

## Mexican government sends federal police to intercept caravan of U.S.-bound migrants

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MEXICO CITY — The government of Mexico dispatched two 727 Boeing planes filled with federal police officers to its southern border with Guatemala on Wednesday to intercept a caravan of Central American migrants who are trying to reach the U.S. border.

The Interior and Foreign Relations ministries said in a joint statement that any migrant in the caravan without proper immigration papers would be arrested and “returned to their country of origin.” Those with proper documents or wishing to apply for asylum would be allowed to enter Mexico.

The caravan of migrants set out last week from San Pedro Sula, Honduras, which has long been one of the hemisphere's most violent cities with a murder rate ranking among the highest in the world.

The group of migrants swelled to an estimated 4,000 people even as President Donald Trump has condemned them and threatened to cut aid to Honduras if government officials do not cooperate in preventing their trip to the U.S.

"The United States has strongly informed the President of Honduras that if the large Caravan of people heading to the U.S. is not stopped and brought back to Honduras, no more money or aid will be given to Honduras, effective immediately!" Trump tweeted on Tuesday.

He followed up Tuesday night with a similar threat, but added more Central American countries to his list. "We have today informed the countries of Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador that if they allow their citizens, or others, to journey through their borders and up to the United States, with the intention of entering our country illegally, all payments made to them will STOP (END)!" he wrote.

Trump continued ranting about the caravan of migrants on Wednesday, lashing out at Democrats and accusing them of not wanting to boost border security.

"Hard to believe that with thousands of people from South of the Border, walking unimpeded toward our country in the form of large Caravans, that the Democrats won't approve legislation that will allow laws for the protection of our country. Great Midterm issue for Republicans!" he wrote.

**More:** Trump: Aid will end to Central American countries allowing migrant caravan to head to US

Migrants have long streamed out of Central America in large numbers, increasingly as family units, in attempts to flee poverty and violence.

The "Northern Triangle" of Central America — Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador —rank among the most violent in the world, though homicide rates have fallen in recent years. Drug cartels move illegal merchandise through the region and street gangs control neighborhoods and routinely charge residents "rent" (a euphemism for extortion payments).

Caravans of migrants regularly convene as participants seek safety in numbers. Undocumented migrants transiting Mexico often fall victim to crimes such as kidnapping, extortion and rape — often committed by criminal gangs, drug cartels, coyotes and crooked public officials.

A caravan earlier this year also captured Trump's attention. In a series of tweets, he accused Mexico of inaction to irregular migrants moving through its territory, even though Mexico operates checkpoints across its southern states. Over the past five years its immigration agency has detained and deported more Central Americans than the United States.

**More:** Did Central American migrants from the previous caravan enter the U.S.?

Mexican immigration officials deported 77,371 people from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras in 2017, according to the Interior Ministry.

The Washington Post reported Wednesday that Border Patrol agents detained nearly 17,000 family members in September, an 80 percent increase from July when the administration ended its controversial practice of separating families at the border.

The United States has sent \$1.1 billion in aid to Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador over the past two years, according to the Washington Office on Latin America, a think tank. The aid has been controversial: Guatemalan President Jimmy Morales has been accused of corruption and has moved to terminate the work of a UN-sponsored anti-impunity commission, which has helped to convict members of the country political class on graft charges. Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández controversially won re-election last year in a race marred by irregularities and a crackdown on people protesting the outcome.

Guatemala's government issued a statement Monday saying the caravan would be stopped — even though Central American countries have agreements allowing its citizens to cross borders freely.

A caravan lawmaker, Bartolo Fuentes, was arrested in Guatemala and would be deported back to Honduras, Reuters reported. The caravan, however, continues moving northward.

Honduras has deployed police to its border with Guatemala and urged its citizens not to participate in the caravan.

Vice President Mike Pence has warned Central Americans repeatedly to stay put. Last week, he told the Conference on Prosperity and Security in Central America: "We need all the nations in the Northern Triangle region to reinforce this message: Do not put your families at risk by taking the dangerous journey north to attempt to enter the U.S. illegally. The truth is, if they cannot come to the US legally, they should not come at all."

Rep. Andy Biggs, R-Arizona, said the caravan is another example of how undocumented immigrants and "their enablers continue to flout the laws of the United States" and urged his fellow lawmakers to approve a bill he introduced to penalize the home country of every undocumented immigrant caught at the border.

"We have continued to provide foreign aid to our neighbors to the south even though they permit, and even encourage, thousands of their citizens to enter the U.S. illegally," he said in a statement issued Wednesday.

Under Biggs' bill, "Fund and Complete the Border Wall Act," the U.S. government would reduce \$2,000 in aid to countries for each migrant arrested and direct money collected into a border wall fund.

Analysts say most migrants are not dissuaded by the risk of the road and ignore admonishments from the U.S. government, or anti-immigrant sentiments that appear to be more prevalent in the country, because the situation is that dire in their own countries.

"Many Hondurans are or were leaving behind gang or domestic violence in marginalized neighborhoods, where government services are lacking and the day to day life may be controlled by the dominant gang," said Stephanie Leutert director of the Mexico Security Initiative at the Strauss Center at the University of Texas.

More recently, though, U.S. Customs and Border Protection data show "larger numbers of migrants from the rural western regions" of Honduras, she added.

"The factors pushing out these migrants are going to look different and generally be tied to agriculture — such as low global commodity prices, especially coffee — and increasingly unpredictable weather patterns," she said. "These rural migrants could head to the dangerous Honduran big cities or go north. And from the data, it looks like more and more are choosing to go north."

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo travels to Mexico City on Friday, where he will meet with officials from Mexico's outgoing and incoming governments. In the campaign, president-elect Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who takes office Dec. 1, pledged not to "do the dirty work" of any foreign government, when referencing Central American migrants transiting Mexican territory.

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