



Departure from the Port of Miramar
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REPORT OF THE FELD VISIT TO COLÓN, PALENQUE – MIRAMAR (PANAMA) REVERSE IRREGULAR MIGRATORY FLOW

APRIL 2025

GENERAL CONTEXT



ITINERARY: The visit took place on April 3 and 4, 2025.

Visits were made to the villages of Palenque and Miramar in the district of Santa Isabel, province of Colón, Panama.

Since the change of government in Panama in July 2024, significant shifts have occurred in the migratory dynamics. One of the most notable has been the reduction in the number of migrants entering through the Darién Gap and the definitive closure—on March 13, 2025—of the Temporary Migrant Reception Stations (ETRM)s in Bajo Chiquito, Lajas Blancas, and Canaán Membrillo, which had been operating with support from international cooperation.

At the same time, changes in U.S. migration policy—particularly the suspension of appointments for regular entry through mobile applications since January 2025—have led to an unexpected shift: thousands of migrants have begun returning to their countries of origin or moving once again toward the south. This emerging phenomenon, known as reverse irregular migratory flow, has been steadily increasing.

ALTERNATIVE ROUTE: IRREGULAR TRANSIT THROUGH PANAMA'S CARIBBEAN COAST

In response to the closure of official migration routes, migrants are resorting to non-conventional pathways to return to South America:

1. Entry into Panama from Costa Rica:

Migrants cross into the province of Chiriquí and travel by public transportation from the city of David to the main bus terminal in Panama City. The journey takes approximately 6 to 7 hours and costs between USD 10–15.

2. From Panama City to Colombia:

Informal networks offer packages for approximately USD 300, which typically include: transport from Panama City to the coastal towns of Palenque or Miramar in the region of Colón; boat transportation from Palenque or Miramar (Panama) to Necoclí or Turbo (Colombia) stopping for one night in Puerto Obaldia. The package also includes meals and lodging.

Estimated times:

- From Panama City to Miramar/Palenque (Panama), roughly 4 hours by public transportation.
- From Miramar/Palenque to Puerto Obaldia (Panama), between 7 and 9 hours by boat. Before reaching Puerto Obaldía, boats usually make stops at islands such as Gaigirgordub or Ailigandí within the Guna Yala comarca.
- From Puerto Obaldia (Panama) to Necocli or Turbo (Colombia), around 1 hour by boat

MAP: REVERSE IRREGULAR MIGRATORY FLOW TO MIRAMAR

SOURCE: Own elaboration

CONDITIONS OF THE ROUTE AND HUMANITARIAN CHALLENGES

- The boats operating along the maritime route are equipped with outboard motors and typically carry between 30 and 40 passengers. They often exceed safe capacity limits, both in terms of passengers and luggage, significantly increasing the risks¹, particularly for children.

¹ [Video of boat starting the route.](#)

- Departures take place daily between 8:00 and 9:30 a.m. On average, two boats per day departure from Palenque, each transporting around 20 people, often in overcrowded conditions.
- The journey to Puerto Obaldía takes between 7 and 9 hours. Upon arrival, migrants usually stay overnight before continuing their journey toward Capurganá and subsequently to Necoclí or Turbo, Colombia.
- The maritime leg is the most expensive segment of the route, with costs ranging from USD 260 to 300 per person.



Local Tensions and Infrastructure Improvements: Following the shipwreck on February 21, 2025, transit operations ceased in Puerto Cartí (located on Panama's northern coast, specifically in the San Blas archipelago) and shifted to Palenque and Miramar. This relocation has triggered tensions among boat operators' associations competing for control of the service. As a result of this rivalry, improvements to port infrastructure, particularly in the port of Palenque—have been reported.

Stranded Populations and Need for Assistance: The journey from Tapachula, Mexico, to Panama typically takes 5 to 7 days, with migrants transiting rapidly through Guatemala, Honduras, and Costa Rica. However, exiting Panama has become the most challenging part of the route due to high transportation costs and limited financial resources. Consequently, many migrants are left stranded for weeks in communities such as Miramar, awaiting the funds necessary to continue their journey southward.

TESTIMONIES AND CONDITIONS OF RETURNEES DURING THEIR PASSAGE THROUGH THE MIRAMAR COMMUNITY DURING THEIR PASSAGE THROUGH THE COMMUNITY OF MIRAMAR



Miramar is a small coastal community consisting of approximately 116 households. The local population primarily relies on fishing and domestic tourism, particularly on weekends. Although the environment is typically calm, recent weeks have seen a significant increase in the arrival of migrants, who reach the area by public buses or private vehicles at various times throughout the day.

Many people in transit spend the night on porches or in outdoor spaces of local homes, where they are allowed to sleep on mats or cardboard and use bathroom facilities—either out of solidarity or in exchange for small services such as cleaning.

Humanitarian Situation and Returnee Testimonies

During a recent visit to the community, several cases of migrants stranded due to lack of resources to continue their southbound return were identified. Among them:

- A 31-year-old woman and her 15-year-old son have been in Miramar for over a month.
- Another family has spent two weeks in similar conditions.
- A pregnant woman and her partner are attempting to earn money through construction work, supported by residents.

In three of the four family interviews conducted during the visit, individuals reported having been kidnapped in Mexico and held for periods ranging from four to eight days until they were able to pay a

ransom. Although the Darién Gap crossing was described as extremely challenging, the passage through Mexico was considered the most traumatic, leaving deep emotional scars.

Despite these experiences, the families initially remained hopeful of reaching the United States. However, the cancellation of regular appointment systems forced their decision to return. All interviewed families were of Venezuelan nationality, but none intended to return to Venezuela. Instead, they aimed to go back to Colombia or Ecuador, where they had previously lived.

Economic Barriers to Return

The journey from Tapachula (Mexico) to Panama is estimated to cost around USD 200 per person. Returning from Panama to Colombia can cost an additional USD 260 to 300, bringing the total to approximately USD 500 per person.

This amount poses a significant barrier for those seeking to return, as many lack the financial means to complete the journey.

Shelter Conditions

There are currently at least two locations in the town where migrants can access basic sanitation facilities. Additionally, a two-story structure known as “La Casa Rosada” was identified, containing six rooms and shared bathrooms (four showers and one toilet).

While the infrastructure could potentially be used to organize temporary shelter, the building is in poor condition, lacking furniture and presenting protection risks, especially for women, children, and adolescents. As a result, many migrants choose to sleep outdoors despite the associated hardships.

Basic Services and Health Care

Miramar has a small health center with minimal resources. During the visit, basic medications were unavailable. Cases such as a girl injured by broken glass and a pregnant woman had to be referred to the health center in Nombre de Dios (approximately 15 minutes away), which also lacked basic medical supplies for simple procedures such as sutures. The Miramar clinic operates on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays from 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., staffed by a nurse. A physician assigned to Nombre de Dios conducts biweekly outreach visits to Miramar.

The Panamanian Red Cross provided temporary medical care between 9:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m., attending to common ailments such as joint pain, swollen feet, and respiratory infections.

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) is expected to arrive shortly to support the Ministry of Health (MINSA) in monitoring and responding to the evolving health needs of the community.

Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH)

Access to drinking water is limited and can only be obtained through purchase, which creates a barrier for migrants without resources. There is an urgent need for the distribution of safe water.

Regarding sanitation, many people are forced to relieve themselves on the beach, creating unsanitary conditions. The urgent installation of portable toilets is recommended to reduce health risks and protect the dignity of people in transit.

Security and Institutional Presence

The presence of the National Migration Service (SNM) is intermittent; on some occasions, it has distributed food in collaboration with humanitarian organizations.

The National Police conducts motorized patrols, especially in the port area, but does not have a permanent base in Miramar. The closest station is Nombre de Dios. The base of the National Aeronaval Service (SENAN) is in Palenque and conducts patrols in Miramar. No presence of the National Police or the National Border Service was identified.

It is recommended that humanitarian personnel avoid staying in the area after 4:00 PM due to the presence of local gangs that pose a risk to the safety of migrants and humanitarian staff.

HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE AND ORGANIZATIONAL PRESENCE

Organizations Present and Actions:

- RET International: Conducting surveys, distributing hygiene kits, sunscreen, clothing, and other essential supplies, and management for children requiring special attention.
- Panamanian Red Cross: Providing medical assistance, distributing oral rehydration salts and nutritional supplements such as Ensure.
- HIAS, World Vision, and local churches: Occasional distribution of dignity kits for women.
- IOM, UNHCR, and UNICEF: Monitoring and collecting information on reverse migration flows.

Despite these interventions, there is no continuous presence of humanitarian actors in the area.

MIGRATORY DYNAMICS AND MONITORING

The reverse migration flow has increased, but it has not yet led to a massive expansion of trade in Miramar. The town only has two or three small supermarkets and lacks formal restaurants.

Community solidarity has been crucial, with residents sharing food such as fish, seafood, plantains, and cassava, which migrants cook on makeshift stoves on the beach.

The Panamanian government has not authorized the establishment of formal service points in Miramar, seeking to prevent it from becoming a new critical hotspot like Darién. Currently, there are no official records of entries or exits of migrants.

Given this situation, it is urgent to implement a constant monitoring system to track the evolution of the flow, strengthen institutional coordination, and ensure the protection of the migrant population, as well as to plan for the installation of basic services. Additionally, it is crucial to explore other routes through the Panamanian Caribbean that may currently be in use.

PHOTO REPOSITORY



LEGEND:

1 and 2. Migrants on the return route are temporarily housed on terraces and vacant spaces in local homes, often in exchange for jobs or support. In these spaces, they accommodate their belongings, mattresses, cardboard or other basic resources to rest and spend the night.

3 and 4. External space of the “pink house”, lent by the municipality, where migrants cook and prepare their food on a makeshift campfire. This place has rooms, bathrooms that have already been assigned to migrants, and hammocks have been set up outside the house for those who cannot afford them.