS

Ships, speedboats, and traditional boats.



### MIGRANT TYPOLOGY

Migrants with resources, mainly Asian and, to a lesser extent, Latin American. There are different levels of resources, which makes it possible to reduce risks.



### COSTS

From 1,500 to 5,000 USD



### RISKS

Shipwrecks, vessels unfit for open sea travel, disappearances at sea, abandonment of migrants in jungle areas.



### BIDIRECTIONAL

In January 2025, 17 migrants of Venezuelan nationality were identified upon arrival in Juradó and were transferred to Medellín.



### CONTROL OVER THE ROUTE

Territorial control by NSAG, which coordinates the entire route and controls traffic flows. In some areas, there are territorial disputes, which increase the risks. In areas such as Buenaventura, the fragmentation of the conflict makes the situation more complex.

<sup>31</sup> Fieldwork information. San Andres Island. February 2025.

<sup>32</sup> Migración Colombia (2025) Migración en tránsito irregular en Colombia. 2024. Observatorio de Migraciones, Migrantes y Movilidad Humana. Marzo 2025- Bogotá.

risks, in the fieldwork process, actors mentioned violent actions such as robbery, murders on the high seas, and abandonment of migrants in jungle areas without access to land routes.

Regarding the profiles of migrants using these maritime routes through the Pacific, it can be noted that they have high incomes and that, historically, they belong to Asian nationalities (India, Bangladesh, China, among others) and, to a lesser extent, to Latin American nationalities. The cost of maritime transport can vary from US\$1,500 to US\$5,000, depending on the route and type of vessel.

Among the risk factors on this route is the intersection of factors such as drug trafficking routes and transit through areas of territorial disputes between NSAGs that significantly limit information. The Colombian Pacific region (comprising the departments of Cauca, Nariño, Valle del Cauca, and Chocó) is one of the areas most affected by the armed conflict in the country. These departments lead the nation in massive displacement (74% of the national events) and confinement (52% of the national total)<sup>33</sup>. These

high levels of violence are explained by the dynamics of disputes between NSAGs for territorial control of a strategic zone for conflict economies (drug trafficking, mining, among others), as well as for the mobility corridors and control of the exits to the Pacific Ocean.

In this context, maritime migratory routes do not escape this control; the NSAGs articulate and control many of these routes and flows. The complexity of the Pacific route, in terms of security, arises from the fact that along its path, it crosses areas of dispute between NSAGs, which increases the risks for migrants due to charges or signals that the different groups may make, which can jeopardize the integrity of people in transit. These risks are not only present in rural areas, but also in the transit of migrants within cities, such as Buenaventura, where territorial disputes between gangs are found in urban areas.

A characteristic element of this route is the marked limitations in the presence of migrant care routes and the absence of organizations directly serving the migrant population in transit.

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<sup>33</sup> CICR (2025) Retos humanitarios 2025. Colombia. Informe anual. Marzo 2025. Bogotá.





## **CONCLUSIONS**

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## **MARITIME MIGRATION ROUTES ARE THE MOST LETHAL SPACES FOR THE POPULATION IN TRANSIT. IN COLOMBIA, THIS IS NO EXCEPTION**

Globally, maritime routes are the areas of most significant risk for migrants in all their journeys. In Colombia, available official figures indicate that drowning is the leading cause of death or disappearance of migrants in transit through the country, accounting for 48% of the cases recorded. These extremely high risks for the migrant population along the maritime routes are not only due to climatic factors or navigability (which are present in the different routes of the Caribbean, Pacific, and Darien), but also to factors such as armed conflict and conflict economies that operate in these territories.

## **MARITIME ROUTES ARE RELEVANT AND ARE BIDIRECTIONAL**

Maritime routes have always existed, but they are becoming much more relevant today with the changes in population flows, especially the north-south (return) linked to changes in international migration policy. In this case, the incentives for these maritime routes to begin to mobilize large population flows are high, both because of Panamanian migration policies (which are prioritizing them in the transfer to the Colombian border), as well as on the part of the migrant population, who want to find new forms of transit, in a context of the closure of the land border of El Darien, seeking to avoid interaction and detection by the authorities.

## **HIGH DEMAND IS AN INCENTIVE FOR INFORMALITY AND RISKS**

The impossibility of making land crossings and the fear that migrants have of interacting with authorities can generate incentives for more precarious maritime movements with greater exposure to risk. This implies the possibility of opening new routes, involving actors and routes that would increase not only the number of deaths or disappearances at sea, but also risks associated with the protection, health, and food security of this population. The poor condition of the boats, coupled with the absence of protection

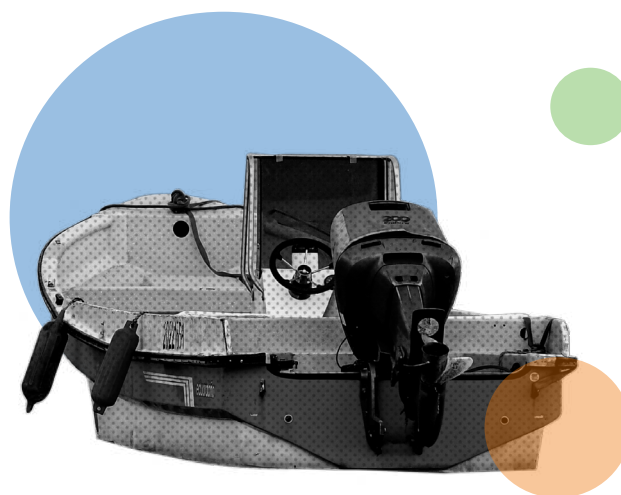
mechanisms in maritime transfers (e.g. life jackets in poor condition or the absence of them ) constitutes a significant risk, especially when it has become evident that the prioritization of this means of transport is for populations such as children, the elderly or pregnant women.

## **VERY HIGH LEVELS OF VULNERABILITY DUE TO THE INVISIBILITY OF MIGRANTS IN MARITIME TRANSIT**

There is marked control of these routes by NSAGs, which, added to the opacity of official information, increases vulnerability due to the impossibility of tracing migrants who move along informal maritime migration routes. Given this, the already identified risks of murders, disappearances, or abandonment of migrants in remote areas can be pointed out. In addition, changes in the levels of vulnerability that appear in the context of reverse migration flows may mean that the risk of displacement by sea includes migrants who were identified as part of the “VIP routes”, who, in this context, could see their resources exhausted and seek any type of transportation.

## **LACK OF PRESENCE AND ARTICULATION AT THE INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL ALONG THE ROUTE**

The areas where maritime routes of informal migration are intensely present have in common a marked institutional weakness or absence, which constitutes one of the great challenges in the possibility of attending to a migrant population with very high levels of vulnerability. The need to promote coordination is not only vital in the intervention that can preserve the integrity of the migrant population that moves along informal maritime routes, but also in the constant production of information that allows for the prediction of trends and transformations in a highly complex issue such as maritime routes.



# WHAT ARE WE DOING AT ACTION AGAINST HUNGER?

## MIGRATION DYNAMICS IN NORTH-SOUTH FLOW IN THE MUNICIPALITY OF ACANDÍ (CHOCÓ, COLOMBIA)

Located on the Colombian-Panamanian border as an entry point into El Darien, the municipality of Acandí (Chocó, Colombia) is the main recipient of the recent north-south migratory flow. In these areas, gaps in access to basic services, geographical access difficulties and the presence of Non-State Armed Groups (NSAGs) limit the territorial response capacity and expose the migrant population, who return with high levels of vulnerability, to double and triple impacts due to violence and exposure to extreme weather events.

The arrival of migrants to this municipality has different routes and means of transportation, which vary depending on the economic resources available, and where the population arrives directly to the populated capital (Acandí) or to the villages of Capurganá or Sapzurro, further north on the Panamanian border.

In the case of Capurganá, the arrival is by sea (from Puerto Baldío in Panama). Sometimes, however, boats arrive directly at Sapzurro (a township further north) and from there they transit through the jungle by land or by sea to Capurganá. Passage through Capurganá has recently become mandatory, since the Maritime Migratory Control Post (PCMM) is located there, where migrants must go through the administrative process of formalizing their migratory status<sup>34</sup>, without which they cannot embark to municipalities such as Necoclí or Turbo (Antioquia), or continue their transit through Colombia.

In Acandí, the high levels of vulnerability in groups of migrants returning by land through El Darien jungle are associated with the depletion of economic resources along the route, the deterioration of their health and food security, as well as exposure to the risk of re-victimization due to violence in transit through the area. In addition, migrants arriving in Acandí are forced to travel through the jungle or pay

for maritime transportation (on average COP 65,000 - USD 16 per person) to reach Capurganá to complete their migratory procedures.

The prohibition of maritime transport companies to transport migrants without the necessary migratory documentation, the costs of such transport (\$180,000 COP - 43 USD) and the time it takes for administrative border procedures (3 to 5 days) have begun to generate a backlog of migrants in the north-south flow, especially in the headwaters of Acandí and Capurganá. Migrants who do not have economic resources remain in Capurganá for several days in order to collect funds to cover transportation costs through temporary sales activities and informal jobs in the cargo, cleaning, and hotel sectors, among others. Migration Colombia estimates that in Panama, as of March 2024, there were about 1,000 migrants in reverse flow, mostly of Venezuelan nationality who would be heading to Colombia, arriving in Capurganá whose local population does not exceed 5,000 inhabitants<sup>35</sup>.

The high cost of living in Capurganá, where 90% of the economy is based on tourism (hotels, bars, restaurants and discotheques) and where the only point of entry for merchandise and personnel is by sea, increases the risk of adopting negative coping strategies in search of economic resources for transportation and food.

In the face of this phenomenon, it is worth mentioning the limited response capacities of local authorities, both in terms of resources for the attention of the migrant population with high levels of vulnerability, as well as the structural conditions of poverty and limitations in access to goods and services in the municipality. Regarding the Multidimensional Poverty Index, 51% of the total population of Acandí is under the poverty indicator, which is 24 points above the national average

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<sup>34</sup> Migración Colombia (2025) Migración en tránsito irregular en Colombia. 2024. Observatorio de Migraciones, Migrantes y Movilidad Humana. Marzo 2025.

<sup>35</sup> Migration Colombia. Report on reverse flows of Venezuelan migrants. 10 March 2025.

<sup>36</sup> DNP (2025) Terridata. Territorial files Acandí. Chocó. Accessed: 04.04.2025.

(27%)<sup>36</sup>. In addition to this, the presence and hegemony of the NSAGs, throughout the municipality of Acandí, aggravates the humanitarian panorama due to the imposition of rules restricting the mobility of the migrant population.

## **RESPONSE ACTION AGAINST HUNGER IN EL DARIEN**

Since 2023, Action Against Hunger has had a permanent operational base in Acandí and Necoclí, and a continuous presence in the camps at the entrance to El Darien, with health teams focused on maternal and child health care and the care of pregnant and lactating women. The response has been permanently coordinated with health and governmental secretaries in the area and other cooperation actors. Currently, Action Against Hunger is implementing the humanitarian response to the new north-south flow phenomenon, concentrating its intervention in the municipality of Acandí, both in the main town and in the villages of Capurganá and Sapzurro.





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