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FEATURED Q&A

What Is Driving Migration Through the Darién Gap?



Record numbers of migrants are traveling through the treacherous Darién Gap, which separates Colombia and Panama. // File Photo: Government of Panama.

Q The governments of Panama and Colombia are failing to protect migrants crossing the treacherous Darién Gap, Human Rights Watch said in an April 3 report. The group called on officials to coordinate a response to the humanitarian crisis in the area. Record numbers of migrants are crossing the notoriously dangerous jungle area, with 520,000 passing through last year—roughly twice as many as in 2022—according to Panama's immigration department. What responsibilities do the governments of Panama and Colombia have to protect migrants who transit between the two countries? What policies could each nation implement to address the crisis? What factors have driven the increase in migrants crossing the Darién Gap to record numbers?

A Ramón Martínez de la Guardia, Panama's ambassador to the United States: "The government of Panama, led by President Cortizo, has been unapologetically vocal in promoting a safe, orderly and humane approach to migration management in the region. This applies to all countries, whether they are countries of origin, transit or destination. Our government is particularly concerned with the tragic conditions of arriving migrants, as vulnerable groups are using the treacherous and inhospitable Darién jungle as a pathway, turning it into one of the world's most dangerous migrant routes. We have taken a proactive approach by adapting our policies and actions to the changing flow, routes and composition of the migrant groups. We have built and expanded shelters, provided targeted services for children and pregnant women and increased the presence of government offices and NGOs to

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TODAY'S NEWS

POLITICAL

Venezuela Closes Embassy in Ecuador Over Raid

Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro ordered the closure of the country's embassy in Ecuador in protest over Ecuador's April 5 raid at the Mexican embassy in Quito to arrest former Ecuadorean Vice President Jorge Glas.

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ECONOMIC

Sheinbaum Vows to Spend Billions on Renewables in Mexico

Mexican presidential candidate Claudia Sheinbaum outlined a plan to spend approximately \$13.6 billion on renewable energy.

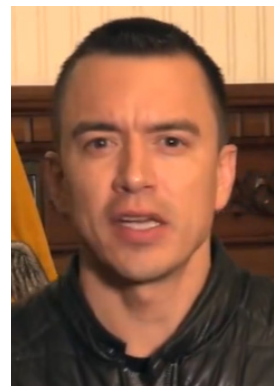
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ECONOMIC

Ecuador's Noboa Declares Energy Emergency

Ecuadorean President Daniel Noboa on Tuesday declared an energy emergency amid a drought that has limited output of hydroelectric dams. He also sacked Energy Minister Andrea Arrobo.

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Noboa // File Photo: @DanielNoboa0k via X.

POLITICAL NEWS

Venezuela Closes Embassy in Ecuador in Protest Over Raid

Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro on Tuesday ordered the closure of the country's embassy and two consulates in Ecuador in protest over its April 5 raid of the Mexican embassy in Quito to arrest former Ecuadorean Vice President Jorge Glas, Reuters reported. During a virtual meeting of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, Maduro and other presidents expressed their support for Mexico's request for the United Nations to suspend Ecuador until it apologizes for the raid, the Associated Press reported. "The condemnation has been unanimous, total, absolute," said Maduro. "No one today in this world comes out today to defend this barbaric act," he added. Also on Tuesday, Honduras' foreign minister, Enrique Reina, said the Central American country was recalling its top diplomat in Mexico in protest of the raid, Reuters reported. The envoy, Clarivel Vallecillo, would return to Tegucigalpa for consultations, said Reina, adding that Honduras supports the case that Mexico filed against Ecuador in the United Nations' International Court of Justice. In the raid, Ecuadorean President Daniel Noboa ordered authorities to break into Mexico's embassy in Quito to arrest Glas, who had been living there since December. Glas, who was previously convicted and jailed on corruption charges, fled to the embassy as he was facing additional charges. Mexico granted him asylum just hours before Ecuadorean authorities broke into the embassy earlier this month, found him in a bedroom there and dragged him out, the AP reported. Governments around the world have condemned the raid as diplomatic premises are considered foreign sovereign territory. Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who severed diplomatic relations after the raid, called the break-in "a flagrant violation of international law and the sovereignty of Mexico," the AP reported. Noboa did not participate in Tuesday's meeting of Latin American lead-

ers, but he has said that he authorized the raid "to protect national security," the AP reported. He also accused Mexico of violating the Vienna treaties by granting Glas asylum.

ECONOMIC NEWS

Ecuador's Noboa Declares Energy Emergency

Ecuadorean President Daniel Noboa on Tuesday declared an energy emergency amid a severe drought that has limited the output of the nation's hydroelectric power plants, Reuters reported. Experts have blamed the drought in large part on the El Niño weather phenomenon, which affected rainfall and limited the production of the country's hydroelectric plants, which generate roughly 75 percent of Ecuador's energy. Noboa also asked the nation's energy minister, Andrea Arrobo, to resign, naming Transportation Minister Roberto Luque as her replacement. Luque will now serve as interim energy minister in addition to his other post.

“We urge Ecuadoreans to cut their electricity consumption in this critical week.”

— Ecuador's Energy Ministry

"Today we took a strong decision, once again we had to, which is to declare an emergency in the country's energy sector," Noboa said at an event Tuesday in Guayaquil, Reuters reported. On Monday, Ecuador's energy ministry announced power cuts across the nation to help deal with supply shortages. "We urge Ecuadoreans to cut their electricity consumption in this critical week," the Ministry of Energy said Monday, the Associated Press reported. "And consider that each kilowatt and each drop of water that are not consumed will help us face this reality," the statement added. The main problem in Ecuador's energy sector "is not the

NEWS BRIEFS

Brazilian Court Reinstates Petrobras Chairman

Brazilian state-run oil firm Petrobras confirmed Tuesday that a court order had reinstated chairman Pietro Sampaio Mendes, Reuters reported. A judge in a lower court suspended Mendes last week over an alleged conflict of interest due to his role in Brazil's energy ministry. Petrobras and the Brazilian federal government appealed the ruling. "Petrobras will continue to defend the soundness of its internal governance procedures," the company said in a securities filing, Reuters reported.

U.S. Files Complaint Over Alleged Union-Busting Case in Mexico

The U.S. Trade Representative's Office announced Tuesday that it had lodged a labor complaint with Mexico over its refusal to address alleged union-busting by a Mexican company, the Associated Press reported. The request for a dispute settlement panel was made under the U.S.-Mexico-Canada free trade agreement, which guarantees unions the right to organize in Mexico. In January, Mexico refused to act on U.S. complaints over a Mexican call center that allegedly took actions against union organizers, the AP reported.

Argentina Buys 24 Fighter Jets From Denmark for \$300 Million

Argentina has bought 24 F-16 fighter jets from Denmark for approximately \$300 million, the South American country's government announced Tuesday, Reuters reported. President Javier Milei and Defense Minister Luis Petri announced the purchase in a video released on social media site X. "With these new aircraft we are taking a transcendental step in our defense policy," Petri said in the video from Copenhagen.

dry season but rather a statist model that is unattractive to private investment,” Alberto Acosta-Burneo, editor of Weekly Analysis in Guayaquil, told the weekly Energy Advisor in a Jan. 5 Q&A. “A legal reform is needed to amend the current statist law and create a competitive and attractive electricity market for investment,” he said. Compounding Ecuador’s energy crisis, Colombia has halted energy exports to Ecuador as its own hydroelectric plants struggle to deal with the same drought conditions, which has led to water rationing for residents in Bogotá and surrounding areas, Agence France-Presse reported Tuesday.

Sheinbaum Vows to Spend \$13.6 Billion on Renewables

Mexican presidential candidate Claudia Sheinbaum of the ruling Morena party on Monday outlined a plan to spend approximately \$13.6 billion to increase the country’s use of renewable energy, Bloomberg News reported. The plan, which Sheinbaum presented to business leaders in Mexico City, would boost wind and solar power generation, modernize hydroelectric stations and add some 3,850 kilometers of transmission lines, the news service reported. It would also add gas-burning power plants. The plan marks a major shift from the policies of current President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who has focused on supporting state oil company Pemex rather than renewable energy. Sheinbaum said her plan would add approximately 13.7 gigawatts of electricity to Mexico’s electrical grid by 2030. “We are going to accelerate the energy transition,” Sheinbaum said at the event. “Going forward, we are working on this energy plan not just with an eye on 2030, but also through 2050 to align with international commitments on climate change” she added. A close ally of López Obrador, Sheinbaum leads her opponent in the race, Xóchitl Gálvez, by more than 20 percentage points, Reuters reported. “We have the possibility and potential to develop Mexico in a way that generates investment with well-being,” Sheinbaum said, Bloomberg News reported.

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meet the needs of these groups. Panama is one of the few countries that provides food and medical care, monitors the influx of children and takes biometric information to identify incoming migrants and apprehend criminals and other dangerous individuals. We have long advocated for countries to work together, share information, monitor flows and actively cooperate to combat criminal organizations that promote and facilitate the illegal movement of migrants and human trafficking. These organizations are constantly seeking to diversify their criminal empires, and it is crucial that we target them through coordinated efforts. To this end, Panama works with countries like the United States and Costa Rica and continues to strive toward expanding cooperation with other neighboring countries. But it is not enough; it is essential that every country step up and take action.”

A **Ana Lorena Delgadillo Pérez, executive director of the Fundación para la Justicia:** “The Human Rights Watch report ‘Neglected in the Jungle’ highlights the Panamanian and Colombian governments’ significant deficiencies in protecting migrants crossing the Darién jungle. Last year, more than half a million people—including 113,000 children—crossed. Many of them suffered sexual violence, lost their lives or are missing. Concerns arise from serious shortcomings in both countries’ protection, investigation and sanctions systems regarding crimes in the Darién Gap. This is worsened by abandonment, marginalization and a lack of state presence in Darién communities exploited by organized crime. According to the report, Colombian prosecutors handling organized crime cases do not investigate the involvement of the Gulf Clan in the trafficking of migrants, nor do those working in the human trafficking area investigate the Gulf Clan, leaving an investigative gap. In Panama, crimes against migrants are rarely investigated or punished,

leading to impunity and a lack of accountability. In both countries, authorities lack a clear and integrated strategy to investigate and prosecute these cases and show little interest in investigating due to the lack of complaints by family members. Cooperation between prosecutors is limited, further hindering investigative and accountability efforts. Urgent measures are needed to improve investigative capacity and ensure accountability for crimes committed against migrants in the Darién Gap. It is essential to establish transnationally coordinated policies, mechanisms and strategies. As an example, Mexico’s mechanisms for investigation, search and identification of remains, which were proposed by civil society but are still imperfect, can be a reference when investigating transnational macro-criminality and serious violations committed against migrants.”

A **Jordi Amaral, author of the Americas Migration Brief:** “Migrants—both pushed by humanitarian crises and pulled by economic opportunity—are increasingly turning to the Darién Gap as a transit route due to visa restrictions limiting other, quicker paths north to the United States. The Darién, however, is a lawless stretch where organized crime and individual actors abuse and extort migrants with impunity. The Colombian and Panamanian governments are responsible for protecting migrants and non-migrants alike, and they should take steps to investigate and prosecute criminal actors in the region that are targeting migrant populations. This is beneficial for the local population as well, as the remote Darién region has long lacked investment and attention from Bogotá and Panama City, and organized crime actors have particularly benefited from the lack of state presence on the Colombian side of the jungle. Neither Colombia nor Panama is especially interested in investing in migrants that have their eyes set on the United States, but investments in

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rule of law in the region can prove beneficial for all and help foster sustainable development and opportunities for local communities. Panama's Operation Controlled Flow has proven an effective initiative to facilitate safe and orderly transit through the country to Costa Rica, although investments in improving infrastructure at the overcrowded Lajas Blancas reception center would be beneficial, as would regulating the informal, often exploitative wire transfer operators taking advantage of migrants lacking the cash to continue their transit north. The Panamanian government should also allow Doctors Without Borders to bring their services back to Lajas Blancas."

A Miguel Pedro Gomis Balestreri, professor of political science at Xavierian University: "The increase in migration through the Darién Gap has one reason, desperation, but many triggers. Some are direct (poverty in Venezuela, insecurity in Ecuador and chaos in Haiti) and some are indirect (no free elections in Venezuela, ineffective or authoritarian governments and climate-displaced people). Huge risks, more human than natural, are preferred to native situations. What is the problem, for whom and why? Obviously, migrants suffer; their discomfort could be reduced at origin or in transit. First, origin countries have no incentives to act (less pressure on labor market, more currencies from remittances and increased negotiating power). Second, the United States wants

more from Colombia and Panama, while knowing the action range is limited. What is their responsibility? Although they should intensify migrant protection, it is neither sought nor easy: state and coordination capacities are limited. In the Colombian Darién, the Gulf Clan substitutes for the state, which is delaying intervention due to territorial peace negotiations. In Panama, where paradoxically most physical violence occurs, the government wants migrants to move through quickly. For both countries, protection would be counterproductive as it might increase the route's attractiveness. What could they do? It is tough to discourage transit and at the same time assist migrants. To curb the flow, most effective measures are at the origin (unfeasible nowadays), and transit country strategies have little political probability and effectiveness. Easing refugee status is good, but evidence shows it delays but does not disincentivize the trip to the United States. To aid migrants, public intervention could destabilize the region, upending local residents' lives. With no miracle solutions, countries probably value the status quo."

[Editor's note: The Advisor invited Colombia's embassy in the United States to submit a commentary for this issue but received no response.]

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

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