

Migrant caravan, raising concerns in US, halts in Mexico

By CHRISTOPHER SHERMAN

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MATIAS ROMERO, Mexico (AP) — The caravan of Central American migrants that angered U.S. President Donald Trump was sidelined at a sports field in southern Mexico with no means of reaching the border even as Trump tweeted another threat to Mexico Tuesday.

“The big Caravan of People from Honduras, now coming across Mexico and heading to our “Weak Laws” Border, had better be stopped before it gets there,” Trump wrote. “Cash cow NAFTA is in play, as is foreign aid to Honduras and the countries that allow this to happen.”

The caravan that once numbered 1,150 or more people actually halted days ago in the town of Matias Romero in the southern state of Oaxaca, where participants slept out in the open. After days of walking along roadsides and train tracks, the organizers now plan to try to get buses to take participants to the final event, an immigrants’ rights conference in the central state of Puebla later this week.

Bogged down by logistical problems, large numbers of children and fears about people getting sick, the caravan was always meant to draw attention to the plight of migrants and was never equipped to march all the way to the U.S. border.

“The idea was never for this group of people to reach the border. It was more to achieve a sensible and clear solution” to migrants’ need to leave their countries, said Irineo Mujica, director of Pueblo Sin Fronteras, the activist group behind the annual symbolic event.

With conditions bad in Honduras following that country’s hotly disputed November presidential elections, unexpectedly large numbers of people showed for this year’s march.

“We have never seen a march of this size. It is unmanageable,” Mujica said.

On Tuesday, the group — mostly Hondurans — spread out on blankets in walkways between buildings, on playing fields and on grassy spots between swing sets. Young children kicked soccer balls through the dust and climbed on resting parents, killing time. Adults gathered around the few power outlets to charge cellphones. A single municipal police officer kept watch.

Women and children picked through piles of donated clothing, as volunteers ladled water boiled over a fire into cups with instant coffee and instant noodles.

Aida Raquel Perez Rivera, 31, from San Pedro Sula — one of Honduras’ most violent cities — was sitting on a rolled blanket in the shade. She said she hopes for asylum in the United States because the father of her daughters is trying to kill her.

“I have been threatened with death and I had to leave my daughters back there,” said Perez Rivera. “I left without money, without anything, just the clothes on my back.”

Perez Rivera said she joined the caravan because there was safety in numbers. She said she is also considering seeking asylum in Mexico, but worries she couldn’t support her daughters from Mexico.

On Monday, Mexican immigration officials began taking the names of people interested in filing for asylum, or temporary transit or humanitarian visas in Mexico.

But Mujica said he didn’t know “if that was just to calm down Donald Trump’s tweets, or calm down Donald Trump.” He said the group was waiting for the migration officers to return.

About 150 men already did break off from the march Sunday, hopping a freight train north, probably with hopes of trying to enter the U.S.

But the rest of the migrants at the camp seemed unlikely to move again until Wednesday or Thursday. Mujica said about 300 to 400 say they have relatives living in Mexico and so may consider staying here at least temporarily.

The “Stations of the Cross” caravans have been held annually in southern Mexico for about 10 years. They began as short processions of migrants, some dressed in biblical garb and carrying crosses, as an Easter-season protest against the kidnappings, extortion, beatings and killings suffered by many Central American migrants as they cross Mexico.

The organized portions of the caravans usually have not gone much farther north than the Gulf coast state of Veracruz.

This year’s event seems to have gotten more notice in the U.S., and Trump has sent some angry tweets that raised hackles in Mexico, which in recent years has detained and deported hundreds of thousands of Central American migrants before they could reach the U.S. border.

“Mexico is doing very little, if not NOTHING, at stopping people from flowing into Mexico through their Southern Border, and then into the U.S. They laugh at our dumb immigration laws. They must stop the big drug and people flows, or I will stop their cash cow, NAFTA. NEED WALL!” Trump wrote in one. “With all of the money they make from the U.S., hopefully they will stop people from coming through their country and into ours.”

In a statement late Monday, Mexico’s government said about 400 participants in the caravan had already been sent back to their home countries. “Under no circumstances does the Mexican government promote irregular migration,” the Interior Ministry statement said.

The department also said that unlike in previous yearly caravans, “this time Mexican immigration authorities have offered refugee status” to participants who qualify. But it suggested it is not up to Mexico to keep people from going to the U.S. to apply for asylum.

“It is not this government’s responsibility to make immigration decisions for the United States or any other country, so it will be up to the appropriate authorities of the United States to decide whether to authorize the entry of the caravan participants to U.S. territory,” the statement said.

Navarrete Prida had said earlier that he talked with U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen on Monday about handling migration, “in accordance with each country’s laws.”

Nielsen later tweeted that their talk focused specifically on the annual migrant caravan. “Working with Mexican officials to address the yearly illegal alien caravan. Exploring all options,” she wrote.

Mexico routinely stops and deports Central Americans, sometimes in numbers that rival those of the United States. Deportations of foreigners dropped from 176,726 in

2015 to 76,433 in 2017, in part because fewer were believed to have come to Mexico, and more were requesting asylum in Mexico.

Mexico granted 3,223 asylum requests made in 2016, and 9,626 requests filed last year are either under review or have been accepted.

Deportations continued at about the same pace in the first two months of 2018, with 15,835 people returned to central American countries.