

THE GHOST OF DARIÉN

The route the world decided to erase

INTERVIEW WITH HÉCTOR PEREZ | EDITORIAL KIN INSTITUTE



Héctor Pérez at the KIN Institute studio

Héctor Pérez is 53 years old and carries the posture of someone who has seen too much. He grew up in Castro's Cuba, watching, decade after decade, his neighbors and family members disappear in makeshift boats or on one-way flights. His parents, loyal to the regime, begged him to stay and take advantage of the state-provided education. Héctor obeyed for a long time. He graduated as a journalist and tried to document reality within the imposed limits, but the asphyxiation caught up with him. He left against his

family's wishes. Today, he is a refugee living in Panama. From there, he has spent the last four years (2022-2026) documenting the most brutal artery of global migration: the Darién Gap. In this exclusive interview with the KIN Institute, Héctor details the rise and collapse of a route that moved over 1.2 million people and enriched cartels and corrupt politicians.

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KIN INSTITUTE: Héctor, you grew up under the promise of education and stability in Cuba, guided by your parents to stay. Today, at 53 and living as a refugee in Panama, how do you compare the quality of life you have now with what you left behind?

HÉCTOR PEREZ: The honest answer is that life in exile is a permanent mourning. My parents believed in the system; they saw my education as a shield against the world. But education in Cuba became a glass cage. You learn to see the world, but you can't touch it. Here in Panama, I wake up every day with the anxiety of someone who belongs nowhere, but I sleep with the relief of someone who can write the truth without expecting the police to knock on the door. Quality of life isn't just measured in calories or electricity—though Cuba lacks both—but in the weight of the air you breathe. I left breaking my parents' hearts, but it was that rupture that allowed me to be here, on the edge of the Darién, documenting the story of thousands who, like me, decided that any hell is preferable to the hell they came from.



Héctor's childhood in Cuba

KIN INSTITUTE: You closely followed the Darién route over the last four years, from 2022 until now, 2026. The numbers have changed drastically. Who are the people crossing this jungle?

HÉCTOR PEREZ: The Darién is a mirror of the world's fractures. In 2022, the number exploded to 250,000 people. In 2023, we saw the absolute record: 520,000 souls [1]. The vast majority were Venezuelans fleeing the Chavista collapse, followed by Ecuadorians and Haitians. But the Darién globalized. I saw Afghans, Chinese, Cameroonians. People who flew to Ecuador or Brazil and walked up. What broke me the most was the demographic shift. Before 2019, they were young men. In 2023, about 22% of those crossing were children [2]. I saw pregnant women, infants in arms, elderly people with canes. The average age plummeted, and vulnerability skyrocketed.

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KIN INSTITUTE: How do they get from Colombia to Panama? Are there differences between going by boat and going on foot?

HÉCTOR PEREZ: There are two logics. Most arrive in Necoclí, Colombia. From there, they take boats across the Gulf of Urabá to Acandí or Capurganá. That boat trip costs about 40 dollars [2]. From Acandí, the jungle begins on foot, climbing the "Loma de la Muerte" (Hill of Death). That's the hybrid route. But there are those who can't pay the official guides and try cheaper and infinitely more dangerous routes leaving from Turbo, or trying to cross along the Pacific coast in clandestine boats that often sink or are intercepted by the Navy [2]. In the jungle, the journey takes 4 to 12 days. By sea, you risk shipwreck; through the jungle, you risk everything.



River crossing in the Darién

KIN INSTITUTE: And who controls these routes? Who are the "people smugglers" and what do they gain?

HÉCTOR PEREZ: Make no mistake: no one crosses the Darién without paying a toll to the Clan del Golfo. They are Colombia's largest drug cartel and they control every millimeter of the Colombian side of the border. The coyotes or local guides might operate independently, but they pay a franchise fee to the Clan [3]. The Colombian Ministry of Defense estimated that the Clan del Golfo profited about 125 dollars per migrant. Do the math: half a million people in 2023. We are talking about tens of millions of clean dollars, without the risk of transporting a single gram of cocaine [2]. Worse: they use the flow of migrants as a "shield." Boats with migrants are sent on the same maritime routes as the drug speedboats to distract the coast guard [2]. And if the police approach, the traffickers simply throw the migrants into the water.

KIN INSTITUTE: You mentioned that the Clan del Golfo used migrants to cover up drug trafficking. But did they also force migrants to carry drugs or weapons during the crossing?

HÉCTOR PEREZ: That's one of the most delicate questions, because the answer is: yes, but rarely directly. The Clan doesn't need to turn every migrant into a mule. They have a much more sophisticated operation. What they do is use the human volume as a smokescreen. While hundreds of people cross the jungle, the speedboats with cocaine sail parallel, taking advantage of the coast guard being busy. However, there have been documented reports of guides who, in the middle of the jungle, demanded that migrants carry additional packages in their backpacks, without explaining what they were. Those who refused were abandoned or threatened. The line between migrant and mule is, in this context, deliberately erased.

KIN INSTITUTE: Does this only involve organized crime, or is there official complicity?

HÉCTOR PEREZ: The Darién functioned as a consortium economy. Corruption was endemic. Colombian municipal leaders used their positions to enrich themselves, providing public infrastructure for the smuggling scheme under official pretexts [3]. On the Panamanian side, at support points like the Migrant Reception Stations (ERMs) in Lajas Blancas and San Vicente, the exploitation continued. A plate of rice and beans that would cost 2 dollars was sold for 10. A bottle of water turned into gold. The misery of others became the region's biggest industry.



The Darién jungle

KIN INSTITUTE: You described the lines in Necoclí. What was that like in practice?

HÉCTOR PEREZ: Necoclí was a city that was not prepared for this. A city of 45,000 inhabitants that suddenly received 1,000, 2,000, 3,000 people a day waiting to board [2]. The lines at the two authorized docks stretched for kilometers. Families slept on the sidewalk with their belongings in backpacks. Children cried from the heat. Street vendors circulated with water, food, and SIM cards at gold prices. It was simultaneously a scene of despair and commerce. The boats left full, with life jackets that often didn't fit. And those who couldn't pay the doubled price of the legal boats tried the clandestine boats from Totumo, which left at night and had no record of anyone.

KIN INSTITUTE: And the violence in the jungle? What happens on the crossing?

HÉCTOR PEREZ: As soon as the migrants cross the invisible border to the Panamanian side, the "protection" of the Clan del Golfo ends and they fall into the hands of independent local bandits. That's where hell begins. Human Rights Watch documented that armed groups ambush migrants demanding 100 dollars per head [2]. Those who don't have it are robbed, beaten, or raped. Sexual violence is used as a weapon of terror and an extortion method. In 2023, Doctors Without Borders (MSF) treated 676 survivors of sexual violence; just in October of that year, there were over 100 cases in a single week [4]. Women, girls, and even men were raped in front of their families.

KIN INSTITUTE: Is there a real story you want to tell? Someone you met on this route?

HÉCTOR PEREZ: There are many. But one that never leaves me is that of Louis Gerard, a 38-year-old Haitian who crossed with his wife, his sister, and a 4-year-old son. They came from Brazil, where they had tried to rebuild their lives after the 2010 earthquake. Five days of jungle. Halfway through, six to eight armed men ambushed them. They demanded 100 dollars per person. They searched their backpacks, took all their food and clothes. Louis's son went without food for days [2]. Louis told me the worst part wasn't the robbery. It was looking at his son's face and having nothing to give him. They made it to Panama. I don't know where they are now. Probably in legal limbo in some Central American country that doesn't want them.

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KIN INSTITUTE: NGOs tried to help. Which ones held out, especially after the funding cuts?

HÉCTOR PEREZ: NGOs were the only parachutes in this free fall. Doctors Without Borders (MSF), the Red Cross, HIAS, and UNHCR operated at the limit. But the price was high. In March 2024, the Panamanian government temporarily suspended MSF's operations after the NGO publicly denounced the exponential increase in rapes [4]. Then, with the brutal cuts in international humanitarian funding in 2025, the safety net collapsed. UNHCR reported that needs exploded while funds dried up [5].

KIN INSTITUTE: That brings us to 2025 and 2026. Physical borders began to be closed. What was the impact of the fences in the jungle?

HÉCTOR PEREZ: It was a deliberate strangulation. In 2024, the new Panamanian president promised to close the Darién. With US support and pressure, they installed barbed wire fences at key jungle passes to funnel migrants into controlled routes [6]. The statistical result was immediate: in the first quarter of 2025, crossings fell by 98% [7]. In May and June 2025, the US DHS celebrated that only a handful of people managed to cross [8]. But fences in the jungle don't stop despair, they only divert it or kill it invisibly.

KIN INSTITUTE: And what happened to the local economy that lived off this migration?

HÉCTOR PEREZ: The local economy collapsed overnight. Lajas Blancas, which was a human anthill selling food, SIM cards, and clothes, turned into a ghost town [9]. I spoke with a boatman named Olea in Villa Caleta. At the peak, he was making 300 dollars a day transporting migrants; he installed solar panels and raised his house. Today, his boat rots on dry land and he went back to planting bananas, earning pennies [9]. The gold rush is over. It's the ironic tragedy of profiting from an exodus.

KIN INSTITUTE: And what do you think about the role of social media in this story? How did TikTok and Facebook influence migration flows?

HÉCTOR PEREZ: Social media was the biggest recruiter of Darién migrants. UNHCR revealed that in 2023, 35% of migrants learned about the route from TikTok and 29% from Facebook [2]. Smugglers used these platforms to post glamorized videos of the crossing, omitting the dead, the rapes, and the robberies. They showed families arriving on the other side, smiling, as if it had been a walk in the park. It was marketing for death. And the platforms did nothing to stop it. While TikTok profited from the views, children drowned in the rivers of the Darién.

KIN INSTITUTE: To conclude, Héctor. If the Darién is closed and blocked, what are migrants doing now? Have they stopped fleeing?

HÉCTOR PEREZ: Nobody stops fleeing a burning house just because the front door is locked. What we see now in 2026 is the dam effect. There is a tragic "reverse flow" of Venezuelans trying to return, discovering that the return is as deadly as the departure [9]. Others are opting for much more dangerous maritime routes through the Caribbean or the Pacific, bypassing Panama entirely, where shipwrecks go unrecorded. The Darién was hell, but it was a mapped hell. What governments did was not solve the crisis; they merely pushed death to places where satellites and journalists cannot see.

The KIN Institute works to provide safe routes, verified information, and support networks for migrants worldwide. If you need help or want to learn about routes and rights, visit kin.institute.

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