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Margarita Sanchez
UN Volunteer assigned to UNICEF
in Panama



Reducing invisibilization of refugees and migrants at border crossings in Latin America

The challenges refugees and migrants encounter in transit are numerous, from lack of water and food to the risks of becoming victims of assault and robbery, to mention a few. UN Volunteers are often first responders and points of contact in the field. They ensure the protection of refugees, migrants, internally displaced persons and persons at risk of statelessness. Emanuel and Margarita are among UN Volunteers serving people stuck at borders during the pandemic, identifying needs and finding solutions, all while spreading awareness of COVID-19 and preventive measures.

Migrants and refugees – from countries such as Cuba, Pakistan, Venezuela,

Senegal, Nepal, Angola, and Haiti – travel up the South American continent, cross the Darien Gap, stop briefly in Panama, and continue in transit to North America.

When they stop in Panama, some of these meet Margarita Sanchez, a UN Volunteer Protection and Migration Officer working with the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) in Panama. Margarita monitors the situation of children in transit and gender-based violence cases among the migrant and refugee population in Darien, Panama, coordinating between state entities and partners.

“ Volunteers have to have a lot of passion and a lot of will to handle difficult situations, [...] but knowing that at the same time you can help a child or family. You learn that a grain sand can have an impact. -- Margarita Sanchez, UN Volunteer, UNICEF in Panama.

In 2018, UNICEF Panama saw a change in the flow of migrants and refugees. What were previously men in search of economic opportunities became families with children and/or adolescents traveling alone through the Darien Gap. This 66-mile jungle divides Colombia and Panama, which is also known as one of the most dangerous migration routes in the world. "Twenty per cent of the migrants we receive are children and adolescents and fifty per cent of these are children aged 0 to 5 years old," says the Colombian UN Volunteer, who has been with UNICEF for two years [1].

Currently, UNICEF Panama and its partners – Red Cross, Red International, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) and Children's Villages SOS – provide refugees and migrants with health and water services, psychosocial assistance and child protection at immigration stations in the Darien. "This is an extracontinental flow, where we have served over 53 nationalities," added Margarita.

Similarly, some of those migrants and refugees also stop in Upala, Costa Rica. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) opened a field office to respond to the influx of Nicaraguans in search of international protection, with a focus on age, gender and diversity. The field office focuses on safeguarding the

fundamental rights of refugees and asylum seekers through protection assistance, attention to basic needs and activities that promote peaceful coexistence and local integration [2].

As a Protection Assistant, Emanuel Oviedo Espinoza, a UN Volunteer assigned to UNHCR in Upala, is often at non-authorized crossing points along the Costa Rican-Nicaraguan border to document trends and people who require protection. Emanuel helps by immediately registering them in the UNHCR database, providing them with resources and pinpointing their pressing needs.

“ We identify the entry routes of people in need of international protection, the vulnerabilities that these routes represent and how these situations can be addressed. --Emanuel Oviedo Espinoza, UN Volunteer Project Assistant, UNHCR in Upala

UNHCR provides socio-economic assistance for up to three months to families with greater vulnerability services. "RET International provides comprehensive care and psychosocial care; HIAS provides accompaniment and legal advice; Fundación Mujer provides workshops and training on livelihoods and employability, as does Defense of Children and Girls International, who work with children and adolescents," he explains.

While Costa Rica and Panama have become home for many refugees and migrants, many times, these countries are still rest stops for refugees and migrants in their journey. This was the case of a group of men, who had been stuck at the Costa Rican-Nicaraguan border for a long time when Emanuel found them. "It was impactful for me to see the level of "invisibilization" that these people receive from society. These are tough realities," Emanuel says.

“ The mere fact of me being there and giving them a voice is one of the most valuable parts of my assignment. As a UN Volunteer Protection Assistant,

I want to make sure that no voice is silenced. --
“ Emanuel Oviedo Espinoza with UNHCR in Upala

"Being a UN Volunteer in a field office has allowed me to get closer to the population with whom we work in a very special way," says Emanuel. "We know the realities firsthand and help to ensure that their rights are monitored."

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[1] <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/fifteen-times-more-children-crossing-panama-jungle-towards-usa-last-four-years>

[2] <https://www.acnur.org/costa-rica.html>



• COVID-19 • Coronavirus • refugees • migrants

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