



Biden’s approach to migration: ‘More carrots and fewer sticks’

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Washington, DC – In a stark departure from the previous administration’s approach to immigration, US President Joe Biden, together with leaders of 20 nations in the Western Hemisphere, unveiled a declaration intended to guide a coordinated response to growing migration pressures in the region.

The Los Angeles Declaration, announced on Friday at the end of the ninth Americas Summit, includes giving aid to communities most affected by migration, expanding legal pathways for migrants to enter countries, humane border management, and coordinated emergency responses.

Migration experts have said the Biden administration’s focus on multilateral regional cooperation and its recognition that migration is a phenomenon that needs to be managed, rather than stopped, is far removed from the stance of his predecessor, former President Donald Trump.

Still, experts have said, there are questions about how the terms of the declaration – which are non-binding – will be executed, and whether the migrant programmes that were announced will do enough to address the needs in the region.

“There are more carrots and fewer sticks,” said Theresa Cardinal Brown, managing director of immigration and cross-border policy at the Bipartisan Policy Center, a think-tank based in Washington, DC.

“There are promises of investment in the region and trying to help countries that are hosting migrants with financial and other resource support,” Cardinal Brown told Al Jazeera.

“But it’s one thing to promise more visas, and it’s another thing to process more visas,” she said, in reference to the US’s inflated backlog of visa applications.

Since taking office in 2021, the Biden administration has sought to reverse Trump’s legacy on migration.

As a candidate on the campaign trail, Trump vilified migrants. As president, he focused on reducing migration in the US by slashing visa and refugee programmes, and building a wall along the US-Mexico border. In 2019, he threatened to impose tariffs on Mexico if it did not do more to stop migrants from travelling to the US.

“In terms of the strategy, the goals and the manner in which migration is being undertaken, it is a light and day departure from the Trump administration’s bat-wielding unilateralism,” David Bier, an immigration policy expert at the Cato Institute, told Al Jazeera.

“But this administration does not want to spend a lot of time highlighting immigration domestically,” Bier said. “They haven’t found a way to make it a winner.”

Republican leaders have seized on the topic of migration as an election issue, specifically at the southern border where numbers have reached record levels. The stakes are high for Biden as the US heads for midterm elections in November, where Republicans are vying for control of Congress.

‘This is just a start’

In a fact sheet published on Friday detailing the declaration’s main points, the White House laid out measures that the US has already implemented in recent months, as well as adding some new commitments.

The Biden administration said it was committed to resettling 20,000 refugees from the Americas during the next two years and to providing \$314m in aid for countries that are hosting refugees and migrants, which includes Mexico, Colombia and Costa Rica. The administration also said it would resume efforts to reunite Haitian and Cuban families in the US.

“It’s certainly a step up from what we’ve done in previous years, when only a few hundred or a few thousand refugees from Latin America have been admitted each year,” said Aaron Reichlin-Melnick, policy director at the American Immigration Council.

“But it is also about four days’ worth of border encounters,” Reichlin-Melnick told Al Jazeera.

In the fiscal year 2021, just 11,411 refugees were resettled in the US from all around the world after Trump slashed the refugee admission programme.

Meanwhile, Mexico has committed to integrating 20,000 refugees into its labour market during the next three years. While Costa Rica will give protection to migrants from Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela who arrived in the country before March 2020.

“Each of us is signing up to commitments that recognise the challenges we all share and the responsibility that impacts on all of our nations,” Biden said during the ceremonial unveiling of the pact.

“This is just a start, he said. “Much more work remains, to state the obvious.”

So far, migrant groups have commended the commitments in the declaration, saying they echo some of their demands and provide a good starting point for regional cooperation. But they also voiced concern about implementation and funding, and whether there would be any follow-up before the next summit in four years.

“It is unclear how these commitments will be monitored and evaluated,” Julio Rank Wright, deputy regional director for Latin America at the International Rescue Committee (IRC) said in a statement on Friday.

“Without long-term funding and political will to protect those displaced throughout the region, the IRC is fearful that the Declaration’s intentions will fall flat and leave millions of people in the Americas behind,” Wright said.

Guest list controversy

The week-long summit, which was held in Los Angeles California, was overshadowed by the absences of leaders of key nations and controversy about the guest list.

The US’s decision to exclude the leaders of Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua for having what the US called “authoritarian” governments drew significant criticism. It also led Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador to boycott the event.

Also absent were leaders from the Northern Triangle nations of Central America – Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras – three nations that produce the majority of migrants.

Cardinal Brown said Lopez Obrador’s absence is unlikely to have an impact on US-Mexico coordination, as the declaration clearly showed Mexico’s involvement in the creation as well as the drafting of the text.

As part of the declaration, the US also committed to adding 11,500 H-2B seasonal worker visas for nationals of El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Haiti “to address labour shortages in key sectors of the US economy and reduce irregular migration”.

But that number is very limited and will do little to address migration needs, experts said, at a time when US Customs and Border patrol in April said they apprehended migrants more than 234,000 times at the border. The majority are being expelled under Title 42, a 1944 health act invoked in 2020 by the Trump administration to prevent asylum seekers from filing claims.

The Biden administration tried to get the measure reversed by May 23, but the plan was blocked by a judge after two dozen states sued the administration arguing the move would lead to an increase in border crossings.

“The Biden administration definitely wants to control migration, but they are also taking the longer-term view of focusing on cooperation and attacking root causes,” an expert on defence policy at the Washington Office on Latin America said.

“It’s just not clear which of the two impulses will win.”