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A trailer transports the wreckage of a bus, which was carrying migrants who had traveled thr

A trailer transports the wreckage of a bus, which was carrying migrants who had traveled through the Darien Gap, in Los Planes de Gualaca, Panama, Feb. 15. (OSV News/Reuters)



David Agren

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Pope Francis has expressed sorrow for the victims of a bus crash in Panama, which claimed the lives of 39 migrants transiting the Central American country.

In a Feb. 16 telegram to Cardinal José Luis Lacunza Maestrojuán of David, Panama — whose diocese includes the site of the crash — Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin said: "The Holy Father has received with deep sadness the news of the bus accident … in which several migrants have lost their lives and others were injured."

The telegram continued, "His Holiness, (Pope) Francis, joins the grief of the families and friends of the deceased and prays for the speedy recovery of the injured."

The tragedy occurred in the early morning hours of Feb. 15 in the western Panama province of Chiriquí. Panama's immigration director Samira Gozaine told reporters the bus had entered a camp for migrants and the driver was turning the vehicle around when it slid down an embankment. The driver was among the victims, Gozaine said.

The deaths were a tragic reminder of the perils faced by migrants traveling through Central America and Mexico on their journey toward the U.S. border.

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"The victims of this fatal accident are part of the almost 40,000 migrants who have crossed Panama since the beginning of 2023," said a Feb. 15 statement from CLAMOR, a network of Catholics in Latin America and the Caribbean working on behalf of migrants, the displaced and victims of human trafficking.

"The flow of people does not stop, but what does seem to stop is the political willingness inside and outside the expelling countries to achieve more dignified, just and peaceful living conditions," the statement continued.

"Once again, we lift our voices to signal the co-responsibility of diverse political actors and economic, social and cultural factors in creating this migration drama, which affects the entire region. We urge the authorities to execute national development and integral migration policies, which put families and human rights at the center," CLAMOR wrote.

Migration through Panama has increased exponentially in recent years as the number of people leaving countries such as Colombia, Ecuador and Peru picks up.

More than 7 million Venezuelans have abandoned their country over the past decade and relocated to other parts of South America. Some of those migrants have started heading northward — including many who had established themselves in other countries.

"The flow is going to continue precisely because conditions of poverty continue increasing, continue worsening, and political conditions continue being unstable," Elías Cornejo, migrant services coordinator for the Jesuit ministry Fe y Alegria in Panama, told OSV News.

The bus that crashed was carrying 66 migrants, including 22 Ecuadorians, 16 Haitians, 11 Venezuelans, six Brazilians and five Colombians, according to the Panamanian government. Migrants from Cuba, Cameroon, Nigeria and Eritrea also were on board.

Migrants traversing Panama must traverse the Darién Gap, an impenetrable patch of thick jungle rife with bandits, which separates Panama and Colombia. Overcrowded buses take migrants exiting the Darién Gap on nighttime journeys of 12 hours to a camp in western Panama for $40, according to Cornejo.

Panama recorded nearly 250,000 migrants passing through the Darién Gap in 2022. The majority were Venezuelan, prompting the U.S. government to include Venezuelans under Title 42 in October, allowing for their immediate expulsion to Mexico. Title 42 is a public health provision enforced to restrict border entry over COVID-19 concerns.