

## International

# Haitian migrants narrate their traumatic journey to Panama

## ‘There are many dead, people who didn’t make it this far’

**BAJO CHIQUITO, Panama:** When Moise Cliff Raymond arrives at the Tuquesa River, he plunges in to wash off the filth from trekking five days through the perilous Darien Gap jungle in order to cross the Colombian border into Panama. The Haitian and his companions, who have just arrived at Bajo Chiquito—the first community on the Panama side—are covered in mud after the previous night’s heavy rain.

“The journey was very hard because it’s a long walk,” said the 29-year-old, wearing a rastacap. “There are many dead, people who didn’t make it this far.” While Raymond walked, other migrants who had spare cash or children chose to hire a canoe taxi to take them to the village’s small port. Another Haitian, Peter, struggled into one of the canoes while holding onto his three-year-old daughter.

“This is how things are. You have to do it if you want a new life. Things are very difficult for us Haitians,” said the 29-year-old, who did not give his last name. So far in 2021, 64,000 migrants have crossed the jungle, including 18,000 in August alone, according to Panama’s Security Minister Jean Pino. Most of them are Haitians.

### American dream

Last Sunday, 580 people emerged from the Darien Gap — a 1,430,000-acre (575,000-hectare) jungle which UNICEF says is one of the world’s most dangerous routes. It is infested with

armed gangs and drug traffickers who often rob or attack the migrants crossing it. In a bid to cope, Panamanian and Colombian authorities have agreed to allow the passage of 500 migrants a day. They all arrive in Bajo Chiquito, a village that is home to members of the Embera indigenous people. However none of the migrants want to stay there. “I’m going to the United States. That’s my destiny, that’s where I’ll be able to accomplish my dreams, to get a good job,” said Raymond. He still has a long way to go.

### ‘The stench’

Migrants set off at 6:00 am and walk for 12 hours a day, said Yadira Rosales, one of a small number of Cubans among the throngs. “We saw five dead bodies... some were swollen and others I don’t know because they were covered, but you could see their silhouettes and then there was the stench,” said Rosales, who traveled with her husband Jose Alberto Reyes and five-year-old daughter Adelis. All migrants tell stories of attacks by armed groups, including murders and sexual assaults.

“We ran into some but we were in a group. They took our money and let us go. They went through the belongings of those that didn’t have money,” said Rosales. In Bajo Chiquito there is a post run by the Ministry of Health and Doctors Without Borders (MSF) where around 400 migrants are treated daily. “Most of the injuries are trauma to the feet because of the long days of



LES CAYES, Haiti: People line up with jerry cans at a camp for people who lost their home during the August 14 earthquake in Les Cayes. —AFP

walking and difficult route... gastrointestinal injuries, insect bites and also cases of sexual violence,” said Sofia Vasquez, an MSF doctor.

After registering with local migration officials, most migrants settle down on a basketball court in the center of the village, surrounded by small businesses and people selling lunch for \$3, a sum not everyone can afford. “This year we got together a

bit and prepared to receive them in the community. We installed businesses and food stalls in different places,” said Nelson, a community leader. The village has also installed water pipes from portable tanks for hygiene purposes. Locals offer to send WhatsApp messages for \$2 and villagers have set up a wire transfer system for the migrants, collecting a 20 percent commission. —AFP

## At least 20 dead after torrential rains in Venezuela

**CARACAS:** The death toll from heavy rains that triggered mudslides and floods in western Venezuela has risen to 20, local authorities said Wednesday, with 17 other people missing. Nine states are in an “emergency” situation and more than 54,000 people have been affected by the downpours. Interior Minister Remigio Ceballos told state television. On Tuesday he warned it would continue to rain “for the next 10 days.” The hardest-hit areas are in the state of Merida, where the Mocoties river burst its banks and flooded a village, cutting off electricity and telephone links.

Local official Jehyson Guzman said the number of dead had “increased today to 20”-up from 15. Heavy rains have also hit other parts of Venezuela, including the capital Caracas. The downpours have destroyed more than 8,000 homes in 11 states,



TOVAR MUNICIPALITY, Venezuela: A child stands in front of houses destroyed by a mudslide in the town of Tovar in the state of Merida. —AFP

according to President Nicolas Maduro, who linked the extreme weather to climate change. Scientists say climate change is intensifying the risk of heavy rain around the world, because a warmer atmosphere holds

more water. According to an international study published Tuesday, global warming made deadly floods that devastated parts of Germany and Belgium last month up to nine times more likely. —AFP

## Mauritius hails UN ban on British stamps in disputed islands

**PORT LOUIS, Mauritius:** Mauritius has welcomed the UN postal agency’s decision to ban British stamps from being used on the Chagos archipelago, calling it a victory for the island nation in its decades-long dispute with London. The vote by the Universal Postal Union (UPU), a United Nations agency focusing on the mail sector, follows a longstanding spat between Mauritius and Britain over the Chagos Islands, where London and Washington operate a joint military base. “This is another big step in favour of the recognition of the sovereignty of Mauritius over the Chagos,” Mauritian Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth said late Wednesday.

Although Mauritius became independent in 1968, the Chagos archipelago remained under British control, sparking protests by Chagossians, who accuse London of carrying out an “illegal occupation” and barring them from their homeland. Following Tuesday’s vote, “the UPU will stop registering, distributing and transmitting stamps” bearing the words British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), the name given by Britain to the archipelago, Jugnauth said. In 2019, the International Court of Justice ruled that Britain should give up control of the islands. —AFP