

# US Asylum Seekers from Cuba, Africa and South Asia Take Perilous Jungle Crossing in Panama



Our June *NER* article, [Trojan Horse Federal Refugee Program Brings Jihadi Threat to America: An Interview with Ann Corcoran](#) noted the increasing numbers of illegal migrants making global treks by air and water to Latin America and the trek north to the US border for asylum. They sought this difficult passage for a variety of reasons; but really one, “to seek a better life”. Although there may be some among the 3,400 who have undertaken this dangerous long distance passage who may have other reasons in mind. Coincidentally, the *Wall Street Journal (WSJ) Weekend Edition* had a front page article, focusing on the passage through the Darien jungle of Panama, [“Panama’s Perilous Jungle Is a New Route for Migrants”](#). There are also costly water passages by human traffickers that avoid the Darien jungle equivalent to those we have written about in the Mediterranean. However, like the experience of illegal migrants fleeing Syria, Sub Sahara Africa endeavoring to reach the EU via Libya and other crossing points they may be robbed and murdered by ‘coyotes,’ human traffickers.

Among those interviewed in the *WSJ* article were illegal migrants from Guinea, Somalia, Pakistan and Cuba. Note that common thread is escape from Jihadis; Sharia arranged marriages or tyranny, as in the case of Cuban refugees in this group. What is also not lost is that all illegal migrants have prior knowledge, that if they survive the trek north and

illegally cross the US southern border, they can present themselves as asylum seekers. Because of US asylum privileges for Cuban border crossers, they will likely not be detained but released to possible relatives. In other cases, as we have seen, they will be transported to a [DHS Immigration Customs Enforcement Detention Center](#), to await a hearing before a Justice Department, [Executive Office for Immigration Review](#), immigration judge. Before him they will invoke the important words, 'fear of physical or political threats' before a quick decision is gavelled down admitting them as a refugee. They will then obtain benefits under the Refugee Act of 1980, including community placement, unless they can claim relatives here in the US. The US Refugee Admissions Program then takes over providing a smorgasbord of welfare, Medicaid, housing assistance and a pathway to ultimate citizenship. All without any reasonable means of screening asylees as documentation may be absent or virtually unavailable from their country of origin.

[Watch](#) this *WSJ* video:

Note these *WSJ* article excerpts.

### **A Somali:**

Ahmed Hassan staggered through dense Panamanian jungle, crazy with thirst, his rubber sandals sliding in the mud, fearing he would die thousands of miles from his homeland in Somalia.

"I told my family I would go to the U.S., that was the plan," said the 26-year-old truck driver, who said he fled late last year when al-Shabaab militants took his village. He flew to Brazil and made a cross-continental bus trip to Colombia.

In March came his biggest test: crossing the Darien Gap

that connects South America with Panama and Mr. Hassan's ultimate goal, the U.S.

"There was no water. There were snakes," he said in a small holding center in Metetí, north of the jungle, gashes and bites covering his legs under his traditional sarong. "I thought I might die in that jungle."

#### **A Guinean:**

There is still the journey through Central America and Mexico, but migrants say the Darien is the hardest. "I want to get to the U.S.," said Hawa Bah, 20, who fled Guinea in West Africa. She spoke as she lay weak on a cot in a Panamanian holding center after getting lost in the Darien for more than 10 days.

"I was being forced into marriage, and I was worried about Ebola," she said. "I'd rather have died in the jungle than go back."

#### **A Cuban Couple:**

Yamil Gonzales, a Cuban, staggered up an incline above the beach, wheezing. "Agua," murmured Mr. Gonzales, 45, collapsing against a tree as companions frantically dug through black garbage bags for water.

Soon, he was plowing through underbrush littered with bottles and broken sandals left by prior processions.

"It's been hard, really hard," said his wife, Yalile Alfonso, 47. "But in Cuba, there's nothing. We had to come this way." The couple was well-prepared, with passports, detailed plans to take buses to the U.S. border and knowledge of U.S. asylum laws.

#### **A Pakistani:**

But unlike the jungle route, this approach is close to Colombia, so border authorities can easily deport migrants without passports. That was Mohammed Khan's fate. A father of four from Swat, a Pakistani area plagued by Taliban violence, he had landed with Mr. Gonzales. Months before, people of his village had pitched in \$7,000 for his trip, he said.

A small pack on his back, Mr. Khan, 38, looked elated as he scrambled down the slope toward the tiny town of La Miel. People had told him Panama police would be hospitable.

But he had dumped his passport much earlier. The border authorities shook their heads as he pleaded: "Please, please, help me." They marched him back up the mountain to Colombia.

Early this month, Mr. Khan texted that he re-entered Panama via the jungle, where he had seen "a lot dead." He was in Guatemala, waiting to head north.

"Go USA," he texted. "Plz pray."

**Note the open pathway to the US once access to Panama is obtained:**

Critics like Otto Reich, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, have said Ecuador's open-door stance may result in a threat to the U.S. And Panamanian officials "know they are coming to the U.S. and then once here they will no longer be Panama's problem," said Mr. Reich, who heads a government-relations and trade-consulting firm.

Javier Carillo, director of Panama's National Migration Service, says it is unfair to blame Panama for the problem, since migrants arrive illegally and pass through some nine other countries on their way to the U.S. A

spokesman for Colombia's immigration authority said it combats human smuggling and offers migrants the opportunity to apply for asylum or safe-conduct papers.

Brazil's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said it "is not aware of this human trafficking route." Officials at Ecuador's immigration authority didn't respond to requests for comment. Ecuador's Foreign Ministry has said the country doesn't support criminal activity.

**Cubans, who say crossing the Florida Straits has become too tough, are the biggest group flowing across and around the isthmus. Others from far-off countries are also arriving in growing numbers: Panama processed 210 Somalis crossing the Darien this year through March, up from 60 in the year-earlier period.**

Where have we heard about the Darien Gap in what is now Panama? Think of the brief Scottish colony of "Caledonia" established in the 1690 in the Gulf of Darien, that was supposed to conduct trade in both the Atlantic and Pacific. The so-called ["Darien Scheme"](#) failed for a host of reasons including poor planning, provisions and being ravaged by epidemics until the colony was overrun by Spanish military in 1700. Because it was backed by upwards of 50 percent of currency in circulation in Scotland, its failure ultimately forced the merger that created the United Kingdom in 1707.