

PRESS RELEASE:

HUMANITARIAN CRISIS ON THE COLOMBIAN-PANAMANIAN BORDER

July 5th, 2016

As civil society organizations, academic institutions, defenders of human rights, and promoters of the rights of migrants, refugees and those in need of international protection, we express our deep concern at the ongoing humanitarian crisis on the Colombian-Panamanian border, provoked by the Panamanian government's closure of this border on May 9, as well as at the inability of governments in the region to seek solutions that prioritize the human rights of migrants over security and territorial sovereignty concerns.

Panamanian President Juan Carlos Varela justified his decision to close the border as a means of confronting the passage of irregular migrants through his country, this following the decision of his Nicaraguan and Costa Rican counterparts to close the borders of their respective countries late last year with the same argument. As a result, it is estimated that between 326 and 520 migrants, the vast majority being Cubans, Haitians and extra-continentals (Asians and Africans), find themselves stranded and facing a humanitarian crisis in the Colombian municipality of Turbo, on the border with Panama. The Cuban migrants are trying to reach the United States in order to benefit from the Cuban Adjustment Act (known as the wet feet, dry feet policy), before the relationship between the Castro regime and the U.S. is reestablished. The Haitian migrants are fleeing unemployment in Brazil and the difficult political and socio-economic situation in their own country, searching for better living conditions in the U.S. Moreover, due to the border closures and the tightening of immigration and asylum policy in the European Union, extra-continental migrants originating mainly from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ghana, Senegal, Nepal, Pakistan, Mali, Guinea, Gambia, Somalia, Bangladesh, Angola, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Cameroon, Sierra Leone and Togo, are increasingly seeking the opportunity to emigrate to the U.S. via Latin America.

On their journey to the United States, the aforementioned migrants reach Colombia through the borders with Ecuador, Venezuela and Brazil, utilizing increasingly complex and dangerous routes, such as through the violent Colombian territories of the Chocó and Antioquia. Finding themselves stranded in Colombia, many foreigners, especially those who are not Cuban, use the coast and the Darien jungle to continue their journey to Central America and from there, on to the U.S.

The migrant population stranded in Turbo, which is always changing (as it is composed of flows that are constantly arriving at and leaving from the border), is made up of approximately 25% women and 75% men according to the registry, the majority of whom are residing in a makeshift shelter. As of June 15, 2016, there were also 11 children (about 3% of the total shelter population), 1 teenager, and between 3

and 5 pregnant women registered in this shelter. In addition, some of these people have been identified as having zika, malaria, pneumonia, hepatitis and influenza.

Faced with a crisis of such a regional nature, the responses of Colombian institutions are, on the one hand, inadequate since the Colombian government has simply been deporting migrants it deems irregular, a decision based on diplomatic technical dialogues with its Cuban and Ecuadorian counterparts. On the other hand, the responses are contradictory since local authorities in Turbo issue safe passage papers to facilitate the movement of migrants to Panama, while the central authorities use deportation as the preferred measure to deal with this crisis. It is worth mentioning that in its eagerness to combat the illegal trafficking of migrants, considered the most prominent aspect of irregular migration in this area, the central government has criminalized the actions of solidarity and hospitality taken by the local population of Turbo towards these migrants, especially the most vulnerable ones. Similarly, the security approach adopted by the state has impeded its ability to identify migrants in need of assistance and protection, including children and pregnant women.

Faced with this reality of increasing intra- and extra-continental flows and the repetition of border and binational crises, we recommend to the states of the region that they actively promote dialogue and commitments amongst themselves to ensure the human rights of migrants in the region, regardless of nationality, age, ethnicity, sex, etc., and in accordance with the international and regional obligations and instruments to protect their human rights.

Signed,

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