**A Mother, a Daughter, a Deadly Journey: An Update**

**An increasing number of migrants are trying to pass through the dangerous terrain connecting South and Central America. What forces them to take that route?**

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Michael Barbaro

Hey, it’s Michael. This week, “The Daily” is revisiting some of our favorite episodes of the year, listening back, and hearing what’s happened in the time since they first ran. Today, we return to a mother and daughter who, along with hundreds of thousands of others, made a harrowing journey through the Darién Gap. And we find out where they ended up. It’s Thursday, December 28.

Julie, tell us what we should know about this place, the Darién Gap.

Julie Turkewitz

So the Darién Gap is this narrow sliver of land between Colombia and Panama. It connects South and Central Americas. And this slip of land is a jungle. And it’s an extremely inhospitable jungle. And this is because the territory is sheer mountains, intense, intense mud. To be able to traverse it on foot is very dangerous because there are deadly animals, bugs, snakes, fast-running rivers.

Michael Barbaro

Wow.

Julie Turkewitz

And it’s sort of a changing territory, too, because it’s incredibly wet. This place has no road. So for years, what you saw was that a small number of migrants who heard word of mouth about the possibility of crossing — that they could do it — were braving this trek. And so you saw between 2010 and 2020 an average of under 11,000 people crossing a year.

What you’ve seen in the last two years is an enormous, historic rise in people crossing this very dangerous, in many cases deadly, jungle.

Michael Barbaro

How many more people?

Julie Turkewitz

Well, we saw in 2022 was almost 250,000 people crossed the Darién Gap.

Michael Barbaro

And what explains why so many people are trying to take this treacherous journey right now?

Julie Turkewitz

So first of all, the pandemic really hit economies in South America hard. And because the crisis was region-wide, this left one way out. And that way out was north through the Darién Gap.

And so we see traffickers advertising on social media, encouraging people to come through the gap, talking about this trek as if it’s a vacation. So I needed to make sense of this contradiction that I was seeing between this incredibly harsh terrain, this idea that this place is an impassable jungle, and these numbers that we were seeing.

And so my colleague, Fede, Federico Rios, photographer, and I decided that the only way, really, to do this was to do the trek ourselves. And so we set out to cross the Darién Gap.

Michael Barbaro

So tell us, Julie, about this journey.

Julie Turkewitz

So I started the journey in Necoclí, the beach town in Colombia that serves as the jumping-off point for the trip through the Darién.

Julie Turkewitz

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Speaker 1

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Julie Turkewitz

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Julie Turkewitz

So from Necoclí, the migrants have to cross this large body of water, this gulf, to get to the point where the jungle begins. And so I have to say we were totally struck by the organization and the operation of the entire thing.

Speaker 2

*Daniel José Munoz. Daniel José Munoz.*

Julie Turkewitz

These formerly tourist boat, now migrant boat, companies are calling the migrants one by one to get on their assigned boat after they’ve bought their ticket.

Speaker 2

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Julie Turkewitz

So we get on this boat with a large group of migrants on their way to start this journey. And we reach Capurganá, the last town before people enter the jungle.

Julie Turkewitz

*So we are leaving now to begin this hike. We’re a group of maybe 100 people. There’s lots of children. Everybody is completely laden down with bags and mats to sleep on and things like that.*

Julie Turkewitz

So we set off for what would be for most of these migrants a journey of somewhere between six and 10 days in the jungle. And pretty soon, the terrain gets very steep. And it’s very hot. It’s very hot. People are struggling. They’re breathing hard. Some people start to cry. And then it starts to get really difficult.

Michael Barbaro

Right. And somehow, people are getting through this with children in their arms or on their backs?

Julie Turkewitz

Yes, lots of children, lots and lots of children.

Michael Barbaro

Wow.

Julie Turkewitz

So by the time that we are two days in, we really start to see people fall apart. They start to get sick. They start to get injured. There’s a pregnant woman who we watch fall down an extremely steep hill. And it becomes clear that some people aren’t going to make this journey. They’re not going to survive. We did come across a dead body on the trail.

Michael Barbaro

Wow.

Julie Turkewitz

You often heard adults singing with kids just to keep their spirits up.

Speaker 3

*[SINGING IN SPANISH]:*

Julie Turkewitz

So by the fourth day, we have crossed into Panama. We are about halfway through the journey. And we’re about to do the most difficult part of the trek, what is called the Hill of Death.

Julie Turkewitz

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Speaker 3

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Julie Turkewitz

*Sarah.*

Julie Turkewitz

And it’s on this hill that I meet Sarah.

Julie Turkewitz

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Julie Turkewitz

Sarah is this tiny six-year-old girl from Venezuela. She’s wearing this tiny pink t-shirt with sparkles on it.

Julie Turkewitz

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Julie Turkewitz

And she is climbing the Hill of Death with a man named Angel.

Julie Turkewitz

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Speaker 4

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Julie Turkewitz

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Julie Turkewitz

He’s not her father. And I see Angel help Sarah to make it up and then down the Hill of Death.

Julie Turkewitz

*We’re going to camp between a couple of trees by the river. Fede is making a clearing, basically, with a machete. OK.*

Sarah

*[SINGING IN SPANISH]:*

Julie Turkewitz

And as we’re setting up camp for the night, I got to know Sarah a little bit more.

Sarah

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Julie Turkewitz

Earlier in the journey, Sarah’s mother had then become injured AND that morning had asked Angel if he could help her by carrying Sarah at points by guiding her while she trudged along in her injured state. And by the time I met them, no one knew where her mother was. It wasn’t clear to us if she was even alive.

It really seemed to exemplify what a cruel journey this was, that a mother would be pushed, some would say forced, to hand her child, the fate of her child, to someone she had really just met all in the hopes of making it through the Darién Gap and making it to the United States.

Michael Barbaro

We’ll be right back.

So what happens the next morning?

Julie Turkewitz

So Sarah’s group wakes up very early. And they tell us that they are going to head out.

Julie Turkewitz

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Julie Turkewitz

I asked Sarah for a description of her mother in case I saw her later that day and could interview her, could tell her that Sarah was OK.

Julie Turkewitz

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Julie Turkewitz

And I’m told that Sarah’s mother looks exactly like her, same hair, same skin. Sarah’s group leaves. And Fede and I decide we’re going to wait and hope that we find the mother. And sure enough, a few hours later, a woman matching the description we were given comes down the hill.

And I ask her, are you Sarah’s mother? And she exclaims, and she wants to know immediately if her daughter is OK. By this point, it’s been more than a day since she’d seen her only child. They’d been on this journey for about six days so far. Her name is Alexandra. Sarah’s mom tells me that she has terrible blisters on her feet.

Julie Turkewitz

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Julie Turkewitz

So we sat down on a log by a river. And I asked her what landed her here. How did she get here? Why is she here?

Alexandra

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Julie Turkewitz

She told me she was a lawyer in Venezuela. But when the country’s oil industry collapsed, her business collapsed. So earlier that year, she had left Venezuela, crossed on foot the Atacama Desert to make it into Chile, where she thought that she could build a new life. But —

Alexandra

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Julie Turkewitz

— she couldn’t practice law there because she didn’t have the right paperwork. And —

Alexandra

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Julie Turkewitz

Alexandra tells me that she’s under the impression that the US will let her in and let her stay in the country. And this is where she wants to raise her daughter. That’s what brought her on this trek in the first place.

Alexandra

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Julie Turkewitz

She’s just horrified by the fact that she’s become separated from her daughter. She’s horrified by what her daughter is going through.

Alexandra

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Julie Turkewitz

So we say goodbye. And I continued on, hoping that I might catch back up with Sarah and tell her that her mother was alive and OK.

Julie Turkewitz

*By this point, it’s day seven. We are exhausted. But Fede and I are still moving much faster than Alexandra. And we think we might be able to catch up with Sarah at the next camp. So we’re finally, finally arriving at a place called El Abuelo.*

Julie Turkewitz

The next camp is a place called El Abuelo. And as we settle in, I start scanning for Sarah.

Sarah

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Julie Turkewitz

And I spot Sarah and Angel. And I immediately tell Sarah that I’ve met her mom, that she’s just a day or two behind.

Angel

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Julie Turkewitz

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Julie Turkewitz

And Angel tells me that since I last saw them, Sarah has been crying a lot.

Sarah

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Angel

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Julie Turkewitz

She’s been asking about her mom nonstop. And as I’m talking to her, she’s asking to wait at this camp, to wait at El Abuelo, for her mom to meet them there. But angel has decided what they need to do is get to the end of the trek, where there is a government camp, where children who have been separated along this journey can stay until they are reunited with their parents. So I tell them that I’m staying behind to do reporting and that Alexandra is probably a day behind. I know I can wait and try and connect with her at this camp.

Michael Barbaro

So what happens next?

Julie Turkewitz

So we’re waiting at El Abuelo. I see this boat arrive.

Julie Turkewitz

*Alexandra has just arrived on boat.*

Alexandra

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Julie Turkewitz

Her feet are so destroyed that she can’t walk. She’s crying and she’s shaking.

Alexandra

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Speaker 5

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Alexandra

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Julie Turkewitz

She hasn’t eaten or had anything to drink in two days.

Alexandra

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Julie Turkewitz

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Alexandra

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Julie Turkewitz

I tell her that I saw Sarah, that Sarah is just up ahead.

And all she wants to do is get moving immediately. She doesn’t want to eat. She doesn’t want to sleep. She doesn’t want to rest. She just wants to find her daughter. And so we get in this boat to head toward the government UN camp together.

Julie Turkewitz

*So this is Alexandra arriving at Canaan, which is this community in Panama where her daughter should be.*

Julie Turkewitz

So we get off the boat. As before, she needs to be carried. She’s scanning for her daughter. And finally, she is taken by Panamanian officials to one of the shacks. And there, inside the shack, is Sarah, is her daughter.

And we are watching this reunion happen. And Alexandra, she grabs her daughter. She holds her. And she starts asking for forgiveness right away.

Alexandra

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Julie Turkewitz

Please forgive me. Please forgive me. I didn’t abandon you, is what she says.

Alexandra

*[SPEAKING SPANISH]*

Julie Turkewitz

They had been separated now for three days. Sarah seemed kind of to be in shock.

It was a very bittersweet reunion because they hadn’t even made it near the United States. They still had so much more to do.

Michael Barbaro

After the break, Julie Turkewitz gives us an update on what Alexandra and Sarah are now doing.

Julie Turkewitz

This is Julie Turkewitz, Andes bureau chief. Since this episode aired, my colleague Federico Rios and I have kept in touch with Alexandra. After Alexandra and Sarah crossed Darién Gap, they continued their journey north to try and get to the United States.

And as they were traveling through Central America, they heard that the Biden administration had made a really important policy change. The new policy would no longer allow Venezuelans to enter at the Mexico-US border. Instead, the government was going to open up slots for Venezuelans in a program called humanitarian parole. And it was going to give them a safe, legal way to get into the United States.

So Alexandra decides that she has just suffered too much. She does not want to risk her daughter’s life any more on any other part of the journey. And she is going to apply for this legal option. She just has one problem. And that’s that for the humanitarian parole program, you need to have a person in the United States who says, hey, I commit to supporting this person, even financially, when they get to the United States.

And then the article comes out. And we had a huge, huge response from “New York Times” readers, several of whom reached out and said, we want to be the sponsors. And they submitted applications for this humanitarian parole program.

So now we are more than a year later. All Alexandra has heard from the US government is that it has been received. And she wakes up every morning, checks the status of her application, and refreshes and refreshes, hoping that one day it will say that her application has been accepted and that she will be able to come to the United States.

Meantime, they are in a pretty unstable situation. They’ve asked us not to reveal their specific location. They are in a situation of poverty. And Alexandra really tries to maintain hope.

In the time since the episode aired, I have also been speaking with Angel. Angel is the man who helped Sarah when she lost her mother in the jungle. He took a very different path. And he decided to continue on to the United States.

He eventually made it to Pennsylvania. He got a work permit and a Social Security number. And now he’s making $140 a day as a mechanic. And life is difficult. His family is now broken apart. But he feels that in the US, making this amount of money, he can deliver on what he set out to do. And this is what made him cross the Darién. He can help his child back home. And he can fulfill what he sees as his duties as a father.

So last year, when we were with Alexandra and Sarah, 248,000 people crossed the Darién Gap. That was a record annual high. This year, we are about to hit 500,000 people crossing this jungle. The word is out that the Darién Gap is this treacherous pathway to the United States.

And you see large numbers of Ecuadorians, of people from China, people from Afghanistan, taking this route. And they are fleeing economic instability, political instability, conflict, war.

It’s not that they don’t know that the Darién Gap is dangerous. It’s that many of them are making the calculation that the potential reward is worth the risk.

Michael Barbaro

Today’s episode was produced by Sydney Harper and Carlos Prieto, with help from Nina Feldman and Clare Toeniskoetter. It was edited by MJ Davis Lin and Patricia Willens, with help from Lisa Chow, fact checked by Susan Lee, contains original music by Elisheba Ittoop and Dan Powell, and was engineered by Brad Fisher and Chris Wood. Our theme music is by Jim Brunberg and Ben Landsverk of Wonderly. Special Thanks to Eileen Sullivan. That’s it for “The Daily.” I’m Michael Barbaro. See you tomorrow.