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Mind the Darién Gap: Migration Trends through Americas' Isthmus

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## ABSTRACT

The Darién Gap in Panama and Colombia stretches across a narrow, mountainous, and densely forested isthmus in one of the world's most geopolitically significant migratory crossings. This thesis seeks to investigate and synthesize the literature that evaluates the connections of human migration, drug trafficking, and geopolitical factors affecting the Darién Gap and, by extension, the broader region. To expand understanding of how these problems relate to the rising rates of trafficking and smuggling over the isthmus, this thesis triangulates a discussion of drug trafficking, human migration, and geopolitical regional relationships explicitly. One conclusion is that crucial insights into the area could be gained by placing more emphasis on the lived experiences of migrants who make this treacherous journey and who are vulnerable to powerful drug cartels. More awareness of migrants' actual experiences, when combined with policy reports from the U.S. government and academic research on the area, would deepen our understanding of how migration, trafficking, and geopolitics connect in the Darién Gap. To make this argument, this thesis combines a discussion of peer-reviewed articles, migrant accounts of the journeys, and official U.S. government reports to create an integrated overview of migration trends and the geopolitical importance of the area throughout North America. Through the discussion, the thesis shows that to develop more effective policies regarding migration at national and international levels, it is essential to understand the interplay of these dynamic social forces of migrant perspectives, smuggling and cartel influences, and U.S. policies in the Darién Gap.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Introduction**

An isthmus is a narrow stretch of land with water on each side that joins two larger land areas. The Isthmus of Panama, home to the mountainous and densely forested Darién jungle, connects North and South America and is one of the most influential land bridges in the world. This region also referred to as the Darién Gap, is the undeveloped missing link of the Pan-American highway that stretches approximately 29,826 miles from Alaska to Chile, with a fifty-four-mile disruption in the Darién jungle (Mesa et al., 2017, p. 116). While there is no developed vehicular highway in this region, there is a highly trafficked route used by migrants and criminal groups spanning about thirty-seven miles through unforgiving terrain on both sides of the Panama-Colombia border (Bitar, 2022, p. 20). The characteristics of the Darién Gap facilitate not only the movement of people but also the movement of illicit substances from South America.

According to a report from Panamanian authorities, in the first seven months of 2023, over 250,000 migrants traversed the Darién Gap, surpassing the record total for 2022 (UN News, 2023). The popularity of the routes through the Darién Gap has grown exponentially among migrants due to the COVID-19 pandemic and global climate change. At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, migration rates dropped severely but quickly rebounded and exceeded previous averages. From the beginning of 2021 until November 2021, eighty-four million people worldwide were forced from their homes, marking the third record-breaking year in a row for global migration estimates (UN News, 2021). The pandemic severely affected South America, the Caribbean, and Africa, sending fragile economies into complete disarray. COVID-19 was a significant push factor for many people in countries like Haiti, Cuba, and Venezuela, who had no

choice but to leave their homes for economic stability elsewhere (Medicins Sans Frontieres, 2021). Laura Naranjo et al. (2023) found that there were three times more migrants who crossed the Darién Gap in 2021 than were registered during the previous five years combined, with numbers only increasing from the lasting repercussions of the pandemic. Global climate change is also a significant push factor for migrants. However, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) definition of a refugee does not include climate change or natural disasters. A person is only internationally recognized as a “refugee” if they flee persecution, war, or violence. Each year, the number of people leaving their homes for climatic reasons increases, whether due to natural disasters, sea level rise, or drought. However, these migrants are not given the same assistance as recognized refugees. Data published in 2021 by the UNHCR finds that since 2010, weather-related or natural emergencies have forced around twenty-one and half million people to move each year on average (UN News, 2021).

Investigating the Darién Gap as a heavily trafficked migratory and contraband smuggling route is vital to understanding the area's history. The first known use of the Darién Gap as a migration crossing point was in the late 1990s, as increasing numbers of Colombians began fleeing political unrest and turmoil in their country (Yates & Pappier, 2023). The first recorded migrant crossings began in 2010, and over the next four years, the government recorded around 2,400 official crossings each year (Yates & Pappier, 2023). Migratory trends over the rest of the 2010s fluctuated slightly each year, and migrant crossings grew dramatically from 2021-2023. Migration northward through the Darién Gap is completed by people from all over the world, not just South American countries like Colombia and Venezuela. In addition to South America, migrants from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean travel to the Darién region to make the journey

(Naranjo et al., 2023). It is also essential to fully comprehend the extensive and dangerous journey of crossing the Darién Gap. Migrants face extensive physical and social dangers in their migratory journeys. On foot, the journey through the Darién Gap encounters many natural dangers, such as stream passages, steep muddy banks, and harmful animals. There are also human dangers like human trafficking, illegal trade, and sexual exploitation of women and children by organized criminal groups and drug cartels (Naranjo et al., 2023). Migrants also face general health dangers along the journey, like adverse mental and physical health effects, as well as malnourishment and exhaustion.

Along with the dangers, Manoj Jhangimal (2016) explains that the economic and environmental features of the Darién Gap create an “absence of security and other migratory authorities, hence making it a place of high advantage for criminal organizations” (p. 19). Organized crime groups control the migratory pathways, charging various fees for the journey. No matter the route, each migrant pays at least \$400 to access the jungle passage (Walsh et al., 2023). The longer, more dangerous routes have lower fares in the range of a few hundred USD. The more direct routes cost migrants between \$1000 and \$2000 per person (Yates & Pappier, 2023). The shortest and least naturally dangerous routes are controlled by criminal groups like FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*) and the Gulf Clan (*Clan del Golfo*) because they also use the routes to transport drugs and weapons. The routes are also constantly changing, and a route taken eight months ago will not be the same route taken today because of evolving physical and political landscapes.

This thesis aims to review and evaluate the existing literature about the various types of movement in the Darién region surrounding the border between Panama and Colombia. Four



primary questions led the research for this thesis. What does the movement of contraband or humans look like through the Darién Gap? How has this movement affected migration through the Darién Gap? What is the geopolitical significance of the region to the U.S., and what response tactics are used by state actors? How does the convergence of these three topics expand understanding of migration through the Darién Gap? The investigation of many other topics, like the arms trade and subsequent trafficking, would illicit a fascinating and thorough thesis, but this paper's scope will only extend to the movement of drugs and humans, the geopolitical significance, and state response.

The thesis is organized according to three prongs of the research questions: human migration, drug trafficking, and state involvement. Within human migration the paper discusses both involuntary and voluntary human migration. In this paper, the term “human trafficking” signifies the involuntary movement of people through the Darién Gap. In contrast, “human smuggling” signifies when an individual consents to receiving outside assistance or guidance to move illegally across a national border. Smuggling can include the use of *coyotes*, who are “people hired by immigrants that are undocumented to be transported without being caught to cross the border” (Jhangimal, 2016, p.22). These *coyotes* can be used to transport people to the beginning of the route or to guide the migrant groups through the multi-day journey. The other prong, drug trafficking, is defined by Colectivo Darién (2021) as the production, transport, and sale of prohibited substances. According to a report about Panama's relevance to illicit trade, “90% of the drug trafficking and other types of organized crime coming from South America pass through Central America, including Panama” (Jhangimal, 2016, p. 19). This trafficking can be performed by the cartels that produce the drugs, organized criminal groups like Colombia's

FARC, the Gulf Clan, or by *transportistas* who are traffickers that work “independently or in loose networks, commonly built on family ties” (Blume, 2022, p. 1368). The geopolitical significance of the region to the U.S. is great, and the actions in the Darién Gap by state actors have a direct influence on American immigration and drug policies. First-hand accounts are utilized in this peer review to emphasize the severity of the trek made by migrants, the movement of drugs, and the role of the U.S. government in policies relevant to the area. This thesis will address the literature on each of the three prongs separately and then make an argument about the migration trends through the Darién Gap at the intersection of the prongs.

## CHAPTER 2

### Human Migration

Many push and pull factors affect the number of people migrating through the extremely dangerous and challenging terrain. Push factors include political and economic instability, conflicts and violence, and natural disasters. Pull factors include increased economic opportunity, personal safety, and human rights. The end goal for most migrants taking this path is to reach the U.S.-Mexico border, hoping to enter the “Land of the Free.” The country-of-origin trends for migrants who traverse the Darién Gap have varied dramatically over the past nine years. In 2015 and 2016, most migrants were from Haiti or Cuba, while in 2017 and 2018, most migrants originated in Asian countries like India, Nepal, and Bangladesh (Yates & Pappier, 2023). From 2019-2021, Haitian and Cuban migrant numbers made a resurgence before the proportions completely shifted in 2022 and 2023 when migrants from Venezuela comprised most migrants through the Darién Gap (Yates & Pappier, 2023).

Most migrants start their journeys the same way, beginning in a coastal town on the eastern shore of the Gulf of Urabá in Colombia like Necoclí or Turbo (Yates & Pappier, 2023). From those port towns, migrants take a ferry across the Gulf to either Acandí or Capurganá. From these port towns, migrants typically take one of two general routes to the Indigenous communities of Bajo Chiquito or Canaan Membrillo in Panama. Once the migrants successfully traverse the jungle and reach one of the two towns, they are sent to one of two Migrant Reception Stations (MRS) in either Lajas Blancas or San Vicente. From an MRS, they wait to board a bus to Costa Rica on their way to the U.S.

However, in pursuit of the benefits, many, if not all, migrants passing through the Darién Gap encounter violence, life-threatening situations, and human rights violations. Migrants traveling through the Darién Gap face natural dangers like no access to potable water or food, steep trails, deadly river crossings, hot temperatures, and poisonous animals (Gabster et al., 2021). They are also met with social dangers like traffickers, organized criminal groups, drug cartels, and thieves. Many migrants are deceived and told that the journey is easy and only takes about forty-eight hours. Under this false guidance, many migrants do not bring enough food or water for the multi-day journey. Traffic jams at choke points increase the time migrants spend on their feet and increase the entire length of the journey, which means every minute can mean the difference between life and death. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM) Missing Migrants Project, thirty-six people died in the Darién Gap in 2022, but that number only represents the found and reported deaths. The actual numbers are likely much higher (IOM, 2023).

Violence is incurred during the migration process, but it is also important to acknowledge the role of violence in causing people to migrate. In the context of Colombia, the Latin American Migration Project found that “rising violence during the period from 1986 to 2002 was instrumental in promoting international migration from Colombia (Silva & Massey, 2015, p. 174). The human migration in the Darién Gap falls into one of two categories: involuntary trafficking and voluntary smuggling.

## **Involuntary Trafficking**

Human trafficking comprises a portion of domestic, international, and transnational crime (Ellison & Vogel, 2020). Given the concealed nature of the crime, human trafficking is difficult to quantify, and the prevalence of human trafficking is commonly underwritten in research and official government reports. Most trafficking is primarily for sexual or labor exploitation purposes but can also be for "forced criminality, involuntary domestic servitude, and child soldiers" (Ellison & Vogel, 2020, p. 5). Human trafficking in Panama is understood as a by-product of rural poverty and economic disparity in the country, with the gap between the wealthy and the impoverished perpetuating this issue (Watts & Ruff, 2012). Panamanian Minister of Security Rolando Mirones noted, "If you think drug trafficking is bad, the trafficking of people is even worse because we convert human beings into merchandise" (Darién, 2021, p. 5).

Women and children are disproportionately subject to being trafficked and sexually exploited (Naranjo et al., 2023). Prostitution, or engaging in sexual activity for payment, is a common "occupation" for the women and children who are trafficked. Michelle Watts and Kimberly Dannels Ruff (2012) share that Panama is a source, destination, and transit country for forced prostitution. Dominican and Colombian migrant women are forced into prostitution when their handlers take their passports, leaving them with no way to get a legitimate job. Many trafficked Panamanians remain in the country, but there is a small percentage transported to Jamaica where they continue to be exploited sexually. Women who are trafficked are often forced into prostitution compared to labor. Children are likely to be trafficked into child labor in addition to sexual exploitation. Watts and Ruff (2012) explain that "rural children in particular are trafficked to urban areas for child labor purposes" (p. 222). In 2010, a Protection Project

report shared that child pornography, child prostitution, and child slavery are the most reported crimes among trafficked children. Indigenous children make up a considerable percentage of these rural children in Panama. In the Darién province specifically, young Indigenous girls are sold out by their parents to sexual exploitation or domestic servitude in urban areas (Watts & Ruff, 2012).

To add to the complexity of the issue, in many cases, migrants consent to be trafficked in the beginning, seeking out and hiring *coyotes* who promise to get them jobs across the border. The migrants, excited for the opportunity, agree, and then once they pay to be smuggled and are successfully smuggled across the border, they are forced into labor with no way out. Most migration, however, is voluntary smuggling in which the migrant decides to head north using the Darién Gap.

### **Voluntary Smuggling**

Smuggling occurs when migrants want to cross an international border but must outsource to individuals or groups to do so effectively. With expressed permission from the controlling cartel, a team of journalists from CNN set out on a five-day journey through the Darién Gap in February 2023. Nick Paton Walsh, Natalie Gallón, Brice Lainé, and Carlos Villalón trekked sixty-six miles through the dense and muddy forest with steep inclines and river crossings to interview migrants, locals, guides, and officials about the journey (Walsh et al., 2023). The on-foot journey began at the Sendero Acandí Seco camp, a plot of farmland controlled by a cartel where migrants receive pink wristbands after they pay the fee to use the route. The CNN team walked a route opened only twelve days earlier because the migration

routes change depending on the opinion of the dominant cartel. The older route was heavily trafficked and littered with clothes, tents, refuse, and human corpses, so it was taken out of commission. Locals interviewed by the CNN team believed the cartels wanted a less dangerous route, not for migrant safety but for better organization and the option to charge migrants more (Walsh et al., 2023).

In 2019, SENAFRONT, or *Servicio Nacional de Fronteras* (the Panamanian National Border Service), reported that the smuggling of migrants through the Darién Gap had become a lucrative business for drug trafficking cartels because they charge a commission to use their established drug routes to transport these people without the awareness of law enforcement (Darién, 2021). CNN calculations estimate that the primary cartel managing these trafficking routes makes tens of millions of dollars annually from the smuggling trade. While not named directly by CNN, the ‘cartel’ they are referring to is likely the Gulf Clan. A 2023 Human Rights Watch report estimates that the Gulf Clan collects \$125 per person on average in fees crossing the Darién Gap. Given this estimate, it is believed the Gulf Clan has made \$57 million between January and October 2023 just from passage fees for migrants to use the route (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Cultural anthropologists Jonathan Echeverri Zuluaga and Juan Thomas Ordóñez (2023) explain that the cartels, referred to colloquially among interviewees as *Las Redes*, created an organized crossing through the Darién Gap with various ‘amenities’ available at an additional cost. Cartels allow locals to sell soda and water at a marked-up price. The CNN team also witnessed mini markets during the journey with drinks, shoes, and food for sale. These markets are not for the well-being of the migrants but rather to take advantage of their disparity,

strategically placing the markets far enough in the journey where many migrants have no food, water, or decent shoes (Walsh et al., 2023). At established camps, tents are provided on wooden platforms, and fallen branches are arranged to keep the mud and moisture from seeping into the tents. Additionally, the cartel sells water, hot rice, and coffee for an additional price in the mornings. When migrants reach steep ascents, cartel members called *porters* to offer their services for a price (Walsh et al., 2023). The porters offer to help migrants move bags uphill for \$20 or a child for \$100 (Walsh et al., 2023). Zuluaga and Ordóñez (2023) share that human smuggling through the Darién region “injects thousands of dollars into the local economy” because of transportation, food, and accommodation fees, as well as the money required to pay off paramilitary groups for passage through the Darién Gap (p. 4).

The crossing of the Colombia-Panama border means the separation from the Colombian cartel in charge of guiding them. The cartel guides on this trek offered parting advice for the migrants, like helping others when possible because they might need it reciprocated in the future. The portion of the route in Panama has no cartel oversight and there is violent crime from robbers along the way. The Human Rights Watch reported in 2023 that Afro-Colombian *coyotes* employed by the cartels lead migrants through Colombia and drop them off with indigenous Panamanian guides at the border. This detail supplements the experiences relayed by the CNN team. After a few days in Panama, the groups reach the boats placed to transport migrants to Bajo Chiquito, the official “end” of this route through the Darién Gap. The wooden vessels, known as *piraguas*, fit about fifteen migrants each, paying \$20 each to board (Walsh et al., 2023). The boat ride to the Migrant Reception Station (MRS) takes an hour. At the MRS, migrants are offered first aid, essential services, and are processed by authorities. From here,



migrants are typically moved to one of two migrant reception centers: San Vicente and Lajas Blancas. Neither facility can adequately cope with the sheer number of migrants. From here, it is all about earning a seat on a bus to Costa Rica; some people give sexual favors, others pay, and others clean for the MRS to earn a spot; if not any of these, it is a waiting game that could last for weeks or months. Once the migrants board that bus to Costa Rica, the remaining journey begins, and the migrants combine walking, hitchhiking, and busing to reach the U.S. southern border, where they are met with an entirely new set of challenges.

Zuluaga and Ordóñez (2023) spoke with many migrants at the end of their journeys from South America through Central America to North America. They explained that most travelers felt the Darién Gap stood out as the most violent and dangerous part of the multi-thousand-mile journey. This shared sentiment was due to the jungle terrain and the presence of organized criminal networks. The connection of individual smugglers to the more extensive network lessens the regard for migrant well-being. Given the difficulty of the journey, many migrants pass away from illness, injury, exhaustion, or drowning. Nelson Higueta et al. (2022) explain that the migrants who pass away on the journey are discovered by Panamanian officials as buried by the *coyotes* in shallow or mass graves with little to signify their identity. This is seen as a “callous disregard for human life endured by migrant peoples in transit in their journey across many areas in the Americas is one of the most pervasive kinds of modern cruelty that can be exercised against a human being” (Higueta et al., 2022, p. 3).

When interviewed by the CNN journalists who trekked through the Gap, an unnamed senior U.S. State Department official commented on the cartel’s smuggling business in the region, “This is definitely big business, but it is a business that has no thought towards safety or

suffering or well-being... just collecting the money and moving people” (Walsh et al., 2023). Given the nature of the one-way rather than circular migration, smugglers are unlikely to have repeat customers, so they do not feel obligated to treat the migrants well because they will never see them again. While rare, some guides show more regard for the migrants than others. The CNN team observed a few cartel guides advising the migrants to conserve energy and be patient, urging them to fill up water bottles in the stream so they do not have to pay for the marked-up drink at the next supply stop (Walsh et al., 2023). The involvement of cartels and criminal organizations in human migration through the Darién Gap shifts these processes in many ways, especially about the use of people as “containers” for smuggled substances. As Walsh et al. (2023) explain, cartels increasingly regard people as human “packages” that both contain and transport illicit commodities.

## CHAPTER 3

### Drug Trafficking

The Isthmus of Panama has been a critical pipeline for the movement of drugs and other illicit substances for decades due to the high levels of drug production in South America. While there are many methods of transporting drugs from South America to North America, such as air and maritime transport, the transport of interest in this thesis is known as ground transport. This “ant traffic” is understood as the movement of drugs by employed individual couriers who carry largely insignificant amounts of drugs individually but, as a collective, usher considerable amounts of cocaine and heroin into North America (Bunck & Fowler, 2012, p. 36). According to the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, 86% of the cocaine entering the U.S. passes through the isthmus (Ballvé & McSweeney, 2020, p. 805). Julia Bunck and Michael Fowler (2012) share that the three primary illicit drugs to transit through Central America from Colombia are marijuana, heroin, and cocaine, all psychoactive substances that are federally illegal in the U.S. A highly effective mechanism to ensure business efficiency, the “fronted goods” business style means a small portion of the money is paid upfront to ensure speed (Bunck & Fowler, 2012, p. 42). The remaining money is not paid until the product reaches the end user, who pays for it.

In most cases, the prevalence of drugs and drug trafficking results in the presence of violence. Laura Blume (2022) explains that drug trafficking-related violence is a product of international prohibition. The theory behind this causation is that prohibition increases the risk and profit potential of supplying the drugs. Additionally, issues must typically be resolved outside of the law, which almost always relies on some sort of violence (Blume, 2022). After

having spent considerable time with narco-traffickers in Central America, Blume (2022) found that they use violence, or the threat of violence, “to eliminate hazards (e.g., murdering a police informant or witness) and to settle disputes or enforce contracts (e.g., targeting someone who failed to deliver a shipment)” (p. 1383).

The organization of both internal and international criminal groups present in the Darién Gap contributes greatly to the violence in the region and the efficiency of narcotrafficking. Bunck and Fowler (2012) coined the term “geotactics of the drug trade” to describe how drug networks have developed their trafficking efficacy by “assembling different methods, routes, and logistics, many dependent on geographic factors” (p. 21). The geography of the Darién Gap assists and hinders the trafficking of drugs from South America to North America. The various criminal organizations in the region counter these hindrances and continue the illicit activities.

### **International Criminal Organizations**

The *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), or FARC, is a Marxist guerilla group aimed at politically and militarily challenging the Colombian state (Rabasa & Chalk, 2001). To generate the money needed to challenge the government in the late 1900s, FARC produced, processed, and trafficked drugs throughout South and Central America. FARC’s involvement in the drug trade began by demanding fees for protecting illicit coca crops from authorities while also imposing informal taxes on drug enterprises in the southwest portion of the country (Bunck & Fowler, 2012).

In 1971, FARC established a front in the Darién region between Panama and Colombia, which included building drug production laboratories in Colombia near the border with Panama

(Rabasa & Chalk, 2001; Bunck & Fowler, 2012). This front controlled a corridor from the Panamanian border and the adjacent Atlantic and Pacific coasts. A 2001 report from the U.S. government informed that FARC was receiving \$300 million annually from the drug trade at the very minimum (Bunck & Fowler, 2012, p. 47). The SENAFRONT director reported in 2008 that FARC controlled two-thirds of Panama's Darién Province, maintaining forty to fifty footpaths through the region to traffic drugs produced in Colombia. (Darién, 2021, p. 35; Rabasa and Chalk, 2001). Watts and Ruff (2012) report that drug-related violence has a direct positive relationship with FARC's more frequent appearances in Panama and that Panamanian authorities attribute the worsening security situation to the increase in narcotics trafficking. It is important to note that following the 2016 Peace Accord, FARC has been "officially" disbanded, but there are still many active dissidents in the region.

While FARC is a well-known international criminal group with a history in the region, many other criminal groups are involved in drug trafficking in the region as well. Criminal groups from Mexico are also present in the Darién region, with Panamanian intelligence from 2013 finding evidence of operations of the Sinaloa Cartel, the Juarez Cartel, the Zetas, and the Beltran Leyva Organization (Darién, 2021). In many cases, these Mexican groups work in conjunction with the Colombian groups to control drug transport in the region. A 1984 agreement brokered by a Honduran drug trafficker led to Mexican drug cartels charging Colombian groups "one thousand to two thousand dollars per kilo for cross-border transportation" northward into Central America and eventually the U.S. (Bunck & Fowler, 2012, p.48).

Another international group present is El Salvador's Mara Salvatrucha, MS-13 mara, or street gang (Watts & Ruff, 2012). In 2009 and 2010, MS-13 gang members were arrested in Panama and found to be recruiting children as young as seven years old (Watts & Ruff, 2012, p. 217). There is also evidence of Chinese mafia involvement in human trafficking in the region (Darién, 2021). In the case of the Darién Gap and some other cases, international criminal organizations get involved in domestic groups to expand their influence with minimal detection.

### **Internal Criminal Organizations**

The primary internal criminal group present and involved in drug and human trafficking in the Darién Gap is the *Clan del Golfo*, or Gulf Clan. A primary interest of the Gulf Clan is to produce and traffic drugs from South America to North America. However, due to the challenging geography of the region, there are very few possible routes to take from Colombia to Panama, so the routes used for drug trafficking must also be used for human trafficking. This phenomenon gives the Gulf Clan complete control over the Colombian portion of the trek. Drugs are the principal cargo transported through the Darién Gap, with an ever-growing increase in humans as important, money-making cargo.

FARC is establishing local branches and networks within Panama to increase its authority but minimize the direct FARC-identified footprint since the Peace Agreement. Panama's drug prosecutor shares that in 2009, 80% of individuals arrested for drug trafficking in Panama were Panamanian (Watts & Ruff, 2012, p. 219). These large criminal organizations like FARC recruit locals and are being paid in drugs which is creating a drug economy, something Panama avoided relatively effectively in the past decades. The ever-growing lack of interest in secondary

education among male urban youth leaves them vulnerable to recruitment by gangs and drug traffickers.

Watts and Ruff (2012) report that high poverty rates, unequal distribution of income, and a strong high school dropout rate cause many young people to join street gangs. These children start out in gangs with petty crimes, but the alliances between gangs and more organized and sophisticated criminal groups mean many of these children end up joining the lucrative drug trade. Similarly, rural Indigenous people are becoming involved in drug activity and joining gangs in the Darién region, where opportunities for education and employment are limited (Watts & Ruff, 2012). An individual involved in regional drug trafficking explains that they received “\$5,000 per trip, more than ten times the monthly earnings for working in a local store” (Darién, 2021, p. 5). International criminal organizations will often create local cells in the bridge states, like Panama, to help with the transshipment of drugs and to make semipermanent or permanent relationships with other groups in the bridge country (Bunck & Fowler, 2012). A U.S. official working in Panama noted to Watts and Ruff (2012) that “drugs cannot be moved through Panama without the help of the local population” (p. 219).

Another group in the region is the Ejército Popular de Liberación (People’s Liberation Army), or EPL, an anti-Moscow Maoist guerrilla group created in the 1960s (Rabasa & Chalk, 2001). The group is present in remote parts of Colombia where “land title disputes and physical isolation from the rest of Colombia provided seedbeds for revolutionary activity” (Rabasa & Chalk, 2001, p. 31). Only four EPL fronts are active today, with the most significant present in Chocó, near the Panamanian border.

To transport the drugs from Colombia, where they are produced, Colombian and Mexican cartels negotiate the export details of routes, methods, prices, and quantities, but the journey through the Darién Gap relies heavily on local actors (Ballvé & McSweeney, 2020). Affiliated, local organizations operate with “varying degrees of oversight from their larger, more powerful patrons,” and this organization connects producers, suppliers, traffickers, and smugglers (Ballvé & McSweeney, 2020, p. 811). According to Teo Ballvé and Kendra McSweeney (2020), this dynamic network of actors involved in the illicit drug trafficking business fosters increased violence and corruption in the area. Freedom House, a non-profit devoted to global democracy, found that the sale and transport of drugs contribute to as much as 90% of violent criminal activity in Panama (Watts & Ruff, 2012, p. 219). U.S. embassy officials in Panama express concern about Panamanian groups creating alliances with Central American and Mexican gangs because they will be more organized and violent than current Panamanian gangs (Watts & Ruff, 2012). Coalition-building, alliances, and sophisticated organization of internal and international criminal groups in the Darién Gap are the biggest threats to successful counternarcotics efforts in Panama and Colombia. The U.S. acknowledges the limits to state policing due to the region's geography and has dedicated resources to strengthening anti-drug efforts throughout the region.



## CHAPTER 4

### Geopolitical Factors

The isthmus and the Darién Gap have varying levels of geopolitical importance to countries in North, Central, and South America. The region's significance to the U.S. creates a complicated dynamic regarding its relationships with Central American countries that has shifted dramatically over the years regarding migration and counternarcotics policy. The U.S. is deeply invested in the Darién Gap because it is the only land passage connecting South America to North America, and the U.S. would like to utilize the strategic bottleneck of the Darién Gap to crack down on migration and drug trafficking to the U.S. As the leading consumer market for Latin American illegal drugs, the U.S. government understands the role of the region in drug trafficking and works with both Panama and Colombia to enact anti-drug trafficking efforts. While countries attempt to solve the trafficking and smuggling problems in the Darién Gap, many of them perpetuate the problems through their actions or lack thereof. The border between Colombia and Panama is sometimes called the “forgotten border” because of the lack of law enforcement presence, security, and regulation (Mesa Bedoya et al., 2017, p. 108). There are many points of contention between state interests in the region. In terms of narcotics trafficking, the U.S. aims to cut off movement at the source, while Panama and Colombia would rather demand a slowdown in the U.S., where a substantial portion of the drugs end up.

## State Policing

Due to the physical complexities, there is minimal Panamanian or Colombian government oversight in the Darién Gap. The border region is covered in dense forest with steep inclines and dangerous river crossings, making it difficult to access and build law enforcement infrastructure. The border also has no areas of disagreement between the two countries. Juan Camilo Mesa Bedoya et al. (2017) explain that the designation of the Colombian-Panamanian border has never caused diplomatic turbulence between the governments, meaning neither side monitors the border to enforce the border. This trust means there is little need for either government to monitor the territory. This absence of state law enforcement fosters illicit activities and encourages international and internal criminal groups to move to the region, as the border is a “heaven” for drug trafficking (Mesa Bedoya et al., 2017, p. 112). Over the years, SENAFRONT has been increasingly engaging FARC and other groups in the Darién region with the dismantling of multiple FARC operational bases in the early 2010s (Watts & Ruff, 2012). Mesa Bedoya et al. (2017) believe Panama and Colombia should strengthen collaboration to combat the border issues as they have negative implications for both entities.

For human trafficking surveillance by SENAFRONT, there has not been any security approach at the border. Both governments have promised to make “formative arrangements” but have taken no notable actions to carry out such arrangements (Jhangimal, 2016, p. 25). A report from Freedom House explains that Panama has created a unique human trafficking investigation unit specifically for prostitution, but resources to fund the unit are insufficient (Watts & Ruff, 2012). A 2020 U.S. Trafficking in Persons report declares Panama as a Tier 2 country, meaning little is being done to combat human trafficking (Ellison & Vogel, 2020). To show efforts to

combat human trafficking, Panama is part of the Regional Coalition against Human Trafficking and Migrant Smuggling with many other Central American countries with the “purpose to adopt and promote regional standards, policies and processes to combat and prevent these crimes and improve care for victims, as well as being a source of advice for countries on these issues” (Ellison & Vogel, 2020, p. 25). There is also research to suggest that the involvement of state actors in drug trafficking can reduce violence. Blume (2022) shares that trafficking is not always violent and that there is research to support the idea that traffickers can benefit from having a working relationship with the state, usually meaning less violence is needed. This state support occurs because of corruption by individual law enforcement officers, or the entire police force itself. While not desirable, the corruption and cooperation of state actors in drug trafficking through the Darién Gap can reduce the violence incurred.

The CNN journalists who trekked through the Darién Gap share that the last visible presence of the Colombian government was in Necoclí, which is the beachfront town where many migrants wait to be ferried over the Gulf of Urabá to Acandí and the beginning of the Darién Gap route (Walsh et al., 2023). At this checkpoint, the CNN team noticed the presence of the Panamanian government for the first time with a medical rescue helicopter circling the area. The efforts on behalf of each of the directly involved countries, Panama and Colombia, have been insufficient by U.S. government standards, and the region's significance to U.S. national interests resulted in heavy U.S. involvement.

## **The Role of the United States in the Region**

The U.S. government was highly involved in Panama in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries with the development of the Panama Canal. The canal, which expedited shipping times by negating the need for ships to sail around the southernmost point of South America, was completed in 1903 under U.S. government supervision and financing. Multiple U.S. Army bases were built near the canal for close supervision, and the bases housed U.S. soldiers for decades. From 1963 to 1997, the Canal Zone, a corridor including the Canal and five miles distance from it on each side, served as the headquarters for SOUTHCOM, U.S. Military Southern Command, which is responsible for U.S. military affairs in Latin America and the Caribbean (Bunck & Fowler, 2012, p. 309). In 1979 the area was relinquished to Panama and incorporated back into the country (Bunck & Fowler, 2012, p. 315).

Further direct U.S. involvement in Panama includes the December 1989 invasion of Panama under the President George H.W. Bush administration coined “Operation Just Cause” to oust dictator Manuel Noriega (Bunck & Fowler, 2012, p. 337). On the first night of the invasion, U.S. officials swore in President-elect Guillermo Endara, the leader of the opposition coalition, on a U.S. military base in Panama. Shortly after his swearing-in, Endara signed a comprehensive anti-drug cooperation agreement with the U.S., marking the beginning of modern U.S.-Panama anti-drug efforts (Bunck & Fowler, 2012, p. 345).

The U.S. government is highly involved in the battle against drugs in Central America but is especially involved in the Panamanian isthmus due to its role as a drug trafficking pipeline from South to North America. The first U.S. anti-drug office in Central America was established in Panama in 1972, predating the existence of the Drug Enforcement Administration (Bunck &

Fowler, 2012). Bunck and Fowler (2012) explain that from the mid-1990s into the early twenty-first century, “about 60% of the heroin seized in the U.S. originated in Colombia” (p. 29). However, Bunck and Fowler (2012) also share that the most optimistic estimates of cocaine transit numbers show authorities interdicting only 10-15% of the narcotics meant for the U.S. through the Isthmus (p. 35). To counteract drug trafficking, the U.S. government began to link U.S. foreign aid, loans, and trade preferences to counternarcotics assistance in the 1980s (Bunck & Fowler, 2012, p. 59). Bunck and Fowler (2012) share that under “§490 of the Foreign Assistance Act, the U.S. Congress has required presidents to certify annually that states are fully cooperating with U.S. counternarcotics efforts aimed at curbing drug production, trafficking, and consumption” (p. 59). A late 1900s statement from the Department of State shows the U.S. impression of Panama at the time calling the country a “a crossroads for transnational crime, such as drug trafficking, money laundering, illicit arms sales, and [undocumented migrant] smuggling” (Bunck & Fowler, 2012, p. 314).

According to Angela Rabasa and Peter Chalk (2001), the U.S. counternarcotics policy shifted in the early 1990s from a focus on intercepting illegal drugs in transit zones like Mexico and the Caribbean to a focus on stopping them at the source of production and refining facilities in Peru, Bolivia, and Colombia. In 2000, the U.S. and Colombian governments announced a partnership called “Plan Colombia,” which manifests in a \$1.3 billion foreign security and economic assistance package to encourage the Colombian peace process by combatting Colombian drug cartels like FARC and insurgent groups while improving counternarcotics measures (Bunck & Fowler, 2012, p. 30). Plan Colombia, as it was created, lasted for about fifteen years and resulted in the decrease of power of FARC in Colombia, eventually leading to

the signing of the Peace Accord between the Colombian Government and FARC leadership in 2017 with the U.S. program dubbed “Peace Colombia” created under President Obama which sought to provide the country with aid to assist with implementation of the accord.

The relationship between the U.S. and Panama regarding anti-drug efforts is dynamic and complicated. Former President of Panama Ricardo Martinelli stated that “United States Government (USG) support to Panama’s counternarcotics efforts, including developing an effective community policing model to help control a growing gang problem, is crucial to help Panama stem its increasing security problems” (Watts & Ruff, 2012, p. 221). The authors also share that the collaborative efforts between the U.S. and Panama meant a reported 15% decrease in homicide and 33% increase in drug seizures in 2010 compared to 2009 (Watts & Ruff, 2012, p. 221). However, many Panamanian citizens express disagreement with the Panamanian administration's cooperation with the U.S. “War on Drugs.” Watts and Ruff (2012) explain that many interviewees see the drug war as a U.S. problem fought on Panamanian soil, reducing Panama to a “client” of the U.S. when the U.S. should be focusing more on distributors within the U.S. (p. 221). They argue that the U.S. should be putting a greater emphasis on stopping the drug distributors in the U.S. and reducing the demand in the country to reduce the supply.

Nicholas Barnes (2017) explains that the “War on Drugs” has failed to achieve its purpose and “in many cases, only expanded and strengthened organized crime while deteriorating the rule of law” (p. 979). Rabasa and Chalk (2001) share some of the best ways for the U.S. to reduce violence and drug trafficking in the isthmus region. They explain that the U.S. government should consider the longevity of their counternarcotics and counterinsurgency efforts should the Colombian government be unstable, they should assist the Colombian

government in regaining control of roads and rivers that criminal groups and drug trafficking groups have taken, and that the U.S. should pair with countries like Panama and Ecuador to help them secure their borders with Colombia. In terms of the human trafficking aspect of movement through the Darién Gap and the U.S. role in countering that, SENAFRONT receives migrants emerging from Darién Gap and escorts them to ‘Migrant Reception Stations’ and most, but not all, individuals entering by foot into Panama pass through these stations which are part of an international effort between the U.S. and Panama to control the flow of migrant people (Gabster, 2021).

Colombia, Panama, and the U.S. are no strangers to trilateral agreements aimed at reducing drug production and human trafficking in the region. In 1993 and 1994, a joint endeavor from the three countries eradicated 150 hectares of coca fields in the Darién region (Bunck & Fowler, 2012, p. 324). More recently, delegates from each country gathered in February 2023 in Apartadó, Colombia, to discuss efforts to curb irregular migration in the Darién Gap. One of the issues they worked to resolve was combatting misinformation about the length and difficulty of the trek through the Darién Gap. Many migrants express feeling misled or lied to about the danger and intensity of the trek through the Darién Gap, so to curb unsuspecting migrants and, inevitably, injuries and deaths, the countries announced their joint dedication to countering misinformation (U.S. Embassy Panama, 2023).

The most recent major development was a trilateral agreement between the three countries, released on April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2023. Panamanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Janaina Tewaney, Colombian Minister of Foreign Affairs Álvaro Leyva Durán, and U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro N. Mayorkas met in Panama City, as part of high-level delegations

to discuss migration issues, especially along the Panama-Colombia border (U.S. Embassy Colombia, 2023). Samantha Power, the U.S. Agency for International Development Administrator, General Laura Richardson, the Commander of U.S. SOUTHCOM, and other senior representatives across the Biden administration were present at the discussions. The official statement from the U.S. Embassy in Colombia explains the campaign:

Recognizing our shared interest and responsibility to prevent the risk to human life, disrupt transnational criminal organizations, and preserve the vital rainforest, the governments of Panamá, Colombia, and the United States intend to carry out a two-month coordinated campaign to address the grave humanitarian situation in the Darién. (U.S. Embassy Colombia, 2023)

The governments decided on three overarching goals for the campaign: to end the illicit movement of people and goods through the Darién Gap, to open lawful pathways for migrants, and to launch a plan to reduce poverty and create economic opportunities in affected border communities (U.S. Embassy Colombia, 2023). Little more information has been provided by the governments of each country, so it is not known how effective the campaign has been in each country. Further action is being taken, but success is not being shared. For example, a few months later, in June 2023, the U.S. and Colombia announced the creation of jointly managed Safe Mobility Offices in Colombia that would “identify, register, and categorize the reasons for irregular migration and channel those who qualify through lawful pathways from Colombia to the United States” (U.S. State Department, 2023). Enhanced and unified trilateral efforts between the U.S., Panama, and Colombia are the best chance to counter high levels of criminal organization within the human and drug trafficking spheres.



## CONCLUSION

The Darién Gap acts simultaneously as an obstacle and an asset to the movement of humans and illicit substances. As the only land crossing between South and North America, the Darién Gap is one of the busiest "transit" corridors. Its' unique geographic role as a bottleneck for ground movement provided a fascinating location for a case study on the migration and drug trafficking trends through the region. The rugged terrain and lack of infrastructure make for a complicated journey for both migrants and drugs, costing a lot of time and money. However, the challenging terrain and lack of infrastructure also resulted in a deficiency of law enforcement and government oversight in both Panama and Colombia. The long history of U.S. intervention in the isthmus is well represented in the literature, and the significance of movement through the Darién Gap to the U.S. is clear. The bottleneck provides an opportunity to halt the movement of drugs and people before they have a chance to reach the U.S.-Mexico border.

The literature on migration trends through the Darién Gap exposes three significant factors: human migration, drug trafficking, and geopolitical factors. Three crucial elements emerged from the evolution and development of each of these issues, and each could be the sole focus of future research on migration through the Darién Gap. The first element emphasizes the prevalence of voluntary smuggling compared to the involuntary trafficking of persons through the isthmus. Most migrants hire *coyotes* who are affiliated with the ruling cartel to smuggle them through the Colombian portion of the journey. These migrants pay to use the route, to have a guide, and for 'amenities' like water or food along the way. Given the dynamic nature of migration through the Darién Gap, no two migrants have the same experience, but it is universal that the journey is difficult, dangerous, and life-threatening.

The second element emphasizes the success of internal and international criminal organizations when they work together in smuggling and trafficking efforts. Cartels that would otherwise be in conflict build coalitions to monopolize the drug trade. These groups took advantage of their power and capitalized on human migration through the Darién Gap. They use the desperation of migrants seeking a better life to supplement the revenue created from the drug trade. Literature suggests that the human smuggling market in this region will surpass drug trafficking because humans can move themselves, whereas drugs need to be moved by something else. The third element highlights the geopolitical significance of the Darién Gap to the U.S. Inadequacies of policing efforts from the Panama and Colombia governments are exposed through the literature. Despite historical tensions and unwanted U.S. involvement, it is revealed that trilateral collaboration between the three countries is essential to hindering the efforts of criminal organizations in the Darién Gap. Further investigation into each of these three areas would yield insights and shed light on possible solutions and more effective policies for controlling smuggling and protecting people from abuse and trafficking.

A few articles in this literature review provided personal accounts of or experiences with those using or traveling through the Darién Gap. These experiences are often published by news outlets or magazines but hardly present in peer-reviewed journals. These perspectives are essential to understanding the personal experiences of migrants in this region, and more academic articles should utilize personal accounts of this movement. To enact effective change, the perspectives of the people most affected should be included. This thesis was pulled from non-academic sources to provide personal accounts of the trek through the Darién Gap.

Triangulating these three topics together provides a well-rounded view of the main factors in play at one of the world's most geopolitically significant regions regarding international migration and smuggling. The involvement of international criminal groups in both drug trafficking and human trafficking suggests that one should not be evaluated without also evaluating the other. The sophistication of controlling criminal groups is alarming and should not be taken lightly by state actors. In the U.S., where immigration and drug policy are both highly polarizing topics, understanding migration through the Darién Gap and all the complexities can be the catalyst to positive change.

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