Refugees International

WOMEN'S REFUGEE COMMISSION

COSTA RICA

LIMITED AID AND IMPOSSIBLE CHOICES FOR PEOPLE SEEKING REFUGE

The Human Impact of Trump Administration Policies in Costa Rica

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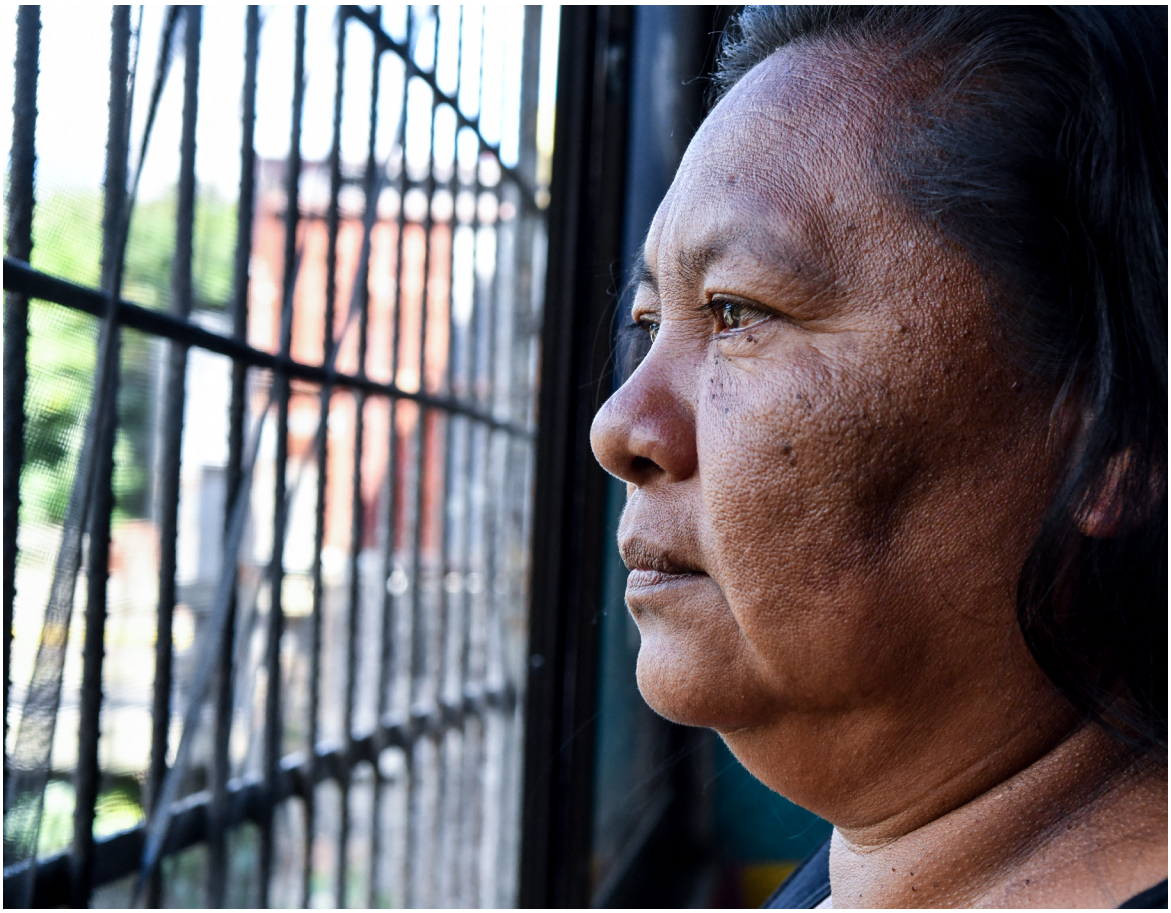

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About Refugees International

Refugees International advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises around the world. We do not accept any government or UN funding, ensuring the independence and credibility of our work.

About Women's Refugee Commission

Women's Refugee Commission responds to crises that affect refugees and displaced people by advocating for the rights of women, children, and other marginalized populations.

Cover Image: Ecuadorian migrant Maria Aguillon, who was contemplating staying in Costa Rica instead of trying to reach the U.S. due to the Trump administration's restrictive policies, at the Puente 2 Refugio de Esperanza Humanitarian Shelter in San Jose on February 21, 2025. Photo by Ezequiel Becerra/AFP via Getty Images.

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Executive Summary

Rapid and problematic U.S. policy shifts have led to dramatic limits in access to humanitarian support and protection for migrants throughout the Americas, including in Costa Rica, one of the United States' most important allies in the region and a traditionally generous country of refuge. During the Biden administration, the United States and Costa Rica expanded collaboration to create protection pathways for displaced people, including expanded refugee resettlement through a Safe Mobility Office in Costa Rica, and increased funding for UN agencies and humanitarian organizations supporting migrants and asylum seekers. In just four months, the Trump administration has dismantled this protection infrastructure and pressured Costa Rica into violating the rights of refugees – while simultaneously increasing the migration pressures on the country.

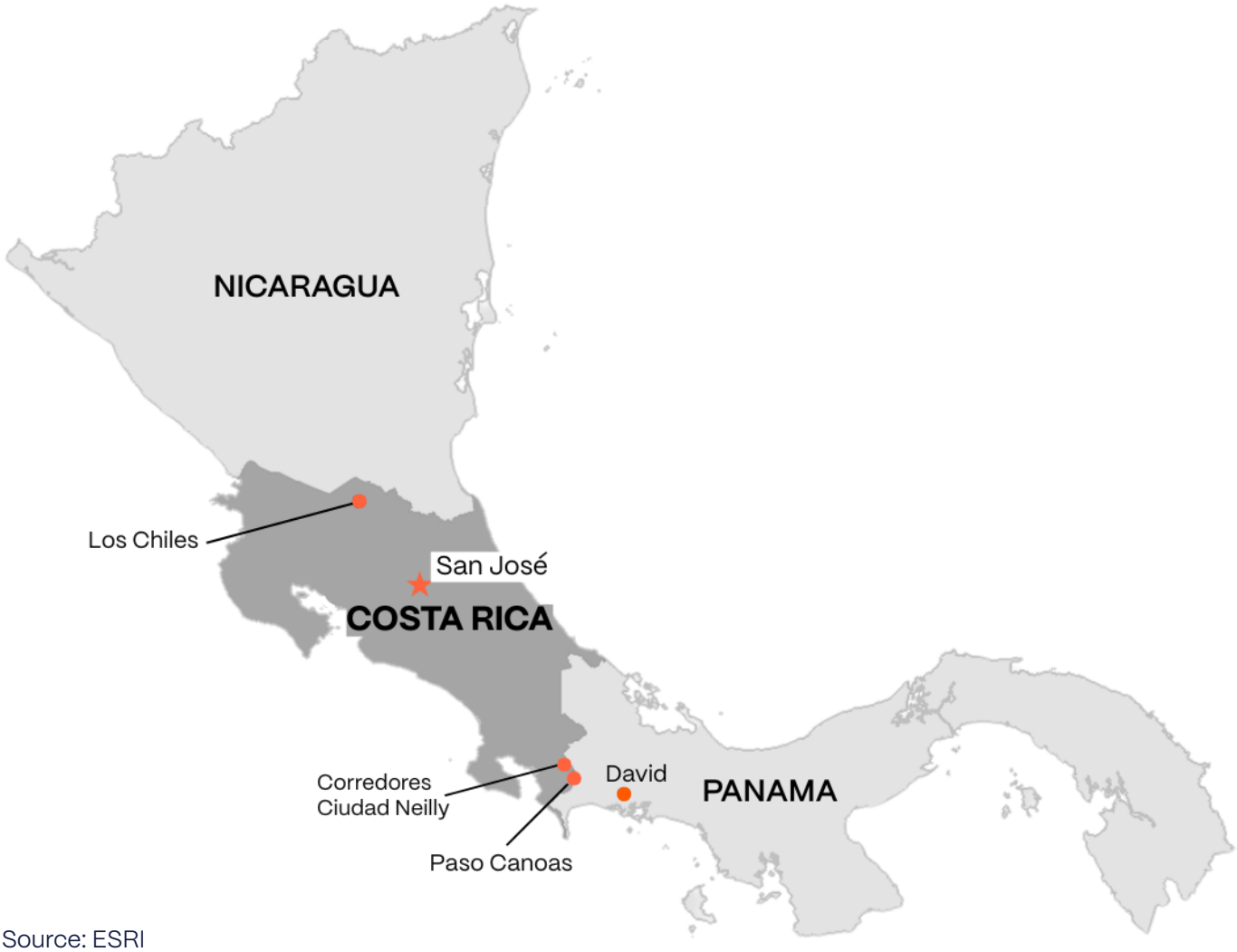
In early 2025, the Trump administration's cancellation of CBP One (an appointment system for people seeking refuge at the U.S. border), combined with insecurity in Mexico, prompted an "inverse" migration southward through Costa Rica into Panama of mostly Venezuelan families who have critical humanitarian and protection needs. But the humanitarian landscape is quite different in 2025 than it was a year ago, when migrants moving north could access an official government-run Panama to Costa Rica bussing program and receive humanitarian support through UN and US funded programs. In March 2025, Venezuelans moving south could not access shelter and support in Costa Rica, where humanitarian organizations serving migrants were hit hard by U.S. aid cuts.

Further, Venezuelans in southern Costa Rica were turned away from the country's only government-run migrant reception center near the Panamanian border – the Temporary Attention Center for Migrants (or CATEM for its Spanish name) – because, as a result of an undisclosed agreement between the U.S. and Costa Rican governments, it was being used exclusively to detain 200 people, mostly Central Asian families forcibly transferred to Costa Rica from the U.S. border when they tried to seek asylum there. By early May, by which time the Costa Rican authorities permitted them to leave the CATEM and provided them with temporary status for a few months, about half of them had returned to their home countries, 30 had applied for asylum in Costa Rica, and the rest remained in limbo because they lack a pathway back to the United States where they have relatives or offers of admission to other countries. Impending cuts in funding to UNHCR will cripple a Costa Rican asylum system that is already overtaxed and over-reliant on UN support.

In Costa Rica, U.S. policies have cut off migrants in need of protection from pathways and humanitarian support, leaving them without access to healthcare, education, work, food, and shelter, and forced to make impossible choices. Given how quickly and significantly the impact of Trump administration policy changes have been felt in Costa Rica, Refugees International and Women's Refugee Commission are concerned they could lead to the institutional collapse of asylum and humanitarian support for migrants in the region. Further, should the Trump administration pursue further aid cuts, deportation agreements with additional third countries with terrible human rights records, and continued termination of protected pathways and statuses for migrants in the United States along with increased deportations, the situation in Costa Rica will likely be replicated elsewhere in a graver form and on a larger scale.

Methodology

In late March 2025, Refugees International and Women's Refugee Commission traveled to San Jose and Paso Canoas, Costa Rica, to understand the impact of Trump administration policies and recommend productive responses. While in Costa Rica, the team met with several local organizations serving migrants, with the Ombudsman's office (Defensoría de los Habitantes in Spanish), and interviewed 20 Venezuelan migrants. Refugees International was denied permission to visit the Emisur and CATEM in Ciudad Neily where asylum seekers sent on flights by the United States were detained (from February 21 through April 21) despite having visited the center in 2024 when it supported migrants moving north. But in March and April and early May 2025, Refugees International remotely – and with the help of interpreters – interviewed 10 heads of families staying at the CATEM, five in conjunction with the organization Human Rights First, with which we published a separate report focused on their treatment by U.S. officials. Refugees International also corresponded with two individuals forcefully transferred to Costa Rica now seeking asylum there. On March 5 and April 5, 2025, Refugees International submitted FOIA requests to the U.S. Department of State regarding the U.S.deportation agreement with Costa Rica (among other agreements). As of May 12, the team has yet to receive a response. In a letter dated May 6, 2025, the General Directorate of Immigration and Foreigners' Affairs of the government of Costa Rica responded to questions and recommendations from Refugees International and other organizations regarding its policies toward the individuals sent on the flights by the United States.



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Recommendations

To the U.S government:

The Trump administration should:

- Restore access to asylum at the border as required by U.S. law.
- Provide those with canceled CBP One appointments an opportunity to seek asylum or humanitarian parole at ports of entry.
- Facilitate the return of those who were wrongfully sent to Costa Rica so that they can seek asylum.
- Immediately end the transfer of asylum seekers and migrants to third countries in violation of U.S. and international law. Transfers are permitted only when there exists a disclosed agreement with a country that is safe and can provide full and fair access to refuge, the agreement is monitored by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the agreement exempts those with family ties in the United States, and is applied only to those with a connection to the third country.
- In line with a court ruling related to the U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program, the U.S. government should process, admit, and provide resettlement support to refugees in Costa Rica who had their travel arrangements made as of January 20, 2025.

Congress should:

- Exercise its responsibility to oversee agreements with Costa Rica and other countries with which the United States has or is contemplating agreements to ensure accountability for the treatment of migrants by U.S. officials and to ensure against misuse of U.S. Department of Homeland Security and State Department funds to facilitate refoulement.
- Restore U.S. aid for the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and aid organizations providing humanitarian support for refugees and migrants in Costa Rica and ensure funds appropriated for humanitarian aid support the UNHCR, migrants serving organizations, and the Costa Rican asylum system.

To Regional Governments:

To address migration from north to south:

- Regional governments should work together to create a coordinated response plan for the north to south migration and for the reception of deportees from the United States – this response should include the facilitation of return flights for Venezuelans to countries where they have status or where their children have status, such as Colombia.
- The government of Mexico should provide access to legal status to migrants whose CBP One appointments or registrations were canceled and ensure migrants have broad access to the asylum system (applying the exception to waive the 30-day limit to apply to all who registered for CBP One).

Legal statuses could include providing a humanitarian visa, which allows for a stay of one year and ability to work legally in Mexico.

- The governments of Costa Rica and Panama should begin a bussing program facilitating movement north to south and ensure wide dissemination of this information so that migrants can access safe transportation.
- The government of Costa Rica should adhere to their domestic laws and ensure that Venezuelans and other migrants from Latin America are not subject to discriminatory treatment when accessing humanitarian aid.
- The government of Costa Rica must invest more resources in hiring staff for its Refugee Unit to make up for the dearth in support and personnel as a result of funding cuts to UNHCR.
- The Costa Rican government should continue its collaboration on refugee resettlement with the government of Spain and other countries.

To address the deported third country nationals:

- Make public the terms of the agreement with the United States and do not accept any more flights of deported third-country nationals from the United States.
- The government of Costa Rica must allow third-country nationals to extend their legal status in the country until they can decide their next steps, whether they have applied for asylum in Costa Rica or not. This legal status must include the right to work. During this extended stay, the government must provide individualized legal support and ensure humanitarian care is provided to those individuals who leave the CATEM to other areas of the country. Those who remain in the CATEM should be guaranteed adequate medical and psychosocial attention as well as free internet connectivity to speak with family members or legal representatives.
- For those who seek asylum in Costa Rica, they should have access to comprehensive accompaniment for social, economic, and cultural integration.
- The government of Costa Rica must help to find viable pathways to Europe or Canada for third country nationals if they have ties there and cannot return to their home countries.
- Create a technical working group with key institutions to provide asylum seekers with screenings and options for protection – communicated clearly in their languages – in Costa Rica or with other countries that are willing to take them.

To International Organizations:

- The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) should hold a hearing on impact of migration agreements between the United States and regional governments on the human rights of migrants
- The IOM should work with the governments of Mexico and Colombia to arrange the safe migration from Mexico to Colombia of Venezuelans with ETPV or other status in Colombia. This will limit dangerous irregular southward migration.

Background

Costa Rica has a strong human rights record and a long history of providing international protection to thousands of people, despite its small size. As of March 2025, Costa Rica had over 220,000 pending asylum claims, 194,000 of those from Nicaragua (making up 83 percent of all claims). Nicaraguan refugees and asylum seekers make up nearly 4 percent of Costa Rica's total population. With support from the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the Costa Rican government implemented changes to address the high number of asylum applications in the country in 2023 and 2024. It increased its capacity to process asylum applications (from 250 to 510 weekly appointments between January 2023 and September 2024) and eliminated barriers to accessing work permits, issuing more than 31,000 work permits between January and September of 2024. Despite these positive changes, there are still considerable wait times for asylum seekers to get an appointment to apply, and resolutions can take years due to the high backlog of applications and limited staff capacity.

Costa Rica has increasingly become a transit country. From 2022 to 2024, hundreds of thousands of migrants, predominantly from countries like Venezuela and Colombia, as well as several extra-continental countries, moved through the country northward after crossing the Darien Gap. Between January and September 2024, 269,000 people transited through the country, according to the General Directorate of Migration (DGME for its Spanish acronym). An important but ignored phenomenon is also circular migration between Panama and Costa Rica of binational indigenous groups such as the Ngäbe-Buglé, who migrate to work on coffee farms on both sides of the border.

To respond to the increases in transit migration through the country, the Costa Rican government made a declaration of emergency in 2023 and instated a busing program in coordination with the government of Panama. The buses transported migrants from the Lajas Blancas reception station in Panama across the border to a newly created Emi Sur bus station and Temporary Center for Migrant Attention (CATEM for its Spanish acronym) near Paso Canoas in Costa Rica. At the CATEM, migrants could receive humanitarian assistance and apply for international protection in the country. For those who wanted to continue north, private buses left from a station at the CATEM for the northern border of Costa Rica (Los Chiles), at which point migrants could travel into Nicaragua. While the model was not perfect, Refugees International observed that this "one stop shop" for migrant support and transport reduced many of the vulnerabilities migrants faced while on the move, and with more funding and general support, could be a model for how to reduce risks for migrants on dangerous journeys.

During its term, the Biden administration implemented the Safe Mobility Office (SMO) initiative in Costa Rica, which facilitated lawful migration pathways – mostly refugee resettlement – for people in need of protection. By December 2024, almost all of the 3,000 Nicaraguan refugees resettled in the United States through the initiative came from Costa Rica. Spain also resettled a few hundred Nicaraguans from Costa Rica, including through a labor pathway program for refugees. President Trump's cancellation of the Safe Mobility initiative and ban on refugee resettlement to the United States immediately after inauguration on January 20, 2025, meant refugees in Costa Rica conditionally approved for resettlement in the United States (mostly Nicaraguans, but also some Venezuelans), including those that had already booked travel, were stranded without a promised pathway to the United States.

Influence of U.S. Policy on Migration Dynamics in Costa Rica

In the first three months of 2025, the migration dynamics in the countries on the route to the southern U.S. border have rapidly shifted from what they were in 2024. The election of Donald Trump as president of the United States has ushered in a new era of migration policies that have had serious consequences for Costa Rica and have exacted a devastating human toll on the migrants affected by them. The U.S. policy changes with the most profound impact are the cancellation of the CBP One appointments system to enter the United States, which has led to reverse migration from north to south; cuts in funding for United Nation agencies and organizations focused on humanitarian support, services, and protection of migrants; and flights forcibly transferring asylum seekers from the United States. to Costa Rica under an agreement with the Costa Rican government.

Impact of the Cancellation of CBP One

The Venezuelans we spoke to in Costa Rica without exception had registered for or already obtained a CBP One appointment giving them a designated time to be processed at a U.S. land border port of entry. The Biden administration first rolled out the use of the CBP One phone application in 2023. From 2023 through the summer of 2024, migrants in Mexico City and further north could register for appointments to seek entry to the United States using the app. Beginning in August 2024, migrants in southern Mexican states of Chiapas and Tabasco could also register for appointments using the app. The Biden administration also implemented two regulations – the Circumvention of Lawful Pathways rule and the Securing the Border rule– that effectively made getting a CBP One appointment the only reliable way a person entering through the southern border could get access to the U.S. asylum system, which a federal judge in the District of Columbia found violated U.S. refugee law. Approximately 1,450 appointments were available per day border wide and, by December 2024, over 900,000 people had entered the United States through this appointment system after an average wait of a few months in Mexico. Most had been given a notice to appear in immigration court and been paroled into the United States for two years. On January 20, 2025, the Trump administration canceled CBP One. Approximately 30,000 people with scheduled appointments and 270,000 people waiting for appointments were suddenly stranded in Mexico without documents, without access to work and services, and targeted by criminal groups.

Thousands of people whose appointments were canceled began applying for asylum in Mexico, overwhelming a system that has been under-resourced for years. Especially in southern Mexico, this continued a trend that had existed even while the CBP One application existed since registering with the asylum office was the only way to get an ID card and eventually a work permit while waiting. Those who had waited for CBP One appointments for months without applying for asylum in Mexico now need the support of aid organizations to get an exception to the 30-day asylum application deadline, which COMAR, the Mexican asylum agency, is upholding inconsistently. At the same time, aid organizations and shelters that already were stretched thin providing for the humanitarian needs of migrants in Mexico have lost funding that had been indirectly provided by the U.S. government, and began limiting their services, closing offices, and laying off staff. The suspension of foreign aid has especially impacted shelters working with UNHCR, other international organizations or major

international nonprofits, so local organizations have had to try to fill the gap – but without sufficient sources of financial support.

For many people who waited for now canceled CBP One appointments, staying in Mexico is not an option because they experienced traumatic arrests and forced bussing at the hands of Mexican immigration officials or because of the targeted kidnapping and extortion they experienced at the hands of criminals and police in Mexico. This targeted violence is particularly bad in southern Mexico, to which the Trump administration also sent increasing numbers of direct deportation flights in March. Thousands remain trapped in Tapachula without proper documentation, living in risk of violence or detention in Mexico but unable to return home due to fear or because they cannot access safe, affordable transport back.

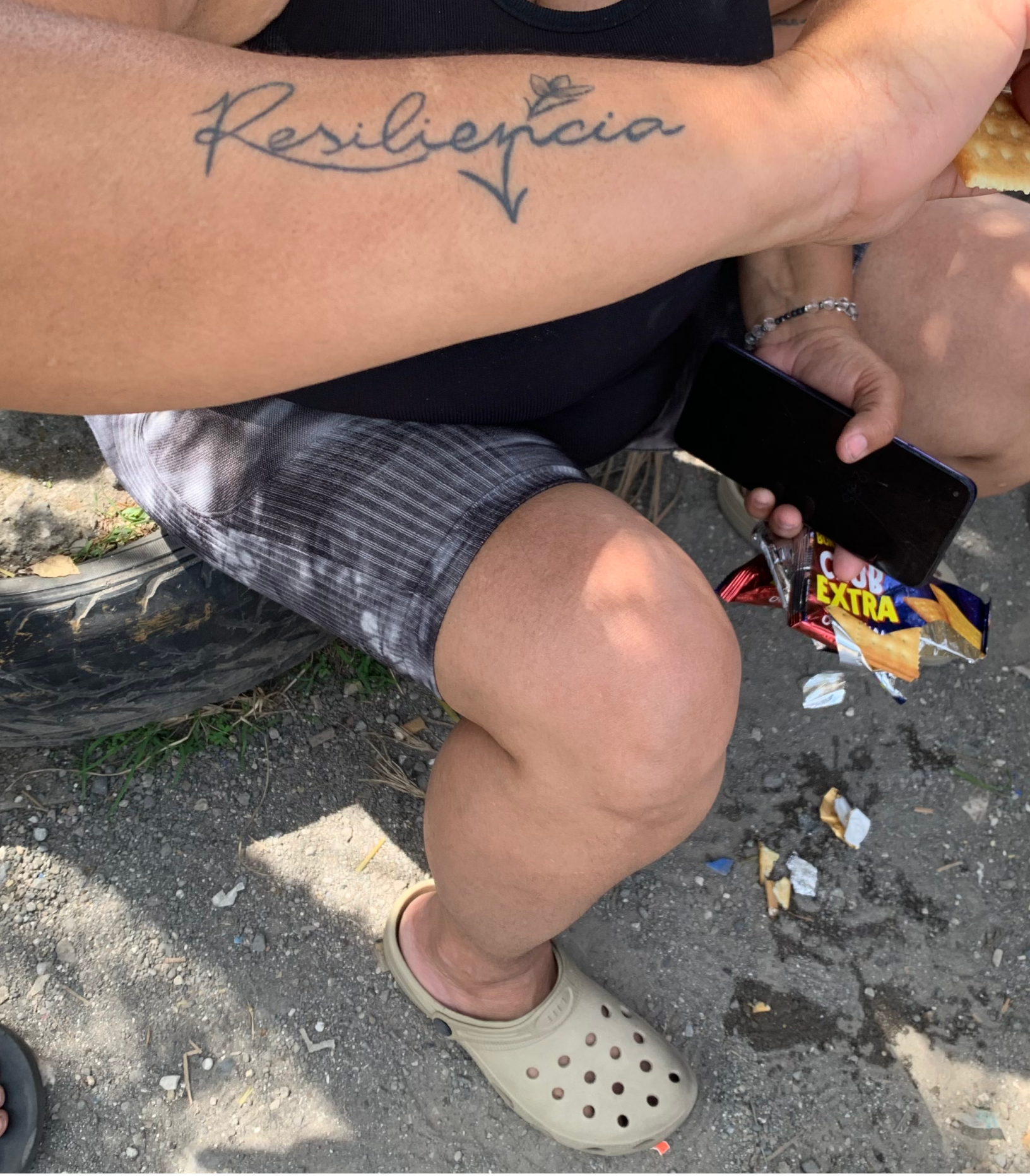
The approximately 20 migrants that Refugees International and Women's Refugee Commission interviewed in Paso Canoas in southern Costa Rica uniformly attributed their reverse migration to insecurity in Mexico. The same was confirmed in surveys done with returning migrants by HIAS in Los Chiles (in northern Costa Rica) and by the Alianza VenCR in San Jose, who particularly mentioned reports of gender-based violence. They shared a story about a Venezuelan girl who was raped multiple times in Mexico and noted that "all the most terrible stories are from Mexico." When Refugees International visited southern Mexico in late 2024, an organization in Tapachula noted an increase in rapes of migrant women there, most of which went unreported and uninvestigated. In March 2025, a local organization in Paso Canoas told us of their effort to raise money to support a single Venezuelan father who experienced a brutal kidnapping in Mexico with his baby and two adolescent daughters, one of whom was pregnant.

For the Venezuelans the team spoke with, the decision to migrate southward – some to countries where they had status or family like Colombia, and others back to Venezuela – was not only forced by insecurity but emotionally devastating because it separated them from relatives and deprived them of needed medical care in the United States.

One Venezuelan woman the team met in Paso Canoas waited for a CBP One appointment with her daughter in Mexico for 10 months, without access to services and schooling and frequently targeted for extortion, in the hopes of entering the United States, where her daughter could get a needed operation and where her brother lived. "When they eliminated the appointments," she said, "my hope for the future of my daughter disappeared."

Another Venezuelan woman the team spoke to in Paso Canoas traveled to the United States to seek medical treatment for her daughter, who has eye cancer. In Ciudad Juarez, she and her daughter were kidnapped by a cartel and held for ten days until her family paid a ransom. After their release, they sought refuge at the U.S. port of entry, but were turned away by CBP because they did not have CBP One appointments. She registered for CBP One and, after a five-month wait in Mexico City, where she sold candy to survive, she received an appointment for January 23. On January 20, she learned her appointment had been canceled.

An extended Venezuelan family we spoke to in Paso Canoas traveled to the United States so that a grandson could get needed care for his cancer. After entering the United States in late 2024, the child and his mother were paroled, but the grandparents were detained for over three weeks in U.S. border



A Venezuelan grandmother, who traveled to the United States to seek care for her grandson's cancer, is now moving south after being detained and deported to Mexico. She is pictured here in Paso Canoas Costa Rica displaying her tattoo, which means "Resilience." Photo by Melanie Nezer, Women's Refugee Commission.

patrol custody and then deported to Mexico (which has agreed to accept returns from the United States of Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, Venezuelans, Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans.) The Mexican immigration authorities flew them to southern Mexico, where the grandfather was brutally beaten.

CBP One appointments were allocated partly based on registration date and partly randomly. The latter led migrants to register multiple times hoping to improve their odds and to scams by fixers who convinced migrants they could secure appointments for a fee. These scams exploited migrants' fear and vulnerability, depleted their resources, and made their registrations seem fraudulent to U.S. authorities.

Most Venezuelans who feel they must leave Mexico lack access to safe transport anywhere else, and thus travel south on foot or by private buses. Most said they did not receive humanitarian support along the route, other than a few who did in Honduras. Because many suffered financial hardship in Mexico, they lacked money to pay for travel, and so traveling to Costa Rica and then from Costa Rica further south took many weeks, with stops along the way to raise money to continue their journey. In Paso Canoas, they sold candy and other small items, and their children asked for money in the streets in order to raise the significant amount of money needed to pay for travel into Panama and from there to Colombia – a journey that is risky. An eight-year-old boy died when a small boat sank traveling from Panama to Colombia in late February.

Many of the Venezuelans we spoke to in Paso Canoas lacked passports or had children born in Colombia, which made them ineligible for the Vuelta a la Patria program repatriating Venezuelans from Mexico. Many wanted to return to Colombia, where they had previously lived and sought protection, rather than Venezuela. A young woman we spoke to who had a Venezuelan passport wanted to return to Colombia where she had left her very young daughter. Many feared returning to Venezuela because of the political instability, the government's arrest and jailing of its critics, and the dire economic situation. We spoke to two Venezuelan teachers in Paso Canoas who left Venezuela because of the poor pay and threatened arrest of teachers who protested in the wake of the contested election in the summer of 2024.

Impact of U.S. Humanitarian Funding Cuts

U.S. funding has been critical for strengthening asylum systems and providing humanitarian support throughout the region. In 2024, the U.S. government provided 99 percent of Costa Rica's $23.1 million of humanitarian funding, following several years of steadily increasing support from the United States. Funding in 2025 so far has fallen to less than $500,000, all from the European Commission.

Impact of Aid Cuts on Emergency Humanitarian Support for Migrants

When migrants moving south reach Costa Rica from Nicaragua, they generally walk or take buses from the northern part of the country to San Jose and then to Paso Canoas in the south, although there are some direct routes from northern Costa Rica to Paso Canoas. While the number of

Sara's Story

Sara was born in Venezuela but fled to Colombia a decade ago, had a child there, and gained a temporary protected status for 10 years. In early 2024, she set off to join her aunts in New York, where she also hoped to seek specialized medical treatment for her son.

She stopped at the CATEM in Costa Rica before traveling through the rest of Central America and reaching Mexico. In Tapachula, she was kidnapped and held for four days until her aunts paid a ransom. Upon release, a fixer promised to get her an CBP One appointment in three days if she paid him $350. After she moved north to Mexico City, she registered for CBP One three more times, paying each time, because she was afraid she would be arrested, bused south, and deported by Mexican authorities if she did not (as happened to her brother, who was detained in Chiapas and deported to Guatemala).Unable to enroll her son in school, she had him stay in the back of the restaurant where she worked. When her CBP registration was canceled on January 20, she decided she had no alternative but to return to Colombia from Mexico.

On the return journey, she did not have the support that she had coming north. The only support she received was some food and medical support in Honduras. The team met her at a bus stop in Paso Canoas, where she could not afford $40/per person a night to stay at a hotel there, the $40 to $70 per person fee charged by smugglers to take migrants from Pasos Canoas into Panama during the night, and the $300/per person cost of the dangerous boat ride from Panama to Colombia for her and her daughter.

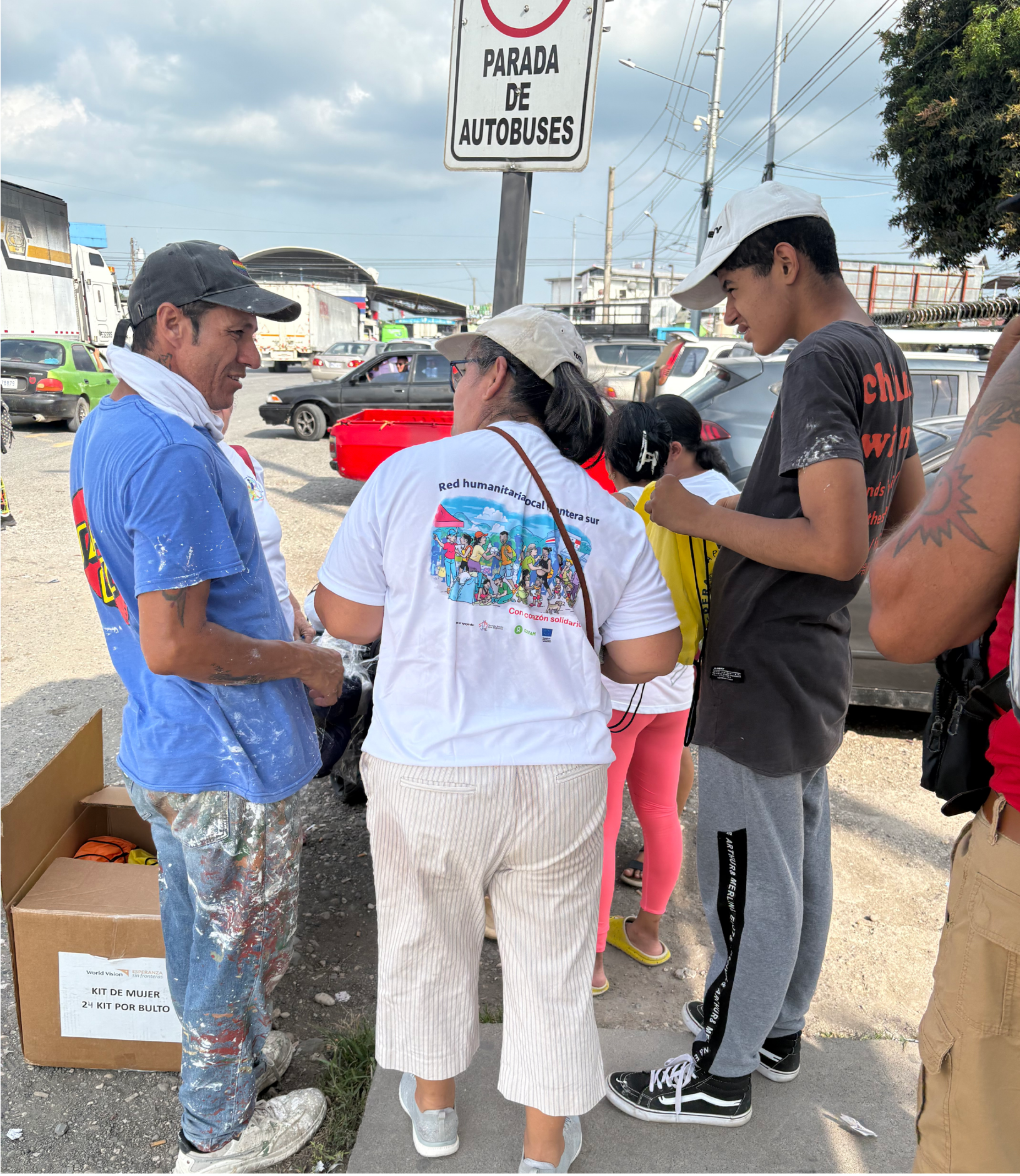
Venezuelans stranded in San Jose has decreased recently, there are no government shelters in the city for migrants. The private shelters that exist in the city are small, also serve the unhoused Costa Rican population, and are operating at significantly reduced capacity because of the aid cuts from the U.S. government.

The country's only reception center and shelter for migrants, the Temporary Attention Center for Migrants (CATEM), is located in a remote part of southern Costa Rica near Paso Canoas and the Panamanian border. Because the migration pattern has so quickly shifted direction, there is no northern equivalent to the CATEM. Without a central reception center in the north, it is harder for humanitarian or government organizations to locate migrants and provide them with referrals and services. Representatives of humanitarian organizations we spoke with said a busing program in the north to help migrants transit safely to the south of the country had not begun.

In the south, the Costa Rican and Panamanian governments have agreed to implement a bussing program from Costa Rica into Panama to facilitate safer travel for migrants. These buses leave from the CATEM and cost $60 per person. Though the buses provided about 400 people safe travel to southern Panama, migrants that we interviewed in Paso Canoas said they did not have access to them and, in fact, were denied entry to the CATEM altogether. A report from the Costa Rica Human Rights Ombudsman noted that the busing program was halted the week of February 24, after the arrival of asylum seekers flown from the United States discussed further below.

When migrants reach Paso Canoas in the south, there are limited services available. There is a bus stop with some shade where most people spend a week figuring out their next steps. Local humanitarian organizations, primarily Red Humanitaria Aid Frontera Sur, hand out hygiene kits and blankets, but they are stretched thin because they also provide support to families seeking asylum in Paso Canoas and to the bi-national indigenous groups that work on farms in the area. Cuts in U.S. funding have led some humanitarian organizations to roll back their presence in southern Costa Rica. UNHCR and HIAS had less presence in southern Costa Rica in March 2025 than six months previous, and UNHCR noted that "A sharp reduction in funding has already forced the suspension or drastic cuts of many essential services."

While all migrants in the current reverse migration path face threats to their personal safety, women and girls are especially vulnerable, particularly given they increasingly have lower levels of education than previous Venezuelan migrants. Women's Refugee Commission's research has shown that women with low levels of education have fewer opportunities for work and are at greater risk of GBV – including sexual violence, domestic violence, and sexual exploitation and abuse. HIAS staff in San Jose noted that, for the first time, they are hearing reports from male survivors of sexual violence among those who who traveled to Costa Rica from the north. Migrants traveling south through Mexico and Central America need services that prevent GBV, treat survivors, and help obtain economic stability. However, the many programs and approaches that have been proven effective are now unavailable or in jeopardy because of the U.S. cuts to foreign aid.



A representative of Red Humanitaria Aid Frontera Sur, a local organization, provides support to Venezuelan families at a bus stop in Paso Canoas. Photo by Yael Schacher, Refugees International.

Impact of Aid Cuts on Costa Rica's Asylum System

Until earlier this year, the United States was the largest donor to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). Last year, the United States provided nearly 40 percent of UNHCR's nearly $5 billion budget. On a global level, UNHCR has already frozen over $300 million of planned activities to cut costs. The slashing of aid from the United States has already had devastating consequences for other protection systems in the region. In Colombia, the government's migration agency had been forced to stop processing documents for migrants and refugees, due to the staffing cuts resulting from a lack of funding. In Ecuador, aid cuts contributed to the cancellation of a critical regularization program for Venezuelans in Ecuador.

The same could happen in Costa Rica, whose protection system relies heavily on UN support – largely funded by the U.S. government. In 2023, UNHCR's response in Costa Rica was funded at about 51 percent, with over 80 percent coming from the United States. In years past, UNHCR has been heavily involved in supporting the Costa Rican asylum system, including providing seconded staff – now reduced by one third– that makeup 80 percent of the Costa Rican Refugee Unit and training personnel from the Costa Rican Refugee Unit on key procedures. They also provided key integration services for displaced people wishing to make a new life in Costa Rica, which are now suspended.

In 2025, UNHCR's programming in Costa Rica was cut by a whopping 41 percent and there has been an alarming 77 percent reduction in the capacity to register newly arrived asylum seekers in the country. Given the 8 to 1 ratio of UNHCR seconded staff to Costa Rica Refugee Unit staff, elimination of UNHCR's seconded staff would leave only five staff members to process asylum claims for the entire country, and only one in southern Costa Rica due to budget constraints.

Despite the country's asylum framework, which local organizations praised, the asylum system in Costa Rica is under significant stress – particularly as claims from displaced Nicaraguans continue to rise. Service providers noted that there is not enough staff or resources for the system to function effectively.

A 2024 report from the Costa Rican Controller General found that the Costa Rican General Migration Directorate was not efficient in approving asylum claims, particularly for vulnerable populations. Due to a numerical cap on the number of appointments available to initiate asylum applications, migrants often must make several attempts to call for an appointment, which then can be scheduled for months later. Before they can register their claims, individuals cannot work and have to rely on humanitarian support, which is lacking because of the U.S. cuts. At their appointments, individuals are officially recognized as asylum seekers by the Costa Rican government and given their work permits, IDs, and documentation. The asylum adjudication process takes 4-6 years, and the approval rate is low. From 2018 to 2023, only about 4 percent of asylum applications from Nicaraguans were approved, although UNHCR supported the agency in implementing accelerated procedures for some Nicaraguans, Cubans, and Venezuelans that increased the approval rate.

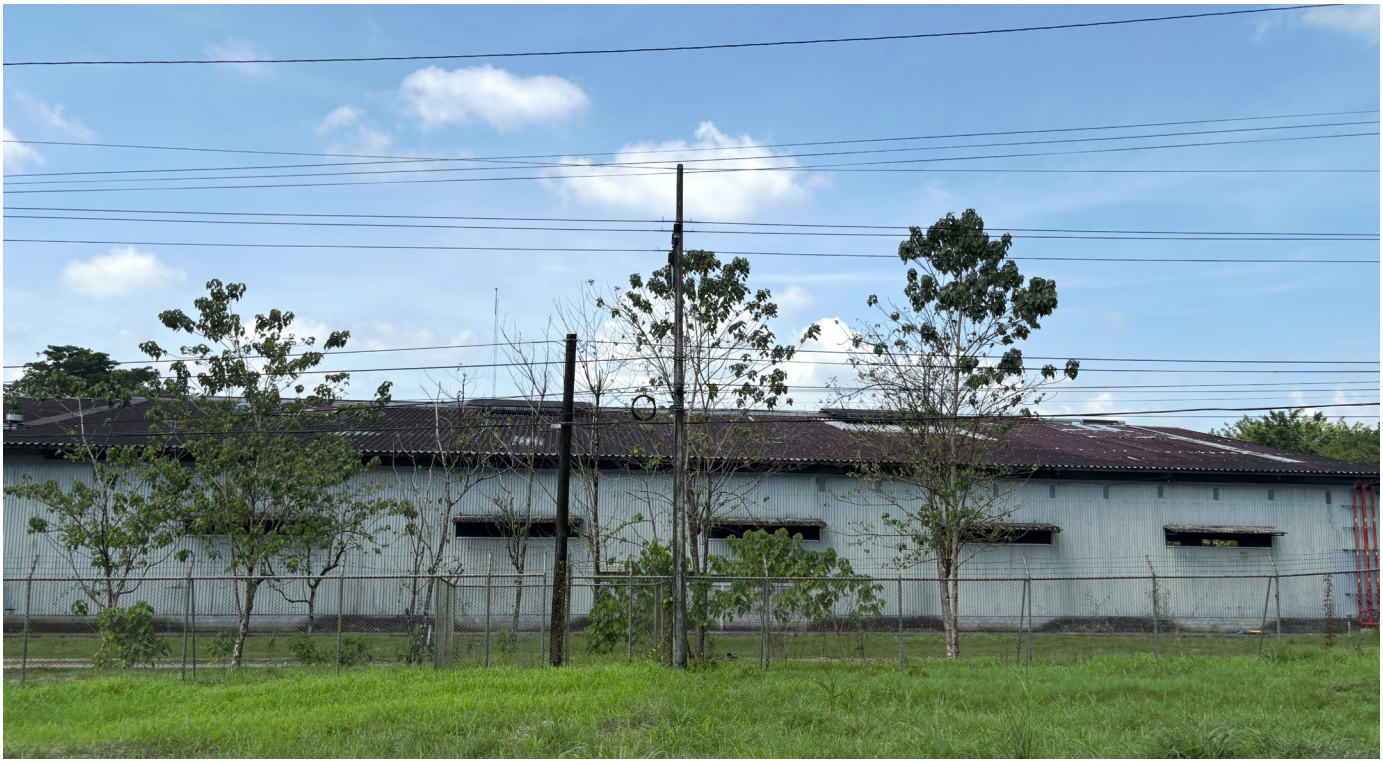
An additional stress on migrants in Costa Rica is the non-renewal of a temporary protected status for those who did not qualify for asylum, known as the CET (for its acronym in Spanish) for Venezuelans, Nicaraguans, and Cubans. Between February 2023 and February 2024, over 8,000 migrants were able to apply to the CET, which provided thousands of individuals with a work permit and status for two years. The Foreign Minister stated Costa Rica would renew the status if Costa Rica received foreign aid to continue implementing it.

Impact of Asylum Seekers Sent on Planes from the U.S.

On February 20 and February 25, 2025, flights of asylum seekers unlawfully sent from the United States arrived in San Jose, Costa Rica. The 200 people, including 80 children, were from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The Costa Rican authorities immediately bussed them from San Jose to the CATEM near Paso Canoas and kept them detained there for two months.

President Rodrigo Chaves agreed to receive these asylum seekers under threat of economic repercussions by the U.S. and stated the country would serve as a "bridge" for the asylum seekers to return to their countries of origin. As with the agreements with El Salvador and Panama, the terms of the arrangement between the United States and Costa Rica have not been made public, and it is not clear what U.S. funds are being used to pay for their stay in Costa Rica and repatriation flights arranged by the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

It is clear that the people sent by the U.S. under the arrangement were done so pursuant to President Trump's January 20 proclamation "Guaranteeing the States Protection Against Invasion," which invoked section 212(f) of the Immigration and Nationality Act and Article II powers under the Constitution to deny entry, restrict access to asylum, and rapidly expel asylum seekers to another country. In February, guidance was sent to all border patrol sectors regarding how to implement the proclamation, including when there were agreements with other countries. It is also clear that detention of the deportees in Costa Rica with inadequate services violated their rights and, in the words of several Costa Rican civil society organizations, "impacted their physical and emotional integrity and their life plans." Costa Rica accepted deportees who had been denied access to asylum in the United States without properly considering their need for protection and without a plan for those who need to remain in the country long term.



The Temporary Attention Center for Migrants, located in southern Costa Rica. From late February through late April, 2025, 200 mostly Asian and African asylum seekers, including 80 children, expelled by the United States and flown to Costa Rica were detained here, while Venezuelans moving south were turned away. Photo by Rachel Schmidtke, Refugees International.

The CATEM did not have translation, medical services, or tailored support for children or other vulnerable groups. These vulnerable people include an Armenian woman who was eight months pregnant and was deported to Costa Rica with two of her three children – the third is still detained in the United States. As there were no adequate services for her advanced pregnancy, she was the first person to "voluntarily" return home. A deported Kyrgz family already traumatized by prolonged detention in the United States found that there was no support for their autistic child at the CATEM so also "voluntarily" returned to their home country soon after arrival.

People the team interviewed reported that conditions at CATEM were uncomfortable, including extreme heat, mosquitoes, and lack of fans, limited access to water and inadequate food, lack of adequate translation for educational and psychological services, lack of clear or accessible information in their languages, and a lack of wifi to enable communication with relatives. A breastfeeding mother from an ethnic minority in Afghanistan complained that she did not have enough food to maintain her milk supply for her young daughter. A mother from Armenia described the lack of medical care for her twelve-year-old son, who suffered from rashes on his body and broken glasses that have yet to be fixed, so he struggles to see. This boy was also suffering psychologically, since he had been separated from his mother for a month while detained at the U.S. border and continues to be separated from his father, who is living in California and seeking asylum there.

Costa Rican civil society organizations exerted significant public pressure on the Costa Rican government regarding the detention of the asylum seekers, including issuing an urgent appeal to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, filing several habeas corpus suits to the Costa Rican constitutional court, and supporting a visit of the Legislative Assembly to the CATEM. In addition, the Human Rights Ombudsman published monitoring reports of conditions at the airport and in the CATEM and issued requests to the Costa Rican government for transparency and proper treatment of vulnerable groups. An international group of lawyers have also filed a suit to the UN committee that monitors the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child about the treatment of the deported children.

As a result of these efforts, on April 21, 2025, the Costa Rican government published a resolution allowing those remaining at the CATEM to stay or leave the facility, live legally and move freely in Costa Rica for three months with a possibility of extending this legal status for another three months – though without permission to work – and after paying $55 fee. At any time, they could apply for asylum in Costa Rica or request the support of IOM to return to their country of origin. This resolution was not translated into the native languages of the deportees, and many expressed mistrust of its terms, choosing to remain in the CATEM without legal status. The Costa Rican government also told individuals at the CATEM that they had the option to be admitted to a third country and stated publicly it had asked other countries about the possibility. Given the lack of response from other countries willing to accept the deportees, many of the asylum seekers resented the Costa Rican government presenting it as a viable option. The Costa Rican government also led individuals at the CATEM to believe that, if they chose to seek asylum in Costa Rica, housing and financial assistance, support finding employment, and intensive language training would be available to them, which is not.

The Costa Rican resolution is a crucial and necessary policy change but insufficient to repair the damage done for some and meet the needs of others.

Before the detention was lifted, nearly half of the people sent on the flights from the U.S. "voluntarily" returned to their home countries. A man who cannot return to Russia, where he will face political persecution, is separated indefinitely from his wife and son who did return to Russia because of the toll the prolonged poor conditions and lack of education for children at the CATEM took on their son.

Other families cannot return to their home countries but will not seek asylum in Costa Rica because their immediate relatives are in the United States. The wife of an Iranian man sent to Costa Rica is in detention in Arizona. A Russian mother and daughter sent to Costa Rica are separated from husband and young son in the United States. These families are in a desperate and isolated limbo.

The resolution also does not adequately provide support for the 30 people who have begun the process of applying for asylum in Costa Rica. They face an overwhelmed system and the added difficulty of not speaking Spanish. One Congolese man has applied for asylum and already has his work permit, but he is struggling to find a job as he does not speak Spanish. A Chinese woman has applied for asylum and stated she is "making a new life in Costa Rica" and fortunately has the support of the Chinese diaspora community to help her.

There was additional fallout from the two U.S. flights. From late February to late April, to make room for the people on the flights, several Venezuelan families were evicted from rooms at the CATEM. Although Costa Rican law gives all migrants equal access to shelter, Venezuelans and Colombians, many of whom are traveling with children (estimates are that 40 percent of the migrants are children), were told there is no space for them and turned away. Venezuelan and Colombian migrants continue to receive limited support there and are left to sleep in the streets, unable to pay for hotels and with little or no support to meet their basic needs in Costa Rica or to safely make their way home.

Conclusion

The sudden and dramatic policy and funding changes since President Trump's inauguration have resulted in a very different environment for migrants and refugees in Costa Rica in just a few months. The north to south migration south, the forced transfers of refugees from the United States to Costa Rica, and the gutting of critical aid to the country have made Costa Rica less hospitable to those on the move than it was in previous years, when the number of migrants was much higher. Costa Rica now lacks the resources to handle the impacts of these policy shifts, leaving the migrants affected by them without viable options to meet their basic needs or for protection. That this change happened so quickly in Costa Rica forebodes even graver degradation of protection in other countries in the region and around the world where the United States uses its significant sway to chip away at humanitarian aid and human rights.

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