

# Migration Does Not Start at the US Border: A Regional Approach to Managing Migration and Keeping People Safe

## Introduction

Today, more than **120 million people** are forcibly displaced from their homes by persecution, conflict, violence, or human rights violations. This is the highest level of displacement ever recorded. In 2024, most migrants arriving at the US-Mexico border have come from **six Latin American countries**: Mexico, Guatemala, Venezuela, Cuba, Ecuador, and Colombia. At the same time, with options for resettlement in safe countries extremely limited, many refugees from Africa, Asia, and other faraway places are seeking new routes to safety, including through the Americas.

Migration across the Western Hemisphere has fundamentally changed over the last decade. Last year, more than 520,000 people crossed the Darién Gap—a mountainous rainforest area at the Colombia-Panama border once considered impassable. This was more than double the year before; just 10 years ago **this number was in the hundreds**. Most were from Venezuela, Ecuador, and Haiti, but others traveled from **China, India, and Afghanistan**. More than 100,000 who crossed were **children**.

Increasing political turmoil and outbreaks of violence in Ecuador led to more than **125,000 Ecuadorian migrants** arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border in 2023. Last year, a tenth of all encounters at the southern border were Venezuelan, with **7.7 million** of its total population of 26.2 million having fled the country over the last decade.

The Biden administration has expanded **lawful migration pathways** that have allowed hundreds of thousands of migrants from countries in crisis throughout the region to safely travel to and temporarily live and work in the United States. These innovative strategies help US communities by ensuring newcomers have permission to work, which enables them to quickly find jobs and afford housing, and helps families reunite. At the same time, we are concerned about the limitations and restrictions the administration has placed on **asylum**. We would like to see more creative, practical solutions that keep families together and build our communities, and fewer restrictions on the legal right to seek asylum. We recommend the following to promote orderly and safe migration throughout the region.

## Our recommendations to promote orderly and safe migration throughout the region

### 1. Continue to develop practical and effective legal migration pathways.

There is a broad public misconception that people who are migrating to the US-Mexico border are “cutting the line” and bypassing visa and resettlement options. Of course, those options are extremely limited and for many, nonexistent, and only Congress can create new visa categories and modernize our immigration system.

The administration’s Processes for Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans (“CHNV program”) relies on existing legal authority to provide a pathway (known in immigration law as “parole”) for more than 460,000 people from countries in the region experiencing conflict and crisis to come to the US to live, work, and join family. They travel safely, with authorization. The CHNV program allows for up to 30,000 individuals from designated countries to enter the US each month for up to two years for urgent humanitarian reasons or significant public benefit.

Since May 2023, Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Venezuelans (CHNV) can be **returned to Mexico** after being deported from the US. The US allows CHNV individuals who enter the country without authorization one chance to request voluntary departure or withdrawal of their application for admission. After leaving the US—most go to Mexico—they can attempt to enter the US via a CBP One appointment or the CHNV program.

Individuals who have irregularly crossed the US-Mexican or Panamanian border after the date the CHNV program was announced (for Venezuelans, after October 19, 2022; for Cubans, Haitians, and Nicaraguans, after January 9, 2023) are ineligible for the program. The current dates significantly limit the number of people seeking safety who are eligible for the programs.

The program has been successful, but WRC recommends the following improvements to provide more access to people who are most at risk and in need of protection:

- » **The administration should continue to improve the program by making the application process and its eligibility requirements more accessible.**
- » **The administration should ensure that international organizations and local nongovernmental partners that serve migrants can refer people for authorization.**
- » **United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) and the Department of State should develop an alternative travel document for individuals who would otherwise be eligible for but lack a valid passport.**
- » **USCIS should update its final dates for irregular crossings or interdictions.**
- » **The US should negotiate with Mexico to ensure that people from CHNV countries who are sent back by the US are not rapidly deported from Mexico or forced to travel to southern Mexico.**

Ultimately, these pathways are temporary and subject to the priorities and objectives of the president in office. Until Congress and the administration can work together to create a modern immigration system that reflects today's economic, security, and labor needs while upholding legal and moral obligations to protect the persecuted, **the administration should continue to use its authority to expand family reunification pathways, the Central American Minors program, and other legal pathways that ease pressure at the border and keep people safe.**

## **2. Invest in and improve the Safe Mobility Initiative.**

In spring 2023, the Department of State, in coordination with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the International Organization on Migration (IOM), and other partners, launched its **Safe Mobility Offices** (SMO) initiative. The SMO initiative expedites refugee processing through the **US Refugee Admissions Program** and provides information and referrals to other lawful pathways to migrate to the US, Spain, and Canada. There are currently four SMO agreements, with offices operating in Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, and Guatemala.

The SMO initiative has significantly **increased resettlement** from the Western Hemisphere, with the administration anticipating the resettlement of **35,000 to 50,000 refugees** from the region in fiscal year 2024. The SMO initiative continues to improve. In May 2024, the US, Guatemala, and Costa Rica announced **expanded eligibility** to the original SMO criteria. These changes included the Guatemala SMO expanding eligibility to Salvadorans, Hondurans, and Nicaraguans in Guatemala.

While SMOs are not a substitute for access to asylum at the border, they are an important component of the US regional approach to migration. To reduce barriers and serve more eligible people, WRC recommends the administration:

- » **Negotiate with SMO host countries to expand access and eligibility to SMOs, which are currently limited by nationality and other factors in each country, resulting in some of the populations that are most in need having highly restricted access.**
- » **Create a process specifically geared toward assisting unaccompanied children at SMOs, who are currently excluded from the SMO initiative, including by assessing eligibility for the Central American Minors (CAM) program.**
- » **Engage with and incorporate [recommendations](#) of relevant stakeholders, including refugee resettlement agencies, and take steps to ensure more streamlined processing by securing funding from Congress to increase SMO capacity.**

### **3. Work with civil society to implement the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection.**

The US continues to be viewed as the global humanitarian leader in refugee protection and reception. The [Los Angeles Declaration](#) on Migration and Protection (“LA Declaration”) provides a unique opportunity for the Western Hemisphere to strengthen international protection and rights-based approaches to migration. As part of the [Third Ministerial Meeting](#) on the LA Declaration, the US supported the launch of IOM’s new online platform and data portal for the LA Declaration to allow countries to share best practices and data. These improvements should continue. WRC recommends that the US:

- » **Lead implementation of the actions and principles affirmed by the LA Declaration.**
- » **Implement the [recommendations](#) shared in June 2024 by 159 organizations, including WRC, from over 19 countries in the region that promote civil society in the implementation of the LA Declaration. Among the recommendations are to create monitoring mechanisms to assess the LA Declaration’s progress and develop country-specific work plans that engage civil society. Such efforts would maximize the LA Declaration’s success.**

### **4. Increase support for Mexican shelters and strengthen Mexico’s asylum system.**

Many people seeking asylum wait for weeks or months in shelters in central and northern Mexico while waiting for an appointment to apply for asylum in the US. These shelters provide temporary housing and meals, as well internet access and other basic support. The US should assist in mitigating the humanitarian need, which is in part created by the long wait times to secure a CBP One appointment.

Although Mexico’s legal framework for asylum is among the most protective in the world, its asylum system is overwhelmed and underfunded. Mexico also has its own security issues, with an increasing number of Mexican migrants fleeing the country due to gang and gender-based violence.

The administration should request that Congress:

- » **Fund the Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) to support international nongovernmental organizations keeping migrants safe and helping them access CBP One while waiting in Mexico.**
- » **Fund PRM to help strengthen Mexico’s protection systems.** Mexico’s refugee agency, [Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados \(COMAR\)](#) needs to expand and modernize to meet the growing

number of applications it receives. Initiatives and policies that combat discrimination and **violence against migrants** and provide security for migrants and those who assist them are also needed.

#### **5. Support deported non-Mexican migrants' integration in Mexico.**

There are few services in Mexico for non-Mexicans deported from the US. Without legal status in Mexico, and unable to return home due to lack of resources or fear of persecution, there is an increased risk of desperation, homelessness, and attempts to try again to make the dangerous journey to the US. Integration programs, including those operated by IOM-UNHCR, help provide people the opportunity to find work and community in Mexico. The administration should:

- » **Negotiate with the government of Mexico to issue documentation for legal stay for those who are placed in US removal proceedings and subsequently returned to Mexico.**
- » **Request that Congress fund integration programs for migrants deported to Mexico from the United States.**

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#### **Women's Refugee Commission**

The Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) improves the lives and protects the rights of women, children, youth, and other people who are often overlooked, undervalued, and underserved in humanitarian responses to crises and displacement. We work in partnership with displaced communities to research their needs, identify solutions, and advocate for gender-transformative and sustained improvement in humanitarian, development, and displacement policy and practice. Since our founding in 1989, we have been a leading expert on the needs of refugee women, children, and youth and the policies that can protect and empower them. [womensrefugeecommission.org](http://womensrefugeecommission.org).

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