

Migrant caravan: Weary, frustrated participants face long, dangerous road ahead

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ISLA, Mexico – Thousands of migrants set out early on Sunday from this city of pineapple farms in the Gulf Coast state of Veracruz, but signs of division and frustration are emerging as the large group tries to get to the U.S.-Mexico border in the face of opposition from President Donald Trump and a dangerous trek ahead.

Debate over how far to travel each day – something decided at a nightly assembly – is among the issues that divide caravan migrants who are still frustrated on being misled over the weekend by promises of buses being provided to take them to Mexico City. The buses never materialized.

On Sunday, many migrants hesitated upon hitting the main highway, which transits an area rife with organized crime activities.

“It’s difficult because of the fear you feel, the uneasiness about it,” said Brian Delarta, 30, a Honduran heading north with his wife and two children, ages 6 and 3.

Like many, he tried to flag down a ride rather than walk a narrow, two-lane high with no shoulder into an area known as Tierra Blanca.

“We’re walking with fear,” he said. “That’s why we’re sticking together, staying united.”

Caravans have become attractive for migrants attempting to transit Mexico safely. But disunity surfaced on Saturday as the caravan splintered with more than half the group showing haste to reach the U.S. border, even if it meant going alone and abandoning the watchful eye of human rights observers and international organizations. The presence of such organizations is viewed as preventing crimes such as kidnap, rape and extortion from being committed against the large group of migrants. It’s also dissuaded police and immigration officials from cracking down on them.

Thousands of migrants

More than 5,000 migrants are reportedly moving through southern Mexico via caravan or in smaller groups, according to Mexico’s Interior Ministry estimates. The ministry said Saturday that 2,793 migrants have requested asylum in Mexico and about 500 have asked for help returning to their home countries.

More than half the participants Saturday pushed on toward the cities of Córdoba and Puebla – and even Mexico City – rather than rest and regroup in Isla, which is in the state of Veracruz. Participants impatient at the slow pace of progress continued

traveling northward, are staying with the whatever vehicle they were traveling on to its final destination, according to migrants interviewed in Isla.

Tension boiled over on Friday night and Saturday morning in connection with broken promises from the Veracruz state government to bus the migrants to Mexico City, leaving them to walk through dangerous towns and rural areas. In a series of tweets on Sunday, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said it “was deeply dismayed due to the lack of protection” for migrants caused by the Veracruz state government offering Friday to bus the caravan to Mexico City – only to renege after the caravan participants had woken early and lined up for transportation that never arrived.

“This cancellation is having the result of fragmenting the caravan, whose unity was its main form of protection. A large number of people in the caravan are not located. ... People are desperately climbing into private pickups. It’s not known if they belong to organized crime.”

The UN’s Twitter thread described Veracruz as “a state in which ... it is reported in a regular manner that migrants are kidnapped and disappeared, often ending up in human trafficking.”

Broken promises of buses

On Friday evening, governor of Veracruz offered 160 buses to take the caravan to Mexico City, saying his state had many migrants already “begging for money in the streets” and calling it “a serious social problem and we don’t want it to increase.”

Gov. Miguel Ángel Yunes Linares reneged later, saying Mexico City was suffering water shortages and unprepared to receive so many migrants – something denied by people familiar with the preparations there, who say everything was ready.

“We were all ready to go,” said Melvin Serrano, 22, a Honduras native. “But the coordinators said the buses [on Saturday morning] weren’t coming and lot of people got frustrated and decided to move on ahead of us. They no longer believe in the leaders here. Because they’ve said twice that we were going to take buses and we end up walking.”



The caravan has covered more than 800 miles since leaving San Pedro Sula, Honduras, Oct. 12. At least three more smaller caravans have formed since their departure, seeing safety in numbers and a way to avoid paying human smugglers high fees for taking them to the United States.

But the caravan is showing signs of fraying – beset by sore feet, illnesses such as coughs and colds and, now, disunity. It comes as they climb into the central valley of Mexico, where the altitude tops 7,000 feet and temperatures drop at night – potentially leaving a population carrying few clothes exposed to the elements.

“The caravan has practically divided into two parts, two groups,” said Víctor Rosales, an El Salvador native pushing a stroller carrying his two-year-old son out of Isla toward the main highway north.

“We’ve been advancing pretty slowly. There are a lot of people traveling with children and there are people going on their own who want to advance much more quickly,” said the 31-year-old Rosales. “The majority of families who brought children stayed here.” Participants say caravans form spontaneously in Central America. A migrants’ advocacy organization Pueblo Sin Frontera has “accompanied” the caravan since its arrival in Mexico, helping coordinate the caravan’s path through Mexico and offering tips for taking a risky road.

Some 2,000 migrants spent the night in Isla, 300 miles southeast of Mexico City, according to Pueblo Sin Frontera, which is assisting the caravan. Another 1,000

migrants slept in a city further up the road called Loma Bonita and 1,500 made it to Puebla, just to the southeast of Mexico City.

Some media outlets have reported some caravan participants already arriving in Mexico City, where the local government has turned a sports park into a shelter for more than 5,000 people.

An official with a Mexico City effort known as “Humanitarian Bridge” to support caravan participants as they advance toward the national capital, said the idea was to provide the migrants an incentive to stay put in Mexico. The capital, the official said, offered more opportunities for migrants.

The Mexican government has offered caravan participants temporary work visas, health benefits and the opportunity to enroll their children in school. Many caravan participants declined the offer, saying their ultimate destination is the United States and the opportunity to earn dollars.

Trump rails against caravan

Meanwhile, Trump continues to rail against the caravan during midterm campaign rallies around the country leading up to Tuesday’s midterm elections, saying the migrants will not enter the United States. He’s also promised to send up to 15,000 troops to the border to help the U.S. Border Patrol secure the border.

“When you look at that caravan coming up, that’s not what we want,” he told a crowd of supporters in Pensacola, Fla., on Saturday night. “That’s not for us folks. Not for us.”

“We want people to come through our strong borders but they have to come in legally,” he said. “They have to come in absolutely through a process and they have to come in through merit.”

“We are determined to secure the southern border,” Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told CBS’s Face the Nation host John Dickerson on Sunday.

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Migrants themselves remain just as determined to get to the U.S. border.

“We’re thinking positive,” said Melvin Serrano, 22, a Honduran, who joined to caravan the restaurant he was working at closed due to extortion demands. “We know it’s going to be complicated. It’s not going to be easy. But if we can arrive as a caravan, maybe they’ll let us through. We’ve crossed two borders so far,” he said.

Both Guatemala and Mexico tried to impede the caravan at certain points, but to little avail.

Other caravans continue forming in Central America as people flee poverty and violence afflicting three of the most dangerous countries in the hemisphere: Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

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