Launching WOLA’s 50th Anniversary
This year, WOLA launched a series of events leading up to the celebration of our 50th anniversary. In September, we commemorated the brutal military coup that overthrew the democratically elected government of Salvador Allende in 1973. The atrocities of the Pinochet regime that followed catalyzed the human rights movement throughout the Americas and around the world, and sparked the founding of WOLA.

Our founding generation was determined to ensure that voices of people who witnessed these abuses should be heard in Washington, thus spurring a unique form of advocacy that has become the hallmark of WOLA. Throughout the years, WOLA has remained effective by combining strong ties to the region with strategic connections to U.S. and international policymakers.

In this annual report, you will find highlights from WOLA’s most remarkable work in 2023 — our collaboration with partners, our authoritative research, and our strategic advocacy. Whether it is behind the scenes influencing U.S. policy, in the media shaping the story, or with our innovative outreach through multimedia platforms, WOLA’s staff makes a profound impact on the key issues facing Latin America today.

We live in tumultuous times. As we address rising authoritarianism, new threats to democracy and the rule of law, unprecedented levels of migration across the region, the ravages of the climate crisis, ongoing struggles for racial and gender justice, the challenges of corruption and militarization, we rely on the principles of our founding to forge innovative advocacy tools today.

The fight for human rights and dignity is a powerful force. The role of civil society has never been more important — in holding governments accountable, amplifying marginalized voices, and promoting new forms of democratic participation. Through WOLA’s work in Washington and elsewhere, we collaborate in developing strategies to amplify these voices and propose effective policy solutions.

We could not do any of this work without the support of our generous donors and our ever-expanding WOLA community. For nearly 50 years, you have made WOLA a leader in advocacy for human rights in the Americas. We thank you.
Our Vision

We envision a future where public policies protect human rights and recognize human dignity, and where justice overcomes violence.

Maureen Meyer, WOLA’s VP for Programs, speaks at a press conference with Representatives Norma Torres, Joaquin Castro and Della Ramirez and representatives of U.S. and Guatemalan civil society and indigenous leaders to call for the peaceful transition of power in Guatemala.
We partner with advocates on the ground and draw on in-depth knowledge of the region. We produce timely and accessible research with clear policy recommendations. We develop sophisticated advocacy strategies to impact policies for human rights and social justice.

PARTNERS

WOLA partners who came to Washington D.C. from across the region for the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) hearings gathered at WOLA’s office. WOLA was a co-petitioner in select hearings during the year and collaborated on several public events discussing how to protect human rights defenders and journalists and counter threats to democracy.

“Latin America is home to a vibrant civil society. Everything WOLA does is based on our ties to partners — their passion for human rights strengthens and inspires us.”

Carolina Jiménez Sandoval, President of WOLA

WOLA Hosts Afro-Descendant Leaders from Colombia, Brazil and Cuba

WOLA’s Gimena Sánchez-Garzoli has for many years played a critical role with partners on the ground fighting for justice and equity, including advocacy for the Ethnic Chapter of Colombia’s Peace Accords. This year, WOLA led a delegation of Afro-Descendant activists from Brazil, Colombia, and Cuba. In a meeting with the U.S. Special Representative for Racial Equity and Justice, Desirée Cormier Smith, they discussed how best to move forward with recent policy initiatives such as the Joint Action to Eliminate Racial and Ethnic Discrimination (JAPER) with Brazil and the U.S.-Colombia Action Plan for Racial and Ethnic Equality (CAPREE).

“The U.S. government has made an official commitment to racial justice in these countries. We work with our partners to make sure they follow through.”

Gimena Sánchez-Garzoli, Director for the Andes

Abuses at the U.S.- Mexico Border: How to Address Failures and Protect Rights

WOLA launched a landmark report with our long-standing partner the Kino Border Initiative based in Nogales, Arizona. The report documents a shocking pattern of human rights violations against migrants with no accountability for Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) and other officers. These include the misuse of lethal force, intimidation, and sexual harassment. We offered over 40
specific recommendations in the belief that the United States can have a well-governed border where migrants and asylum seekers are treated humanely. The report received extensive media coverage in English and Spanish and served as the basis for our advocacy with Department of Homeland Security and Congress.

“The lack of accountability is so widespread that it helps cement in place a culture that enables human rights violations. The abuses keep coming because impunity is so likely.”  
Adam Isacson, Director for Defense Oversight

WOLA Partners with Temple University Law School to Provide Asylum Resources

Based on our in-depth knowledge of the region, WOLA works with students from Temple University’s School of Law to compile information on country conditions in Central America, Mexico and elsewhere in the region and makes this research available to lawyers working on asylum cases. Over 6,300 people have accessed the resources since the start of the program in 2018. In March and October, WOLA hosted the students working on the project for meetings with legal service providers, congressional staff, and subject matter experts.

“These new legal resources — on risks faced by human rights defenders and journalists, persecution based on gender, as well as state complicity — fortify claims for people in need of protection in the United States.”

Maureen Meyer, VP for Programs

RESEARCH

We draw on decades of expertise to provide timely, accessible analyses and propose specific policy solutions.

The Dangerous Journey Through the Darién Gap

Record numbers of people crossed the border of Colombia and Panama through the Darién Gap in 2023. WOLA’s team conducted a field visit to Necocli along the route and produced a video to document the migrant experience. Of the more than a half million people who passed through this area last year, a quarter of them were children, and half of them under 5 years old. There are no migrant shelters here, families sleep in tents on the beach and the area is solidly controlled by organized crime.

“Our (field work) shows the absurdity of trying to block people with little to lose, some of them fleeing for their lives. There is no easy solution but countries along the route have to cooperate much more, they have to do more to integrate people who want to stay, and they absolutely cannot leave migrants at the mercy of organized crime.”

Laura Dib, Director for Venezuela & Adam Isacson, Director for Defense Oversight
Militarization Without Civilian Control Puts Human Rights at Risk in Mexico

WOLA’s research examines the growing presence and unchecked power of the Mexican military as it expands into civilian functions. *Militarized Transformation: Human Rights and Democratic Controls in the Context of Increasing Militarization in Mexico* documents extensive abuses, including the failure to notify the proper agency when someone is detained — and offers recommendations for establishing civilian control over the military. Following the publication of this report, the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention recommended that Mexico’s government guarantee the armed forces report their arrests in the National Detention Registry.

“The Mexican government is giving more and more power to institutions known precisely for their lack of transparency, and it is doing so without adequate civilian controls, in a process that will be difficult to reverse. Power without checks and balances is a high-risk path for human rights.”

*Stephanie Brewer, Director for Mexico*

Five Key Trends in Cuban Migration

WOLA’s analysis describes how almost half a million Cuban migrants — 4 percent of the island nation’s population — have left their homes for the United States in the span of just two years. While shifts in U.S. policy intended to incentivize migrants to use safe, orderly, and lawful means have had the effect of slowing these trends, the report warns of a continuing crisis in the future. Cited in influential sources such as *The Economist*, the report was among our most widely circulated on social media, with one graphic reaching half a million views.

“Stark forecasts of food insecurity and continued shortages underline the urgency of developing domestic policies and enacting changes to U.S. policy that address the abject suffering of the island’s residents.”

*Mariakarla Nodarse Venancio, Assistant Director for Cuba*

Rallying U.S. and International Support for Democracy in Guatemala

The Guatemalan elections defied predictions with the victory of anti-corruption candidate Bernardo Arévalo. But, Guatemala’s attorney general took steps to overturn the results and block the presidential transition. Throughout the year WOLA helped rally the international community — through a delegation led by WOLA’s President Carolina Jiménez Sandoval and Director for Central America Ana María Méndez Dardón to Guatemala with RFK Human Rights and Human Rights Watch before the elections, and continuing with successful efforts to engage the U.S. Congress, the State Department, National Security Council, the OAS and others — to uphold the rule of
**Renewed Venezuela Negotiations: A Positive Step but Barriers Remain**

This year witnessed a significant breakthrough in Venezuela as the Maduro government and an opposition coalition, the Unitary Platform, announced the Barbados Partial Agreement on Electoral Conditions, leading the U.S. to ease some sanctions. As news of the agreement was breaking, a much-watched video explainer by WOLA’s Laura Dib stressed the steps that must be taken by the Venezuelan government to guarantee free elections in the coming year. WOLA’s extensive travel to Venezuela will continue to provide in-depth perspectives on human rights and the prospects for elections.

“The pathway towards the Presidential elections in 2024 has many obstacles, but it is of great value that Venezuelan civil society, political actors and the international community have committed to a peaceful and negotiated solution.”

Laura Dib, Director for Venezuela

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**Congressional Testimony: Protect Right to Asylum and Update Border Policies**

WOLA’s Adam Isacson testified before the Foreign Affairs Committee Hearing in the U.S. House of Representatives on The US Border Crisis and the American Solution to an International Problem. Over four hours, he responded to questions and false assertions by the panel’s other two witnesses, including the Trump Administration’s former Secretary for Homeland Security.

“We hope that, despite the pressures of an election year, Congress can lay the foundations for some rights respecting, pragmatic, practical, and dignified changes like the ones we lay out here.”

Adam Isacson, Director for Defense Oversight

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**Drug Policy Reform to Protect Human Rights and Curtail the Climate Crisis**

As WOLA pioneered work in the 1990s that focused the international community’s attention on the human rights cost of the war on drugs, now WOLA is also raising awareness of the implications for the climate. At the 53rd General Assembly of the Organization of American States in June in Washington, WOLA’s John Walsh testified as spokesperson for the American Coalition on Drug Policy, an alliance of 20 civil society organizations. Among other issues, his remarks underscored how crop eradication and drug interdiction are accelerating the climate crisis, with devastating impacts on Latin America’s tropical rainforests and Indigenous communities.

“If we fail the urgent task of reforming our drug policies, the human rights devastation already so obvious today will become even more extreme — (with)... toxic drug markets, rampant corruption and insecurity, democratic erosion, and a deepening climate crisis.”

John Walsh, Director for Drug Policy
**BEHIND THE SCENES: WOLA INFLUENCES U.S. POLICY**

10 Outcomes from this Year’s Human Rights Advocacy:

1. **Restoring Colombia aid in congressional appropriations**
   After the House of Representatives deferred all aid to Colombia, WOLA worked to restore robust funding in the Senate.

2. **Countering authoritarian trends in El Salvador**
   In response to mass detentions and denial of due process, President Bukele’s defiance of the constitutional ban on running for reelection, and other actions undermining democratic values, WOLA pushed back against the U.S. government’s tendency to embrace Bukele with a range of public and private activities, including hosting delegations of human rights defenders from El Salvador for special briefings with the State Department, NSC, the OAS and congressional offices.

3. **Briefing key Members of Congress to stop the Force Act against Cuba**
   WOLA raised concerns about the introduction of a bill that seeks to prevent the President from removing Cuba from the State Sponsor of Terrorism List.

4. **Prioritizing human rights in Mexico in Congressional appropriations**
   WOLA’s outreach led to passage of language that focuses on prosecution of human rights violations, and the search for and identification of the disappeared.

5. **Building support for an international commission against impunity in Honduras**
   WOLA engaged key U.S. Senators to express support with the State Department for the establishment of the anti-corruption commission.

6. **Responding to Peru’s repression of protests**
   As the country faced political turmoil, WOLA met directly with the Peruvian embassy, gathered U.S. Congressional support, and pressed Secretary of State Antony Blinken to speak out for human rights accountability.

7. **Redirecting U.S. policy toward Venezuela**
   WOLA held over 45 private briefings with U.S. policymakers leading up to the Barbados Agreement where Maduro pledged with the Unitary Platform to meet key electoral conditions; as a result of the agreement the United States eased some sanctions. Leaders of the House and Senate Western Hemisphere subcommittees subsequently released a statement welcoming these developments.

8. **Recommending detailed reforms for accountability to the U.S. Department of Homeland Security**
   WOLA held dozens of meetings with U.S. officials and congressional staff to outline specific, achievable reforms to curtail abuses of migrants by U.S. officials at the U.S.-Mexico-border.

9. **Focusing U.S. assistance on Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities in Colombia**
   As a result of our long-term work with partners, and ongoing dialogues with U.S. officials, support for the Ethnic Chapter of Colombia’s peace accords has become a central part of USAID assistance.

10. **Putting drug policy reform on the agenda of local governments**
    WOLA sponsored the sole panel focused on drug policy at the inaugural U.S. State Department-sponsored Cities Summit of the Americas in Denver, Colorado.
IN THE MEDIA: WOLA SHAPES THE STORY

WOLA's strategic communications and rapid response define the debate on critical issues. Examples of our extensive work with journalists and media outlets:

“Carolina Jiménez, human rights specialist: In Latin America, there are still more opportunities for democratic promotion than in other parts of the world.” El País

“What Trump did was he broke the rules ... he made it OK to go after your opponents in a very no-holds-barred way ... This wasn’t the kind of rhetoric you saw to this level in Latin America before.” Gimena Sánchez-Garzoli, The Hill

“Venezuelans want a peaceful transition to democracy ... for many years human rights violations have been at the forefront of (Maduro’s) leadership.” Carolina Jiménez Sandoval, PBS News Weekend

“Militarization does not work and is not the solution. Why? The true power of organized crime doesn’t come just from firearms, it comes from collusion and corruption on the part of authority.” Stephanie Brewer, Forbes

“Maureen Meyers, who visited the Guatemala-Mexico border in mid-June, said it was too early to tell if there will be a long-term decrease in migration flows.” The New York Times

“On the ‘Bukele effect’: “Limiting constitutional rights poses a huge risk for human rights violations such as arbitrary detentions and abuses of authority.” Ana María Méndez Dardón, BBC Mundo

“Coca should not be on the same list as cocaine[...] it’s a denial of (Indigenous) rights and cultures to classify it as something that needs to be abolished.” John Walsh, NPR

“Speaking to migrants from Venezuela in Necocli, Colombia, they would tell us, the deportations from the U.S worry us. But we are going to press ahead. We have nothing to lose.” Laura Dib, CNN en Español
Dear {{FirstName or 'WOLA Supporter'}},

This week, I am in Guatemala City to monitor electoral conditions as the country prepares to hold presidential run-off elections on Sunday. As you may recall, on June 25, Guatemala held the first round of these elections, which led the Supreme Electoral Tribunal to announce that Sandra Torres of the Unidad Nacional de la Esperanza (UNE) and Bernardo Arévalo, an anti-corruption candidate and leader of the progressive Movimiento Semilla, would compete in a second round. Human Rights Watch urging the Guatemalan authorities to hold free and fair elections: “The country is on the brink of an unprecedented social and political crisis. Robust international...
Dear {{FirstName or 'WOLA Supporter'}},

On Monday, June 26, WOLA observed World Refugee Day and the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture. We continue to see cases of human rights violations committed against refugees and victims of torture throughout the Americas. That is why our experts work tirelessly to ensure that governments and human rights violators are being held accountable for their actions.

On the International Day in Support of Victims of Torture, WOLA signed a joint letter speaking out against the current situation in Nicaragua. Additionally, this week, WOLA President, Carolina Jiménez, commented on the International Criminal Court’s decision to allow prosecutors to continue investigating Crimes Against Humanity in Venezuela. Lastly, WOLA observed the International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking by highlighting the need for decriminalization and investment in harm reduction drug policies via a health-based approach.

WOLA’s experts have stood up and advocated for victims, particularly when they were not able to do so themselves. While we continue to work towards a more just and humane society, we urge our supporters to deepen their commitment to our work. With your generous gift, our experts will be able to:

- Travel to Latin America to meet with allies, partners, and victims to get a first-hand understanding of the complexities on-the-ground and to speak directly to the stakeholders involved.
- Be equipped with the necessary tools and resources to publish detailed communications pieces to inform a variety of audiences about human rights violations occurring in the hemisphere.
- Work closely with policymakers at home and in the region to ensure that human rights-respecting policies are in place to protect all people throughout the Americas.

As we continue to champion human rights throughout the region, I hope you will consider supporting the work of our experts both now and in the years to come.

Please note that WOLA Weekly will be taking a short break next week and will resume on July 14, 2023. We wish you a Happy Fourth of July weekend.

In the last of ten podcast episodes of 2023, WOLA’s President, Carolina Jiménez Sandoval joins host Adam Isacson to take stock of trends and concerns. They look to 2024 when WOLA will mark its 50th year, and discuss how our work for human rights will address new priorities, including democracy, migration, climate, and gender and racial justice.

WOLA’S AUDIOGRAMS PROVIDE RAPID REPORTS

In an audiogram recorded from Tegucigalpa, Honduras, WOLA’s delegation reports on a field visit where they spoke with migrants who had just entered the country from the south, after a harrowing journey through Panama’s Darién Gap and a hostile reception in Nicaragua.

“There were so many people [...] and the feeling you got, even when asking them, was that there was no going back.”

FINANCIAL REVIEW 2023

TOTAL 2023 BUDGET: $3,858,550

*Unaudited figures as of February 2024. Audited figures will be updated on our website.
Funded by People Like You

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WOLA’S PARTNERS’ COUNCIL

As a community that plays a vital role in championing human rights and democracy in our hemisphere, WOLA’s Partners’ Council strengthens our mission through financial contributions and strong engagement with our research and advocacy work. Members are invited to special briefings and receive regular updates through WOLA Impact Reports.

DONOR SPOTLIGHT: CHERYL MORDEN

Why I Donate to WOLA …

“WOLA continues to be the leading edge in how issues that are affecting the lives of people in Latin America come to the attention of policymakers in Washington. WOLA does this by bringing the actual voice of the people in Latin America to speak their own truth [...] not to displace them or speak for them but to create the opportunity for the people of Latin America to bring their own political experience to the policy process [...] It’s the thing that has given WOLA some of its greatest credibility.”     Cheryl Morden

WOLA’S LEGACY SOCIETY

Make Human Rights Part of Your Legacy

As we approach our 50th anniversary, WOLA’s Legacy Society offers our generous donors a chance to make a gift through a will or a trust or a beneficiary donation to ensure the work of human rights for future generations. Find out more about how you can make a lasting gift.
Launching WOLA’s 50th Anniversary

Commemorating the Coup in Chile: Honoring the Courage to Resist

In September 2023, we marked the 50th anniversary of the Chilean military coup, when General Augusto Pinochet led the overthrow of the democratically elected government of President Salvador Allende. Thousands of people were killed or disappeared, tens of thousands tortured, hundreds of thousands forced into exile. The coup and its aftermath mobilized the human rights movement throughout the Americas and beyond, leading to the founding of WOLA.

WOLA hosted a series of September events to honor the history and explore lessons learned.

“We gather to remember these events of the 1970s because without memory there is no justice. Without memory there is no dignity for victims, there is no hope for human rights, and no possibility that we can live up to the promise of “Never Again, Nunca Más!”” WOLA President Carolina Jiménez Sandoval

WOLA’s Community Remembers

WOLA supporters from past and present gathered at the Mexican Cultural Institute for an evening reception. WOLA’s founding director Joe Eldridge was honored and former Board member and distinguished journalist John Dinges spoke of how after the Chilean coup the massive crimes against humanity — crimes that in Pablo Neruda’s words “cried to the heavens for justice” — transformed the human rights movement.

“...We gather to remember these events of the 1970s because without memory there is no justice. Without memory there is no dignity for victims, there is no hope for human rights, and no possibility that we can live up to the promise of “Never Again, Nunca Más!”” WOLA President Carolina Jiménez Sandoval

Watch the video

In a video tribute, author Isabel Allende recognizes WOLA’s role in defending human rights in Latin America since the 1973 coup in Chile
Chilean President Gabriel Boric Honors WOLA

Chilean President Gabriel Boric placed a wreath at the memorial to Orlando Letelier and Ronni Moffit who were assassinated in Washington by the Pinochet regime. Following, at a special reception at the Chilean Embassy, President Boric awarded WOLA a medal in recognition of international solidarity and in gratitude for the defense of human rights that was “essential to raise awareness about the Chilean reality and contribute to the recovery of democracy.”

Reflecting on Lesson Learned

WOLA hosted panels in the U.S. Senate and with WOLA’s Partners’ Council featuring Chilean Ambassador Juan Gabriel Valdés, former U.S. Senator Tom Harkin and others who discussed how civil society and the U.S. Congress worked to defend human rights and help restore democracy in Chile. The road to renewed democracy was long and painful, yet, fifty years later, important insights can be gained from the Chilean experience — especially as new forms of authoritarianism and threats to democracy are rising in the Americas.

Media Coverage: How WOLA Changed U.S. Foreign Policy after the Chilean Coup

As U.S. and international news outlets did retrospectives on the events in Chile, WOLA’s role was prominently cited. Our founder Joe Eldridge was quoted extensively in an NPR feature and penned an opinion piece for The Hill entitled “I was witness to the U.S.-backed coup in Chile. It changed my life.” The piece concluded with this observation on WOLA’s impact:

“The Chilean coup reverberated around the world... By 1976, a mere three years after the coup, every dollar in foreign assistance was conditioned on human rights [...]Surprisingly, that legislation is still on the books.”

Joe Eldridge, WOLA founder.
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Impact Manager
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Washington, DC.
This year, we announced the creation of WOLA’s Honorary Council composed of luminaries, experts, artists, and thought leaders from across the region and beyond. Members of this non-governing body lend their names to WOLA as ambassadors for the organization. Together, we continue to lead the fight for human rights throughout the Americas.

**ALBERTO BARRERA TYSZKA**  
Venezuelan Novelist, Screenwriter, and Journalist

**BILL SHIPSEY**  
Irish Human Rights Activist, Philanthropist, and Founder of Arts for Human Rights

**CLAUDIA PAZ Y PAZ**  
Former Guatemalan Attorney General, Director for Central America and Mexico Program at CEJIL

**DIEGO LUNA**  
Mexican Actor, Director, Producer, and Social Activist

**FRANCISCO GOLDMAN**  
Writer, Journalist, and Allan K. Smith Professor of English Language and Literature at Trinity College

**GIOCONDA BELLi**  
Nicaraguan Poet, Novelist, and Political Activist

**GINA CHÁVEZ**  
Latinx Singer-Songwriter, and Social Activist

**MERCEDES DORETTI**  
Argentine Forensic Anthropologist

**SERGIO AGUAYO**  
Mexican Scholar, Human Rights Advocate, and Political Analyst

**TOM HARKIN**  
Former U.S. Senator

“We are delighted that this group of influential leaders on the international stage have accepted our invitation to join WOLA’s Honorary Council. Their presence will amplify our voice and increase our impact.”  
*Nancy Belden, Chair of WOLA’s Board*
The Sally Yudelman Internship Program

Our internship program is named after the late chair of WOLA’s Board of Directors who was passionate about cultivating the next generation of Latin American human rights advocates. Your generous donation allows WOLA to provide an hourly wage to young people who work closely with our team while gaining experience that will offer them future opportunities.

“My time at WOLA enriched my understanding of human rights challenges across Latin America, but most importantly it reinforced my conviction to work in this field. Working with the WOLA staff was especially impactful, as their drive and commitment to promoting human rights continues to inspire me.” Ana Martinez, WOLA 2023 Intern

Special thanks to Coletta Youngers for Decades of Dedication to WOLA

Coletta Youngers with the Working Group on Women, Drug Policies, and Incarceration in 2015.

Coletta Youngers — who has been a guiding force at WOLA for over three decades as a staff member, consultant, and most recently as a Senior Fellow leading the Women, Drug Policy and Incarceration project — will be stepping aside from her hands-on WOLA work. She will remain part of WOLA in her role as a Senior Fellow.

Coletta has done extensive research and advocacy in the Andean region and was one of the originators of WOLA’s drug policy work. In 2004, she co-edited Drugs and Democracy in Latin America: The Impact of U.S. Policy, a volume that provides a rigorous analysis of the failures of the war on drugs. She is also the author of Violencia Política y Sociedad Civil en el Perú on the Peruvian human rights movement.

She has supported many generations of WOLA staff as a mentor, and her book Thirty Years of Advocacy for Human Rights, Democracy and Social Justice on the history of WOLA still serves as an invaluable resource for people across the Americas who seek to learn from WOLA’s effective model of fighting for human rights and justice.

Her latest report, Justice is Setting Them Free, reflects on almost ten years of collective research and joint advocacy by the Working Group on Women, Drug Policy, and Incarceration that she helped found with partner organizations committed to significantly reducing the number of women deprived of liberty in Latin America.
Man and child in Necoclí, Colombia about to begin the migrant journey through the Darién Gap. They are among the more than half a million people, many of them children under five years old who made the dangerous journey in 2023.

(Photo: Sergio Ortiz Borbolla)

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