

FRANCISCAN NETWORK FOR MIGRANTS.

Darien Tour March 12- 14, 2024

Participants:

Franciscan Network for Migrants Panama.

Places visited.

March 12: Travel from Panama to Darien, visit to the Temporary Migrant Reception Station Lajas Blancas.

Due to overcrowding at the Temporary Migratory Reception Station in Lajas Blancas, the Panamanian authorities did not allow the commission to enter. We arrived at the entrance and there we were able to talk with migrants who were waiting to get a place on the buses to continue the journey to Costa Rica.

In general terms, the profile of migrants at that time was young, men, women and many children; Their complaints were mainly directed to the lack of money to continue the journey, scarce food, the health problem most often mentioned was gastrointestinal diseases, difficulty to get cash, some migrants approached and complained of mistreatment by the authorities, they said that the food is brought from Panama, the food providers at the migrant station, they bring served the three times of food, breakfast, lunch and dinner, according to migrants they had bad smell and could not consume them, some who did so had intestinal problems. Another complaint is about the water, if they drink it they get diarrhea. Some women commented that they were raped and assaulted in the jungle and had no money to continue. They also commented that there are Panamanian money lenders outside of the Lajas Blancas MRE, who provide them with money if their relatives send them money by bank transfer to the accounts of these people, paying a 30% commission, which they consider very high.

Panamanian authorities have arranged transportation from Darien to Costa Rica with private transportation companies. The cost per person from Darien to the immigration reception in Costa Rica is \$60.00 dollars per person, children also pay their fares. There were approximately 20 buses preparing to transport migrants to the southern border of Costa Rica. The trip takes approximately 12 hours to the border.

The atmosphere we perceived from the outside was chaotic, the migrants were upset and asking for support to continue. It was noted that there are no money transfer services, such as Western Union.

We were not able to talk to the authorities present at the site because we could not approach them for security reasons.

March 13, visit to the Bajo Chiquito Community:

We traveled in four pickups from Metetí along the La Peñita route. In the forests of Darien, 2,638 species of flora have been recorded, representing 27.7% of all species in the country.¹ According to what we were told, in the summer, the logging companies that exploit the Darien rainforest open roads and build bridges to plunder the forest and remove the wood that they have cut during the winter. We witnessed trucks loaded with logs leaving for Panama City. Every year the same thing happens, the indigenous leadership of the Emberá-Wounaan Comarca sold to the Chinese company all the timber trees in the forest, and in summer they make their debut without anyone saying anything. It is also known that the stretch of jungle is already a road full of mud in the rainy season and dust in the dry season. A few months ago, environmentalists shouted to the skies because of the plastic, fabric and bottle pollution on the route that the migrants travel, thus losing a large number of hectares of jungle forest, the only lung in the world along with the Amazon in America, which affects the balance of our planet.

During the rainy season, it is impossible to make this trip from La Peñita to Bajo Chiquito by land; it is only possible to reach the communities by river.

After almost two hours in the jungle, we arrived at the community of Bajo Chiquito. We passed the due controls with the authorities, in this case SENAFRONT, who is the authority in security matters in the migratory route through Panama.

We went to the community and were welcomed by the Noko (leader) of the community, Mrs. Esmeralda, who accompanied us throughout the tour of the community explaining in detail how the community is organized to welcome migrants and how they work in coordination with international agencies and international NGOs that work with the migrant population, supporting the communities to cope with this new reality.

We can see the large posters of international NGOs and we can imagine the investment that is involved. This day there was no presence of people from these organizations, but we understand that they have a presence helping in the attention, orientation and assistance to migrants. According to the US Embassy in Panama "in the last three years, the United States has allocated about 43 million dollars to assist refugees, migrants and local communities in Panama through the work of international organizations".²

The community has benefited from an aqueduct, camps for migrants to settle and rest to continue their journey, support with doctors and medicines for both migrants and the local community.

The four communities of Río Tuquesa, Bajo Chiquito, Marragantí, Nuevo Vigía and Villa Caleta, are organized to transport the migrants. We approached the port of arrival of the canoes with the migrants coming from the last point of arrival at the end of the journey through the jungle, called Come Gallina, to this place migrants arrive after leaving the jungle and are transferred in canoes to the community of Bajo Chiquito where they are registered at the posts of the National Immigration Service. Canoe transportation costs \$20 to Bajo Chiquito. Here we were able to talk with migrant women who were just arriving. Their tiredness was evident, they brought few belongings, and the expression "we made it through the worst, we made it". They told us that they had been assaulted, robbed of cell phones, watches and money. Two women had been survivors of sexual violence and commented that one woman who accompanied them was taken with them by the assailants. They commented that they take them as their wives and then do

¹ https://www.prensa.com/sociedad/duenos-madera-provincia-Darien_0_4231077001.html

² The Star of Panama. March 18, 2024.

not know what they are doing to them. Tired from the sun, fear and hunger, they go into the community to look for food and rest.

The transfer from the community of Bajo Chiquito to Lajas Blancas is organized by the community in coordination with the personnel of the National Migration Service. They do it by river, in canoes where 11 migrants are transported in each canoe. For this transfer, each migrant pays \$35; migrants who cannot raise the money are transported free of charge to the ETRM (Temporary Migratory Reception Station) in Lajas Blancas. The leader tells us that sometimes they have used up to 60 canoes, which they organize according to the number of migrants who arrive and need this service.

We were able to observe the school in full school activity, with children and teachers in attendance. We were pleased that the life of the community can go on.

Within the community, there are a number of restaurants that sell food, clothing and personal goods stores, international call services and telephone chip sales. The commercial activity is very noticeable, from which the families of the community benefit and where migrants can buy their food. This activity and transportation generate a good income that benefits an area that previously lived exclusively on a subsistence economy. The passage of migrants generates an important activity in the local economy, so we believe that the migrant is not a burden as many say.

As we approached the arrival point or port where the migrants arrive, we had the feeling of something a bit improvised, there was no assistance for people who came crippled or with walking problems, with no space to sit, there were long lines for the search by the officials of the National Migration Service. The people were very tired and in poor condition.

After the search, the migrants pass freely into the community, where they find a place to rest, bathe and eat. Those with injuries or health problems go to the health post. The leader told us that there are two doctors and three nurses (we did not see them) and that they assist both migrants and the local population.

Around three o'clock in the afternoon, we started our return trip to the Centro de Vida in the community of Santa Fe where we were staying. When we arrived at La Peñita we were stopped by a SENAFRONT patrol, we were detained for almost an hour without knowing the reason. They accused us of distributing cards to migrants and that we were going to help them to leave Lajas Blancas. After an excellent intervention by our director Rafael Lara, they checked the vehicles and our personal belongings and let us continue on our way.

March 14. Visit to the Zapallal community

We shared lunch with some brothers from the Zapallal community who participated in the experience of caring for migrants in the year 2022 as a result of the one-month national strike, which prevented the passage of migrant buses from Darien to the border with Costa Rica.

At Mrs. Chela's house, we were able to listen to the experience told by some pastoral agents who actively participated in welcoming migrants in the San Antonio de Padua church. An ecumenical group improvised the care of migrants who, desperate for the overcrowding in the ETRM in San Vicente, began to walk towards Panama City. In the chapel, men and women volunteers from different churches met and prepared food, washed clothes and improvised bathrooms and toilets to welcome the migrants who left by different paths. In the very small place, but with a big heart, they slept, ate and continued their journey. According to Chela, in

three months they attended to ten thousand migrants. In coordination with the priest and a Claretian brother they looked for food. The community solved the demand for food, the women cooked and attended to the migrants day and night. One can see in this experience the deep religious motivation, the sense of commitment to help others and a delicate awareness that they were helping, as Chela said, "God himself". It is very motivating to see the affection, the love, the sensitivity with which they tell it. You can see that "the joy of serving, without interest", they put it into practice until the authorities decided to close the center because it did not meet the physical conditions. Although the hearts were overflowing with love and attention.

Currently, very few migrants pass through on foot, but if the community detects them, they provide them with food and clothing and a place to bathe.

We left 200 hygiene kits in the community, which they will then deliver to the migrants.

Some reflections:

- ✚ The violation of human rights on the migratory route through the Darien jungle has increased over the years. Currently there is an increase of 125% in the number of people crossing the jungle and the testimonies of being violated is increasing, especially women and minors, this by criminal groups in the jungle territories.
- ✚ It is notorious the business on the road, the transport business, of which there are high economic benefits, and that the authorities of SENAFRONT are aware of.
- ✚ The absence of the Vicariate of Darien in the Migratory Reception Stations is very striking. It would be of great benefit, a spiritual accompaniment and actions in other efforts.
- ✚ We are concerned about the atmosphere of tension and violence that exists in the Migratory Reception Stations, due to the situation of deterioration and frustration with which migrants arrive when crossing the Darien jungle, and then those who were assaulted do not find the way to continue the journey since there is no facility to get the money, especially the people who were assaulted. wouldn't it be more profitable, even in cost, to evacuate most of the migrants from the Stations, looking for a way for the transporters to transfer them free of charge?
- ✚ The issue of health in the community is of concern to us, before there were Doctors without Borders who provided both medicines and medical personnel as well as other health professionals such as psychologists, social workers, nurses, who facilitated care. We know that in the province of Darien there is not a single hospital with medical specialties and that the construction of a hospital in Meteti has been planned for years. In all the regions of the province of Darien we know the complaints of the population for the lack of medicines; in view of this reality we ask ourselves, is the Ministry of Health - MINSA - prepared and does it have the human and material resources to supply the great demand of services and medicines generated by the migratory flow? Do they have the resources and the will to provide medicines if they have not done it with their nationals?
- ✚ Another of our concerns is that the spaces to house migrants built by international NGOs are within the community. We are aware of the different nationalities of the migrants, and in this situation we are concerned that the shelters are built within the community, next to the homes of the indigenous people. We know that in the extracontinental nationalities, there are endemic diseases such as cholera and others that can be transmitted to the local population and cause an emergency situation.

- ✚ How is the issue of the destruction of nature due to the high levels of contamination in the Darien jungle progressing? In addition to the pollution caused by the high level of garbage, how is the waste being managed in the community of Bajo Chiquito? We had no comments on this.

Proposals for follow-up:

- ✚ It would be of great benefit for the Vicariate of Darien to provide spiritual accompaniment and humanitarian aid, as well as to gather information on human rights violations for advocacy with the authorities.
- ✚ As Red Clamor, initiate a process to create a team that is inter-congregational and of members of networks that accompany migrants, to be present in Darien in situations involving human rights violations or other complications experienced by migrants.
- ✚ As a Clamor, let us write to the immigration authorities and SENAFRONT to negotiate with the carriers so that they will carry some people free of charge, including children under five years of age, so that they do not pay the fare.
- ✚ Develop, based on visits to Darien, bimonthly reports on the situation, data and status of migrants' human rights.
- ✚ Have dialogues with the authorities involved in receiving and welcoming migrants arriving in the Darien in the ETRM. Establish an institutional dialogue table, government - Clamor, to accompany the migratory flow crisis in the Darien.