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HAITIAN ODYSSEY:
10,000 miles in search of home

By Elizabeth Trovall and Marie D. De Jesús | Mar. 9, 2022

Marie D. De Jesús / Staff photographer

DEL RIO — From atop the Del Río-Ciudad Acuña International Bridge that stretched above the makeshift migrant camp on the U.S. side of the border, the cries of children rose from below and the loud thunder of a government helicopter boomed overhead. Families shielded themselves from the hot sun under tents constructed from the carrizo cane that was growing along the river.

The arrival of some 16,000 Haitian migrants to this border town grabbed the nation's attention mid-September 2021. There were images of border agents on horseback rounding up Haitians, a local disaster declaration and stories of pregnant women with little to eat and drink.

What Americans saw as the beginning of a crisis was the end of a long journey for many Haitian migrants who crossed South and Central America to be there.

Thousands were ushered into the country and made it to cities like Houston, Miami and Boston.

Others were not so lucky.

Since mid-September, according to the International Organization for Migration, the Biden administration has flown nearly 13,000 men, women and children back to Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.

But what happened in Del Rio was the bubbling up of one of the most surprising immigration stories of the decade – a story that traverses unexpected parts of the Americas: the Chilean capital of Santiago, Brazilian stadiums and a place where the Pan-American highway gives way to roadless jungle.


Migrants from Haiti waiting to get access to the United States cross the Rio Grande toward Ciudad Acuña to get supplies on Sept. 17, 2021. (Marie D. De Jesús / Staff photographer)

NECOCLÍ, Colombia — Four dozen Haitian men and women strap their wide-eyed children into black-and-yellow life vests underneath a large white tent in this beach town on the northwest coast of Colombia on a cloudy November morning. They wear their Brazilian and Haitian passports covered in plastic around their necks — a badge of the lives they leave behind.

It took thousands of miles on numerous buses to get here, yet the toughest part of the journey is ahead of them.

Babies are crying, but the mood is lively. The warm Caribbean winds that gust through town are familiar. A vendor offers popcorn and fried plantains for the road. Men carrying small tents and large plastic water jugs chat energetically in Haitian Creole as they wait to board. Backpacks and thick plastic trash bags hold the essentials — and the last treasures of their former lives.

They line up to board the Perla II, a boat that will take them across the Gulf of Urabá to one of the most secluded and dangerous stretches of Latin America. They've already dealt with price gouging, extortion from officials and blatant discrimination – but they haven't seen the corpses yet.

Thousands of Haitians lined the beaches of this seaside town to make the trek through the Darién Gap. They are the same families who were met with chaos and squalor under the Del Río-Ciudad Acuña International Bridge in fall 2021.

What drove Haitians from South America toward the Texas-Mexico border is part of a cross-continental migration story that started more than a decade ago with the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. Seismic economic and political forces have moved Haitians to South American slums, to the Houston suburbs and even back to Haiti.

And nearly all made the journey through the Darién Gap — the only way to reach North America by land.

Perilous path

The Darién Gap is a mountainous and heavily forested stretch of land, connective tissue that joins northern Colombia (South America) and southern Panama (Central America). It is literally a 66-mile gap in the 19,000-mile Pan-American Highway, which runs from southern South America into the United States. Logistical difficulties, environmental concerns and a desire to keep foot-and-mouth disease out of North America kept the gap from being filled in over the decades.

Along the Darién Gap, there are no roads or hospitals or electricity.

There are armed groups, venomous animals, flash flooding, disease and death.

But for many, a chance at life in the U.S. was worth it.

In 2021 alone, some 83,000 Haitians hiked this difficult, beautiful terrain. Dozens did not make it out alive. The Missing Migrants Project confirmed at least 52 people have died in the Darién Gap since January 2021, though they say their figures “represent only the barest of minimums in this area.”

Necoclí

Necoclí, Colombia, is a common stopping point before venturing through the Darién Gap.

With paved roads, ATM machines and cellphone service, Necoclí is a place to soak in modern-day comfort and stock up on supplies before migrants face days without electricity or plumbing. Necocli’s vendors push their carts selling ponchos, headlamps and knockoff Crocs to migrants.

Normally it is a low-key beach town for Colombians. Not unlike Del Rio last fall, it became an unexpected hotspot for Haitian migration.

From Necoclí, the migrants take boats across the Gulf of Urabá to Acandí. Motorcycles and horses transport people on the dirt roads that crisscross this tiny, predominantly Afro-Colombian town. Those who can cough up the cash hitch a ride on horse-drawn wooden carts up the muddy hills to Las Tecas camp, where migrants sleep before they begin the roadless trek through the Darién Gap.

At Las Tecas, migrants pitch tents in a large clearing, just before the land becomes more rugged and a thick

forest takes shape.

Under black and green tarps held up by wooden posts, locals from Colombia's Chocó department surround the camp in makeshift storefronts to sell food, water, alcohol and even WiFi to the night's guests.

On a cool night in November, many Haitians, Syrians and Venezuelans have set up tents before they venture into the forest. They mostly stick together by nationality and common language.

The Venezuelans tend to be young men traveling alone, while the Haitian cohort are more likely to arrive in families. Haitian mothers sit cross-legged inside their camping tents, tending to their small children. The men stand outside, protectively, and talk.

'A chicken has more value than we do'

Jean Jeanbaptiste arrives at the camp late with his wife and son. Tall and full of energy, Jeanbaptiste explains how he got to Las Tecas camp — and why he's willing to risk his life to make it to the United States.

Originally from Haiti, Jeanbaptiste arrived here after living for eight years in Curitiba, a city in southern Brazil.

"(Haiti) isn't safe," Jeanbaptiste says in Spanish, one of several languages he speaks. "The government wasn't good with us poor Haitians, and it's even worse today."

He moved to Brazil to escape the instability and insecurity in Haiti, which grew more acute after the assassination of Haitian president Jovenel Moïse last July. The country also has dealt with an uptick in kidnappings and gang violence.

"Nobody is protecting us there (in Haiti)," he says. "A chicken has more value than we do."

He found safety when he immigrated to Brazil, which many Haitians did in the 2010s. There he said he worked at an Outback Steakhouse — and though life wasn't bad, he found it difficult to get ahead living off the minimum wage of about $200 per month. He managed to save up for this journey with the tips he got.

Smiling comes easy to Jeanbaptiste, even as he describes his current predicament: being broke midway through the journey. He's spent his last $300 to pay for a guide to take him to the Panamanian border. The journey has been pricey so far — around $3,000 for the three of them.

"The police is what's killing us, taking a lot of our money," he says. When they've taken buses, officials will come aboard and threaten to turn them back to the city they came from if they don't pay up.

He traveled from Brazil through Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador and Colombia to get here.

Now he's worried if the money he paid will really get him to the Panamanian border. There's no money-back guarantee if he doesn't make it.

He's headed to the U.S., where he has family in Massachusetts. He's heard about people getting sent back to Haiti at the border and is worried he could be sent away, too.

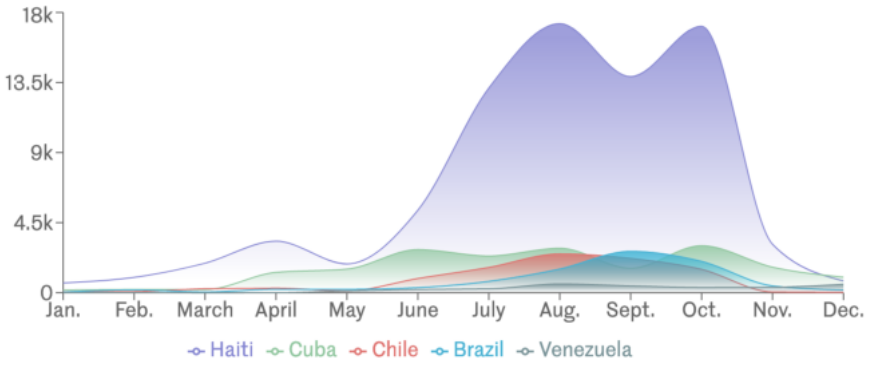
"I can't say (the U.S. is) abandoning us. They're helping us because sometimes we cross and they let us in, no big deal, but sometimes they also deport us," he says.

He admits he doesn't know many specifics about the journey ahead of him. He's taking it step by step — he knows tomorrow they have to climb a hill to eventually reach Panama — but from there he isn't sure.

A local guide standing nearby, Andres Aristizabal Meza, pulls out his phone to show him photos and text messages from the other Haitians he's shepherded into Panama's southern border with Colombia.

The guide reassures Jeanbaptiste and reminds him that at dawn the group will depart and the most difficult leg of the journey begins.

Irregular transit of foreigners across the Panama-Colombia border in 2021, top 5 countries of origin



Note: Chile and Brazil numbers represent children of Haitian citizens whose birth records correspond to these countries.

Source: Servicio Nacional de Migración de Panamá

Runway to America

Panama's official migration statistics indicate that in 2021, some 83,000 Haitians and an additional 18,000 children of Haitians born in Brazil and Chile were detected at Panama's southern border with Colombia. Migration experts use this number as a proxy for how many migrants are headed to the United States, though not all make it there.

The some 100,000 making this journey in 2021 are nearly three times the number of people that made the same odyssey during the entire previous decade.

It's not just Haitians. Panamanian border authorities have a long list of nationalities they've seen crossing into their forested southern border on their way to the United States — some have traveled shockingly far from home countries like Bangladesh and Uzbekistan.

A small but increasing number of Africans have been crossing through this region as well, according to the Migration Policy Institute.

"We're talking about more than 10 nationalities that pass through here, Haitians in the largest volume," Acandí's former mayor, Lilia Córdoba, said in Spanish. Córdoba handles local migrant issues for the area.

In Las Tecas camp, a boisterous group of Venezuelans — mostly slender men in their 20s — talk about why they left home.

They joke that the only reason to go to Venezuela is to lose weight. Hyperinflation and food shortages have led to roughly a third of the country being food insecure.

They are bracing themselves for the journey ahead, equipped with few personal belongings.

One young man, Daniel Alexander Olivero Coronel, explains how his father was killed in Venezuela and his mother didn't take care of him, so he left the country on his own when he was 17 – roughly five years ago.

"To save your life, you have to immigrate," he says in Spanish.

Since then, he's been adrift in South America, moving from city to city to find a place where he could make a living and anchor himself.

He's traveling without any money or help from his family, finding odd jobs here and there, or asking for charity.

He writes songs. But his notebook with his lyrics was destroyed in a downpour. He hopes he can start writing again when he finds a home.

"We're fighting for a good future, to have something better," he says.

On the other side of camp, two Syrians stand near a makeshift bar run by locals, where reggaeton and a blend of pop and old classic songs in Spanish blare throughout the camp.

As a kid, Ashraf Al Kontar left Syria to live with his dad, who worked in Venezuela. On top of the economic and political crisis in Venezuela, he wasn't able to secure permanent immigration documents there. He decided to leave and go to Philadelphia to reunite with family there.

"(The U.S.) is the only country that's going to give the freedom that one needs, the freedom to work, to live, to enjoy what you're doing," he says.

Life begins and ends

The journey is arduous; guides explain travelers must repeatedly cross and recross waterways along the route.

Lilia Córdoba knows the stories from her months working with Haitian migrants.

"In the audio messages, they tell me there are a lot of dead people on the path," says Córdoba.

She remembers one woman who was traveling alone with her two daughters, around ages 3 and 5, who insisted on continuing her journey through the Darién Gap.

"I told the woman that it won't go well for her because she doesn't have someone to help her to take the two girls," Córdoba says.

She asked some of the other people traveling with the mother to help out. Concerned about the family, she followed up with someone else traveling in the same group.

The girls' mother had died along the path, Córdoba was told.

"And these girls?" says Córdoba. "Nobody is going to claim them."

On her phone, she pulls up an audio message from a Haitian man who recounts crossing a river in Panama. He said he saw two people die while trying to cross, washed away by the river, including a pregnant woman.

Doctors Without Borders, which provides medical and mental health consults for people passing through the

Darién Gap, said migrants reported 328 incidents of sexual violence and 86 cases of other types of violence from April 2021 through December. Half of sexual violence survivors were Haitian.

In their consults, migrants have presented with respiratory infections, skin and gastrointestinal issues and physical injuries from falling. Mental health patients have been treated after witnessing and experiencing violence from armed groups and seeing dead bodies.

A woman lies on the ground in a tent after just giving birth in Las Tecas camp. (Andres Aristizabal Meza / Courtesy)

But the forest also can be a place for small miracles.

Andres Aristizabal Meza – a Colombian guide who leads migrants to the Panamanian border – says he enjoys this work because he's helping others. He beams as he reveals a photo of a woman lying on the ground in a tent – she had just given birth.

With the help of a Colombian woman managing one of the makeshift shops at the remote camp, without access to a doctor, hospital or pain meds, the Haitian woman gave birth to a baby girl.

“Luckily everything worked out, but it was scary,” says Aristizabal Meza. “It was crazy; it was beautiful.”

Into the heart of the Darién Gap

Before the sun rises at the camp, small children start to cry inside the tents, their voices cutting through the soft chirping of the frogs and insects. Pans clink over crackling fires as migrants prepare breakfast ahead of the tiresome journey.

The light begins to illuminate the panorama visible from the camp – dewy, bright green grass, a melange of lush trees and the shaded curves of forested hills in the distance. A tourist might call it paradise.

Birds sing with gusto and people start taking down their tents and begin to pack. They chat and joke in Haitian Creole and Spanish.

Those with the cash pay a “mochilero” or backpacker to carry their bags for them through the jungle. As the journey continues, these bags get lighter and lighter as people shed their heavy belongings to lighten the load as they make their way up and down hills and wade through rivers.

On the other side

If Jean Sony Eugene had known the journey would be this dangerous, he never would have sold off his belongings in Chile and risked the lives of his wife and unborn daughter to come to the United States.

He still finds it difficult to talk about what he saw in the forest – the murders, robberies, crying… the families forced to leave loved ones behind and forge ahead.

“I saw a lot of grotesque things in this place,” he says in Spanish.

The 32-year-old from Port-au-Prince recalls stepping over corpses in the forest on the journey.

“Haitians, Cubans, Venezuelans … I saw a lot of dead people on that route,” Eugene says. “Each person who goes through this path and makes it here is a hero.”

He and his wife ended up in Del Rio with the thousands of other Haitians who gathered there in the late summer and early fall of 2021.

They had crossed South and Central America to get there – abandoning the life they built in Chile – yet they had no idea that afterward, the United States still might not let his family in at all.

(Left) People pass by a religious figure as they enter the Colombian beach town Necoclí on the eastern bank of the Gulf of Urabá on Nov. 5, 2021. (Right) After crossing the Gulf, migrants walk about four hours from the coast of Acandí to Las Tecas migrant camp carrying provisions. The following day, the migrants will start a trek deep into the Darién Gap on their way to Panamá. (Marie D. De Jesús / Staff photographer)

It started with a rumble. One of the deadliest natural disasters on record, it was the seismic event that left 1.5 million Haitians homeless.

Jean Sony Eugene and a buddy were hanging out at his girlfriend’s house in Port-au-Prince when the 7.0 magnitude earthquake hit. It was just a month before he was going to turn 20, Jan. 12, 2010.

His girlfriend’s home was relatively unscathed, and he remembers rushing to his family’s house.

Everyone inside died under the rubble. (His mother wasn’t home and was spared.)

“The house where I lived was completely destroyed,” Eugene said. “If it had been me in my house, I could have lost my life.”

He remembers corpses being pulled out from under collapsed houses around him. He felt weak assessing the damage. His cousin was among the victims.

The United Nations estimates some 220,000 people died.

Eugene and his mom didn’t have a place to live. They gathered tents and sheets to create shelter on the ground in a clearing. Eugene lived in the makeshift tent city for two years.

Like Eugene, Haiti is still recovering from those seismic wounds 12 years ago. The disaster, which exacerbated the country's political instability and poverty, has provoked waves of Haitian migration across the region.

Scores of Haitians, like Eugene, looked to the Americas for new opportunities. Two South American countries drew in determined Haitians over the next decade.

Building stadiums

Ahead of hosting two major international sporting events, Brazil put Haitian migrants in the country to work in the early 2010s. These immigrant workers helped build new stadiums for the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics. Brazil reaped the benefits of affordable immigrant labor.

But those jobs dried up after those sporting events were over and unemployment in Brazil doubled in the latter half of the 2010s.

While Haiti was still reeling from the earthquake, another migration pattern emerged – Haitians (in Brazil and Haiti) began to move to a second South American country known for its strong economy, Chile.

In contrast to Haiti, the poorest country in the Americas, Chile in the 2010s had a growing international reputation for its vibrant economy in South America, attracting entrepreneurs, study-abroad students and foreign direct investment.

"Chile has been portraying this image of being a stable economic and also a stable political country," said Marcia Vera Espinoza, an immigration researcher at Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh.

Vera Espinoza said "news travels fast" among migrants, and Chile – an isolated country wedged between the Andes mountains and thousands of miles of coastline – became an immigrant destination.

Eugene had read about Chile in school, but he hadn't considered it as a place to live.

But in 2013, his mom was murdered while working at a small butcher shop. She had financially supported Eugene, who grew desperate after her death.

His cousin in Santiago knew how to help – he persuaded Eugene to join him in Chile.

Eugene didn't speak much Spanish at the time, but he was running out of options. In 2015, his cousin bought his plane ticket and even welcomed him at the airport.

Even though he brought a coat, prepared for the cold Chilean winter, it still took Eugene off guard when he stepped out of the airport.

"The cold said to me, 'welcome.' It hit me in the stomach, and that's when I realized that I'm not in my country anymore," he said.

Chile was still relatively open to newcomers at the time. Vera Espinoza said Chilean business owners told her in 2015 they needed immigrants to fill jobs.

The country had fewer visa restrictions. Haitians who could afford a flight were eligible for an automatic tourist visa upon entry. Then, once they were in Chile, laws allowed them to apply for an employment-based visa, if they found work.

Haitians trickled into the country in the first half of 2010 this way – but after 2015, something changed.

From 2014 to 2019, the immigrant population grew rapidly from 410,000 to 1.5 million – in a country with just 19 million residents. Most of that growth was from Haitians and Venezuelans.

Haitian newcomers started having children in the country, and an Afro-Chilean population emerged for the first time. The cultural and racial identity of Chile was changing in real time.

From open arms to closed doors

Some Chileans embraced this evolution – others did not. The arrival of many low-income, Black and brown newcomers, some who spoke only Haitian Creole, was a shock to some Chileans. Many view themselves as whiter than other Latin American countries, according to a survey by the country's National Human Rights Institution.

Haitian-Chilean educator Carl Abilhomme has carefully observed the influx of Haitian migrants to Chile since he arrived in the country 15 years ago and how it's been a catalyst for more overt anti-Black, anti-immigrant discrimination.

"When I first got here, people accepted me with open arms," he said in Spanish.

When Abilhomme first arrived in the 2000s, he remembers feeling like a celebrity. People asked to take photos with him and sometimes would even ask to touch his skin because they had never seen a Black person before.

"It was a tremendous experience for me," Abilhomme said.

But he said he noticed a distinct change in how he and other Haitians were treated during the latter part of the 2010s. The sudden increase in Haitian migration sparked more vocal and overt xenophobia, racism and classism.

At a Chilean presidential debate in 2017, conservative candidate Sebastián Piñera promised voters to "open the doors to those who are good for Chile" and warned, "We are going to close the doors to those who come to hurt, those who come to bring crime, drug trafficking, organized crime."

Piñera won the election, and it didn't take long after he took office in 2018 for him to impose new migration limitations that targeted poor immigrants from Haiti and Venezuela, who were arriving in historic numbers.

Haitians were no longer allowed to arrive in Chile without visas – and were denied most visa requests – drastically limiting the arrival of Haitian newcomers. Another temporary visa, often used by Haitians, was eliminated.

For the many Haitians with expired visas, the government did try to offer amnesty – but it soon became a major frustration for Haitians. The program required documents, such as a background check, which were virtually impossible to get from the Haitian government in a timely manner.

"I decided to abandon Chile because of the documentation issue," Domingue Paul said in Spanish. "They (Chile) don't want to legalize (us)."

Many Haitian migrants like Paul have said that if it hadn't been so hard to get a work visa, they would have stayed in Chile instead of making the cross-country trek to the United States.

"It's very hard to get a good job," said Paul, who worked at a warehouse in the Chilean capital of Santiago that would transport cellphones, laptops and clothing throughout the country. He can name all the Chilean cities they would ship to, even though he's never been to any of them.

He was working with an expired visa and ID and tried for more than a year to get that paperwork from Haiti so he could stay, but Haiti's government isn't cut out for that.

"In my country, they still live in the 1950s," he said, chuckling.

Social unrest

In 2019, after immigration policies had been changing, Chile's economic success story was interrupted by massive social protests that were spurred by stark inequality in the country. Businesses were shuttered, and the government imposed curfews in the capital city of Santiago. The economy started to move into recession.

Then the pandemic hit – jobs were drying up, especially for informal work. More restaurants and stores closed their doors. Homicide rates spiked. To stop the spread of COVID-19, in some parts of the country, residents were on strict lockdown and allowed to leave their homes only with special permission.

Domingue Paul's children are Chilean citizens, and he speaks fluent Spanish, but that didn't shield him from suspicion.

He said he was stopped by police officers and wrongly sent to the police station for not having the correct permission slip to be out in public during the pandemic.

Paul said he did have authorization, but it didn't matter because he's Haitian.

"I saw Chileans walk by, but (the police) never stop them," he said. "This is why it doesn't hurt me to leave Chile."

Wooldy Edson Louidor, a researcher at Pontifical Xavierian University in Bogotá, said Haitian immigrants to South America are dealing with alienation beyond simply a language or cultural barrier.

"In the soul, one has an injury from being uprooted, because we're not from here, from the American continent. We're from the African continent," said Louidor, who is Haitian and lives in Colombia.

He said it's important to consider the history of Haitian people being uprooted when their ancestors were ripped from their communities in Africa and taken to the Caribbean to be slaves.

"As a Black person, there's always this uprootedness, and on top of that when you have to migrate, your relationship with where you arrive is different. There are more things at play."

Uprooting again

While many Haitians were struggling to get visas in Chile and earn a living during the social crisis and pandemic, Eugene was doing so well he had started his own business. He opened a small corner shop, where he sold things like cigarettes and Gatorade in a Santiago community called Quilicura, where many Haitians live.

"It wasn't a large business, but with it I started to make a living," he said.

But one day he arrived at his shop to find the padlocks removed and much of his inventory stolen. When he went to the police to file a report, they told him they couldn't help because he hadn't completed all the paperwork for his business.

He talked to his wife. They decided to invest their money in restocking the empty shelves and toughing it out.

But the attacks continued.

One day, six guys showed up to the business.

“One of them pulled out a gun and said ‘give me the money,’ ” Eugene said.

He pretended to reach for the cash but instead hid behind a wall. They shot at him. He fell to the ground in shock as the group fled the scene.

He called his wife. He was done. He couldn’t lose his life for this. His mom had been murdered the same way. Within a week, they knew what they had to do.

“We made the decision to leave the country,” he said. He quickly closed his business in July 2021.

His wife never had a work visa anyway. They sold their car, their belongings and decided they would start over in the country he’d heard about since he was a kid: the United States.

Despite anti-immigrant discrimination and stark racial and economic inequalities in the United States, it generally lives up to its reputation for high wages and plenty of jobs. Then, when President Joe Biden took office, many Haitians saw the shift in leadership as a signal that border officials would be friendlier to asylum seekers and other migrants in need.

They made the long journey by land across the Americas, through the Darién Gap. Starting in January 2021, Panamanian border officials were tracking hundreds of Haitians coming in from South America, heading to the United States. By March, thousands were making this trek.

Eugene, like many others, believed that if they survived the journey, the United States would let them in without a hitch.

“I thought … they would have compassion for us,” he said, “I knew I was going to get in.”

But it wasn’t compassion that greeted him when he arrived in Del Rio with his pregnant wife. Instead, he was met with the harsh realities of a militarized border and many of the same Trump-era immigration policies.

Quettlie Fanfan, her husband Domingue Paul, their children Ruthshamma Paul Fanfan and Ismael Dowens Paul Fanfan prepare snacks and wait for their turn to get into a bus leaving Ciudad Acuña for Torreón, Mexico, on Friday, Nov. 19, 2021. (Marie D. De Jesús / Staff photographer)

Jean Sony Eugene and his eight-months-pregnant wife arrived in Ciudad Acuña, Mexico, in mid-September, still shaken after coming upon corpses in the Darién Gap during a hellish two-month journey from Santiago.

Domingue Paul arrived with his wife and two kids in October.

They were among thousands who ended up in this border town, across the Rio Grande from Del Rio.

Like many others in the camp, the families had been fleeing violence for years. Eugene's mom was shot and killed in the small shop she ran in Haiti. When he moved to Santiago, Chile, his small business was targeted by a street gang.

Jean Sony Eugene holds his 3-month-old daughter, Neissa Eugene Merone, next to his wife, Naomise Merone, at a house where community leaders have provided them space on Jan. 25 in Houston. (Marie D. De Jesús / Staff photographer)

Paul also fled Haiti after the murder of a family member. He, too, abandoned his life in Santiago and risked everything for the shot at getting into the United States.

The stories of both families lay bare the contradictions of U.S. immigration policy.

From September 2021 to the end of the year, 40 percent of Haitians detected by Customs and Border Protection — 10,666 individuals, according to agency data — were sent on flights to Haiti, including women and children.

Those flights took off under Title 42, a U.S. public health rule, which has been used by both the Trump and Biden administrations to expel migrants in the name of preventing the spread of COVID-19. (Facing legal scrutiny, the policy has recently been partially blocked.)

Under pressure, when so many people assembled at the border in September, the administration acted quickly to clear the area – expelling some Haitians but allowing thousands more into the United States.

By contrast, the Biden administration has turned back hundreds of thousands of Central Americans with asylum

claims – more than 90 percent of single adults from the Northern Triangle.

But images of border agents on horseback rounding up Haitians were an unintended reminder of the role racism played in the ordeal Haitians underwent over the last decade. Black descendants of slaves were unwelcome in the South American countries where they settled after fleeing violence and natural disaster in Haiti. They were an unwelcome presence at the border. That many ended up back amid the poverty and violence in their home country is an indication of the overwhelmed and chaotic U.S. border policy.

Stuck at the border

He had expected to be in the U.S. by now.

On a chilly November evening, Paul, wearing a brown beanie, leaned back on a parked semi truck outside a dancehall-turned-shelter in Ciudad Acuña. The 40-year-old shot a wary look at a crowd of fellow Haitians rushing around a trailer full of donated winter clothes and toys. He sat back, watching.

“It embarrasses me, because foreigners think that we’re all the same,” he said in Spanish, referring to the stigma of being a Haitian migrant. “This is the time when we (Haitians) need to present ourselves differently.”

It was Paul’s final night at the migrant shelter, which would be cleared out by month’s end. He was ready to leave but feared crossing the Rio Grande into Del Rio.

Dozens of Haitians had found temporary housing in the Mexican shelter since leaving Brazil or Chile. Many had been in the area since September and were waiting to be processed by Mexican immigration officials.

Paul’s son called out to him. Both of his kids were sick.

After traveling around 10,000 miles to get to the border, they were stymied at the final mile.

“We thought with Joe Biden it was going to be better,” Paul said. He expected the left-leaning president would have more humanitarian policies toward migrants, which was the case in Chile, where more progressive leadership had welcomed Haitians years back.

“With Donald Trump, of course this would happen,” he said. He almost prefers Trump’s tactic – at least his anti-immigrant message was clear and consistent.

“I don’t like it when people say they love you to your face and then treat you differently behind your back,” he said.

He had decided not to risk deportation and instead was taking up the Mexican government’s offer to build a new life in Torreón, a city of 720,000 in northern Mexico. In the morning, he and his family would take a bus there with dozens of others.

Tens of thousands of Haitians have decided not to continue into the U.S., causing a sharp increase in Haitian asylum seekers in Mexico with nowhere else to go. Mexico saw a 773 percent increase in Haitians seeking asylum in 2021, nearly 52,000 people, along with nearly 7,000 Chileans who are children of Haitians, according to the country’s refugee agency COMAR.

With the support of the United Nations refugee agency, Haitians at the temporary shelter, like Domingue Paul, were encouraged to pursue their asylum claims in Mexico. Local business owners said they would hire Haitians, and with the goal of closing the migrant shelter, the government began busing families to Torreón.

The next morning, the sun was shining on a crisp November day in Ciudad Acuña. Standing in the bus line within the shelter's concrete walls was Paul's wife, Quettlie Fanfan. With minimal luggage in tow, she smiled in anticipation of finally leaving.

"We want to thank the Mexican people, above all Acuña," Fanfan said in Spanish. "It's a town with a heart of gold."

She said if it weren't for their help, they would be dead.

She was ready to get on with her life, especially for her kids, both Chilean citizens, both extremely sick.

She hopes they can forgive her and understand it was all done for them.

"We believe, God willing, in Mexico we can find what we were looking for," Fanfan said.

A disastrous change of mind

Not long after the family moved to Torreón, a friend told the couple that immigration authorities released him into the U.S. after he crossed the border. The friend convinced the family they would be able to enter without any problems.

They made a snap decision to cross into the U.S. from Ciudad Juarez.

In WhatsApp messages, Fanfan described what happened.

They were caught and detained by border officials and spent a week in cold detention centers with little food.

Then, one night at around 3 a.m., they were suddenly woken up without any word of what was going on. Their feet and hands were bound, so she couldn't hold her own children, and they were put on a plane.

"They deported us. Now we are in Haiti," she said, her voice lethargic and strained.

After three years, they were back where they started, and conditions were much worse than before.

"Returning to this country is like hell. There's no electricity, there's no potable water, there isn't anything," she said. "There's no life."

The violence and political instability in Haiti has reached alarming levels. It was severe enough for the Biden administration to give temporary immigration protections to Haitians in August 2021 after President Jovenel Moïse was assassinated. The U.S. State Department has advised U.S. citizens not to travel to Haiti due to "kidnapping, crime, civil unrest, and COVID-19" under a level 4 advisory (the most serious). For context, Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras are all at a level 3.

Fanfan and Domingue were living at her mother's house in northwest Haiti, by the border with the Dominican Republic. They left home only during the daylight, though the possibility of being killed for no reason was an everyday threat.

They had to live with family because she left everything in Haiti behind when she moved to Chile.

"We don't know what to do with the kids," she said, beginning to weep.

Tough political decisions, devastating consequences

The Biden administration's decision to ramp up the expulsions of Haitians in September 2021 was made under a challenging political context for the new president.

The sudden influx of Haitians in early fall was part of a sharp increase in border crossings to historic levels, which happened over Biden's first year in office. Furthermore, the new president inherited hawkish Trump-era border policies, like Title 42, at a time when immigration and border security has been a rallying cry among many conservatives.

Before September, Biden had been allowing a large majority of Haitians at the border into the United States while turning away most Central Americans. But then, when Haitians began to arrive en masse and the national press descended onto the Del Rio camp, Biden quickly ramped up the expulsions of Haitians back to Haiti.

"I think that the expulsions in September were both a response to a situation that was overwhelming the U.S. authorities but probably more so an attempt to signal to potential future migrants that they would not be let in without question," said Jessica Bolter, analyst at the non-partisan Migration Policy Institute.

Bolter said Biden's strategy to deter Haitian migration from South America has been at least partially effective – many families turned back to Mexico; others never reached the U.S. at all.

But Guerline Jozef, director of the Haitian Bridge Alliance, which advocates for asylum seekers, said there's no excuse for the cruelty of sending Haitians back to a violent, impoverished country.

"The political turmoil in Haiti, the insecurity in Haiti is forcing displacement in the country, pushing people to leave. And yet we continue to deport people into that same system," said Jozef.

She sees the U.S. treatment of Haitian migrants as a continuation of the country's history of anti-Black racism, a resistance to adding to the Black population.

"How can you talk about civil rights when you have Haitians here, you don't even allow them to go to a judge to make a case," said J. Sadraque Cius, founder of People Outreach Ministry and a Haitian community leader in Houston. "It's all about racism. Let's call it like it is," he said.

In the U.S.

Eugene sat on a squeaky stool at the kitchen counter in a spacious two-story brick home in northwest Houston. In the living room, his wife, Naomise Merone, held their daughter, Neissa Lindsey.

He recalled that after the long journey to the border, he was shocked to hear of his friends who were sent back to Haiti. He had assumed he – and other Haitians – would be admitted to the United States.

In Del Rio, his family waited for three days that hit triple-digit temperatures with limited access to food and water.

"I came with a lot of faith. I knew I was going to get in," he said.

He was right – by sheer luck.

His family was among the thousands of Haitians who did gain entry to the U.S. They were quickly released and took a bus to Houston, where they've decided to stay for now.

“I think (in the U.S.) we can have a certain security, we can work, we can achieve our goal,” he said.

But his story is far from over. His newborn is a U.S. citizen, but he has an asylum case to win (which Haitians rarely do), a work permit to apply for and housing to secure.

After learning Spanish and building a life in Chile, he’s starting over — again. Now with a wife and newborn. He said he’s been blessed to find a temporary home through the Haitian community for the last few months, but the clock is ticking for him to become self-sufficient.

“We arrived to the best place to have a better life, a better opportunity to live in peace,” he said, grateful he no longer has to worry about the lawlessness he’s endured over the years. “It’s the best place for us to live.”

Back to square one

In Haiti, Quettlie Fanfan and Domingue Paul are still processing all they’ve been through.

In a voice message, one of their kids screams out for their grandmother, who lives with them, saying, “abuela, abuela,” in Spanish, a foreign language in the Haitian Creole-speaking country.

They’re starting from zero — again, in a country Fanfan said is more dangerous than when they left.

“The gangs have more powerful guns than the police, and there are many more of them than police,” she said.

She’s still shaken from the trauma of their journey – the horrors of the Colombian forest and the cruel treatment by U.S. immigration officials. It makes her sad whenever she thinks about it.

Her children are still sick. Things that had been easy in Latin America, like charging a phone or making a call, are an ordeal in Haiti. Her mom is suffering from diabetes and is devastated to see them back.

They put everything into making a better life for themselves but were rejected by Chile and the United States – among the wealthiest countries in the Americas.

And in the teetering republic of Haiti, it’s as if their own government has turned its back, too.

“For now, we are in Haiti, living in fear,” she said. “One doesn’t know what could happen each day. One can only count on the day that’s already passed. But what happens tomorrow, we leave in the hands of God.”

Weeks after being expelled to Haiti, in mid-February 2022, Quettlie Fanfan and Domingue Paul were able to fly back to Santiago, Chile, with their two children.