

Washington uses Panama's new government to attack migrants crossing deadly Darien jungle

Andrea Lobo
12 July 2024

The Biden administration has signed an agreement with the new president of Panama, José Raúl Mulino, to block migrants from crossing the infamous Darien jungle on the border with Colombia and organize deportations from the Central American country.

US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Central America Eric Jacobstein explained to reporters last week that deportation flights from Panama would begin “in the coming weeks.”

Washington is seeking to create a bottleneck for hungry and desperate migrant workers escaping from the impact of imperialist oppression and war in dozens of countries. It has chosen, of all places, Panama, a principal international trade route through which thousands of ships cross from the Pacific to Atlantic Oceans and where billionaires go to hide their fortunes from taxes.

It is the latest grim illustration of how the conflict between the globalized forms of production and the obsolete capitalist nation-states is dragging humanity into barbarism and turning “our planet into a foul prison,” in the words of Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky.

On July 1, on Mulino's inauguration day, US Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas traveled to Panama and signed an agreement providing \$6 million for repatriation flights, as well as training programs and technical assistance for migrant authorities to “close” the border with Colombia.

Under the previous government, the Panamanian authorities would directly profit off of busing or otherwise expediting the transportation of the US-bound migrants across the country to Costa Rica. However, representing a significant political shift to the right in local politics, Mulino campaigned on the basis of scapegoating migrants, equating them with criminals.

A livestock ranch owner and lawyer who headed the

country's employer association, Mulino acts openly on behalf of former President Ricardo Martinelli, an authoritarian figure who sought asylum in the Nicaraguan embassy after facing charges for phone tapping opponents and journalists, money laundering and embezzling tens of millions of dollars in public funds.

Foreshadowing the character of the Mulino administration, Martinelli is also infamous for ordering police and soldiers to massacre banana workers, Indigenous activists and others demonstrating against his attacks on labor rights, mining concessions and the creation of the Colon Free Trade Zone.

The Darien already forms a natural obstacle from coast to coast between South America and the Central American isthmus. Every attempt to connect the Pan-American highway, which would otherwise run continuously from Alaska to the southern tip of Argentina, has failed.

The dense rainforest and extremely difficult terrain kill dozens each year. For survivors, gang activity, wild animals, illness, and remoteness add to countless possible traumas, including frequent cases of having loved ones go missing.

Numerous experts and humanitarian workers have indicated that it is virtually impossible to block and patrol the entire Darien jungle. In the words of a Jesuit migrant service coordinator, Elías Cornejo: “It is not feasible because there is nothing to close. It is a jungle without any border-like features.”

Panamanian Security Minister Frank Ábrego announced on Wednesday that layered fences of barbed wire have already been placed along four of the five most common paths used by migrants to redirect migrants onto one where authorities can ostensibly “protect” them.

These measures, however, will merely force migrants

along more dangerous and remote routes in order to avoid falling into the clutches of the authorities now planning to deport them.

Videos posted on social media this week show groups of migrants desperately facing a wall of barbed wire placed by Panamanian authorities, on the Colombian side, in Necoclí.

“My children have moved ahead,” said a Venezuelan mother to *Voice of America*, “now we will never catch up to them.”

Last year, a record 520,000 migrants crossed the Darien, and over 208,308 crossed in the first half of this year, a slight uptick compared to last year, according to Panamanian authorities. Since the announcement by Panama on July 1, the numbers have dropped slightly, but still, nearly 1,000 migrants continue to cross daily, about three-fourths of them Venezuelan, followed by large numbers of Colombians, Ecuadorians and Haitians.

Nearly 8 million Venezuelans have escaped their home country since 2014 as a result of a deepening humanitarian crisis caused chiefly by an economic crisis and brutal US economic sanctions. More broadly, since 2014 Latin America as a whole has seen its worst economic decade on record, while the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the US-led economic war against China, the Ukraine war and the massive accumulation of public debt spell continued stagnation, poverty growth and social austerity.

Colombian pseudo-left President Gustavo Petro has criticized the measures taken by Panama, saying this will only result in “people drowning in the sea.” But his administration has not moved a finger since he came to power to provide migrants a safe passage around Darien.

The Colombian ruling class is making windfall profits from exploiting the bulk of the desperate diaspora from neighboring Venezuela, while everywhere the corporate media and politicians have sought to pit native-born workers against migrants to “divide and conquer” and bring down labor costs across the board.

At the same time, Petro has continued the Colombian oligarchy’s dependent orientation to Wall Street and Washington. In late May, his administration signed a joint statement with the Biden administration, which included greater cooperation on “migration management.”

If migrants survive the venal and brutal military and police forces commandeered by Washington for use in “migrant contention” operations across Central America, the greatest hurdle they face has been the administration of Mexico’s “leftist” President Andrés Manuel López

Obrador. The Mexican government has deployed tens of thousands of troops to detain 590,401 migrants in the first five months of 2024, which constitutes a massive increase over already record numbers last year.

In the United States, former President Donald Trump and incumbent Joe Biden have placed the issue of who would make the tougher deporter-in-chief at the forefront of their election campaigns. While Trump has vowed to move thousands of troops from overseas to the southern border and use the National Guard to deport millions, Biden already “shut down the border” to asylum seekers last month—violating US and international law—and since 2023 has been far outpacing Trump’s deportations and returns of migrants.

The efforts by Washington to normalize such barefaced illegality and brutality against impoverished families across the continent and to essentially extend its southern border to the Darien Gap is a warning to all workers, native-born and immigrant alike. The attacks on migrants have always been used by the ruling classes as a precedent for expanding the attacks on the democratic and social rights of the entire working class.

The willingness of the likes of Mulino, Petro and López Obrador to turn their governments into branches of US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) demonstrates that none of the representatives of the ruling elites in Latin America, whether they claim to be “left” or not, will hesitate in employing equally ruthless means to repress native-born workers to defend profits and impose the diktats of global finance capital.

Workers in Panama, the United States and across the region must respond to all efforts to divide them along national lines by coming to the active defense of their migrant brothers and sisters and fighting to end the capitalist system and establish the United Socialist States of the Americas.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact