

*More than 50 migrants have died
so far this year in Panama's
Darien Gap*



A forensics team buries a group of 15 migrants who died trying to cross the Darien Gap in Panama [File: Arnulfo Franco/AP Photo]

Panama City, October 8 (RHC)-- More than 50 people have died so far this year while trying to cross the Panama jungle along a perilous migration route towards the United States, officials from the Central American country have said.

The figure is considerably higher than in previous years, when officials say an average of 20 to 30 bodies have been recovered in the Darien Gap, a 575,000-hectare (1.42 million-acre) stretch of the jungle on the border between Panama and Colombia that the United Nations has called one of the most dangerous routes in the world.

The number is all-but-assured to be below the actual death count for those who make the journey, according to officials. "The Institute of Forensic Medicine and Forensic Sciences of Panama has registered 53 migrant deaths in different circumstances in the province of Darien," Jose Vincente Pachar, director of Panama's Forensic Sciences Institute, told the AFP news agency on Wednesday.

Migrants hoping to travel from South America to the US border with Mexico often have little choice but to traverse through the jungle, where they face not only natural threats, including snakes, difficult terrain and dangerous water passages, but also criminals who routinely rob and rape travellers.

The recent mass deportation of Haitians from the US-Mexico border has further shone a spotlight on the situation, with many recounting undertaking the treacherous journey with hopes of reaching the US after fleeing Haiti for South American countries in the years since a devastating 2010 earthquake.

While activity along the route dropped significantly in the first months of the coronavirus pandemic, it has steadily risen since. About 70,000 people have crossed the Darien Gap so far in 2021, according to Panamanian authorities, a number almost equivalent to the previous five years combined.

On September 24, Panama's attorney general's office reported that 10 bodies, including two children, had been discovered. Pachar, of the Forensic Sciences Institute, said it is "very [much] possible the number of deaths will increase" as more people make the journey.

Colombia, meanwhile, on Tuesday asked Panama to "facilitate" entry into its territory for underage or pregnant migrants in order to prevent them from trying to cross the Darien Gap.

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