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FEATURED Q&A

Why Does U.S.- Bound Migration Keep Surging?



Nearly a quarter million migrants crossed the dangerous Darién Gap, which connects Panama and Colombia, in the first seven months of this year. // File Photo: Panamanian Government.

Q Almost 250,000 migrants crossed the Darién Gap in Panama and Colombia in this year's first seven months, a greater number than for all of 2022, Panamanian officials said on July 28. The rise came despite an April agreement between the United States, Colombia and Panama to offer alternatives to migration. In a statement on Aug. 2, the International Organization for Migration called for joint efforts to address the root causes driving the record number of migrants and refugees. What explains the surge in U.S.-bound migration? What effect did the April agreement have on migrant flows, and what other solutions can help address the issue?

A Francisca Vigaud-Walsh, director for strategy and advocacy at the Center for Democracy in the Americas: "We have seen a continued rise of migratory flows through the Darién and beyond, in spite of the April agreement that launched a 60-day campaign to stop the irregular movement of people and goods through the Darién, and that announced the establishment of new regular pathways to migrate. Any initiative to expand access to temporary protection, sponsorship, refugee resettlement or labor mobility options is necessary and welcomed. The sheer number of people in need, however, far outweighs the availability of pathways, as well as the urgency and ability to access them. People on the move are fleeing for multiple reasons—extreme violence, food insecurity and the deprivation of human rights, to name a few. Some of these drivers make it urgent to seek safety and security through various means, including traversing the Darién jungle. As governments continue to establish or refine these pathways, they must

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Hurricane Hilary has strengthened into a Category 4 storm off Mexico's Pacific coast and was moving west-northwest.

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Brazil's government is planning to impose caps on carbon dioxide emissions for major companies as part of its CO2 neutrality goal.

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Prosecutors in Colombia Charge 60 in Odebrecht Case

Colombian prosecutors on Thursday charged 60 people in connection with the sweeping bribery case involving Brazilian construction conglomerate Odebrecht. President Gustavo Petro has said the justice system failed to aggressively prosecute banks and politicians in the case.

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Petro // File Photo: Colombian Government.

POLITICAL NEWS

Prosecutors in Colombia Charge 60 in Odebrecht Case

Colombian prosecutors announced criminal indictments on Thursday against 60 people on corruption charges connected to the sweeping bribery case involving Brazilian construction conglomerate Odebrecht, The Wall Street Journal reported. Among those charged are 33 former officials, contractors and advisors of Colombia's state infrastructure agency. Authorities allege that public works contracts were awarded following rigged public tenders, the newspaper reported. More than two dozen others, including former senior Odebrecht executives in Brazil, contractors and lobbyists, were charged with money laundering and conspiracy. In 2016, Odebrecht admitted to bribing officials in a dozen countries, including ones in Latin America, in return for lucrative government contracts. At the same time, it agreed to pay as much as \$4.5 billion to the United States, Brazil and Switzerland to settle the case. In Colombia, prosecutors have said the company paid approximately \$30 million in bribes in order to secure a contract for a 328-mile road construction project, The Wall Street Journal reported. The company was renamed Novonor in 2020 after establishing new procedures to adhere to anticorruption practices. The new procedures were part of a settlement with the U.S. Department of Justice. A Novonor spokesman told the newspaper that its lawyers were reviewing the new charges filed by the Colombian prosecutors, but added that new indictments against former company executives could run afoul of agreements that the company already made with several countries. Marcelo Odebrecht, the company's former president, was among those charged in Colombia, Agence France-Presse reported. Colombian prosecutors added that international arrest warrants had been issued from senior Brazilian Odebrecht executives Eder Paolo Ferracuti, Amilton Hideaki and Marcio Marangoni, AFP reported. Colombian President Gustavo Petro has recently said

that the country's justice system failed to aggressively prosecute banks and politicians allegedly connected to the Odebrecht case, The Wall Street Journal reported. Petro is currently facing his own scandal after his son, Nicolás Petro, admitted to receiving money from people with links to drug trafficking and funneling some of that money into his father's presidential campaign, prosecutors said earlier this month. The president has denied knowing about those contributions.

Hurricane Gains Strength off Mexico's Pacific Coastline

Hurricane Hilary has developed into a category 4 storm off Mexico's Pacific coast and could bring heavy rain to the Southwestern United States by this weekend, the Associated Press reported today. The storm had maximum sustained winds of 145 miles an hour and was located about 400 miles south of the Mexican resort city of Cabo San Lucas, the U.S. National Hurricane Center said in an advisory today at 6 a.m. Mountain Time. Hilary was moving west-northwest at 13 miles an hour, the hurricane center said. Hilary's projected path shows that it could make landfall by Sunday in the middle of the Baja California peninsula, although it may remain offshore while moving toward southern California, the Associated Press reported. If it reaches Southern California, Hilary would be the first tropical storm to do so in 84 years. The hurricane center issued a hurricane watch and tropical storm warning for parts of Baja California state, which means that tropical storm conditions are expected in 36 hours and hurricane conditions within 48 hours. "Heavy rainfall in association with Hilary is expected to impact the Southwestern United States through next Wednesday, peaking on Sunday and Monday," the National Hurricane Center said. Experts believe super-charging hurricanes are a consequence of climate change, as warmer weather lets more moisture fill the air and allows hurricanes to produce more intense precipitation, Al Jazeera reported.

NEWS BRIEFS

Haitian Aid Groups Backed by IRC Suspending Operations

Aid groups in Haiti that are backed by the International Rescue Committee, or IRC, are temporarily halting their operations amid extreme levels of violence in the Caribbean country, Reuters reported. "In a matter of days, violence escalated dramatically in Port-au-Prince, particularly affecting neighborhoods where the IRC collaborates with local organizations to provide vital services," the aid group said in a statement.

Ecuadoreans Head to Polls Sunday for Snap General Elections

Ecuadoreans are to cast votes on Sunday in the country's snap presidential and legislative elections. The presidential ballot will contain the names of eight candidates, including that of Fernando Villavicencio, who was assassinated on Aug. 9 while departing a campaign rally in Quito, the Associated Press reported. Six men have been arrested in connection with the killing. Outgoing President Guillermo Lasso triggered the elections in May, ending his own term and those of lawmakers as they were seeking to impeach him.

Arévalo Leads Polls Ahead of Guatemala Presidential Runoff

Former diplomat Bernardo Arévalo is leading polls ahead of the second round of Guatemala's presidential election on Sunday, Reuters reported. The leader of the progressive Semilla party, Arévalo faces former First Lady Sandra Torres in the vote. Arévalo was nearly removed from the ballot after the first round vote in June when a prosecutor persuaded a court to disqualify the party over alleged irregularities in its registration. The Supreme Court reversed the move, keeping Arévalo on the ballot.

At Least One Person Killed as Earthquake Rattles Colombia

At least one person was killed Thursday as a series of strong earthquakes rattled Colombia, the Associated Press reported. The first earthquake, with a magnitude of 6.3, was centered about 100 miles southeast of Bogotá, according to the U.S. Geological Survey. Two aftershocks followed. The quakes damaged a piece of stonework that fell from the ceiling of Colombia's House of Representatives, but the chamber was unoccupied at the time.

ECONOMIC NEWS

Brazil to Impose Caps on Carbon Dioxide Emissions

The Brazilian government is planning to impose caps on carbon dioxide emissions for major companies as part of its goal to reach CO2 neutrality by 2050, Bloomberg News reported. The plan includes the development of a regulated carbon market, concessions, tax exemptions promoting decarbonization, stimulating the use of electric public transportation vehicles and ending subsidies for fossil fuels. "These are very deep changes that will involve all sectors of the economy," Rafael Dubeux, a senior official, told the news service Tuesday in Brasília "The plan means more jobs, higher GDP and income for Brazilians," he added. The plan is a part of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's "ecological transformation," which has a goal of boosting growth while enacting an aggressive environmental agenda at the same time, Reuters reported. Deforestation in Brazil has dropped 33.6 percent since Lula took office, the Associated Press reported on July 6. Previously, deforestation in the Amazon peaked at a 15-year high during the four years of former President Jair Bolsonaro's term.

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consider the administrative and economic barriers to accessing some of these options, which can ultimately block people in need from accessing them. For example, legal costs and fees associated with securing passports have been a significant barrier for some. Finally, the new initiatives cannot come accompanied by new restrictions on access to territory or asylum procedures. This is counterproductive to efforts to increase pathways and to the spirit of the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection; all efforts should remain focused on collaborative efforts to improve migration governance throughout the region, with a view of providing protection to people in need."

A Jennie Murray, president and CEO of the National Immigration Forum: "Throughout history, humans have made dangerous journeys to reach destinations where they can pursue happiness. The increasing movement of migrants through the Darién Gap—one of the world's most perilous regions—is no exception, and the forces driving people to migrate are stronger than the April trilateral deal. First, Latin American and Caribbean economies are experiencing a significant slowdown. The region's economy—facing a challenging 7 percent unemployment rate—is expected to grow only 1.2 percent in 2023. Worryingly, the region's economic difficulties have accentuated social problems such as violence and poor quality of education. Consequently, many families are left with no choice but to migrate to more prosperous nations. Second, the U.S. economy is performing well despite the country's acute labor shortage. That makes the United States a draw for migrants because surplus jobs are available. The prospects of security and socioeconomic mobility also make the United States appealing. But why the Darién Gap? The answer also hints at potential solutions. Migrants risk their lives by crossing the Darién Gap because they don't have saf-

er options. Here the U.S. Congress and the Biden administration could help by creating legal immigration pathways that would serve as alternatives for migrants—not to mention bring more order to borders in the Americas and address U.S. demographic challenges. For instance, Congress has the authority to create new visa categories and increase the annual cap of current work visas. The administration could revamp the asylum and refugee resettlement systems and enter into bilateral labor agreements with partner countries."

A Jordi Amaral, author of the Americas Migration Brief: "U.S.-bound migration has increased largely due to economic and security issues. Haiti and Ecuador, for example, are confronting security crises, while a wide range of countries across the Americas are still facing the fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic. Authoritarian regimes in Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela face exoduses. The trilateral agreement in April has had little effect on slowing migration through the Darién, and it remains unclear what tangible, useful actions have been conducted under the initiative from its border enforcement perspective. Ultimately, deterrence measures have shown to have limited effect. Instead, facilitating easily accessible legal pathways is the most effective way to ensure a safe, orderly and regular system. Humanitarian parole has already proven a successful initiative, although sponsor and passport requirements hinder accessibility. The Regional Processing Center (Movilidad Segura) program is also an innovative approach but will require time to roll out. The United States and Colombia have announced three centers in the latter country, alongside centers in Guatemala and Costa Rica. Currently, opportunities are restricted by nationality and arrival dates. The program will need to expand for migrants to see it as a viable pathway. Growing the number of countries taking part and increasing coordination

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with local governments are opportunities for improvement. Additionally, it is crucial to support integration for the more than six million Venezuelans currently living in other countries of the hemisphere. International assistance and local political will are key. A new regularization program in Panama is commendable, although high costs will limit accessibility; Colombia's historic 10-year regularization program is a useful model."

A **Raul Sanchez Urribarri, associate dean at the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at La Trobe University:** "A large percentage of forced migrants who cross the Darién Gap come from Haiti and Venezuela, countries that remain trapped in intractable complex humanitarian crises. In Venezuela, the economic decline has not stopped, and the Maduro government has managed to keep power and consolidate its authoritarian rule. The economic crisis is still the main problem—millions of Venezuelans continue to struggle to survive on a daily basis. A major part of the country's collapse has involved the decline of the rule of law and the rise of corruption, against the backdrop of the country's faltering economy and dampening efforts to curb illegal cartels.

This multidimensional crisis remains the main push factor for Venezuelans, who continue to leave their country mainly due to the dismal economic circumstances and a lack of a political solution in sight. With respect to solutions, as has been widely pointed

“It is critical to focus on efforts that diminish the dangers of the Darién Gap...”
— Raul Sanchez Urribarri

out, it is critical to focus on efforts that diminish the dangers of the Darién Gap, and that offer safer legal pathways for migrants. There should be a multifaceted, combined effort to raise awareness about the real dangers of the Darién Gap. At the same time, all of these efforts need to be considered together with an ongoing recognition of the importance of the restoration of democratic governance and a functional economy in Venezuela."

The Advisor welcomes comments on its Q&A section. Readers can write editor Gene Kuleta.

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