



## THE CUBAN DREAM: Reflections on Cuban Migration across Panama and Costa Rica

Mission Report January 2016

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### Introduction

Since November 2015, border closure in Costa Rica and Nicaragua has disrupted the migration of Cubans from Ecuador by land through Central America to the Mexican-US border. This has added to the vulnerability of many migrants who as a result have become trapped particularly in the border areas of Panama, Costa Rica and Nicaragua. This has led to the establishment of currently 6 collective centres to house Cubans in Panama and 36 in Costa Rica until a political solution can be negotiated to facilitate their onward journey.



<sup>1</sup> Source IOM <https://goo.gl/maps/KRMv2F9sNk22>



## Methodology

This is a report of a field mission completed by road from Panama City to La Cruz in Costa Rica on the border with Nicaragua and back, from 14 to 21 of January 2016.

Shelter Cluster Americas considers the Cuban migrants to suffer from genuine humanitarian needs that warrant to be monitored and assisted where possible. In addition, the situation lends itself to a valuable preparedness exercise for future emergencies. This mission has allowed the sector to revise the type, capacity and condition of collective centres identified by the government, assess the capacities of local and national governments to manage collective centres, identify gaps and address key protection and sheltering needs, as well as, learn about the hosting capabilities of communities. This will articulate into recommendations and capacity building at the country level.

The information in this report is based on individual and group interviews with migrants, collective centre managers, local government authorities and host community members. Police, SENAFRONT, immigration and customs officials were also interviewed in the course of the mission.

The following collective centres were visited<sup>2</sup>.

Collective Centre	Population	Women	Men	Minors	Vulnerables <sup>3</sup>
La Iglesia Católica Progreso, Panama	102	25	77	6	
El Gimnasio Progreso, Panama	163	41	122	5	
El Hotel Milenium, Panama	134	40	94	2	
Parrita, Costa Rica	296	87	207	2	106
Matapalo, Costa Rica	294	91	200	3	133
Bilingüe, Costa Rica	492	141	348	3	218
Nocturno, Costa Rica	665	201	444	20	375
El Fogón, Costa Rica	146	39	104	3	97

<sup>2</sup> The population figures are from the IOM evaluation conducted in January. Some population figures were higher during the mission.

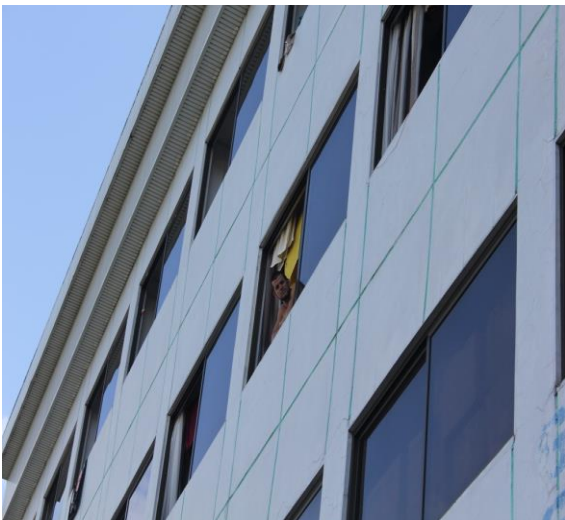
<sup>3</sup> The vulnerability criteria used in Costa Rica was age, disability, illness/wounded, pregnant women.



**La Iglesia Católica Progreso**



**El Gimnasio Progreso**



**El Hotel Milenium**



**Parrita**





## Why now?

All migrants spoken to cite the reason for leaving Cuba as a combination of the lack of freedom and economic opportunity under the current regime. The chief impetus for the exodus at the end of 2015 were rumours circulated by the regime and ‘coyotes’ along the route across Central America that the US would rescind its dry feet, wet feet policy on 2 January 2016.

Currently, under this policy Cubans who arrive in the United States, even without proper authorization, are granted entry and benefit from a fast-track process that allows them legal permanent resident (LPR) status after one year in the country. This unique policy which accelerates the access of green cards for Cubans is originally based on the presumption that all Cuban emigrants are political refugees in need of protection. These US policies that automatically welcome Cubans may need to be revised now as the two countries improve relations and open their travel channels. According to US Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson the current immigration policy and law concerning Cuba will remain “for the time being,”<sup>4</sup> Migrants explain that the normalisation of relations between the US and Cuba raised fears among young professionals in Cuba that the US would accept the regime as is and therefore any chance of significant change and increased freedom in the country would not take place.

## The Numbers

There are no available statistics as to the number of Cubans who have left over the course of last year. Estimates among migrants varied between 30-60,000 individuals already between Ecuador and Costa Rica. The US Coast Guard reported a spike in interdictions of Cubans at sea since the announcement of normalisation of relations, with 500 interdictions in December 2015 alone—three times the typical amount. The Coast Guard also attributes the spike to fear among Cubans that the United States could soon repeal the *wet-foot, dry-foot policy*.<sup>5</sup>

## The Route

The migration of Cubans over land to the United States has been going on for decades and is well established and efficient. As one SENAFRONT officer described “They used to pass across the borders by bus so quickly they were almost invisible”.

Cubans fly to Ecuador, a country for which they did not need a visa. This flight could cost anywhere from 400 to 1500 USD. Visa requirements have consequently been instituted, which has slowed down travel. From Ecuador migrants travel by road through Colombia from where they exit by boat to Puerto Obaldia and again by sea to Panama City. From Panama until the Mexican –US border travel is typically by bus in groups or with the entire bus hired for Cubans. There is consensus among migrants that this well established migration route would cost an average of 2000 USD and take 21 days to complete. Currently, most Cuban migrants housed in collective centres in Panama and Costa Rica have been on the road on average two months and

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<sup>4</sup> Migration Policy Institute

<sup>5</sup> Alien Migrant Interdiction, US Coast Guard



estimate that the cost of reaching the US border has increased to between 5000 and 10,000 USD per person. Many have run out of money.

Migrants themselves refer to this as the fifth wave of migration from Cuba and they consider the current flow different from previous migration because for first time transit countries have become involved in the politics of movement.

All Cuban migrants have passports and perceive their travel as legal through transit countries with the exception of Colombia where they have to purchase transit visas for 300USD. Due to the cost most prefer to travel illegally. Panama does not grant visas but does allow free transit travel recording biometric data of Cubans entering and exiting its borders. This is kept separate from other immigration data. Costa Rica granted transit visas but now issues humanitarian visas on the basis of which Cubans claim assistance in collective centres. Cubans entering on tourist visas cannot transfer these to humanitarian visas and therefore cannot claim any assistance. In Paso Canoas there was a number of Cuban “tourists” who had run out of money and would not be assisted in collective centres on either side of the border. Mexico grants a 20 day transit visa.

Migrants attribute the closure of the Nicaraguan border to the collaboration between Presidents Castro and Ortega. They believe that a deal was struck, at the request of Castro, to hamper the exodus of Cubans in return for continued visas for Nicaraguan students to Cuba. The closure of the Costa Rican border (7-11 of November and 19 December) is considered more to do with the Government’s capacity to accommodate Cubans in collective centres within its borders.

### **Final Destination**

All migrants have the US and specifically Florida as their final destination. No-one considers staying in any of the transit countries. In Costa Rica some Government officials expressed that they would like to encourage many of the professionals to consider being naturalised in Costa Rica to fill critical gaps in Costa Rica particularly in medicine, nursing and engineering. Youth without Frontiers during their IOM registration in the collective centres, also provided information of options of staying and what rights migrants have in Costa Rica. The ultimate Cuban dream is to join family and work in the United States without severing ties to Cuba. There is a strong nationalistic feeling among migrants and an acknowledgement that the only reason to leave Cuba is to gain freedom of thought and the freedom to earn money.



## Shelter

There is a variety of buildings being used to house Cuban migrants. Most are churches, gyms, community buildings and technical schools, even a bull ring. Some are on mayor roads and others far off main routes in villages from where access to the border or larger towns is expensive. For instance, in Paso Canoas this makes access to information on the progress of visas and travel arrangements expensive. In terms of the condition of the buildings, including sanitation and cooking facilities, Churches and Technical schools, particularly if private, are in reasonably good condition although all house more people than should according to minimum humanitarian standards of space accorded per person. There is no privacy in the collective centres – rooms and spaces are not divided. Only one room in Bilingüe had a curtain of black plastic drawn across a corner to provide some privacy to change clothes. Mattresses or camp beds are usually purchased by the migrants themselves. Some people have invested in tents but use them little due to the heat. Depending on the size of the room there are on average 14-20 people per room and there is no segregation between men and women. This is by choice as migrants tend to travel in groups of friends or family and feel a greater sense of security being together.



Matapalo



Bilingüe



Nocturno



El Fogón



Families accommodated in hotels are in some cases able to get a room for themselves. Government owned buildings such as the night school Nocturno in La Cruz and the gyms do not afford adequate shelter from the elements. The gyms in Matapalo, Bilingüe and Nocturno where hundreds of migrants sleep have a concrete floor, roofing but no walls. The facilities offered by churches vary a great deal from the very basic such as Fogón in the Centre of La Cruz to the Seminary buildings housing 102 migrants in Prospero.

In terms of shelter the two hotels being used in Paso Canoas, are perhaps the most inadequate in terms of protection although the buildings themselves appear sound. The first is the Hotel Millennium that is a hotel under renovation that belongs “to the Arabs that own Jerusalem mall” in Paso Canoas. The management of two floors of the hotel has been taken over by the Panamanian Red Cross. Every possible space apart from the halls is used for accommodation. Toilets of individual rooms are being shared by those in rooms without toilets. It is not clear how the management of the hotel will be carried out but due to its immediate proximity to the border post it is likely to pose challenges, particularly those of protection. The Hotel La Morenita is being used as a collective centre as well. The Government of Panama is covering these costs and in an effort to keep the cost as low as possible and to inflict as little damage as possible to the interiors, migrants are required to leave the hotel at 8 am and not return to their rooms under after dinner at night. Spending the entire day in the street, most of the migrants congregate in a park for the days, is far from ideal.

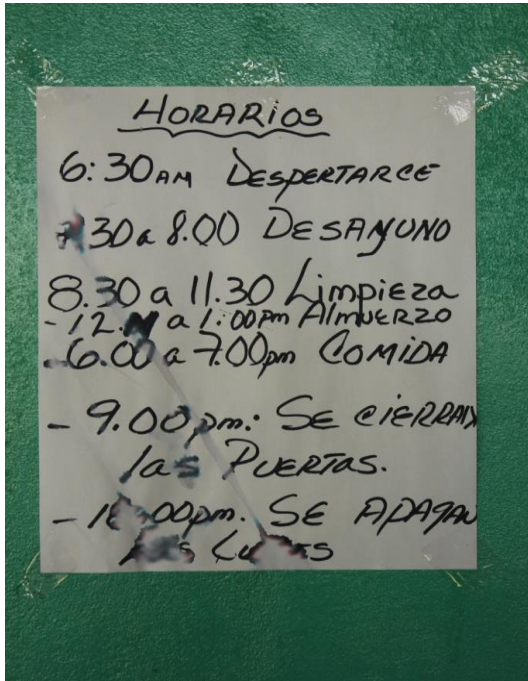
Most of the spaces used as collective centres currently are acceptable as short term shelter solutions for migrants. The conditions of the buildings themselves and the lack of adequate WASH and cooking facilities, as well as, the precarious location of some of the centres will cause problems in the months to come.

### **Collective centre management**

“No meat, no information”. This is how a forty year old migrant engineer summed up life in the collective centre. None of the collective centres had well trained or experienced managers or coordinators. They also never expected that migrants would need to be housed for more than a few weeks. The centres that appeared to be very well run such as Parrita, Bilingüe in La Cruz or the church in Progreso was due to a few extremely dedicated individuals. Parrita is run by three strict female teachers of the technical colleague, Progreso by Caritas and the pastor, while in La Cruz the deputy mayor makes daily rounds in the collective centres. After almost three months of management these people are extremely exhausted and stressed and unable to count on substantial institutional support or even a few days respite.

The difference in the centres without staff of the same level of commitment can clearly be seen. All staff in the centres would benefit from support and some capacity building in collective centre management and coordination. Some have created committees to manage the population. This seems to have worked best for cooking but not as well for cleaning and general order.









Evictions from the centres do take place. The managers had evicted a group of 40 migrants from Parrita for continuous drunken nights that turned violent and one family, a couple with a young child, were evicted by general consensus for being extremely arrogant. They didn't want to clean or eat communally. One young woman described the couple as 'ordering everyone around like Fidel Castro'.

The managers in Costa Rica have also had to face the daily press inventing stories describing the centres full of drunken, drug and sex fuelled parties to try and discredit the institutions providing support and turn host communities against the migrants. The campaign has not been very successful but there is little capacity to carry out public information dissemination inside and outside the centres. The government does periodically arrange meetings in the centres to give updates. In Matapalo migrants were waiting for such a meeting. In the last one they had been informed of the first flight of 180 Cubans departing Costa Rica.

Dealing with drug use in the centres also falls under the purview of managers. In Parrita, the police arrested on the request of the managers, one Costa Rican man found selling drugs inside the centre. The chief manager of the centre rounded up all the inhabitants of the centre and informed them in no uncertain terms that next time also the buyers would be arrested and urged migrants not to lose their opportunities and assistance due to a foolish few. Angry, she added that if anyone was so bored and stressed that they needed to use drugs, they could come and get a pair of tweezers and entertain themselves by plucking every hair on their testicles, one by one! The drug use has moved to the deserted park opposite the centre.

Boredom and uncertainty is rife and for many difficult to handle. The time and energy of the managers cannot extend to providing forms of entertainment. IOM had arranged a census and evaluation in the centres carried out by Youth without Borders. In addition to the more formal interview and data collection the evaluation team carried out games and discussion groups which were met with much enthusiasm.

## **WASH**

WASH facilities have not been generally invested in. Most of the centres have portaloos provided by Government but many were not operational due to not being cleaned or maintained. In Progreso out of 18 portaloos 6 were functional.

There are no separate showers for men and women. The sports hall in Progreso had open sewage right next to three showers of which one did not work at all and two had extremely low water pressure – this was catering to 251 people. Bilingüe and Parrita had benefitted from engineers among the migrants who had devised temporary showers in addition to the few existing ones.







Servicios Sanitarios  
Hombres y Mujeres

Sábado 09	Domingo 10	Lunes 11	Martes 12	Miércoles 13	Jueves 14	Viernes 15
Aulas	Aulas	Aulas	Aulas	Aulas	Aulas	Aulas
1 y 2	3 y 4	5 y 6	7 y 8	9 y 10	11 y 12	13 y 1

Sábado 16	Domingo 17	Lunes 18	Martes 19	Miércoles 20	Jueves 21	Viernes 22
Aulas	Aulas	Aulas	Aulas	Aulas	Aulas	Aulas
15 y 16	17 y 18	19 y 20				





Waste management and garbage collection were a major issue in all locations. In all the Government owned sports halls used as centres there was rubbish around the centre. Private buildings such as technical colleagues and churches were much cleaner but struggled to get waste collected regularly from the centre.

**Health**

During the mission period there were 13 cases of HN1N virus among Cubans in Paso Canoas. According to the migrants one death of a 39 year old man of the virus had already taken place, but this was unconfirmed by authorities. The health department had the morning I arrived, distributed gloves and face masks to all managers at the collective centres as well as the SENAFRONT police, the former declined to use them while the police religiously wore both masks and gloves while in or close to the collective centres.



The Panamanian Red Cross and IOM both reported that there are cases of HIV/AIDS among the migrants. No distribution of condoms or any other contraceptives has taken place. There is evidence of prostitution in the collective centres in Paso Canoas in particular, and this is causing concern from a health perspective, as well as, a protection perspective.

In Matapalo, Costa Rica, there were two cases of Hepatitis A and a case of Dengue. The three patients were separated spatially from the rest but not in isolation.

Pregnant migrants in Costa Rica are able to access local health care and had been given assistance in the case of complications. Some however, were constrained due to lack of logistics to the health care centres. Migrants have to pay to get to the facilities by taxi or bus and some do not have the money to do so. In Parrita, a couple from the host community visited the pregnant women in the centre and provided them with extra food and drink, particularly fruit and juices, on a daily basis. There is no systematic antenatal or postnatal care on offer. There is no nutritional monitoring or paediatric care for under-fives in the collective centres.

No awareness on the Zika virus had taken place or was available.

According to the collective centre managers occasionally they had an ambulance collect migrants who had suddenly fallen ill or were wounded. There are wounded in the collective centres – most have been badly



beaten up by coyotes when unable to pay, some by police, local gang members while others have sustained injuries during muggings, being robbed or raped. Many of those injured have feared to seek medical assistance for fear of repercussions.

### **Food**

Most collective centres in Panama receive in kind food donations from churches and companies such as Machetazo and Supermarket 99 in addition to government. In Costa Rica the Government supplies food for three meals a day at each centre. In both countries cooking is done on a rotation basis by migrants themselves. Meals are chiefly variations of rice, beans and vegetables. The chief complaint was the lack of meat. Some centres close to plantations received fruit as donations.



### **Protection**

In the narratives of Cuban migrants, two locations clearly feature as dangerous and highly traumatic: Colombia and Puerto Obaldia in Panama. Many migrants do not survive crossing Colombia. Even the ones, who do, tell stories of being robbed, beaten up and raped. The migration routes of Cubans in Colombia are well known by local gangs who take advantage of the travellers.

One woman described Puerto Obaldia as “a prison from where it is better to escape to the jungle than stay there for more than a few days”. Upon arrival, migrants report that the Police remove everything they can from their luggage and off their person “money, even cigarettes and tweezers” said one woman. They sell them to the local store from where the Cubans can buy them back with instalments of money they access through the local Western Union which adds a 10% “tax” on the funds their clients have been sent by family.

There are no sanitation facilities, only one place to buy food for which they are grossly overcharged on average 10 USD a plate of rice and beans or sometimes some fish. Some migrants pay 5-6 USD daily to sleep in a tent while others sleep on a concrete slab. For a bottle of water for which locals are charged 1.50USD Cubans are charged 4USD; the 20 USD boat trip to Panama City costs a Cuban 200 USD or the 160USD flight over 250 USD.

In places like Puerto Obaldia where there are limited services and difficulties to travel onward, migrants become particularly vulnerable an easy targets for abuse, including the rape of both men and women. Also the journey by sea is reported to be perilous – boats are over loaded, especially children are known to have fallen overboard in high seas. Boats cannot and will not turn back. One young couple committed suicide by hanging in Puerto Obaldia after their two year old daughter drowned.



Far from home with very limited contact with relatives back home and in the US, the sudden access to information, seeing a different way of life that often challenges a Cuban migrant's entire worldview makes them even more vulnerable. To improve their own security and decrease vulnerability they attempt to travel in groups. According to advice from those who have gone ahead, anyone not travelling in a large group is likely to disappear in the Zeta<sup>6</sup> controlled border areas of Mexico.

Within most collective centres there is relative security. In Costa Rica all the centres visited were gated and had police protection, except for the one in Matapalo but it is located across from the Police station. No one mentioned grave incidences of violence sexual or otherwise inside the centres although prostitution operating from the centres is a growing concern particularly in Paso Canoas.

Coyotes prey on migrants, making promises and charging whatever they can. I talked with a group of six young men who the week before had paid a Coyote to take them across into Nicaragua. Within two days they had been informed upon by local villagers and returned to Costa Rica by the Nicaraguan military. The Vice Mayor of La Cruz reports that of all the migrants crossing into Nicaragua illegally at least half are returned by the Armed Forces or the Coast Guard. Threats of arrests and incarceration if found in Nicaragua are proving to be additional deterrents for leaving the collective centres on one's own. Everyone has the local coyote's number on their phone. "When the money starts to run out and there is no information of whether we will get out of here we call the Coyote" explains one young woman.

### **Livelihoods**

Most of the migrants no longer have income generating livelihoods in Cuba. Virtually without exception the travel to the United States is paid for through remittances from family in the United States which are picked up along the route through Western Union. With the 6 USD monthly salary, for instance, of a University Economics Professor it is impossible to save enough money for travel outside Cuba. Some migrants, doctors, engineers or teachers were volunteering in host communities while others work for tips in super markets.

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<sup>6</sup> Zeta is a Mexican criminal syndicate, considered by the US government to be "the most technologically advanced, sophisticated, powerful, ruthlessly violent and dangerous cartel operating in Mexico."





## Logistics

Transportation from Paso Canoas to collective centres in Costa Rica is arranged by the Government but paid for by migrants. The average cost from Paso Canoas to Matapalo for instance is 21USD.

The longer the delays in finding transportation solutions for migrants the less likely they will be to complete their journey. This will mean a larger caseload of migrants for which more permanent solutions will need to be found.

## Closure of collective centres

Problems are likely to arise when schools start on 8 February. The Government has been looking for a transit centre that could accommodate all migrants from three collective centres: Parrita, Matapalo and Puntarenas. This has been impossible as it would be housing almost 700 people. The manager in Parrita has used this as a negotiating chip. She has made a formal proposal to the government that they delay the start of the term and allow migrants to stay until the 22 of February if the government guarantees that all migrants in the centre are shifted straight from the centre onto a plane on that date. Other schools being used are joining in the proposal.

In La Cruz, the night school Nocturno is being planned as the main centre. Night classes will be shifted to other schools like Bilingüe that does not offer evening classes.

There is no due process or protocols in place for the closure of centres. In Progreso church a formal meeting was being held between CARITAS and the Panamanian Red Cross to discuss handover of management and the possible movement of people into the sports centre and the Hotel identified in Paso Canoas.



## Host Families

Hosting communities are very active, local services and local government less so, especially in Parrita. 396 (262 men, 134 women, 10 minors) Cubans are living in host families. Of these 148 are classified as vulnerable. A Nicaraguan farm labourer takes Cubans for early morning fishing, and other community members provide support, food and other daily commodities for migrants.

The local government in La Cruz is considering paying a small stipend to hosting families as they are running out of resources as they never expected to be hosting for such an extended period of time.

## “Extra Continentales”

There are a number of ‘extra continentales’, migrants from outside the LAC region, in the border areas and travelling the same routes as the Cubans. They are mostly Nepalese, Senegalese, Syrian, and Afghan. In Paso Canoas on the Costa Rican side of the border there is a collective centre that houses around 100 such individuals – a number that fluctuates greatly as ‘they disappear into the night alone or with coyotes’ as the SENAFRONT officer explained. They do not have documents and they are not afforded any of the services currently provided to the Cubans. None of the collective centres had any ‘extra continentales’ in them.

## Conclusions

This emergency has provoked a re-evaluation of sheltering assistance in the region. It is likely that the models of humanitarian assistance traditionally implemented by shelter actors need to be broadened to include, at least the short term humanitarian needs of vulnerable migrants when faced with situations beyond their control. This will entail not only broadening our internal discourse but also broadening our mandates and pool of stakeholders. What is humanitarian assistance in the contexts of the LAC region in 2016?

A 33 year old economics professor shows me a sign on his phone he photographed in Cuba before he left. It says “The last one in Cuba, turn off the lights!” It makes him cry. You never stop being a Cuban you know. Not even when we get another nationality. It is a beautiful country. But now the only way left for us to protest is to leave.” On the 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> of February two more flights of Cubans will take off from Costa Rica to El Salvador. I hope he has a seat.

## Recommendations

- Provide local government and other relevant stakeholders’ capacity building and training in collective centre coordination and management.
- Advocate for sufficient rotation of staff in collective centres to avoid burn outs of assistance personnel.
- Urgent information dissemination on the Zika virus.
- Distribution of contraceptives.
- Improve protection monitoring, particularly in Puerto Obaldia
- Increase health monitoring in collective centres.



- Consider assistance packages for host families.
- Provide logistical assistance to those without means.
- Advocate for the fast tracking of migrants with financial means to continue their journey, including those with children, pregnant women, unaccompanied children and the disabled and injured.
- Advocate for activities within the collective centres, for instance sports.
- Use the current situation as a preparedness exercise for future emergencies.

