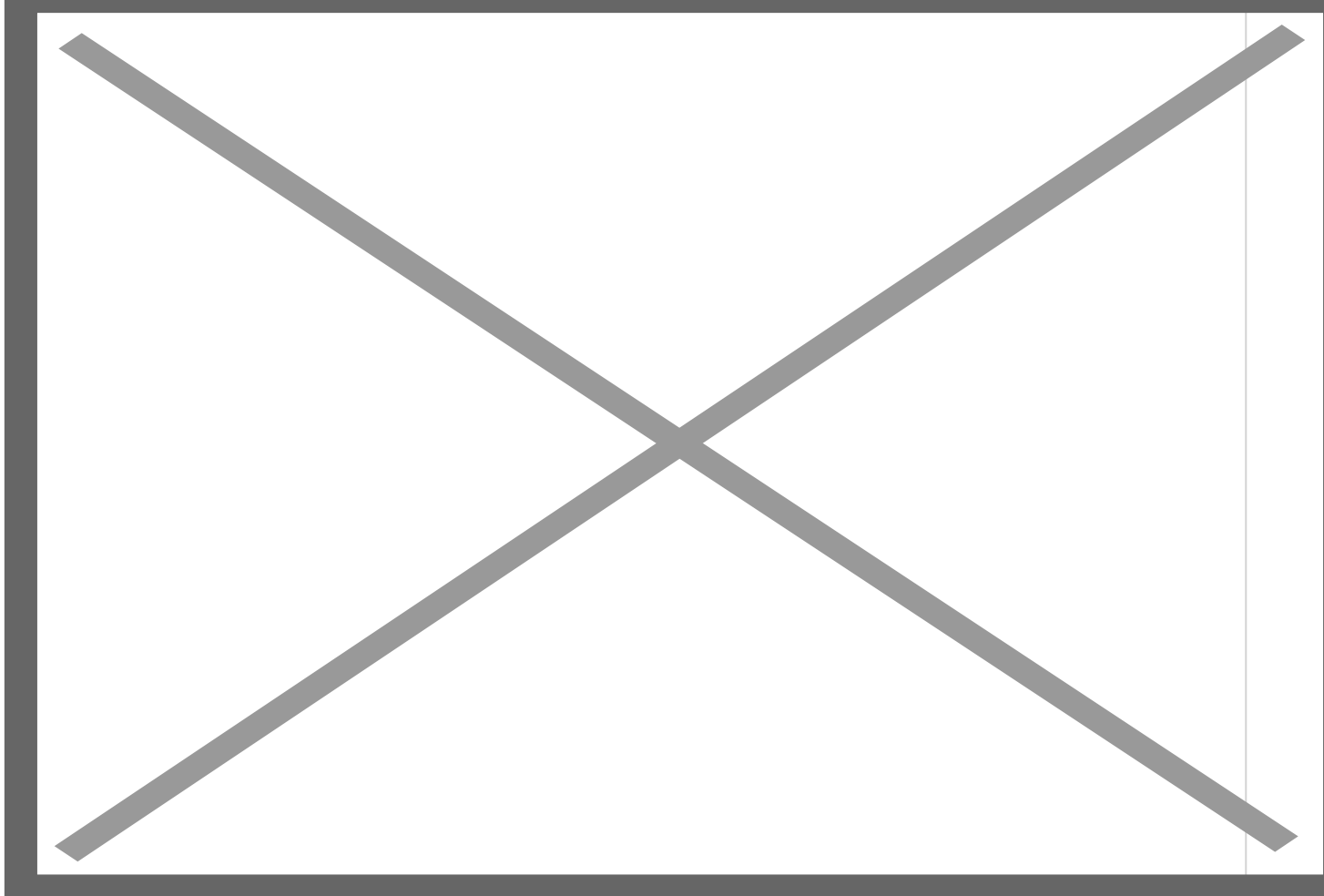


More than 91,000 migrants crossed perilous Darien Gap this year

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Most of the migrants who crossed the treacherous jungle were from Haiti, the International Organization for Migration says [File: Fernando Vergara/AP Photo]

Panama City, October 10 (RHC)-- More than 91,300 migrants – most of them Haitians – have trekked through Panama's dangerous Darien Gap jungle so far this year in hopes of reaching North America, the

International Organization for Migration (IOM) said over the weekend.

Citing statistics from Panamanian migration authorities, the IOM said 56,600 Haitian migrants had passed through the Darien Gap, one of the most dangerous routes in Latin America, between January and September of this year. Many had children with them.

“Border closures and economic contractions due to the COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in irregular migration,” Santiago Paz, who heads the IOM mission in Panama, said in a statement about the figures.

“Caribbean and extra-regional migrants make the crossing in extremely vulnerable conditions and are exposed to risks along their migratory route, particularly in the crossing of the Darien Gap on the border between Panama and Colombia,” Paz said.

The announcement comes as the United States maintains a near-total border closure to those seeking asylum at the country’s borders, and as Mexico and other countries in Central America have blocked people trying to transit through their territories on the way to the US.

The Darien Gap, a 575,000-hectare (1.42 million-acre) stretch of the jungle on the border between Panama and Colombia, is controlled by armed gangs. Smugglers usually guide small groups through the route, but many are robbed, assaulted or raped along the way and dozens have been killed this year alone.

Panama said this week that more than 50 migrants died while crossing the jungle pass so far in 2021. But officials said that number is all-but-assured to be below the actual death count for those who make the journey.

In recent years, 20 to 30 bodies on average have been recovered annually, but observers said the death toll this year reflects a surge in migration. Experts have said many of the deaths are due to natural causes, such as heart attacks or falls. Drownings and snake bites are also common. But others are assaulted and killed by armed gangs.

The Darien Gap route has come under renewed scrutiny in recent weeks after nearly 15,000 people, most of them Haitians, camped under a bridge in south Texas last month, hoping to claim asylum in the United States.

Many left Haiti years ago and had been living in Brazil or Chile, making the journey to the US border with Mexico on foot after crossing the Darien Gap on their way north. The Biden administration has faced widespread criticism for deporting thousands of Haitian asylum seekers to Haiti, which is facing deadly gang violence, political instability, and the fallout of a recent earthquake.

Giuseppe Loprete, the head of the IOM mission in Haiti, said that the U.S. had sent more than 7,500 people back to Haiti to date. Earlier, rights groups filed a petition with the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights calling on the international body to demand the US stop using a public health directive to immediately expel most asylum seekers who arrive at the border.

The former U.S. envoy to Haiti, who resigned over the Biden administration’s treatment of Haitian asylum seekers, told U.S. lawmakers this week that the deportations would make the crisis in the Caribbean nation worse.



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