

Mexico Is Now Trapping Migrants Before They Can Even Reach the US Border

'We were locked inside as if we were in a jail,' one migrant said of his experience at a shelter. [SHARE TWEET](#)

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When the migrants [left Honduras](#) they had one goal in mind: Get to Piedras Negras, just across the border from Eagle Pass, Texas, and [apply for asylum in the US](#). In front of them were thousands of miles of Mexico, and a new system of background checks and visas introduced in late January by the Mexican government.

What they didn't know is that a third impediment to exercising their legal right to claim asylum stood in their way: the Mexican government itself. Under its new president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, [Mexico has been speeding up approval](#) of "humanitarian visas" granted to migrants who pass background checks, a way to encourage them to stay and work in Mexico rather than continuing north. But even after receiving documents that were supposed to allow them to travel freely, some of the Honduran migrants held until recently at a makeshift shelter in Piedras Negras say they remained under armed guard.

"We were locked inside as if we were in a jail," said Andres Lopez, a 29-year-old father of one who ended up in Piedras Negras after leaving Honduras with a caravan of some 7,000 migrants. "I think we were there for about three weeks, but of course I lost track of time in there."

It isn't entirely clear exactly whether the Trump administration asked the Mexican government to take those actions. An [October visit by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to Mexico City](#) was followed by Mexican troops being [sent to the country's southern border with Guatemala](#) and an agreement [not to stop the US](#) from sending asylum seekers back to Mexico, a policy called "Remain in Mexico."

But even given all of that, the situation at Piedras Negras—where reporters, lawyers, and migrant advocacy groups were barred from entering for weeks as an [estimated 2,000 migrants were held there](#)—shows how closely the Mexican authorities are allied with Trump's policy.

"It's not that Piedras Negras is the very first time that the Mexican police have cooperated with US immigration authorities. It's that what we saw there is just a really egregious development of what they've done previously," said Stephanie Leutert, director of the Mexico Security Initiative at the University of Texas at Austin.

Joe Rivano Barros saw in Piedras Negras a preview of what Remain in Mexico will look like. Except even Remain in Mexico allows migrants to actually reach the border. In Piedras Negras, many weren't even allowed to even do that, said Rivano Barros, a field officer for RAICES, a Texas-based migrant advocacy organization.

Now, many of those migrants have been shipped to shelters in Mexican cities far from the border.

“It seems that [Mexican president Andrés Manuel López Obrador] is kowtowing to American demands that migrants be controlled from applying for asylum and stopped from coming to the border,” Rivano Barros said.

Lopez and Jose Serrano, 31, were among the caravan when it left Honduras, bound for Piedras Negras. Both left because the combination of crime, gang violence, and a lack of economic opportunity had pushed them to a difficult decision that many Central Americans have been making in recent months: Their options were leave their homeland, die in violence, or languish in poverty. They chose the former, thinking their various situations—Lopez a single father, Serrano is paralyzed from the mid-chest down following a motorcycle accident a decade ago—offered a shot at obtaining asylum. They chose Piedras Negras because it was a more obscure port of entry, Lopez said, and might be easier to pass through with an asylum claim.

“We had heard of the caravan that was trapped in Tijuana,” he said of the [hundreds of migrants who remain there](#), waiting for their chance to apply for asylum. “So that was not somewhere we wanted to go.”



Jose Serrano (left) and Andres Lopez.

The migrants waiting in Tijuana and elsewhere are a direct product of Trump administration policies that result in bottlenecks at ports of entry, Leutert said.

“Their big fear and the one they’ve been talking about is people storming ports of entry and the border in general, which is what we’ve seen in southern Mexico and [in Tijuana],” Leutert said, noting that the Trump administration has been raising fears of groups migrants rushing the border, [which only briefly occurred](#) at the San Ysidro port of entry between Tijuana and San Diego (there was also a [skirmish at the border](#) between Mexico and Guatemala). “While they’re focused on avoiding this storming the border, they haven’t put a single cent into the asylum-claim process that would avoid the buildup.”

Leutert would know. She’s been studying the number of asylum claims processed at ports of entry for the last several months. By the time Lopez, Serrano, and the other migrants arrived in early February, US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) was processing about a dozen asylum claims a day at Piedras Negras. At the time, about 120 migrants were waiting to claim asylum, Leutert reported in her [ongoing study](#) of asylum claims and other border migration issues. With the arrival of nearly 2,000 migrants in Piedras Negras, the wait times skyrocketed accordingly, from a few weeks to as long as six months.

Instead of increasing the number of claims it processed, the Trump administration sent more troops to the area, and Texas Governor Greg Abbott sent state law enforcement officers to Eagle Pass.

“It’s a mess and no one’s actually trying to solve it. There are real challenges at the border but none of this has been in any real response to that,” Leutert said. She singled out a “show of force” that appeared to be nothing more than an opportunity for police to create dramatic television by lining up vehicles on the US side of the border.

“Instead, they’re flashing their lights and pointing their headlights into Mexico,” Leutert said of the incident, which [occurred not long after migrants arrived in Piedras Negras](#). “I’m not even sure if those police agencies have legal authority to deal with migrants, but they were there anyway.”

If the goal is to deter migrants from even coming to the border to seek asylum, it’s having two effects, Leutert and Rivano Barros said. First, migrants are avoiding busy ports of entry like Tijuana and Juarez and crossing in more obscure locations, like Eagle Pass or Antelope Wells, where Jakelin Caal, a seven-year-old Guatemalan girl, [died in December](#). Secondly, they’re crossing between ports of entry, either across rivers or through the desert.

In a single day in mid-February, authorities in Sunland Park, New Mexico, just outside El Paso, apprehended more than 600 migrants crossing a desert pass there. In Piedras Negras, desperate migrants have taken to trying to cross the Rio Grande River. More than two dozen were rescued in recent weeks, according to CBP.

“They’re wading across the river in Piedras Negras, they’re jumping over the fence in Tijuana, they’re crossing the desert in New Mexico, and it’s all because of the policies that prevent them from crossing through ports of entry,” Leutert said. “So you create the problem and then you take credit for saving someone’s life when they’re in the river.”

Lopez and Serrano waited for weeks for their chance to apply at the Eagle Pass port of entry. It never came. Families with young children were prioritized by Mexican authorities, and Lopez was told he didn’t count because he was a single father, he said. As children began to get sick inside the shelter—which was located in and abandoned factory that used to make body bags for the US Army—migrants began to protest conditions.

Serrano’s best friend, who had traveled with him on the difficult journey from Honduras and tended to his medical needs, tried to leave the shelter to get food on a day when other migrants were protesting conditions there. Caught in the chaos, Mexican authorities mistook Serrano’s friend for a protester and deported him.

Lying on a table in a back room of the shelter in Juarez, Serrano cried when he recounted the story. Only Lopez had befriended him since, and has helped care for Serrano, who is battling an infection as a result of his stay in Piedras Negras.

“They promised to give him a humanitarian visa, then took him to a room and deported him,” Serrano said. “He was trying to get the food I need for my health, not protesting, but they sent him away anyway.”

As news of the shelter in Piedras Negras began to spread—and as migrants there continued to protest for their release—Mexican authorities scrambled. One day, buses showed up at the shelter with names of several Mexican cities on the windows. Some migrants were given a choice of where they wanted to go. Others weren’t, Lopez said. He and Serrano chose Juarez because it was the only destination that was actually on the border.

Whether and how long it is logistically feasible for Mexico to hold thousands of migrants in shelters is an important question. Leutert and Rivano Barros note that local Mexican governments are bearing the brunt of these costs, which is why Juarez Mayor Armando Cabada [told me in January](#) any plan to hold migrants there would be “unfair” to Mexico. But when Lopez, Serrano and the other migrants from Piedras Negras arrived in Juarez, local and federal police were there waiting for them.

Leutert says holding Central American migrants in Mexico isn't enough right now to tilt the "political needle" against Obrador. More curious, Rivano Barros points out, is why Obrador has chosen to do Trump's bidding in the first place.

Either way, the result is that more than 100 migrants are stuck in a high school gymnasium in Juarez, about a 20-minute drive from the border. Last week, as government officials spoke to the press in the lobby, federal and local police patrolled the parking lot in trucks with mounted 50-caliber machine guns.

As in Piedras Negras, the intent is clear: To keep them from reaching the border.

"I will not leave here and try to go to the border because I'm afraid what will happen to me, or that I'll just be sent right back here. We can't leave," Lopez said. "But I will not go back to Honduras. I will stay here as long as it takes."

Justin Glawe is an independent journalist based in Dallas. He writes a newsletter, [Where Do We Go From Here](#).