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A group of Venezuelan migrants begins the trek through the Darién Gap April 30, 2023, as they leave the Colombian village of Capurgana. Catholic groups working with migrants traversing the treacherous Darién Gap expressed skepticism over a July 1, 2024, joint U.S.-Panama plan to deport people who are coming through the jungle, which straddles Colombia and Panama, and heading to the U.S. border. (OSV News/Manuel Rueda, Global Sisters Report)



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Catholic groups working with migrants traversing the treacherous Darién Gap have expressed skepticism over a joint U.S.-Panama plan to deport people passing through the thick jungle between Colombia and Panama on journeys toward the U.S. border.

The groups called for governments to attend to the needs of migrants instead and deal with issues such as organized crime, which controls access to the Darién Gap. They also argue that migrants are not easily deterred, making it likely they would seek out new but risky routes instead.

"The efforts that our governments have made have not been sufficient to respond to this reality, especially because they are marked by the vision of national security and ignore the basic right to life, a dignified life," the Panama chapter of the Latin American and Caribbean Network on Migration, Displacement and Trafficking, known as Red CLAMOR, said in a July 7 statement.

"We understand that governments consider that closing the Darién route is best for migrants, given the number of deaths due to drowning, animal bites and other incidents typical of the jungle, in addition to the violence carried out by criminals," the Scalabrinian Mission with Migrants and Refugees in Mexico City said in a July 4 statement.

"However, it is necessary to express that these situations cannot be completely controlled and as long as the various causes that give rise to migration are not

addressed, the victims will continue to increase," the organization said.

The plan announced July 1 by the U.S. and Panamanian governments would provide U.S. assistance with removal flights, targeting migrants coming through the Darién Gap — a notoriously difficult trek rife with bandits — and controlled by organized criminal groups. U.S. officials with experience in processing migrants and receiving asylum claims would also help their Panamanian counterparts on the ground and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security would assist building infrastructure for deportations.

More than 500,000 people passed through the Darién Gap in 2023, according to Panama's immigration service — a sharp increase from earlier in the decade, when the jungle strip was considered impenetrable. Some 70,000 migrants have transited the Darién Gap so far this year.

The announcement followed Panama's inauguration of a new president, who campaigned on halting irregular migration through the Central American country.

"I will not allow Panama to be a path open to thousands of people who illegally enter our country supported by an entire international organization related to drug trafficking and human trafficking," President José Raúl Mulino said at his July 1 inauguration. "I understand that there are deep-rooted reasons for migration, but each country has to resolve its problems."

Many of the migrants transiting the Darién Gap hail from Venezuela. But many come from other continents such as Africa and Asia, landing in South America, then heading northward through Panama, Central America and Mexico. Most of the migrants don't stay in Panama, instead taking direct buses through the country to the border with Costa Rica.

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Elías Cornejo, migrant services coordinator for the Jesuit ministry Fe y Alegria in Panama, called the plan to deport migrants from Panama "unfeasible because there's nothing to close. The Darién Gap is a jungle without border markers."

Cornejo added in comments to OSV News that deportation flights are expensive and "flights from the (United States) have not had the capacity for massive repatriations."

"This is more a search for media attention than a real solution. By seeing the phenomenon as a political electoral issue, they're closing more humanitarian paths" for attending to migrants, he said.

The U.S.-Panama agreement follows President Joe Biden issuing an executive order, temporarily imposing restrictions on asylum claims at the U.S. southern border. The Biden administration boasts migrant encounters have fallen by more than 40% since the June 4 announcement. The Department of Homeland Security said in a statement that it had operated more than 120 deportation flights to more than 20 countries.

Catholics working with migrants in Mexico report an increase in shelter traffic due to deportations. They also say many migrants in Mexico are taking a wait-and-see approach with the new rules, while many are trying to snag appointments with the CBP One application, which allows them to enter at ports of entry and make asylum claims.

"The population is doing whatever possible to wait for CBP One before running any risks," said Scalabrinian Father Julio López, executive secretary of the Mexican bishops' migrant ministry.

Mexico has also stepped up enforcement in 2024, with Mexican migration officials often detaining migrants in northern Mexico and sending them to southern Mexico — with the hopes they will be dissuaded from heading north again, according to advocates.

"In the border areas of the south and north of the country, the authorities have carried out arbitrary arrests and deportations without due process, violating the human rights of migrants," the Scalabrinian statement said. "Prior to deportation, many people remain for hours and sometimes days in an immigration station where access to basic services is limited."

The increased enforcement adds to the difficulties for migrants, who risk becoming

victims of crimes such as kidnapping, rape and extortion as they transit through Mexico.