

The children of Darien

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UNICEF said the phenomenon of migrant children, often alone, needs to be addressed as a humanitarian crisis throughout the region.

Photo: Chicago Tribune

By Guillermo Alvarado

The jungle area that separates Colombia from Panama, known as the Darien Gap, is about 70,000 hectares in size and is populated by a great diversity of flora and fauna that includes very dangerous animals, such as poisonous snakes, medium-sized felines and other wild species.

It is a crossing point between the vast southern regions of the continent and the Central American isthmus, which has become a litmus test for groups of people flowing northward in search of the apparent advantages of the United States, the richest country in the world.

The Darien is a natural paradise where a quarter of the animal and plant species it contains exist only there and nowhere else.

It is also often a hell for those who without adequate preparation, equipment and gear, with local guides who are often in contact with organized crime gangs, dare to cross it as tens of thousands of desperate people are doing these days.

The United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF, warned that at least 19,000 children, traveling accompanied by family members or alone, crossed the 266 kilometers of jungle this year, which represents a historical maximum of underage migrants in this hostile territory.

According to the entity, half of these children are under five years old, and although those of this age usually go with their parents, many things can happen along the way and they can be separated from adults.

UNICEF assured that this phenomenon must be urgently treated as a humanitarian crisis in the entire region, beyond the countries directly concerned, in this case Colombia and Panama.

Every child who manages to complete the journey is a survivor, said the Fund's director for Latin America and the Caribbean, Jean Gough, who warned that in the thick of the jungle, robbery, rape and human trafficking are as dangerous as wild animals and insects.

This is not a sweetened version of Rudyard Kipling's "The Jungle Book", but a crude reality that these children must face as a consequence of the misery, abandonment and lack of opportunities suffered by their families in their place of origin.

Information is available on those who made it to Panama, where there is always the possibility that they will be expelled, but the exact number of those who died on the way will never be known.

It is disturbing that in the 21st century, those who are the seed, the hope for our survival as a species and who, as José Martí said were born to be happy, continue to be treated with such indifference and abandonment.

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