

Hundreds of migrants cross Arizona border after 'several busloads' dropped off in Mexico

By Geneva Sands

CNN, January 29, 2019



(CNN) — In the early morning hours Thursday, several busloads of migrants were dropped off on Highway 2 in Mexico, just south of the Arizona border.

"They walked about 100 yards, climbed under and over the vehicle barrier that is the only infrastructure in that area and agents were called in to make the arrest," said acting Tucson Border Patrol Chief Jeffrey Self.

In total, 242 people -- mostly families from Guatemala -- were arrested when Border Patrol agents arrived at the scene after the migrants were detected by a mobile surveillance system.

This was one of the largest single groups crossing the Arizona border over the last year, according to Border Patrol, and comes on the heels of other large groups illegally crossing at other parts of the border.

Similar to other groups of families, these migrants willingly surrendered to Border Patrol with no attempts to evade or hide from authorities.

Earlier this month, Border Patrol agents stationed in the Yuma, Arizona, sector took around 375 migrants into custody after they had made it into the United States. Last week, a group of 306 migrants were taken into custody in a remote part of New Mexico near the border.

In Arizona earlier this month, agents encountered a group of 85 Central Americans after they arrived by bus and illegally entered the country in the same general area of Thursday's crossing.

In December, Customs and Border Protection Commissioner Kevin McAleenan raised concerns that a new trend was emerging of very large groups of migrants arriving at the southern border by bus and unloading in remote areas.

"So far in this fiscal year, and this has been a brand-new phenomenon this fiscal year, we have started to see extremely large groups arrive together several times, usually once or twice a week since about mid-October," said McAleenan in December.

The trend appears to be continuing into the new year.

It was unclear exactly how the migrants on Thursday had made the journey from Guatemala to Arizona.

Of that group, 130 were children and 11 of those children arrived unaccompanied, without legal guardians.

"It's a situation where not only are we overwhelmed with the numbers and the fact that there are so many children and (families) that are involved in this," said Self, but also "the fact that our system is not set up to handle family units. It's set up to handle adults."

Coast Guard medical staff, including a physician, were flown on a helicopter to the Ajo Border Patrol station to screen every child in the group and more than a dozen adults complaining of medical issues. Two children were sent to the hospital with high fevers and were later re-released to Border Patrol custody.

"They are doing well," said Self.

The agency implemented more in-depth medical checks for children following the deaths of two Guatemalan migrant children after they had entered US custody in December.

The "positive" impact of the Coast Guard medical assistance, which frees agents for other work and prevented overwhelming the local hospitals, can't be "overstated," said Self.

Echoing comments made by other Border Patrol officials, Self pointed out that the Border Patrol facilities had been designed for single men, not children.

"Basically, you just turned an adult short-term detention center into ... basically, a day care center. There's nothing for them to do there. You've got to watch them, you have to separate them from non-family members, you only have so much detention space," he said.

Self told CNN that the increase in large group apprehensions is taking resources away from other border security missions, like narcotics interdiction.

The Arizona region has not seen a notable uptick in narcotics seizures, but the concern is that the large groups distract from agents' ability to prevent smuggling, according to Border Patrol.

"The manpower that is dedicated to having to deal with the children and the families really creates a situation where it makes us vulnerable in other areas of the border because we are having to collapse in on this one incident with additional resources that were out patrolling other parts of the border," which opens up other regions to exploitation, said Self.

Like other regions across the border, Arizona has also seen an increase in illegal crossing by families.

In fiscal year 2019 to date, Tucson Sector, which extends from the New Mexico state line to the Yuma County line, has seen more than a 231% increase in family apprehensions compared with the same period in fiscal year 2018, according to Customs and Border Protection. Border Patrol uses apprehensions as a measure of illegal crossings.

"Our agents, they embrace the humanitarian effort, but it impacts our ability to do border security versus having to do this humanitarian mission. And I would also add that most of our agents aren't trained to do a medical evaluation," said Self.

Although family apprehensions have reached record highs in recent months, overall numbers of illegal crossings are way down compared with highs in the late '90s and early 2000s.

In 2000, there were 616,346 total annual apprehensions in Arizona. That number was down to 52,172 last year.

"The border is stronger than that time frame," said Self, but "still areas of the border are ripe for exploitation."