African Migration through the Americas

Drivers, Routes, and Policy Responses

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Executive Summary

Since 2013, migrants from Africa have increasingly trekked through upwards of nine South and Central American countries to reach the U.S.-Mexico border and apply for asylum in the United States. Border apprehensions of African migrants, at and between ports of entry, peaked in U.S. fiscal year (FY) 2019 at 5,000. This is part of a broader and growing trend of migrants from outside Latin America—including from countries in the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia—transiting through the region, often collectively referred to as extracontinental migrants. Though migrants from across the African continent are part of this movement, with Africans of 35 different nationalities intercepted in FY 2019, those from Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Ghana, and Somalia were encountered most often by U.S. and Mexican border officials between 2015 and 2019. While African migration through the Americas is still relatively small in scale—and at a global level, Africans made up less than one-sixth of all international migrants in 2020—Africa’s population is growing at the fastest rate of any continent, and migration is likely to continue to grow as well.

Migrants’ reasons for leaving their countries of origin are varied and, ultimately, are individual decisions. Some common reasons include: armed conflict, political persecution, a lack of economic opportunities, climate change, and family reunification. While most African migration happens within the African continent, the increase in the number of Africans traveling through the Americas and encountered at the U.S.-Mexico border in recent years has occurred against a backdrop of decreasing numbers of Africans intercepted while trying to enter Europe irregularly. This shift comes as Europe has more forcefully impeded migrants’ passage through the Mediterranean Sea and as current or potential migrants’ social networks have relayed personal success stories and information about routes through the Western Hemisphere.

As this migration increases, it will be crucial for Latin American transit countries to build their capacity to manage migration and address the specific challenges that arise for Africans moving through the Western Hemisphere. While African migrants take different routes out of the African continent, most enter the Americas through Brazil or Ecuador. Brazil is the most accessible Latin American country for Africans, as it has more embassies and consulates in Africa than any other South or Central American country. Meanwhile, Ecuador has historically allowed visa-free travel for most nationalities, though it imposed new restrictions on a handful of nationalities in 2019 and 2021. Moving northward, nearly all African migrants pass through Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico. The most dangerous part of the route is the Darién Gap—a stretch of jungle that straddles the Colombia-Panama border—where migrants must survive criminal groups, flash floods, limited food supply, and difficult trails. The movement of Africans through the Americas, like global mobility more broadly, stalled in 2020 due to COVID-19-related mobility restrictions, trapping thousands of migrants en route, but started to pick up again in 2021.

It will be crucial for Latin American transit countries to build their capacity to manage migration and address the specific challenges that arise for Africans moving through the Western Hemisphere.
That said, because African migration through the Americas is small compared to the massive movements of Venezuelans and migrants from some Central American countries, most Latin American transit countries do not prioritize Africans in their migration management policies. At present, most of these countries have little capacity to carry out full-scale immigration enforcement at their borders, even when pressured by the United States and provided with U.S. assistance. These countries’ migration management strategies are generally limited to facilitating transit northward toward the United States and Canada and carrying out enforcement in exceptional cases, such as when individual migrants are discovered to have serious criminal histories in international law enforcement databases. Indeed, from Colombia northward, all transit countries (with the exception of Nicaragua) provide African migrants in transit with some sort of documentation if apprehended by the authorities, allowing this migration to take place through authorized means.

Overall, Latin American countries mostly view African migrants as a transitory population. In addition to facilitating their movement northward, this means these countries rarely make permanent settlement through humanitarian protection or other legal statuses accessible to African migrants, and there are few efforts to ensure they can access rights in transit or upon settling. For instance, in Panama and Costa Rica, enforcement officers ferry migrants through the countries, but migrants have little access to asylum officers. Although many African migrants are not interested in remaining in transit countries, due to language barriers, racism, and a lack of social networks, it is often not clear to them that this is even a possibility.

Challenges related to language and racial and religious discrimination impede Africans’ journeys from beginning to end, pushing many if not most to move on and complete the trip to the United States. African migrants generally are unaware of or do not understand immigration processes within transit countries, where Spanish predominates and few, if any, interpreters are available. Experiences with racism generally begin when migrants enter Brazil or Ecuador, making it difficult for those who may otherwise intend to remain, at least in the short term, to secure housing and good jobs, and leading to violence and harassment for some. Cultural differences between African migrants and the societies through which they are traveling can make them the subject of harassment from not only authorities but also from other migrants and criminal groups. In Mexico, for example, Africans have experienced worse detention conditions than other migrants and are more easily targeted for extortion.

As African migration to the U.S.-Mexico border has become a regional phenomenon, involving the entire Western Hemisphere rather than only the United States and Mexico, it must be addressed with regional solutions. Such an approach should involve the U.S. and Latin American governments as well as international organizations playing a coordinating role. Key recommendations in this report include:

For the U.S. government:

► **Create refugee resettlement opportunities for African migrants in transit.** The administration should commit to establishing a Refugee Processing Center in Panama and/or Costa Rica where African migrants can have their claims for refugee status in the United States, or other partner countries, adjudicated. This would mitigate some of the dangers of the journey and reduce the number of African migrants arriving to the U.S.-Mexico border.
► **Fund an assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) program for migrants from outside the Western Hemisphere.** The United States should fund, and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) should implement, an AVRR program at some point along the route. This would allow African and Asian migrants the option of returning to their countries of origin if, for example, they decided the dangerous trek through the Darién is not worth it or if they run out of funds or are injured. The program should be completely voluntary and explained to migrants in a language they speak.

For governments across the region:

► **Reduce linguistic barriers and discrimination in immigration processes.** This would involve bolstering language access by providing universal access to translation and interpretation—in English and French, as well as Haitian Creole for the large population of Haitian migrants in Latin American transit countries—during immigration processes. Migrants also should not be denied access to immigration processes, health care, education, or justice in transit countries due to discrimination. A first step toward addressing this issue could be to provide antidiscrimination (including anti-racism) training to officials in immigration, law enforcement, and public service agencies.

► **Increase access to humanitarian protection.** African migrants should be informed of their right to seek asylum in transit countries, particularly Panama, Costa Rica, and Mexico, which have better functioning asylum systems than other countries in the region. The appropriate officials should be present at southern border camps in Panama and Costa Rica to facilitate the application process in those countries.

For international organizations:

► **Provide funding for language access and anti-racism efforts in transit countries.** International organizations should step in to fill the resource gap that transit countries may face in trying to scale up translation, interpretation, and anti-racism efforts. Funding from international organizations could help ensure that these steps are prioritized, even as the region faces other, large-scale migration challenges.

► **Improve missing migrant tracking in the Darién Gap.** A missing migrant tracking system—recording how many migrants enter the Darién and how many exit—would fill an important data gap and provide crucial information to worried families. The system’s designers should also consider whether anonymized data could be shared with the government of Panama to guide search and rescue missions in this dangerous but frequently traveled area.

While African migration through the Americas has been a somewhat overlooked migration dynamic to date, it is likely to be an enduring one and countries in the region will need to take a balanced approach to managing it through a combination of transit facilitation, enforcement mechanisms, and avenues to access humanitarian protection and other legal statuses, all while safeguarding migrants’ rights. Merely increasing enforcement while continuing to facilitate transit—without making pathways to legal status available for those interested—would only further increase unsustainable pressure on the U.S.-Mexico border and place African migrants in more danger during their transit.
1 Introduction

While public and political attention to the U.S.-Mexico border has in recent years primarily centered on the arrival of growing numbers of Central American children and families, another smaller yet noteworthy trend has been underway. The number of migrants from African countries attempting to cross the border into the United States without proper documentation began growing in 2013 and spiked in 2019. In U.S. fiscal year (FY) 2019, there were more than 5,000 instances of African migrants—coming from 35 countries—being apprehended while trying to cross the border irregularly or being determined to be inadmissible at ports of entry. While a relatively small number compared to, for example, the 270,000 encounters of Guatemalans at the border during the same year, it was more than double the number of encounters of African migrants in FY 2018 and a nearly eightfold increase from the 700 a decade prior, in FY 2009. This correlates with growth in legal African migration to the United States as well: the growth rate of African migration to the United States has outpaced the rate for all other world regions in recent years (see Box 1).\(^1\) In Mexico, encounters of African migrants transiting irregularly increased even more dramatically—to 6,000 between October 2018 and September 2019 (the months comprising U.S. FY 2019), a 600-percent increase from the year prior.

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BOX 1
African Migration in Numbers: Within and Outside the African Continent

As of 2020, Africans made up only about 14 percent of all international migrants. Most Africans migrate within the African continent: in 2019, of the 40 million African migrants living outside their countries of origin, 53 percent lived in another African country, while 27 percent lived in Europe, 12 percent in Asia, and 8 percent in North America.

Just as the increase in African migration to the U.S.-Mexico border is a relatively recent occurrence, growth in the overall population of Africans who have voluntarily immigrated to the United States is new—although, of course, there is a long history of involuntary African migration to the United States as forcibly enslaved people. About 130,000 sub-Saharan African immigrants lived in the United States in 1980, but that total rose to more than 2 million by 2018. This large and growing population of African immigrants in the United States provides both opportunities for legal immigration—for instance, sponsorship of family members for green cards or identification of employers who could provide such sponsorship—as well as a draw for unauthorized migration of those who cannot access such legal channels from their origin communities. Canada, meanwhile, is home to a smaller but also growing population of African immigrants: 640,000 as of 2016.


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Although the onset of the pandemic and the introduction of travel restrictions saw mobility in the region (and worldwide) decrease in 2020, African migration through the Americas has already started to rebound. In the first six months of 2021, more than 1,650 migrants from 18 African countries were apprehended in Panama—more than twice as many African migrants as were apprehended in the country during all of 2020. It is thus likely that African migration to and through the Americas will continue—and continue to increase—in the years to come.

The growth of African migration in and through the Americas is not happening in a vacuum but rather is part of a larger trend of migrants from outside Latin America—including from countries in the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia—transiting through the region, often collectively referred to as extracontinental migrants. Between FY 2015 and FY 2019, Mexico apprehended more than 17,000 migrants from African countries, more than 25,000 from Asian countries, and more than 44,000 from the Caribbean countries of Haiti and Cuba travelling irregularly through Mexican territory. While the dynamics, drivers, and experiences of migrants from different countries and continents differ, transit and destination countries throughout Latin America respond to extracontinental migrants through similar enforcement and migration management policies. This report examines both this shared policy context and, by focusing specifically on African migration, drills down into the dynamics of this segment of the extracontinental migrant population and the diversity of experiences within it.

African migrants typically come to the United States using legal channels, most commonly as students, to reunite with family members, as temporary workers, or through the diversity visa lottery. Historically, those who cannot obtain a visa—and who instead migrate irregularly—have taken well-worn routes to Europe, rather than forging new transatlantic routes. The recent increase in migrants crossing the Atlantic and traveling irregularly through the Americas is largely due to growing networks of established African migrant communities in the United States, solidifying Western Hemisphere migration routes, and to the closing off of migration channels to Europe. Many are fleeing difficult conditions in their countries of origin, including conflict, poor governance, the effects of climate change, and political repression. Others are seeking economic opportunity and family reunification or are motivated by a combination of several of these drivers.

To reach the United States without a U.S. visa, African migrants rarely take a linear route from their origin countries to the U.S.-Mexico border. Often, migrants do not even begin their journeys with a final destination in mind, but rather make decisions as they move, determining only the next country to which they will travel rather than an overall end goal. Some migrants try to make a life for themselves in African or South American countries before ultimately traveling through Central America to the United States (or, less
often, to Canada). For those who do not start with the intention to reach the United States, the country’s pull may begin once they are in the Americas. From start to finish, their journeys can take months or even years.

These migrants typically enter the Western Hemisphere via Brazil or Ecuador, passing through at least nine countries before reaching the United States. But because this migration flow is relatively small compared to others in the region—such as the movement of Venezuelans and Central Americans (primarily Guatemalans, Hondurans, Nicaraguans, and Salvadorans)—most transit countries do not prioritize the management of African migration. That said, Panama and Costa Rica are significant outliers, as each has developed a system to conduct security screenings of most migrants, administer vaccines, provide basic services, and coordinate movements between the two countries.

African migrants traveling along this route face unique challenges that are less common for the many South and Central Americans traveling through the same countries—such as racism, language barriers, and a lack of access to humanitarian protections—and that transit countries have done little to address. As this migration will likely continue to grow, it will be important for Western Hemispheric countries to more actively acknowledge and further manage this migration, while addressing the specific challenges African migrants face.

**BOX 2**

**Methodology and Data Sources**

This report examines African migration through the Western Hemisphere in general, while providing a more in-depth examination of migration from Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Ghana, and Somalia. Nationals of these five countries accounted for more encounters by U.S. border authorities and Mexican immigration agents than any other African countries between U.S. fiscal years (FYs) 2015 and 2019—a period encompassing the recent spike in African migration through the Americas. Findings in the report draw on available open-source migrant apprehension data; public research and media sources; and interviews with 36 experts from countries in the Western Hemisphere, Europe, and Africa, including migration officials, academics, policy experts, international organization officials, members of nongovernmental organizations, and staff at migrant shelters.

The apprehension data employed in this report include U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) statistics on migrants apprehended between ports of entry and migrants found inadmissible at ports of entry along the U.S. southwest border, data from the Mexican National Migration Institute (INM) on migrants apprehended at Mexico’s borders and in the interior of the country, and statistics from Panama’s National Border Service (SENAFRONT) on migrants apprehended after irregularly crossing into the country from Colombia. For comparison, and to understand how the scale and changing trends in African migration through the Americas compare to African movements to Europe, the authors also analyze apprehension data from the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex).

While there is no exact count of African migrants traveling through the Americas or to Europe, apprehension data can be used as a proxy to estimate the volume and nationality breakdown of migration flows. However, some migrants’ nationalities may be incorrectly recorded, limiting the accuracy of apprehension data. Migrants from some African countries such as Eritrea and Somalia may be undercounted because they often travel with fake passports that identify them as having a different nationality. Additionally, Congolese migrants may be overcounted because Haitians sometimes pose as Congolese to avoid deportation from Central America or Mexico. Finally, some Nigerians may use Ghanaian passports as there is a large Nigerian community in Ghana, and Ghanaian passports allow for more freedom of movement.
This report examines several facets of African migration through the Americas. It first looks at the migration drivers for nationals from five African sending countries—Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Eritrea, Ghana, and Somalia—whose nationals most commonly travel through the Western Hemisphere. (For more on the methodology of this report and how these countries were chosen, see Box 2.) It then lays out the routes these migrants take and the transit- and destination-country policies that affect their mobility. Next, the report explores how transit countries handle three components of migration management: immigration control and management of flows, the provision of humanitarian protection and other legal statuses, and integration strategies for migrants who stay in Latin America for longer periods of time. It also looks at the difficulties African migrants face in these countries. The final section of the report provides forward-looking recommendations for national governments and international actors to address the unique dynamics of African migration in the Americas.

2 Drivers of Migration and Forced Displacement

Africans decide to leave their origin countries for diverse and personal reasons. Even so, these often stem from widespread and long-term structural challenges. Some general push factors are driving migration across Africa, whether from Eritrea and Somalia in the Horn of Africa, Cameroon and the DRC in Central Africa, or Ghana in Western Africa, with specific characteristics depending on the country (and the region within that country). These factors include civil conflicts, the effects of climate change, and poor economic performance as well as rapid economic growth. These underlying issues often create environments where opportunity—educational, economic, and social—is scarce. For at least the past several years, conflict has broadly been the principal driver of displacement across the African continent, in particular for four of the five countries surveyed in this report (all but Ghana). Climate change, meanwhile, is sometimes a direct driver of migration—for instance, when it causes increasingly severe weather events or famine—but it is more often a broader structural factor that indirectly leads to displacement, through ensuing conflict and poverty. In countries that are struggling to develop economically—and whose residents may live with high unemployment, low wages, and poor working conditions, often in the informal sector, among other factors—the very poor may be less able to migrate long distances due to a lack of resources. However, the middle class and wealthy populations may be more driven to migrate due to an inability to advance within the society and because they have the resources to move.

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7 Those migrants with significant socioeconomic resources are more likely to have access to visas that can ease their travel to other countries, while those with few or even moderate resources are more likely to take irregular routes once in a position to move. See Marie-Laurence Flahaux and Hein De Haas, “African Migration: Trends, Patterns, Drivers,” *Comparative Migration Studies* 4, no. 1 (2016): 1–25.
All three of these factors—human insecurity, environmental changes, and a lack of economic advancement—can lead to a general lack of opportunity, particularly for young adults who are just entering the workforce. Additionally, rapid economic growth in developing countries often leads to young people in urban areas being increasingly able to afford further education and, relatedly, to look for jobs that make use of their skills and allow them to continue advancing within society. It also can mean that more people have the resources to finance travel, providing individuals with opportunities and incentives to migrate. Several African countries have been experiencing rapid economic growth and emigration of young people with better resources, including Ghana—one of the five case-study countries.

Migration is also driven by factors pulling people to the Western Hemisphere and, eventually, the United States, such as diaspora networks and economic opportunities, described in more detail in Section 3. There are also some particular migration drivers that distinguish the five case-study countries from each other, as will be discussed in the subsections that follow.

A. Eritrea

Eritrea was engaged in sporadic armed conflict with Ethiopia from 1998 through 2018, and as a consequence, its society revolves around the military. Migration from Eritrea has historically largely stemmed from forced national military conscription, a correlated lack of economic opportunity, and massive human rights violations by the country’s military-led, autocratic government. The government has continually promoted few career prospects outside of the military because the military, and citizens’ involvement in it, is the governments’ primary vehicle to exercise control over its population. Lack of opportunity outside the military is stifling for young people, for whom staying in Eritrea may be like “waiting for death” or waiting on economic opportunities that will likely never come. Migration, while risky, offers the possibility of something more.

By 2019, more than 500,000 Eritreans were outside their country as refugees or migrants otherwise in need of protection, close to 180,000 of them in neighboring Ethiopia. Many Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia have been displaced again by the war in the Tigray region of Ethiopia since November 2020 and an ensuing famine. Before the conflict, more than 90,000 Eritrean refugees lived in Tigray, though many have since fled. It has also become more difficult in the past three years for Eritrean refugees to qualify for protection

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11 Author interview with a senior expert on the Horn of Africa at an international nongovernmental organization (NGO), June 11, 2020.
12 Author interview with Tekalign Ayalew Mengiste, Chairperson, Department of Social Anthropology, Addis Ababa University, June 8, 2020.
in Ethiopia: Ethiopia restricted access to asylum for Eritreans in 2018, after signing a peace deal and ending the official conflict between the two countries.\textsuperscript{15} Less able to seek asylum in Ethiopia, some Eritreans have moved to Uganda and Sudan, while others have headed for Europe or the Western Hemisphere.\textsuperscript{16}

Eritreans often have difficulty obtaining necessary travel documents (such as passports) from their government. Passports and exit visas are unavailable to people who are supposed to be serving in the military, absent a bribe, as it is illegal to leave the country while one is in active military service.\textsuperscript{17} To obtain a passport without paying a bribe, Eritreans most often leave their country illegally and subsequently request a passport at an Eritrean consulate abroad, where they must also pay a 2-percent income tax to the Eritrean government.\textsuperscript{18} Because of the costs involved in obtaining a passport and airplane tickets, only those with substantial resources can migrate from Eritrea and leave the African continent for the Americas.

\textbf{B. Somalia}

Migration from Somalia is driven by armed conflict and insecurity, as well as by the dearth of economic opportunity brought on by widespread violence and chronic droughts. There were 2.6 million internally displaced Somalis at the end of 2020,\textsuperscript{19} and more than 628,000 Somali refugees outside the country as of February 2021.\textsuperscript{20} Attacks by the terrorist group al-Shabab and interclan conflict are the major sources of violence in regions throughout the country.\textsuperscript{21} As in other major African sending countries, such as Cameroon and the DRC, this conflict not only drives people to leave because they fear harm (which is a major part of displacement), but also because it quashes economic opportunity in the country.\textsuperscript{22} Secondary effects have prompted people to migrate as well, including the deforestation largely driven by al-Shabab’s participation in the charcoal trade, which has led to several major droughts and accompanying famines.\textsuperscript{23}

Somalis sometimes buy passports of other nationalities to migrate internationally. Travelers with Somali passports face more visa or travel restrictions than holders of all but five other countries’ passports,\textsuperscript{24} so many migrants purchase Kenyan or Ugandan passports to travel to countries that have more stringent entry requirements.\textsuperscript{25} As is true in the other case-study countries, most Somalis do not have sufficient resources to take an international flight, let alone a transcontinental one. Those Somalis who do travel to the Western Hemisphere are thus likely to be middle class and/or have social connections with individuals who are able to assist in paying for their transit.

\textsuperscript{15} Human Rights Watch, “Ethiopia: Unaccompanied Eritrean Children at Risk” (news release, April 21, 2020); Simon Marks, “Ethiopia Ends Banket Protection for Eritrean Refugees,” Voice of America, April 22, 2020; Author interview with Tekalign Ayalew Mengiste.
\textsuperscript{16} Author interview with a senior expert on the Horn of Africa at an international NGO; Hans Lucht and Tekalign Ayalew Mengiste, “Eritrean Refugees Struggle after the Peace Agreement with Ethiopia,” Danish Institute for International Studies, November 6, 2020.
\textsuperscript{17} Author interview with a senior expert on the Horn of Africa at an international NGO; UK Home Office, County Policy and Information Note – Eritrea: National Service and Illegal Exit (London: UK Home Office, 2018).
\textsuperscript{18} Author interview with María José Alexander.
\textsuperscript{21} Author interview with a senior expert on the Horn of Africa at an international NGO; Author interview with María José Alexander, former Executive Director, Caritas Somalia, June 9, 2020.
\textsuperscript{22} Author interview with María José Alexander.
\textsuperscript{23} Author interview with a senior expert on the Horn of Africa at an international NGO; Author interview with María José Alexander.
\textsuperscript{24} Henley and Partners Passport Index, “Global Ranking,” accessed April 21, 2021.
\textsuperscript{25} Author interview with María José Alexander.
C. Democratic Republic of Congo

While displacement is widespread across the DRC, it mostly remains internal or leads to migration to neighboring countries, such as Rwanda and Tanzania, due to the limited resources of displaced persons.26 Decades-long conflict—a civil war and lingering clashes after it officially ended in 2003—in the eastern North and South Kivu provinces and the southern-central Kasai region is a major driver of displacement. By the end of 2019, there were more than 5.5 million internally displaced people living in the DRC, the third-highest count of any country in the world.27 Congolese nationals accounted for more than 918,000 refugees and asylum seekers living in other African countries, and since 2016 the DRC has been the top origin country for refugees resettled into the United States.28

Outside of conflict-generated displacement, other drivers of Congolese emigration include political repression and a lack of economic opportunity. Through the end of the presidency of Joseph Kabila in 2019, those who opposed him and his term extensions in office were targeted with violence.29 Further, the results of the 2018 election have been disputed, and members of the opposition political party have been targeted by government security forces.30 Others may leave in search of economic opportunity, due to persecution based on gender identity or sexual orientation, or some combination of these various factors.31 Overall, there are indications that more Congolese are choosing to migrate outside the African continent, to both Europe and the Americas, as the DRC was the only country among the five case-study countries whose nationals saw significant increases in apprehensions in Europe, Mexico, and the United States in 2019.32

Most displaced Congolese migrants and refugees would not have the resources, or necessarily the desire, to travel through the Americas, though increasingly a small portion of Congolese have opted for this route. Those reaching the Americas are typically escaping difficult conditions other than pervasive civil conflict and are part of a nominally middle-class, urban population in the west of the country, often near the capital city, Kinshasa.33

D. Cameroon

Violence is at the core of displacement for the Cameroonians who travel through the Western Hemisphere to the U.S.-Mexico border. The Anglophone Crisis—a conflict between Francophone government forces and governmental or paramilitary forces composed of English-speaking Cameroonians—has uprooted those who speak English or who have cultural or educational ties to the English-speaking regions of Cameroon.34 As of 2020, there were approximately 1.4 million internally displaced people living in Cameroon, the highest count of any country in the world.35

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and local Anglophone secessionists in the northwest and southwest regions of the country—had resulted in the internal displacement of more than 700,000 people and the flight of more than 63,000 refugees into neighboring Nigeria as of March 2021. The conflict, which started in 2016 but escalated in late 2017, has included both government persecution of the English-speaking minority and attacks by Anglophone separatists on civilians. The effects of this pervasive violence extend beyond physical harm: it also diminishes opportunities for societal advancement. For example, since 2017, the Anglophone separatists have enforced a boycott of the government-run educational system in the two English-speaking regions, meaning that most schools are closed, and the staff and students who attend the handful of schools that remain open are at risk of violence. The lack of opportunity brought on by the shuttering of the educational system has caused many students to flee.

Other violence in the country includes attacks by the terrorist group Boko Haram, but the majority of Cameroonians arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border anecdotally appear to be Anglophones fleeing the violence and poor conditions in Cameroon’s western region. When the Anglophone Crisis started in 2016, apprehensions of Cameroonians increased by 231 percent in Mexico and by 141 percent at the U.S.-Mexico border compared to 2015. Since 2016, Mexican apprehensions of Cameroonians have rapidly increased each year, while the increase in U.S. encounters was more gradual until it peaked in 2019.

While a complex web of factors drives displacement in Cameroon, those who can afford to leave the country and travel to the Western Hemisphere are a small subset of the overall displaced population. As with other countries surveyed here, passports are not widely issued or available in Cameroon, and obtaining them often requires bribing officials. Because those traveling by plane must buy passports or fake documents as well as plane tickets, they are generally from the middle class or have their trip funded by family members or in some cases by separatist groups, if the separatists determine they need to leave the country to avoid imminent arrest.

### E. Ghana

The situation in Ghana is markedly different from the situations in the other case-study countries, in that there is no widespread conflict, terrorism, or mass violation of human rights. In addition, Ghana had one of the fastest growing economies in the world as of 2019, experiencing 7-percent growth that year. But

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39 Authors’ analysis based on data from U.S. Border Patrol, “U.S. Border Patrol Nationwide Apprehensions”; CBP data on noncitizens determined to be inadmissible for FYS 2014–19; Mexican Interior Ministry, UPMRP, Boletín estadístico anual.
40 Author interview with Ilaria Allegrozzi.
41 Author interview with Ilaria Allegrozzi.
strong economic growth in low- and middle-income countries often correlates with increased emigration.\textsuperscript{43} Ghana also has a history of emigration that stretches back to the mid-1960s,\textsuperscript{44} which has allowed Ghanaians to develop social networks abroad that facilitate continuing migration and which has created a culture of migration\textsuperscript{45} in the country, largely among the middle class. At the end of 2017, there were more than 850,000 migrants and almost 17,000 refugees from Ghana living abroad, constituting 3 percent of the country's total population.\textsuperscript{46}

Other factors driving people to leave can include poor governance, discrimination, and violence. While Ghana is a democratic country, corruption is widespread throughout the government and mostly goes unpunished.\textsuperscript{47} Same-sex relationships between men are criminalized, though rarely prosecuted, and there are reports of discrimination against LGBTQ people, including by the police.\textsuperscript{48} Instances of violence may occur on an individual level, such as against specific journalists, or among broader groups, such as between herdsmen and landowners, but overall the instances are more contained in scope than in the other African countries described here.\textsuperscript{49} As residents of a middle-income country,\textsuperscript{50} Ghanaians may have more economic resources and visa accessibility to fly into the Western Hemisphere and other world regions than would-be migrants from other African countries.

3 Current and Future Migration Patterns

The destinations of migrants from across Africa vary dramatically depending on their country of origin, social networks, the financial resources available to them, as well as the particular migration enforcement conditions at the time. While most African migration takes place within the continent, significant numbers have traveled to Europe as well. That said, in the last five or so years, Europe has become more difficult to reach, and overall the number of African migrants who have reached Europe has decreased. During this same period, routes to the United States, starting in Brazil or Ecuador, have become more popular.

\textsuperscript{43} Michael Clemens, “Emigration Rises along with Economic Development. Aid Agencies Should Face This, but Not Fear It,” Center for Global Development, August 18, 2020.
\textsuperscript{44} Djamila Schans, Valentina Mazzucato, Bruno Schoumaker, and Marie-Laurence Flahaux, “Changing Patterns of Ghanaian Migration” (Migrations between Africa and Europe working paper 20, Institut national d'études démographiques, January 2013).
\textsuperscript{45} For example, in the Brong-Ahafo region, where most Ghanaian migrants come from, migration is seen as a “rite of passage.” See Brennan Weiss, “Ghana Is Safe and Stable, but Its Young People Are Still Risking Their Lives to Cross to Europe,” Quartz Africa, June 13, 2017; Author interview with Samuel Okyere, Senior Lecturer, School of Sociology, Politics, and International Studies, Bristol University, June 18, 2020.
\textsuperscript{46} Guiliana Urso et al., “Migration Profile Ghana” (brochure, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2019).
\textsuperscript{49} U.S. Department of State, “Ghana 2019 Human Rights Report.”
\textsuperscript{50} Tom Bollyky, “Implications of Ghana’s New Middle Income Status – Todd Moss,” Center for Global Development, November 21, 2011.
A. Intra-African Migration

Cameroonian, Congolese, Eritrean, Ghanaian, and Somali migrants have each established different migration routes to bordering and nearby countries within Africa. For instance, Ghanaian and Cameroonian migrants tend to migrate to other English-speaking African countries such as Nigeria. And because Ghana and Nigeria are both members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), nationals from these countries are able to move freely within other ECOWAS Member States. 51 An estimated 500,000 Ghanaians were residing in Nigeria as of 2018, as were 60,000 Cameroonians in 2020. 52 Nearly two-thirds of all Eritrean migrants and refugees reside in Ethiopia, parts of Sudan, Djibouti, and Yemen. 53 The majority of Somali refugees and displaced migrants reside in nearby Kenya and Ethiopia, either in official refugee camps or in urban centers. 54 Finally, the majority of Congolese refugees and migrants live in neighboring countries, including Uganda, Burundi, Rwanda, and Tanzania. 55

In addition to migrating to neighboring countries, Africans from around the continent have consistently viewed South Africa as a destination. Since the mid-1990s, South Africa has liberalized its immigration framework—particularly with regards to inclusive asylum processes—which has resulted in the steady arrival of migrants from around Africa and the world. 56 An estimated 75 percent of South Africa’s foreign-born population is African. 57 South Africa is an appealing destination for a variety of reasons, including its generous asylum laws, established immigrant communities from countries throughout the continent, and comparatively favorable economic opportunities. South Africa may also be a stopover point during a longer migration journey where migrants make some money to continue on to other destinations, including to the Western Hemisphere. 58

B. African Migration to Europe

A smaller subset of African migrants travels to Europe. African migrants arrive legally in Europe for a variety of reasons, including for employment, family reunification, and to study, as more than 450,000 did in 2019. 59 In addition to regular migration channels, some Africans also attempt to reach Europe irregularly, with some requesting asylum upon arrival. From calendar years 2014 to 2019, European authorities made approximately 748,000 apprehensions of African migrants trying to reach Europe’s borders by either land or sea. 60 This includes about 194,000 apprehensions of nationals from this report’s five case-study countries. Historically, there have been a few major routes into Europe, including across several points in the Mediterranean and by land through the Balkan countries. Between 2014 and 2019, the most common

55 Westerby, Ngo-Diep, Hueck, and Phillmann, Welcome to Europe, 48.
56 Author interview with academic at a South African university, September 24, 2020.
58 Author interview with academic at a South African university.
60 Frontex, “Migratory Map.”
routes for migrants from four of the five case-study countries were through the central Mediterranean route from Libya, while migrants from the DRC most often used the eastern Mediterranean route.\textsuperscript{61}

Following the heightened arrivals of asylum seekers and migrants on European shores in 2015 and 2016 (from Africa as well as other places, notably Syria), the management of irregular migration rose to the top of the European Union’s political agenda. The bloc has sought to forge agreements with Turkey and various African countries to control these movements before they reach Europe. Some individual EU countries have also negotiated migration-management deals with African countries,\textsuperscript{62} and others have enforced “pushbacks” of migrants trying to enter their territory.\textsuperscript{63} EU pressure on African transit countries has led some to more strictly control their borders. In 2016, for example, Niger—the main transit country for migrants traveling to Libya—implemented a 2015 law making it a crime to help foreigners enter or exit the country.\textsuperscript{64} Additionally, through a more long-term development strategy, the European Commission is taking steps to address the drivers of irregular migration and forced displacement. The EU Emergency Trust Fund, established in 2015, aims to address the root causes of irregular migration and forced displacement in 26 African countries, including four out of the five discussed in this report (all but the DRC), by funding African governments’ efforts to combat smuggling and trafficking and create economic opportunities.\textsuperscript{65}

The sum of these policies has made it more difficult for many African migrants to reach North African countries, let alone to enter Europe. Coupled with EU efforts to increase returns of irregular migrants and asylum seekers whose claims are denied to their origin countries, these policies may also be pushing some migrants to search for alternative mobility options, including the Americas.\textsuperscript{66}

\textbf{C. Migration through the Americas}

Unlike in the European context, in the Americas, there is really only one route for African irregular migrants attempting to reach the United States or Canada. That said, there are at least two main entry points in the Western Hemisphere, with African migrants’ journeys generally starting in the South American countries of either Brazil or Ecuador and winding their way up through Central America to Mexico and ultimately to the U.S.-Mexico border.

\textsuperscript{61} Frontex, “Migratory Map.”
\textsuperscript{62} For example, under an agreement between Italy and Libya, the Libyan coast guard is to intercept and return maritime migrants to Libya, even as reports of human rights abuses of migrants in Libyan detention centers are common. See European Council, “Malta Declaration by the Members of the European Council on the External Aspects of Migration: Addressing the Central Mediterranean Route” (statement, February 3, 2017); Benjamin Bathke, “When Helping Hurts – Libya’s Controversial Coast Guard, Europe’s Go-To Partner to Stem Migration,” InfoMigrants, July 24, 2019; Sertan Sanderson, “Eluding Libya’s Coast Guard: Fewer Migrants Make it to Europe on Central Mediterranean,” InfoMigrants, February 25, 2021.
\textsuperscript{64} This policy change has had a wide reach. Even migrants who should be able to travel freely as nationals of ECOWAS countries are unable to move north of Agadez, a city in central Niger, as a result of the legislation. See Jérôme Tubiana, Clotilde Warin, and Gaffar Mohammad Saeneen, \textit{Multilateral Damage: the Impact of EU Migration Policies on Central Saharan Routes} (The Hague: Clingendael – Netherlands Institute of International Relations, 2018), 22–35; Colleen Moser, “The Adverse Effects of Niger’s Anti-Smuggling Law,” \textit{Forced Migration Review} 64 (June 2020).
\textsuperscript{66} Many migrants from the Horn of Africa have also long transited to Gulf States, though this route has decreased steadily since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020. See IOM, “Migration from Africa to Gulf Countries Decreases, Risks Facing Migrants Increase as Countries Grapple with COVID-19” (press release, April 23, 2020).
While contemporary African migration through Latin America is small, this population is nonetheless increasing. In the months that make up U.S. fiscal year 2019, Mexico made 6,641 apprehensions of migrants from African countries, up approximately 1,000 percent from the 634 such apprehensions in FY 2014. By contrast, European authorities made 59,409 apprehensions of African migrants in FY 2019 compared to 117,755 in FY 2014, a 50-percent decrease. While the figures in Mexico are marginal when compared to Europe, overall apprehensions fell dramatically in Europe while increasing in Mexico over the same period. Moreover, for some African nationalities, the number of migrants traveling through the Americas had become comparable to the numbers reaching Europe by FY 2019. For example, while in FY 2017 there were 364 apprehensions of Cameroonians in Mexico versus 4,774 in Europe, in FY 2019 there were 3,196 apprehensions of Cameroonians in Mexico compared to 2,387 in Europe.

While the total number of apprehensions for nationals of the five case-study countries decreased dramatically in Europe, they simultaneously increased in Mexico and at the U.S.-Mexico border (see Figure 1). The stark decrease in apprehensions in Europe is primarily a result of a significant drop in the number of Eritreans being apprehended rather than indicative of a shift in arrivals for nationals of all five countries.

FIGURE 1
Apprehensions of Migrants from Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Ghana, and Somalia by European, Mexican, and U.S. Authorities, FYs 2014–20

Note: These data are shown in U.S. federal government fiscal years, which run from October 1 through September 30. U.S. data from FYs 2014–19 include both the number of apprehensions made between ports of entry by the Border Patrol and the number of inadmissible determinations made at ports of entry by the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) Office of Field Operations (OFO). U.S. data from FY 2020 include only the number of Border Patrol encounters of migrants between ports of entry, as data on the number of encounters by CBP OFO at ports of entry are not publicly available.
The increase in African migrant apprehensions by Mexican and U.S. authorities is due to a particularly stark increase in both Cameroonian and Congolese migrants transiting through the Americas in FY 2019. Cameroonian migrants, particularly Anglophone migrants fleeing conflict in the southwest and northwest of the country, began to reach Mexico in large numbers in FY 2016, with their numbers increasing substantially through FY 2019 (see Figure 2). Congolese migrant apprehensions also increased markedly beginning in FY 2016 in both Mexico and in Europe. Somali and Ghanaian apprehensions have decreased over the years surveyed for this report in both the European and Latin American contexts. Finally, Eritrean apprehensions in Mexico have oscillated, peaking in FY 2017 at 621. By contrast, Eritrean apprehensions in Europe peaked at 38,578 in FY 2015 before plummeting to 845 in FY 2019. Thus, while some African migrant groups’ apprehension trends have mirrored each other in Europe and Latin America, this has not always been the case. (For additional figures showing the apprehension trends for migrants from each of these five countries in Europe, Mexico, and the United States, see the Appendix.)

FIGURE 2
Mexican Apprehensions of African Migrants, by Nationality, FYs 2014–20

Note: These data are shown in U.S. federal government fiscal years, which run from October 1 through September 30, to allow for comparability with U.S. data.
Source: Authors’ analysis based on data from the Mexican Interior Ministry, UPMRIP, Boletín estadístico anual.

The year 2016 also saw an increase in Haitian migrants throughout the Americas, some of whom pretended to be Congolese in order to avoid immigration enforcement. Some of the reported increase in apprehensions of Congolese migrants in Mexico that year thus could include Haitians. See, for example, Laura Sánchez, “¿Africanos? Haitianos dicen ser del Congo; van a EU por asilo,” El Universal, September 12, 2016.
Similar trends emerge from data on the nationalities of migrants apprehended after crossing irregularly into Panama, with recent African migration dominated by nationals of Cameroon and the DRC (see Figure 3). While the data do not necessarily mean that the same individual migrants from these five African countries of origin transited through Panama before reaching Mexico, they do suggest that similar numbers of people from these five countries traveled from Panama through Mexico, and thus that most migrants apprehended in Mexico would have traveled through Central America to get there. The same general trends for nationals of the five case-study countries are echoed in data on migrants taken into custody by U.S. authorities at the United States’ border with Mexico (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 3
Panamanian Apprehensions of African Migrants, by Nationality, Calendar Years 2014–20

Note: While other figures throughout this report provide data in U.S. federal government fiscal years for ease of comparability, this figure provides data in calendar years because data from the Panamanian National Migration Service were available only by calendar year and were not disaggregated by month.
As described in Section 2, the drivers that shape African migrants’ decisions to come to the Americas vary dramatically, but prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a marked increase in the overall number moving through the Americas. These figures plummeted in late 2019, possibly as word spread that Mexican and U.S. border enforcement had increased, and they have remained significantly lower than they were in FY 2018 and FY 2019 since the onset of the pandemic in March 2020. For example, while Panamanian border authorities made 2,223 apprehensions of Cameroonians in calendar year 2019, they made only 39 such apprehensions in 2020, and these figures have only risen to 89 through the first six months of 2021.

Choosing and Entering the Americas

With Europe more difficult to reach due to increased enforcement in both transit and destination countries, other countries that are economically developed, that have African diaspora communities, or that have lenient immigration policies may become more attractive destinations. The United States meets the first two criteria. And regardless of Europe’s accessibility, some Africans may prefer the United States or Canada as destinations. For instance, in a 2017 survey, four in ten Ghanaians who planned to migrate in the next

69 Ariel G. Ruiz Soto, One Year after the U.S.-Mexico Agreement: Reshaping Mexico’s Migration Policies (Washington, DC: Migration Policy Institute, 2020), 4–6.
five years said that their intended destination was the United States while only three in ten said their destination was a country in Europe.\(^7^1\) Some African migrants intend to reach family in the United States but are unable to secure visas and thus look for less direct routes. Other migrants may opt to move toward the United States in search of economic opportunities, either driven by a general notion of the "American dream" or after hearing from people already in the United States about their ability to advance socially and economically.\(^7^2\)

**For migrants in search of financial or physical security, Brazil stands out as particularly attractive, leading many to start their journey through the Americas there.**

With limited legal pathways for Africans hoping to immigrate to the United States, particularly those mainly seeking economic opportunity, entering the hemisphere elsewhere may be the only option for some. They may have misconceptions about how geographically close South American countries are to the United States or the ease of transit from South America to the United States.\(^7^3\) However, some African migrants do not intend to travel, whether immediately or ever, to the United States and are only trying to leave their origin country or transit countries in Africa and reach somewhere economically or physically safe. For migrants in search of financial or physical security, Brazil stands out as particularly attractive, leading many to start their journey through the Americas there.

First, Brazil is the seventh largest economy in the world.\(^7^4\) Second, approximately 50 percent of Brazil’s citizens identify as being of African ancestry, though most Afro-Brazilians have been in the country for generations, having arrived as a result of slavery and forced displacement.\(^7^5\) Moreover, Brazil is one of the most accessible Latin American countries for travelers from the African continent: it has diplomatic representation in more African countries than any other South or Central American country, and direct flights are available from a number of major cities throughout Africa. Finally, during the last ten to 15 years, Brazil has had some of the laxest visa or entry requirements in the Western Hemisphere. While Brazil requires individuals from most African nations to have a visa to enter, when Brazil hosted the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics, tourist visa requirements were reportedly relaxed for individuals from participating countries, facilitating the entry of some African migrants.\(^7^6\) Since 2017, these requirements have become more stringent.\(^7^7\) That said, some Africans can still get visas, and others have reached Brazil without a visa and then requested asylum upon reaching customs officials at an airport or other point of entry.\(^7^8\) Brazil is thus a common entry point into the Western Hemisphere.

\(^7^2\) Author interview with Santiago Paz, Head of Panama Administrative Center and Chief of Mission, IOM Panama, August 11, 2020; Author interview with Soledad Alvarez Velasco, postdoctoral fellow at the University of Houston, October 7, 2020.
\(^7^3\) Author interview with Samuel Okyere.
\(^7^7\) Author interview with Luana Medeiros, Chief of Durable Solutions Division, National Refugee Committee, Brazilian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, August 26, 2020.
\(^7^8\) Author interview with Joao Chaves.
Ecuador is the other most common entry point for African migrants flying into South America. It has a significantly smaller diplomatic presence across African countries than Brazil, with only two consulates on the African continent: one in Egypt and the other in South Africa. Ecuador nevertheless became an attractive entry point when in 2008, President Rafael Correa lifted visa requirements for almost all nationalities. Over the next two years, although Correa’s administration reimposed visa requirements for nationals of ten countries, including five in Africa (Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria, and Somalia), Ecuador still had one of the most liberal visa regimes in the world. Taking advantage of Brazil’s diplomatic accessibility and Ecuador’s relaxed entry requirements, some migrants flew into Brazil first and then caught a connecting flight to Ecuador. In August 2019, Ecuadorian President Lenín Moreno added 11 countries to the visa requirement list, including seven in Africa (Angola, Cameroon, DRC, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, and Libya) and four in Asia. In the first seven months of 2020, the total number of arrivals of nationals of these seven African countries in Ecuador decreased more than arrivals of nationals from all other African countries (though arrivals overall decreased due to the pandemic). In May 2021, Ecuador imposed visa requirements on five more countries: Republic of the Congo, Côte d’Ivoire, Haiti, Mali, and Myanmar (also known as Burma). But despite growing visa restrictions limiting African migrants’ entry, there are still small African communities in Ecuador that continue to attract a small number of new migrants.

While many African migrants who reach Ecuador or Brazil intend to continue to Central and North America, many others opt to stay in South America. For instance, both Brazil and Argentina have established Senegalese communities. Angolan, Cameroonian, and Congolese asylum seekers have also commonly arrived in Brazil with plans to stay indefinitely in the country. Outside of Brazil and Ecuador, some migrants may also enter the hemisphere via Guyana, though this pattern may be more common for South Asian than African migrants. Finally, some African migrants who later enter Argentina may have initially entered the continent through Bolivia.
Transit Routes

Recently arrived African migrants may stay in one of these entry point countries for days, weeks, or even years, depending on their financial resources, social networks, and intended migration outcomes. For those attempting to transit north, the journey requires crossing through at least nine countries (see Figure 5). African migrants who arrive in Brazil must first reach Peru and then cross into Ecuador. Once in Ecuador, African migrants often cross the Ecuador-Colombia border either at official crossing points or through irregular crossing points (known as trochas) before continuing through the country to reach Colombia’s northern border.91

FIGURE 5
Common Western Hemisphere Migration Routes for African Migrants

The transit through Colombia is more than 800 miles, and African migrants typically take a combination of buses through mainland Colombia followed by a boat ride in the north of the country to reach the Panamanian border. This part of the journey through Colombia can take anywhere from several days to

91 Author interview with Leonardo Arizaga.
several weeks. From there, migrants must cross one of the most difficult segments of the transcontinental journey: the Darién Gap. The Darién Gap (or the Tapón del Darién, as it is known in Spanish) is an approximately 90-mile stretch of dense, almost unabated jungle that divides South and Central America.92

From northern Colombia, the trek through the jungle takes anywhere from four to ten days on foot. Migrants frequently travel in small groups and often start out with guides, or smugglers, though the quality of their services varies. Most guides serve as smugglers only up to the Colombian border as they do not want to risk crossing and being apprehended themselves by Panamanian officials for smuggling activities.93 The journey is dangerous given both natural impediments—such as flash floods, limited demarcated paths for navigation, and a lack of shelter—as well as more illicit dangers—such as bandits, drug traffickers, and guerillas.94 The two largest challenges for successfully crossing the Darién Gap are logistical in nature, as migrants tend to run out of food or to get lost and be unable find their way out. According to Panamanian officials, between 2014 and the first half of 2019, 25 migrants died in the Darién jungle.95 That said, these figures only reflect migrants whose remains have been found; many go missing far from Panamanian border patrol outposts, Indigenous communities, or the more common migrant trails where they could be found.

Migrants who successfully cross the Darién Gap are typically apprehended by Panamanian border patrol officials, since the natural bottleneck of the Darién jungle forces migrants to follow the most established paths available. From there, migrants are taken to one of four camps in the Darién province of Panama.96 These facilities are operated by Panama's national border service (SENAFRONT) and migration agency (Migración Panamá), in collaboration with international organizations including the International Federation of the Red Cross (IFRC), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).97 Panamanian officials then make arrangements for African migrants—as well as Haitian, Cuban, and South Asian migrants—who have successfully crossed the Darién and who can pay the USD 40–50 fee to be bussed from southern Panama to a camp in northern Panama near the Costa Rican border. In northern Panama, Panamanian and Costa Rican authorities coordinate the process of allowing the migrants to cross into Costa Rica. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, Costa Rica accepted approximately 100 migrants from Panama each day, but it closed its borders to this population during the pandemic, and as of May 2021, it had not resumed receiving African and other extracontinental migrants under this arrangement with Panama, despite reopening its borders to other travelers.98 While waiting to take a bus north and, perhaps, cross into Costa Rica, African migrants can spend anywhere from two weeks to several months in Panama.

In Costa Rica, migrants are not held in camps, though they are provided with basic resources, if needed. Costa Rican government agencies, in collaboration with international organizations, provide migrants

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94 Yates, “As More Migrants from Africa and Asia Arrive in Latin America.”
95 Ohigginis Arcia Jaramillo, “Ruta por Darién ha cobrado la vida de, al menos, 25 migrantes,” La Prensa, June 16, 2019.
96 These camps are all on the outskirts of the Darién Jungle and accessible to Panamanian officials either by road or rivers. The camps include: Lajas Blancas, San Vicente (Nicanor), Bajo Chiquito, and la Peñita. Author interview with humanitarian worker in the Darién Gap, February 9, 2021.
97 Author interview with humanitarian worker in the Darién Gap.
with food, shelter, and basic health care at Temporary Attention Centers for Migrants (Centro de Atención Temporal para Migrantes, or CATEMs).99 CATEMs—one in the south of the country and one in the north—are only accessible to transit migrants who have a valid transit document to be in the country, which includes most African migrants who are en route to the United States or Canada. While some migrants may opt to stay in Costa Rica for a few weeks, most African migrants continue their transit north as soon as they are permitted to do so, as the option to apply for asylum or for another legal status is not presented to them and because of the language barrier. It is possible for migrants to spend no more than one or two days in Costa Rica before continuing on to Nicaragua.

In contrast to the coordinated effort between Panama and Costa Rica to manage transit migration, Nicaragua does not have an official policy for doing so. In general, African migrants enter Nicaragua through informal border crossings on foot.100 Often shortly after crossing, migrants encounter Nicaraguan military officials who require a USD 150 payment to enter and pass through the country.101 In some cases, migrants may also hire guides to transit around Nicaragua by boat, though this is reportedly less common.102 After crossing Nicaragua, African migrants reach Honduras, where those encountered by Honduran authorities have historically been issued exit permits that allow them to transit and exit the country legally within several days.103 Upon reaching Guatemala, African migrants who come into contact with authorities there are typically issued a ten-day permit, in theory giving them time to apply for immigration status, but which they generally use to move through the country.104 Migrants thus usually attempt to transit Honduras and Guatemala irregularly, without being apprehended, but if they are, both countries allow them to continue their journey.

Finally, after passing thorough Guatemala, African migrants reach Mexico, where they most frequently cross into the southern state of Chiapas. Until relatively recently, Mexico issued African migrants exit permits (oficios de salida) allowing them to transit the country in a matter of days.105 The issuance of such documents ended in Summer 2019, making the logistics of navigating Mexico as an African migrant significantly more difficult (see Section 4.A. for more on this policy change). Thus, while the time it takes to cross from Panama through Guatemala can range from only a couple of weeks to several months, the time needed to transit Mexico alone has significantly increased since Mexico stopped issuing exit permits in 2019. Other delays in transit may occur for a host of reasons, including African migrants being apprehended and detained by officials, being kidnapped by criminal groups, or having run out of money and being unable to hire guides or pay for transportation to continue.

100 Author interview with Felipe Rivera-Vargas, Senior Project Assistant at IOM Costa Rica, January 21, 2021.
101 Author interviews with migrants in transit, September 2019; Yates, “As More Migrants from Africa and Asia Arrive in Latin America. ”
While reaching Mexico’s northern border is the end of African migrants’ transit through Latin America, it is not necessarily the end of their time in the region. Migrants from around the world seeking admission at the U.S. southwest border have been subject to the United States’ policy of metering, beginning in 2018 and continuing today at some points of entry along the U.S. southern border. The metering policy forces migrants who arrive at ports of entry—and who wish to apply for asylum in the United States—to wait for months or more to be allowed into the country to begin the application process. With the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, the metering policy was suspended at some ports of entry, due to U.S. bans on nonessential travel at its borders with Mexico and Canada. In March 2020, the United States also began to expel migrants, including asylum seekers, who arrived at ports of entry without proper documentation or who crossed the border illegally, returning them either to Mexico or to their origin countries, under a U.S. health law referred to as Title 42. Two of these policies—metering and the ban on nonessential travel—continue to effectively trap some migrants in northern Mexico for months or years. While Title 42 has done the same to migrants of other nationalities, very few migrants from African countries have been subject to these expulsions.

Some African migrants who have managed to enter the United States continue to Canada where they request asylum after crossing the U.S.-Canada border irregularly. The journey from South America to Canada involves crossing 11 countries, at minimum.

**Pandemic Effects**

The arrival of African migrants in the Western Hemisphere via entry points such as Brazil and Ecuador likely slowed during the pandemic. Brazil banned the entry of all foreigners traveling by air, with some exceptions such as for Brazilian residents and some immediate family members of Brazilian citizens, from March 30 until July 29, 2020. When air travel was allowed to resume, travelers were required to have health insurance valid in Brazil for the duration of their stay. That requirement was lifted in October 2020, though as of July 2021 all travelers were still required to provide proof of a negative PCR test for COVID-19. As a result of these policies, entries into Brazil drastically slowed from April through July 2020. They began to gradually increase starting in August but remained well below 2019 levels. As of February 2021, Brazil still had not reached arrival numbers anywhere near those seen before the pandemic.

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114 Brazilian International Migration Observatory, *Acompanhamento de fluxo e empregabilidade dos imigrantes no Brasil* (Brasilia: Brazilian International Migration Observatory, 2020), 46.
Ecuador, likewise, prohibited the entry of foreigners via airports, from March 17 until June 1, 2020.\textsuperscript{116} Airports reopened at 30-percent capacity, with arriving travelers required to present proof of a negative PCR test or to undergo one at the Ecuadorian airport at their own expense.\textsuperscript{117} As of July 2021, Ecuador requires either a negative COVID-19 test within 72 hours of entry or proof of vaccination two weeks before arriving in the country.\textsuperscript{118} So, even though air entries to both countries resumed during the summer of 2020, the additional health requirements imposed likely continue to impede the arrival of many would-be African migrants, depending on the availability of PCR tests in their countries of residence, whether they have the resources to cover the added expenses, and whether their countries of origin or residence have themselves halted travel.

Transit countries throughout the hemisphere also closed to travel when the pandemic began and subsequently added a variety of security and health measures at their borders. While travel restrictions have likely prevented some new African migrants from entering Brazil or Ecuador via plane since March 2020, the policies put in place by transit countries likely prevented some of those who were already at various points en route through South and Central America when the pandemic began from continuing their journeys for much of 2020. An estimated 2,500 Haitian, Cuban, African, and Asian migrants were stuck in the camps in Panama\textsuperscript{119} as of March 2021 and another 1,200 African and Haitian migrants were stranded in northern Colombia.\textsuperscript{120} Farther south, approximately 400 Haitians and Africans attempted to cross into Peru from Brazil in February 2021, but they were pushed back by Peruvian authorities enforcing COVID-19 lockdown measures.\textsuperscript{121}

As borders in South and Central America begin to reopen, the movement of African migrants through the Americas continues. Between January and June 2021, Panamanian authorities made 26,992 apprehensions of migrants entering irregularly from Colombia, already more than four times the 6,500 apprehensions made in all of 2020.\textsuperscript{122} While 84 percent of these apprehensions were of Haitians and Cubans or children born in South America to Haitian and Cuban parents, the number involving nationals of certain African countries increased dramatically from 2020. For example, there were 478 apprehensions of migrants from Senegal and 251 of migrants from Ghana in the first six months of 2021 compared to 50 and 13, respectively, in all of 2020. Additionally, as of August 2021, an estimated 10,000 Caribbean, African, and Asian migrants


\textsuperscript{119} Agence France Presse, “Desperation and Violence in Panama Migrant Camp,” France 24, August 12, 2020.

\textsuperscript{120} Sophie Foggjin, “Hundreds of Migrants Headed for the U.S. Are Stranded on a Beach in South America,” Vice World News, February 2, 2021.


were waiting in the northern Colombian city of Necoclí to cross the Darién Gap. In total, an estimated 49,000 extracontinental migrants reached northern Colombia in the first seven months of 2021.

If trends continue, more extracontinental migrants will be apprehended in Panama in 2021 than any other year on record. Though the majority of extracontinental migrants crossing through Latin America in 2021 are Caribbean, the number from Africa and Asia has increased as well. Transit countries are struggling to process migrants as they arrive. In response, several countries in the region are working to increase coordination and regional agreement on the number of migrants who are allowed to cross through each country in the region, as well as on health and security responses to migrant arrivals. High-level discussions have taken place among representatives of Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Panama, and the United States, one of the first times countries across the region have prioritized addressing this migration. As extracontinental migration through the region continues, African migrants are likely to encounter a mix of lingering pandemic-related policies and other, pre-existing policies for managing transit migration, described in the next section in more detail.

4 Immigration Policies and Management Capacity

A decade ago, Latin American countries had no policies to manage African migration—or other migration from outside the region—through their territory. Any policies or responses were primarily reactive and often uncoordinated. Since around 2014, Panama, Costa Rica, and to some extent Mexico have developed formal policies to address extracontinental migration, including migrants from African and Asian countries as well as Caribbean migrants who take this same route. While this report focuses on African migrants, many of these policies apply to other extracontinental migrants as well. All transit countries from Colombia northward, except Nicaragua, provide documentation to individuals encountered or apprehended by the authorities, and this documentation allows migrants to complete their transit through legal means. Still, countries often lack capacity to fully enforce the laws on the books, to provide protection or more permanent legal statuses to those who qualify, and to integrate migrants who speak different languages and are of other cultures into society, should they opt to stay.

A. Managing Transit through Permits and Enforcement

While some transit countries have the capacity to carry out immigration enforcement policies when encountering African migrants—mainly through security checks and a small number of deportations—transit migration is mostly managed by issuing temporary documentation allowing migrants to pass through and exit transit countries in an authorized and legal manner. African migrants’ options for staying legally in these transit countries are generally not advertised by government officials.

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123 Joe Parkin Daniels, “‘If I Go Back, I’ll Die’: Colombian Town Scrambles to Accommodate 10,000 Migrants,” The Guardian, August 8, 2021.
125 Gustavo A. Aparicio O., “Directores de Migración de Panamá, Colombia y Costa Rica coordinan acciones para tratar crisis migratoria,” La Estrella de Panamá, La Estrella de Panamá, August 13, 2021.
For African migrants who have entered the hemisphere via Ecuador, and those who have entered via Brazil and crossed through Peru into Ecuador, the next country of transit is Colombia. Colombia’s capacity and will to conduct enforcement against African transit migrants has historically been minimal. Host to a large population of Venezuelan migrants and refugees—more than 1.7 million as of July 2021—\(^{127}\) the transit of a few thousand African migrants rarely draws attention in Colombia. If migrants are apprehended in the country’s interior, Colombian officials conduct a security review and then release the migrants to continue toward Panama with a 72-hour exit permit.\(^{128}\) Prior to 2021, Colombia did not coordinate with Panama on managing transit migration between the two countries. However, on April 30, 2021, Panama and Colombia signed a memorandum of understanding to increase information sharing and work together to control the movement of transit migrants into Panama.\(^{129}\) Then in August 2021, the two countries announced that they would begin jointly controlling the number of migrants who can access the Darién Gap en route to Panama based on the space that Panama has to receive migrants in its camps, allowing 650 migrants to enter Panama daily in August and 500 daily starting in September 2021.\(^{130}\)

Once in Panama, African migrants experience more formal enforcement and immigration control processes, as well as comprehensive government facilitation of transit. Since approximately 2014, Panama has responded to the arrival of migrants across the Darién Gap with coordinated migrant apprehension, reception, and processing—a policy known as controlled flow (flujo controlado).\(^{131}\) Controlled flow is operated by SENAFRONT, whose officers are posted throughout the Darién Gap. The limited routes through the jungle ensure that most migrants are apprehended once they complete the jungle crossing (when they are already in Panamanian territory). Once apprehended, the officers screen the migrants’ passports, provide vaccinations, and conduct biometric security checks of each migrant.\(^{132}\) This process is closely coordinated with the U.S. government, which provided the biometric screening technology and training to Panamanian authorities.\(^{133}\)

Those deemed to be security risks in U.S. and international law enforcement databases may be deported from Panama. Deportations are infrequent, though, given that they can cost between USD 15,000 and 20,000 per migrant.\(^{134}\) Panama’s policy for deporting migrants requires getting permission from both the migrants’ origin country and any countries where the deportation flight might stop over. All deportees must have two custodians accompany them to their origin country. Meanwhile, migrants cleared of security concerns continue their transit. While they do not receive a formal transit permit, the Panamanian government does provide vaccination cards as proof that migrants have been inoculated and processed through controlled flow. They are then placed on waiting lists (similar to metering lists along the U.S.-Mexico border) to be transported by Panamanian officials to the Costa Rican border.

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\(^{130}\) Panamanian Foreign Relations Ministry, “Panamá y Colombia Acuerdan Mecanismos para el Flujo Controlado de los Migrantes Irregulares a Través de la Frontera Común” (press release, August 6, 2021); Juan Zamorano, “Panamá y Colombia acuerdan cuotas ante avalancha migratoria,” Associated Press, August 11, 2021.

\(^{131}\) Caitlyn Yates, “As More Migrants from Africa and Asia Arrive in Latin America.”

\(^{132}\) Yates, “As More Migrants from Africa and Asia Arrive in Latin America.”


\(^{134}\) Author interview with Panamanian migration official.
At Panama’s northern border, African migrants are held in another camp until Costa Rica accepts them. Costa Rican officials check migrants’ vaccination cards and conduct security reviews. These security reviews are similar to Panama’s, so migrants who might be deemed security risks have typically already been detained and deported by Panamanian officials. Thus, Costa Rica rarely deports African migrants. The small number it does deport are held in Central Regional Apprehension Centers while awaiting removal. Since 2015, Costa Rica has offered African (as well as Asian, Haitian, and Cuban) migrants who pass their security checks special transit (or safe conduct) visas to temporarily move through the country. In 2016, Costa Rica doubled the permissible transit time from 25 days to 50 days. Controlled flow from Panama to Costa Rica has allowed these countries to manage these movements, facilitating enforcement against high security risks while encouraging other migrants to continue their transit north. The controlled flow process is now being expanded to Colombia as well. However, this system does not fulfill countries’ obligation to offer international protection to migrants: officials generally do not provide migrants with information about opportunities to seek protection in Panama or Costa Rica, nor are they given the chance to apply for other legal statuses for which they may be eligible if they wanted to stay in either country.

Honduras and Guatemala also offer African migrants transit permits to move through their countries and continue north, though only if they are apprehended by the authorities. Nicaragua is the only country on the route from South America to Mexico that African migrants must navigate without any chance of legal authorization. Historically, none of these countries have conducted enforcement in practice, though there are some indications that they may begin to take a stronger stance on immigration enforcement going forward. In both Guatemala and Honduras, security forces have been deployed to the border to prevent irregular entries. And Honduran security forces have increased the sharing of migrants’ biometric data with the United States. In February 2021, the Central American Commission of Migration Directors announced that participating countries, including Guatemala and Honduras, would not permit the free transit of Haitian, Cuban, Asian, and African migrants, citing concerns of a potential migrant caravan, though the caravan did not materialize. The pandemic has provided a justification for more restrictive border measures, with both Guatemala and Honduras requiring that travelers provide proof of a negative COVID-19 test or proof of vaccination in order to enter the country.

137 It should be noted that the definition of who is a high security risk can be subject to bias, with Yemeni migrants, for example, reportedly being kept in southern Panama for longer than migrants of other nationalities while extensive checks are conducted, despite showing no initial security concerns. See, for instance, Yates, “A Case Study.”
this requirement, as illustrated by efforts to stop Honduran migrants trying to cross the border in January 2021, though the migrants ended up forcing their way through. The effects of new border security policies in Guatemala and Honduras are thus still limited by capacity and training shortcomings.

With regards to Mexico, prior to 2019, African migrants would arrive at the country’s southern border and frequently be apprehended by authorities. From there, they would often experience a short period of detention before being issued exit permits (oficios de salida) that officially gave them 20 to 30 days to exit the country, in practice allowing them to continue to make their way through the country until they reached the U.S. border. In Summer 2019, under pressure from the United States, Mexico changed its policy in an attempt to prevent these migrants from moving north. At first, it stopped issuing exit permits, resulting in hundreds of African and Haitian migrants being unable to leave southern Mexico, where migrant protests against these policy changes ensued. In an attempt to end the protests, Mexico resumed issuing exit permits but with new conditions: the new permits required migrants to leave the country through the southern border and return to Guatemala, preventing them from traveling north. Many refused to exit via the southern border, and by August 2019, an estimated 3,000 African and Haitian migrants were trapped in the southern Mexican city of Tapachula. By October 2019, growing desperate, an estimated 2,000 African and Haitian migrants attempted to organize a caravan and transit toward the United States. Mexican security officials quickly thwarted the attempt.

As is the case in Panama and Costa Rica, Mexican deportations of African migrants are infrequent, with the cost of a transcontinental deportation from Mexico estimated to be USD 10,000 per person. From FY 2014 through FY 2019, Mexico deported just 3 percent of the African migrants it apprehended compared to 96 percent of Central American migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Instead, authorities in September 2019 began processing African migrants for various immigration statuses, which ultimately allowed these migrants to begin moving northward again—a situation Mexican authorities had initially tried to prevent, but which they later allowed in order to take pressure off of the country’s southern states. Mexico’s policy about-face ultimately reflects the impossibility of scaling up enforcement—in the form of preventing African migrants from moving northward—without having an alternative system in place to offer a status or protection to those who qualify and a deportation process for those who do not. In 2021, Mexico continues to refuse to issue transit permits to allow African migrants to move northward, instead providing other, more permanent (but nonetheless sporadic) legal statuses, described in more detail in Section 4.B.

142 Meyer and Isacson, The “Wall” before the Wall.
147 Pradilla, “El Campamento de los ‘Apátridas’.”
148 Mexican Interior Ministry, UPMRRP Boletín estadístico anual.
149 Author interview with Rafael Alonso Hernandez Lopez, Coordinator for the PhD in Migration Studies, Colegio de la Frontera Norte, Mexico, June 29, 2020.
In short, most African migrants moving from South America toward the United States are processed by transit countries and allowed to continue their journeys with a transit pass or visa. Outside of transit permits, the most developed immigration policies for African migrants in the region focus on immigration control and enforcement and are concentrated in Panama, Costa Rica, and Mexico. Overall, while some Latin American countries have modified their policies in recent years, most have limited options, interest, and capacity to pursue coordinated or sustained immigration control and enforcement policies toward African migrants. This is in part because countries throughout Latin America are responding to far larger movements of migrants from Venezuela and parts of Central America. Additionally, deportations of African migrants are limited throughout the region, both because they are costly and because African countries rarely have diplomatic representation in these Latin American countries.

While this focus on facilitated movement may allow African migrants to transit the hemisphere through authorized means for some parts of their journey, the statuses and permits they are granted simultaneously dissuade migrants from staying in South and Central American countries. Though most African migrants do not want to settle in these countries—largely because of language barriers and a lack of social networks—they are also typically not aware of options beyond transit permits that would enable them to stay in these countries legally and seek protection.

B. Humanitarian Protection and Other Legal Statuses

While transit countries in Latin America officially have options to provide foreign nationals with humanitarian protection, asylum, or other legal statuses, these options are rarely publicized. Brazil is to some extent an exception: it regularized all migrants in the country in July 2009 and then, in December 2019, created a special regularization process for Senegalese migrants. Additionally, some African migrants file asylum claims, with these asylum seekers typically intending to remain in Brazil at least until they receive a decision on their applications. More than 3,000 individuals from African countries filed asylum applications in Brazil in 2019, with the largest numbers of claims coming from individuals from Angola and Senegal. But far fewer African asylum claims were approved. In 2019, only 54 cases involving African asylum seekers from the DRC, nine from Mali, eight each from Egypt and Guinea, and six cases from Angola were approved. Additionally, far more asylum cases brought by Africans were either rejected or abandoned that year. And while the Brazilian asylum system is more robust than most in South America,
it faces a backlog due to the sharp increase in applications from Venezuelans in recent years; 20,902 
Venezuelan asylum cases were lodged in 2019 alone.

Ecuador's legal status options are minimal. Once they have arrived in the country, transitioning to a 
residence visa is expensive and likely out of reach for most African migrants.¹⁵⁷ Few Africans apply for 
asylum in Ecuador: only 97 Africans submitted applications in the decade between 2010 and September 
2020; the highest number in a single year was in 2019, when there were 35 applications.¹⁵⁸ As in Brazil, 
Ecuador's asylum system has a large backlog due to the volume of Venezuelan claims in process. The 
documentation provided to asylum seekers during the wait, while technically allowing them to work, is less 
widely recognized by employers than the documentation provided once refugee status has been granted. 
Life in the country can thus be precarious for asylum seekers, which may discourage African migrants from 
pursuing this form of legal status even if they have a claim to protection.¹⁵⁹

In other transit countries, African migrants are encouraged to continue north—a journey often facilitated 
by short-term transit permits, as described in Section 4.A. In southern Panama, for instance, while migrants 
in theory could request asylum with migration officers in reception centers, they cannot request asylum 
with SENAFRONT officers, and SENAFRONT officers rarely inform them of their right to apply for asylum. 
Moreover, migration officers are not always present in the camps.¹⁶⁰ In Costa Rica, African migrants are 
received by border officials at the reception centers. If these migrants wish to apply for asylum, they must 
do so in a secondary process outside of the border reception centers.¹⁶¹ The other Central American transit 
countries similarly push migrants to continue north with even less formalized processes. One program 
under development in Costa Rica may change the situation there. The International Organization for 
Migration (IOM) and the Costa Rican government are working to provide employment opportunities 
to migrants who arrive at the CATEMs. While still under discussion as of April 2021, there is a possibility 
that migrants who participate in this work program would have opportunities to apply for temporary or 
permanent residence.¹⁶²

Mexico has provided some form of humanitarian protection or other legal status to many African migrants, 
but it has sometimes done so without migrants’ full, informed consent. After Mexico suspended exit 
permit issuance in 2019, trapping large numbers of African migrants in southern Mexico, some applied for 
asylum. In 2019, approximately 1,300 African migrants requested asylum before Mexico’s refugee agency 
(COMAR), some voluntarily and others without fully understanding what they were applying for.¹⁶³ However, 
thousands of migrants refused to apply for asylum as Mexico was not their intended destination. To solve 
the logistical and increasingly high-profile challenge of Africans stuck in its southern states, Mexico opted 
to stop recognizing many African migrants’ citizenship, declaring at least 1,000 Africans stateless after their 
embassies were unresponsive to Mexican officials’ requests to coordinate repatriations.¹⁶⁴ In late 2019,

¹⁵⁷ Author interview with Soledad Alvarez Velasco.
¹⁵⁸ Data provided to the authors by the Ecuadorian International Protection Directorate, September 11, 2020.
¹⁵⁹ Author interview with Soledad Alvarez Velasco.
¹⁶⁰ Based on fieldwork and interviews conducted by Caitlyn Yates with extracontinental migrants and law enforcement officials in the 
Darién Gap in August 2019.
¹⁶¹ Author interview with Felipe Rivera-Vargas.
¹⁶² Author email exchange with Felipe Rivera-Vargas, April–March 2021.
¹⁶³ Pradilla, “El Campamento de los ‘Apátridas’.”
¹⁶⁴ Alberto Pradilla, “979 migrantes africanos que el gobierno considera ‘apátridas’ piden ser regularizados,” Animal Político, 
September 19, 2019.
Mexican authorities began issuing these “stateless” migrants—Africans, as well as some Haitians—residency statuses (see Figure 6).

African migrants were unable to challenge their stateless designations and subsequent residency statuses because many African nations lack a diplomatic presence in Mexico. And even with a diplomatic presence, some migrants (in particular, Anglophone Cameroonians fleeing repression from the Francophone government) would likely not have wanted to contact their governments. Moreover, the Mexican government’s lack of translation and interpretation services meant that few migrants understood that they had been declared stateless or what their new Mexican residency status meant. ¹⁶⁵ Migrant advocates also raised concerns that once these migrants made it to the United States, they could be barred from seeking asylum there due to unknowingly having residency in Mexico.¹⁶⁶ As can be seen in Figure 6, by July 2020 the monthly number of permanent residency cards Mexico was issuing to stateless migrants nearly matched the number of Africans and Haitians apprehended in the country, suggesting that, by then, nearly all African migrants, and many Haitian migrants, were subject to this stateless designation and residence issuance process after apprehension.

**FIGURE 6**

Mexican Apprehensions of African and Haitian Migrants and Issuances of Permanent Residence Cards to Stateless Persons, 2019–20

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¹⁶⁵ Author interviews with Guerline Jozef.
¹⁶⁶ Author interview with Tsion Gurmu, Legal Director, Black Alliance for Just Immigration, June 23, 2020; Author interview with Salva Lacruz, Former Coordinator of Political Advocacy, Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Matias de Cordova, July 31, 2020.
Thus, Latin American countries of transit offer a variety of limited, often fragmented options for African migrants to receive legal status. That said, most Africans are encouraged to continue their journey and are not explicitly told of their options to acquire immigration status. Going forward, as the United States works with partners in the region to coordinate migration management, it will be key to ensure that humanitarian protection and other forms of legal stay are both available and accessible to transit migrants, including those from Africa.

C. Access to Rights and Integration

In addition to the challenges associated with understanding and acquiring humanitarian protection or other statuses in Latin American countries, African migrants face considerable obstacles to accessing their rights during transit and to long-term integration. Throughout the route, African migrants face myriad difficulties rooted in differences between their nationalities, languages spoken, religions practiced, and their race and ethnicity and those of the societies through which they travel. Racism, a lack of interpretation and translation services, and a lack of understanding of cultural and individual practices make transit and longer-term settlement particularly difficult for African migrants in the Americas. These factors set the dynamics of African migration apart from those of migrants transiting the region from Venezuela, Central America, and other parts of Latin America.

Brazil, considered one of the hemisphere’s most amenable countries for humanitarian protection, still has significant barriers that push African migrants to leave the country. For one, there is immense structural racism toward Black individuals, making it difficult for them to find housing and jobs and also leading to instances of street harassment and violence. Other obstacles include a lack of economic opportunities amid Brazil’s economic decline and extreme insecurity in the communities where recently arrived African migrants tend to live. The combination of these challenges hinders integration and makes staying in Brazil untenable for some African migrants, even if their initial plan is to make a life there. Similar experiences with racism and economic precarity have led African migrants to leave Ecuador. As in Brazil, Ecuadorian landlords are reportedly reluctant to rent to African migrants, and Africans experience harassment in public spaces. They are also commonly relegated to the informal labor market, where they lack job security and opportunities for advancement.

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168 Missao Paz, Angelo Martins Junior, and Julia O’Connell Davidson “To Be a Congolese Woman in Brazil,” Open Democracy, March 18, 2021; Author interviews with Guerline Jozef; Author interview with Larissa Getirana, Staff Member, Caritas Brazil – Rio de Janeiro office, November 6, 2020.
169 Author interview with Larissa Getirana.
170 Author interview with Soledad Alvarez Velasco.
171 Author interview with Soledad Alvarez Velasco.
Costa Rica, like Brazil, is often regarded as a country amenable to receiving African migrants and one that offers more support than others in the region. The country’s CATEMs offer transit migrants services such as phone charging stations and basic medical care. Additionally, the employment program being developed by IOM and Costa Rica’s National Institute for Learning (Instituto Nacional de Aprendizaje), would create training and work opportunities that would allow transit migrants to make some money before continuing their journey. That said, services in the CATEMs are offered only while migrants hold a 50-day transit permit. The period during which migrants could stay in Costa Rica through the employment program has not yet been determined, though it will likely allow for slightly longer stays.

In Mexico, in theory, the issuance of resident statuses to many African migrants allows them to access social services. In practice, this has been more difficult. To begin with, African migrants did not request to be declared stateless, nor to receive a residence status in Mexico. Moreover, some African migrants are not issued a Mexican identification number (Clave Única de Registro de Población), while others are denied access to services even if they do have a residence card and identification number. Broadly speaking, just having an immigration status does not protect Africans from racial discrimination and other challenges particular to being Black African migrants in the Americas.

The challenges in Mexico fit into three main categories. First, there is wide-ranging direct and structural racism, including discrimination in detention centers, police violence, employment discrimination, and a lack of access to Mexico’s education system. In interviews conducted as part of this study, researchers and members of civil society in Mexico described African migrants being refused food in Mexican migrant detention centers unless there is food left after all non-Black migrants have eaten; factory workers refusing to work on the line with Black employees; and teachers walking out of classrooms to avoid teaching Black children. Africans are also targeted by criminal groups, based on the understanding that the Mexican police will not punish them for crimes committed against Black migrants. Local police forces themselves also reportedly extort some African migrants, threatening to report them to the migration authorities if they do not pay.

A second challenge is the lack of translation and interpretation services for migrants who do not speak Spanish. This has impeded African migrants’ understanding of the process that led to their designation as stateless and the residency status they were subsequently issued. As of April 2021, COMAR had started to make a Haitian Creole interpreter available a couple times per week at its office in Tijuana—an important first step, but African migrants and those whose applications are before the country’s immigration agency

172 Author interview with Zefitret Molla, graduate student at the University of San Francisco, August 25, 2020.
173 Author interview with Felipe Rivera-Vargas.
174 S. Priya Morley, “There Is a Target on Us”: The Impact of Mexico’s Anti-Black Racism on African Migrants at Mexico’s Southern Border (New York: Black Alliance for Just Immigration, 2021), 40–44.
176 Author interview with John Arold Lazarre, Coordinator of Haitian Bridge Alliance in Tijuana, Mexico, September 15, 2020; Author interview with Tsion Gurmu.
177 Author interview with Paulina Olvera, Director, Espacio Migrante, July 29, 2020.
179 Author interview with Paulina Olvera, April 5, 2021.
INM) rather than COMAR are still left in the dark. Language barriers also make it difficult to find jobs, access education for children, receive health care, and find adequate housing.\textsuperscript{180}

Finally, there are cultural differences that magnify racism and discrimination, while also making daily life more difficult. For instance, the way African migrants dress and the foods they eat differ from the customs of individuals from Latin American countries. This is particularly pronounced for Black Muslim migrants, but it affects Africans of all religious, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds. These differences create more tension in transit and destination spaces for African migrants, which can lead to discrimination, targeting by criminal groups, or harassment by law enforcement officials.

Throughout the region, racism and discrimination based on nationality, religion, race, and language consistently emerged in expert interviews and advocate reports as the primary barriers to African migrants’ integration into Latin American countries. This shapes both the structural processes involving different statuses, protections, and permits that push African migrants out and on to the next country, and the discrimination directed at Black African migrants by officials and citizens of Latin American countries. As a result, many African migrants are unlikely to view settlement and integration into these countries as a realistic option.

5 Conclusion and Recommendations

Contemporary African migration through the Americas presents an array of challenges for the governments of transit countries and for migrants themselves. The scale of this migration may be small compared to other regional migratory movements—such as those from Venezuela and northern Central America—but the diversity within the African migrant population presents unique needs and vulnerabilities. In addition, state agencies face difficulties conducting immigration enforcement, due to the cost and the diplomatic complexities of carrying out transcontinental migrant returns, while also struggling to offer humanitarian protection and appropriate services to those in need. Meanwhile, migrants, some fleeing for their lives and with only a vague understanding of migration processes in Latin America, are faced with a long, dangerous journey during which many are confronted with language barriers as well as structural racism and other forms of discrimination—from other migrants, local populations, and government authorities.

It is important for countries in the Western Hemisphere to build the capacity to manage African migration. Even though the number of Africans arriving in the region is relatively small at the moment, it will likely increase in the coming years given the African continent’s rapid population growth, ongoing restrictions on migration to Europe, and the development of social networks that inform would-be African migrants about transit- and destination-country conditions in the Americas. The policy recommendations for the U.S. government, other governments in the region, and international organizations laid out below promise to aid in building the capacity necessary to manage current and future African migration.

\textsuperscript{180} Morley, “There is a Target on Us,” 40–44.
For the U.S. government:

► **Create resettlement opportunities for African migrants in transit who are in need of humanitarian protection.** Many African migrants traveling through the Americas to the U.S.-Mexico border would qualify as refugees under U.S. law. To protect them from the dangers of the journey and to alleviate some pressure on the U.S.-Mexico border, the U.S. government should set up one or multiple centers where Africans’ protection cases can be adjudicated along the route. The Biden administration-backed immigration bill introduced in Congress in February 2021, the *U.S. Citizenship Act*, proposes setting up Refugee Processing Centers in Central American countries for Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Salvadorans fleeing persecution. The United States could consider developing a similar processing center in Panama and/or Costa Rica to serve African migrants, as the majority of Africans heading through Latin America toward the United States pass through these countries. Panama and Costa Rica already coordinate with the United States on migrant screening, and they both already have the infrastructural foundations of processing centers—the migrant camps in Panama and the CATEMs in Costa Rica—that could be used to shelter transit migrants awaiting the adjudication of their cases. Approved refugees could be resettled in the United States, or possibly in other partner countries, as is currently done for some migrants deemed highly vulnerable from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras under the Protection Transfer Agreement between the United States and Costa Rica.\(^{181}\)

► **Fund a voluntary return program for African (and Asian) migrants in Colombia and Panama.** Given the duration, danger, and toll of the migration route from South America to the U.S.-Mexico border, some migrants may decide at some point that they would prefer to return to their origin countries. However, they may have already spent much of their money and have little ability to buy a plane ticket home or may have difficulty obtaining necessary travel documents if their country of origin does not have a diplomatic presence in the Latin American transit country where they are. In particular, when migrants realize the difficulty of crossing the Darién Gap, either in Colombia (right before they cross) or upon making it to Panama (often having been robbed of their possessions and sometimes injured), they may want to return but lack the resources to do so. The U.S. government could provide funding for IOM to coordinate an assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) program for African and Asian migrants in Colombia and Panama who decide they do not want to continue northward. The returns would be fully voluntary, and information about the program would need to be made available to migrants in languages they speak. This AVRR program could be modeled after IOM’s voluntary humanitarian return programs, which provided assistance to more than 30,000 African migrants returning from other areas of the world in 2019 but that have not yet fully expanded operations to South and Central America.\(^{182}\) Assisted voluntary return programs do exist in Mexico and Central America, with U.S. funding, but their participants are mostly migrants from other countries within the region.\(^{183}\)

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Scale up processing capacity at U.S. southwest border ports of entry to eliminate metering of asylum seekers and expulsions of African migrants under Title 42. While asylum seekers from all over the world have been subjected to metering at the Mexico-U.S. border, African migrants waiting in communities along the border are subject to specific forms of violence, crime, and discrimination—sometimes from authorities themselves—that are often rooted in racism. Additionally, they are largely unable to access public services in Mexico. While it is important for Mexican border cities to address these issues in the longer term, the United States should devote resources in the short term to increasing the physical and personnel capacity for processing metered and future African asylum seekers at ports of entry along the border—prioritizing the San Ysidro port of entry between Tijuana and San Diego, where most African migrants arrive—so these migrants are not required to spend long periods of time in Mexico. For the same reasons, African migrants should not be subjected to expulsions to Mexico under Title 42 during the pandemic—which, already, they rarely are. The two, parallel Title 42 exemption processes used to identify particularly vulnerable asylum seekers and facilitate their entry into the United States—one conducted by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the other by a consortium of civil-society organizations from March through August 2021—could serve as a model for efforts to exempt Africans from metering and Title 42 expulsions.

Weigh the arbitrary nature of African migrants’ statuses in Mexico in U.S. asylum cases. Many African migrants passing through Mexico since mid-2019 have had their nationality ignored, been declared stateless, and then provided with a residency status in Mexico. Others were shuttled into Mexico’s asylum system and may still be awaiting an adjudication decision. Few African migrants have understood these complex processes, largely due to language barriers, and few intended to settle in Mexico because they do not feel safe there. Nevertheless, those who arrive in the United States may find it difficult to qualify for U.S. asylum, due to a bar on asylum for migrants with residency or asylum in a third country. Immigration judges and asylum officers should be made aware of Mexico’s arbitrary provision of residency to African migrants so that they can make eligibility decisions with full knowledge of this context.

For transit-country governments:

Make interpreters and translated documents available for all immigration processes. African migrants are often left in the dark as to their immigration options as well as their own legal status in transit countries, particularly in Mexico. English and French interpreters (as well as Haitian Creole, for the large population of Haitian migrants who also move through these countries) should be available whenever African migrants interact with authorities in transit countries, as should translated versions of informational and official documents. In Mexico, the need for interpretation includes not only interactions with the country’s refugee and immigration agencies (COMAR and INM) but also with law enforcement, the National Guard, and public service providers such as health-care and educational institutions.

184 A shelter in Tijuana has estimated that, as of March 2021, there were 3,000 to 5,000 Black (African and Haitian) migrants waiting in the city. See Venkat, “Black Immigrants Are Facing Rampant Racism in Mexico.”
Increase access to humanitarian protections and legal status. In countries such as Panama and Costa Rica, African migrants are often unaware that they have the option of claiming asylum or accessing temporary or permanent legal statuses. When officials process these migrants as part of the “controlled flow” policy, they should inform African migrants that they have the right to seek asylum and explain what that right entails. In addition, migrants are often not permitted to apply for asylum in the camps or centers where African migrants are processed; instead, they are required to begin an entirely separate and external process if they wish to seek asylum. In both Panama and Costa Rica, migration agency officials should be stationed at each country’s southern border to assist migrants with filing protection claims, should they choose to do so. Again, both countries should provide at least English and French interpretation and offer translated explanatory documents during the asylum process.

Provide antidiscrimination training to officials in immigration, law enforcement, and public service agencies. African migrants, those who work with them, and other observers report that these migrants experience immense and persistent discrimination from government officials, ranging from being denied education or health care to being ignored by police when they are victims of crimes, or even being targeted for violence by security officials. The racism, exclusion, and violence that African migrants experience on their journeys are pervasive and deter them from remaining in Latin American countries, pushing them on to the United States or Canada. Transit-country governments can start to address this issue by providing antidiscrimination (including anti-racism) training specifically focused on combating discrimination against Black individuals to officials who interact with these migrant populations. Trainings could potentially be led by civil-society organizations, international organizations that are already working in these countries, or by universities. In Mexico, civil-society organizations doing anti-racism work, which could potentially be funded to provide trainings, include COPERA (Collective to Eliminate Racism in Mexico)187 and the National Network of Afro-Mexican Youth.188 These trainings should not just be offered on one occasion but rather be conducted periodically with the understanding that combating discrimination is an ongoing process.

Create regional, standardized transit documentation. As the migration process stands now, many of the Latin American countries through which African migrants transit offer various exit permits, short-term visas, or travel documents to facilitate their movement northward to the next country. These documents were each created through reactive, uncoordinated national processes, and migrants must be reprocessed in each country. To alleviate some of the challenges of this disjointed system, transit countries from Panama to Mexico could create a humanitarian corridor and use a singular migrant registration process followed by a singular transit document authorizing African, Asian, and Caribbean transit migrants to move through each country for a short period of time. In a coordinated, authorized migration process such as this, African migrants would have less of a need to rely on smugglers or irregular (and oftentimes more dangerous) transit routes.

For international organizations:

► **Fund translation, interpretation, and antidiscrimination training, and coordinate transit documentation.** The recommendations provided above for transit-country governments require a level of resources that exceeds what most of these governments have available at this time. International organizations—including UNHCR, IOM, UNICEF, and the IFRC—should provide funding for essential investments in translation and interpretation and in antidiscrimination trainings. African migration through the Americas will not be regular, safe, and orderly without assistance from international organizations, and especially aid and training offerings focused on the unique dynamics of African migration. Further, IOM could take on a coordinating role in the development and issuance of the standardized transit documentation described above.

► **Create a public information campaign on the Darién Gap.** The most dangerous point along the route African migrants take through the Americas is the Darién Gap. Migrants’ ability to access information about the route and the dangers of passing through this jungle region before beginning their journey is often limited to news reporting, advice from locals and smugglers (often in a language not spoken by the migrants themselves), and guidance from other, often distantly known co-nationals who may have previously undertaken this journey. To better assist migrants in preparing to cross the Darién Gap, international organizations such as the IFRC, IOM, UNICEF, and others could create a public awareness campaign in English, French, Haitian Creole (and potentially in other frequently spoken languages and dialects) to assist migrants in understanding the route, the supplies they may need, and the challenges they may confront. Such a campaign could take the form of pamphlets, links to be sent via cell phones, or billboards to draw migrants’ attention in northern Colombia. While such information would be unlikely to deter most migrants from embarking on this dangerous journey, it may assist them in preparing and thereby somewhat insulate them from harm.

► **Improve tracking of missing migrants in the Darién Gap.** It is unknown how many migrants go missing in this stretch of the route, though IOM’s Missing Migrants Project has recorded some deaths. Tracking migrants who do go missing could provide sought-after information to migrants’ families and provide data that spurs governments to rework policies to prevent other migrants from going missing in the future. One way to track missing migrants might be to create an integrated registration database: migrants would register on the Colombian side, before entering the Darién, and check in on the Panamanian side, after successfully crossing. In addition to registering themselves, migrants could also register information about travel acquaintances and friends who may not have successfully made it through the jungle to support better understanding of the risks of the journey and to pass information along to family members and friends. Such a process would be best implemented by international organizations because migrants and their families are more likely to trust them than governments. However, it is also worth considering whether an anonymized version of the data could be shared with the government of Panama, so officials know when and where search operations should be launched for migrants who are missing within the Darién Gap.

Overall, while COVID-19 briefly paused the movement of African migrants through the Americas, as it did mobility globally, this migration is resuming and will likely increase in the months and years to come. As the world begins to consider how mobility will look in a post-pandemic reality, it will be more important than ever to manage this movement effectively. Doing so will require improving coordination between regional actors, avoiding policies that push this migration into more dangerous routes, and ensuring that migration control and humanitarian protection systems throughout the region are equipped to address the unique dynamics, challenges, and vulnerabilities of African migrants traveling through the Americas.

Appendix. Apprehensions of Nationals of the Five Case-Study Countries in Europe, Mexico, and the United States

FIGURE A–1
Apprehensions of Cameroonian Migrants by European, Mexican, and U.S. Authorities, FYs 2014–20

Note: These data are for U.S. federal government fiscal years, which run from October 1 through September 30. U.S. data from FYs 2014–19 include both the number of apprehensions made between ports of entry by the Border Patrol and the number of inadmissible determinations made at ports of entry by CBP OFO. U.S. data from FY 2020 include only the number of Border Patrol encounters of migrants between ports of entry, as data on the number of encounters by CBP OFO at ports of entry are not publicly available. Sources: Authors’ analysis based on data from U.S. Border Patrol, “U.S. Border Patrol Nationwide Apprehensions”; CBP data on noncitizens determined to be inadmissible at ports of entry by citizenship for FYs 2014–19, obtained via FOIA request; Mexican Interior Ministry, UPMRIP, Boletín estadístico anual; Frontex, “Migratory Map.”
FIGURE A–2
Apprehensions of Congolese Migrants by European, Mexican, and U.S. Authorities, FYs 2014–20

Note: These data are for U.S. federal government fiscal years, which run from October 1 through September 30. U.S. data from FYs 2014–19 include both the number of apprehensions made between ports of entry by the Border Patrol and the number of inadmissible determinations made at ports of entry by CBP OFO. U.S. data from FY 2020 include only the number of Border Patrol encounters of migrants between ports of entry, as data on the number of encounters by CBP OFO at ports of entry are not publicly available. Sources: Authors’ analysis based on data from U.S. Border Patrol, “U.S. Border Patrol Nationwide Apprehensions”; CBP data on noncitizens determined to be inadmissible at ports of entry by citizenship for FYs 2014–19, obtained via FOIA request; Mexican Interior Ministry, UPMRIP, Boletín estadístico anual; Frontex, “Migratory Map.”

FIGURE A–3
Apprehensions of Eritrean Migrants by European, Mexican, and U.S. Authorities, FYs 2014–20

Note: These data are for U.S. federal government fiscal years, which run from October 1 through September 30. U.S. data from FYs 2014–19 include both the number of apprehensions made between ports of entry by the Border Patrol and the number of inadmissible determinations made at ports of entry by CBP OFO. U.S. data from FY 2020 include only the number of Border Patrol encounters of migrants between ports of entry, as data on the number of encounters by CBP OFO at ports of entry are not publicly available. Sources: Authors’ analysis based on data from U.S. Border Patrol, “U.S. Border Patrol Nationwide Apprehensions”; CBP data on noncitizens determined to be inadmissible at ports of entry by citizenship for FYs 2014–19, obtained via FOIA request; Mexican Interior Ministry, UPMRIP, Boletín estadístico anual; Frontex, “Migratory Map.”
FIGURE A–4
Apprehensions of Ghanaian Migrants by European, Mexican, and U.S. Authorities, FYs 2014–20

Note: These data are for U.S. federal government fiscal years, which run from October 1 through September 30. U.S. data from FYs 2014–19 include both the number of apprehensions made between ports of entry by the Border Patrol and the number of inadmissible determinations made at ports of entry by CBP OFO. U.S. data from FY 2020 include only the number of Border Patrol encounters of migrants between ports of entry, as data on the number of encounters by CBP OFO at ports of entry are not publicly available. Sources: Authors’ analysis based on data from U.S. Border Patrol, “U.S. Border Patrol Nationwide Apprehensions”; CBP data on noncitizens determined to be inadmissible at ports of entry by citizenship for FYs 2014–19, obtained via FOIA request; Mexican Interior Ministry, UPMRIP, Boletín estadístico anual; Frontex, “Migratory Map.”

FIGURE A–5
Apprehensions of Somali Migrants by European, Mexican, and U.S. Authorities, FYs 2014–20

Note: These data are for U.S. federal government fiscal years, which run from October 1 through September 30. U.S. data from FYs 2014–19 include both the number of apprehensions made between ports of entry by the Border Patrol and the number of inadmissible determinations made at ports of entry by CBP OFO. U.S. data from FY 2020 include only the number of Border Patrol encounters of migrants between ports of entry, as data on the number of encounters by CBP OFO at ports of entry are not publicly available. Sources: Authors’ analysis based on data from U.S. Border Patrol, “U.S. Border Patrol Nationwide Apprehensions”; CBP data on noncitizens determined to be inadmissible at ports of entry by citizenship for FYs 2014–19, obtained via FOIA request; Mexican Interior Ministry, UPMRIP, Boletín estadístico anual; Frontex, “Migratory Map.”
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