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Migration



Venezuelan migrant Rosangela Ramos folds her clothes at Casa Arrupe, a support center run by El Servicio Jesuita para Migrantes en Centroamérica (Jesuit Migrant Service) in Paso Canoas, Costa Rica, March 4, 2025. (OSV News/Manuel Rueda)

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A few months ago Albeny Gutierrez crossed the Darién Gap on his way to the United States, where he planned to ask for asylum and start a new life.

Now the bus driver from Venezuela is once again faced with the prospect of crossing the dangerous rainforest, where many migrants have been assaulted by thieves, as he heads back toward South America.

Thousands of migrants are heading back to South America after new U.S. immigration policies, including the cancellation of the CBP One program, have made it harder for them to seek asylum in the U.S.

"(President Donald) Trump made things harder for us," Gutierrez said as he arrived in Paso Canoas, a small town on the border between Costa Rica and Panama. "There is no hope of getting into the U.S. anymore."

Many of those coming back are Venezuelans who had spent months in Mexico trying to get appointments to enter the U.S. legally and seek asylum there, through a smartphone application called CBP One.

The Trump administration canceled the CBP One program the day he came into office, triggering a phenomenon that officials in Central America describe as "reverse migration."

"There's no point for us to stay in Mexico waiting for an appointment that will never come," said Rosangela Ramos, a Venezuelan migrant who was also in Costa Rica, trying to gather some money to return home.

"We had no money to pay for smugglers and it was dangerous" to enter the U.S illegally, Ramos added. "So we preferred to return to our country."

According to the International Organization for Migration, more than 2,200 migrants left Mexico in the month following Trump's inauguration, and transited through checkpoints in Guatemala, as they headed south. Fifty-four percent were Venezuelans.

In Costa Rica and Panama, Catholic groups are trying to help migrants who are making their way back to South America by providing them with food, medicine and orientation.

Catholic organizations have also asked governments in Central America to facilitate the transit of south-bound migrants and help those who want to seek asylum.

"We are worried that restrictions on the movements of migrants will increase," said Roy Arias, an official with El Servicio Jesuita para Migrantes en Centroamérica (Jesuit Migrant Service) who runs Casa Arrupe, a support center for migrants in Paso Canoas.

"Many people could be trapped in border towns, and they have very limited resources to support themselves," he told OSV News.

Migrants who are leaving Mexico must cross five countries in Central America, as they make their way back to South America.

Most of these countries allow them to take public transport. But that's not the case in Panama.

Instead, Panama's government is requiring that migrants board special buses at a shelter in Costa Rica that take them straight to Lajas Blancas, an isolated camp that is located at the edge of the Darién jungle in eastern Panama.

At the camp, migrants can pay around $250 for boats that will take them toward Colombia, as there are no roads that link both countries.

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In Colombia, immigration authorities say that up to 250 migrants have been arriving each day on boats coming from Panama, though the number of people arriving each day varies.

Arias said that Panama's policy seeks to steer migrants away from cities, where they might try to stay and look for work.

But he said that for many people, including families who are travelling with children, the boat fees are unaffordable.

"Taking migrants back to the edge of the Darién jungle is cruel," Arias said. "And the risk is that many people who have no money will try to cross the jungle on foot again."

Migrants who do not want to be taken to the Lajas Blancas camp have also attempted to cross Panama on their own. But they risk detention at checkpoints set up by police along Panama's roads.

Victor Pacheco, a construction worker from Venezuela, said he had been stopped twice in Panama, as he tried to return to Venezuela. He was sent back to Costa Rica both times.

Pacheco said he was threatened with imprisonment if he tried to enter Panama on his own again. So he said that his only option now is to save some money and take the bus organized by Panama's government that drops migrants near the Darién jungle.

"I'm going to have to work (at a farm) in Costa Rica to save up for my journey," Pacheco told OSV News. "And if I don't have enough cash then I will have to walk across the Darién jungle again."

Arias, from the Jesuit Migrant Service, estimates that somewhere between 50 to 70 people are arriving each day in Paso Canoas, as they head towards South America.

A group of nuns in the small town serves free meals every day to migrants at the local church, and also helps them with medicine and clothes.

Sr. Claudia Cuadras, from the Congregation of St. Teresa of Jesus, said that the nuns are serving 40 to 50 meals per day, with the help of a parish on the Panamanian side of the border.

"Many people are staying here while they gather enough money to continue," Sr. Claudia said.

She added that the sisters are also trying to provide psychological and spiritual support.

"When people were going north they were shaken by the experiences they had encountered while crossing the Darién jungle," she said.

"Now that they are coming back, some are feeling a sense of frustration. They have not realized their goal, and they are now faced with the challenge of rebuilding their lives."

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. View the full series.