

Mexico Detains More Migrants as Crackdown Steps Up

BY OLIVER DE ROS / AP JUNE 24, 2019



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ARRIAGA, Mexico (AP) — Authorities reinforced efforts over the weekend to deter Central Americans and others from crossing Mexico to reach the United States, detaining migrants in the south and stationing National Guardsmen along the Rio Grande in the north. In Arriaga, a town in the southern state of Chiapas, The Associated Press saw about 100 migrants bused to detention Sunday, while Milenio TV reported that 146 more were pulled from a private home in the central state of Queretaro and more than 100 were taken away from a hotel in the Gulf state of Veracruz. Pressured by the U.S., Mexico's government has deployed some 6,000 agents of the National Guard, its new militarized policing force, along its southern and northern borders this month. In Ciudad Juarez, just south of El Paso, Texas, National Guardsmen turned back migrants trying to cross the border over the weekend. The guardsmen patrolled along the Rio Grande with assault rifles.

"The function of these brigades is to try to educate and inhibit people who are at risk," said Luis Mario Dena Torres, representative of the Chihuahua state governor in Ciudad Juarez.

Many of the National Guardsmen are soldiers and police officers who now wear black armbands indicating they are part of the National Guard.

Some Mexicans worry that the increased enforcement is an overreach.

“The National Guard, in theory, shouldn’t be repressing those who want to cross to the United States,” said Isabel Sanchez, coordinator for a Ciudad Juarez civic group concerned with security and justice.

More broadly, however, stiffer immigration enforcement has popular support in Mexico. More than half the Mexicans surveyed by the newspaper El Universal earlier in June said that authorities should not allow migrants to enter the country and that those found traveling through Mexico without visas should be deported.

Residents of Arriaga expressed a mixture of concern for the migrants they have grown accustomed to hosting and relief that officials are looking to get a better handle on migrant flows.

“As a resident, sometimes you have distrust because with the necessity that they have, they could try to rob or do something to you,” said Rogelio Perez, an accountant. “They’re human beings and they need help, but Mexico can barely employ Mexicans.”

Migrants have long congregated in Arriaga to hop on a freight train known as “The Beast.” Migrants would pile onto train cars, sometimes being maimed or killed when they fell off. Authorities started pulling migrants off the train in mid-2014, under pressure to reduce flows to the U.S.

Still, Arriaga remains a strategic point on the migrant trail. Over the weekend, there were no migrants riding atop the trains that pulled in and out of town.

Since January, Mexico has detained more than 74,000 migrants and deported over 53,000, according to the latest figures available. Those numbers are expected to rise when June figures are released.

Luis Arbey Perez, a civil rights advocate, corroborated that five immigration vans carried about 100 migrants from Arriaga to the southern border with Guatemala early Sunday. He worries that the National Guard deployment, together with heightened inspections of passenger vehicles, will push migrants into more dangerous modes of travel.

“There is more persecution, more detentions, but the people keep coming,” he said. “What rises is the risk.”

Dozens of families have been found packed tight into semi-trailers in recent weeks, while travel in secret compartments of vehicles is also common. Mexican authorities have also broken up recent caravans of more than 100 migrants traveling in packs for greater safety.

Last week, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador instructed private bus companies to begin checking identifications of those buying bus tickets, in an effort to crackdown on human smuggling.

Significant numbers of migrants appear to still be crossing into Mexico, but they are traveling in smaller groups and under the radar.

Elias Camacho, coordinator of the 84-bed Hogar de la Misericordia migrant shelter in Arriaga, said that on average at least 15 migrants show up each day at his shelter. He said private homes in the town also take in migrants.

Honduran migrant Edwin Cruz, 22, said conditions in his country will continue to propel Hondurans north.

At least three people were killed in protests across Honduras last week that demanded the resignation of Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández. Violence, gang threats and poverty plague the country.

Cruz said he spotted at least nine checkpoints on his way north from Mexico's border with Guatemala. To avoid detection, he crossed through mountains and swamp rather than more visible highways. He also said he traveled by taxi and train.

"It has become more complicated, but the necessities of the countries are increasing as well. So we prefer to take the risk than to stay there," said Cruz, who hoped to make it to Tennessee.

Associated Press journalists Amy Guthrie in Mexico City and Salvador Gomez in Ciudad Juarez contributed to this report.

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