

## Mexico ramps up immigration crackdown at northern border to 'dissuade people from crossing'

Lauren Villagran

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JUÁREZ — A rare clamp down on illegal immigration by the Mexican government at the northern border has migrants frightened for their future.

At least four separate armed forces in Juárez coordinated an effort to reduce the flow of migrants to the U.S. border. Elements of the country's newly created National Guard, wearing camouflage and black armbands emblazoned with "GN" began patrolling the southern banks of the Rio Grande, alongside federal police, Chihuahua state police and the Mexican army.

On Monday, guardsmen, soldiers and federal state police were stationed within a quarter mile of each other within the river banks and at the foot of the international bridge.

Facing President Trump's threat to raise tariffs on Mexican imports, Mexico agreed in early June to drastically curb migration within 45 days. Although the country has historically focused enforcement efforts on its southern border with Guatemala, that deadline has put enormous pressure on Mexico to deliver on its promise.

More than detaining migrants to be deported, "the mission is to dissuade people from crossing," said Enrique Valenzuela, coordinator of a Chihuahua state agency called COESPO that provides services to migrants. "But, yes, it's time that everyone be concerned they have legal documents to be here."

Half a dozen migrants crossed the river in plain view of the guardsmen one afternoon last week as they staged heavily armed vehicles near the border. The INM says its law enforcement partners are tasked with turning over unauthorized immigrants to immigration authorities, who will determine whether they have some legal recourse to stay or will be deported.

Mexico's apprehensions of unauthorized migrants surged from fewer than 9,000 in January to more than 21,000 in April, the latest month for which data is available from the country's National Migration Institute, or INM. Among overall apprehensions, the percentage in Mexico's northern border states has grown.

"That is a sign they are definitely ramping up," said David Bier, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a think tank. "But because of the fact that so many more people are coming, the number who make it to the U.S. border is still greater than it was in the past."

It's too soon to tell if increased enforcement on the Mexican side is working to deter illegal crossings north, according to Border Patrol spokesman Ramiro Cordero.

"We have seen little dips in the numbers," Cordero said, noting that the 30-day average of apprehensions in El Paso sector dropped from more than 1,000 per day to 966 per day last week. "It's still all day long. It's nonstop."

Mexico Interior Secretary Olga Sánchez Cordero told Mexican media in early June that the National Guard wouldn't be a "border patrol" but highlighted the guardsmen's role in protecting national security.

"We want orderly and safe migration," she said. "We also have a right to have our laws respected and to secure our border."

Still, the increased law enforcement presence has left many migrants fearful. Unconfirmed rumors of roundups spread in the Cuban community; some migrants expressed fear of leaving their hotel rooms or shelters.

Mexico has slashed its issuance of transit and humanitarian visas that let migrants travel in the country legally, leaving many exposed to increased enforcement including checkpoints on highways leading north to Juárez and other crossing points to the U.S.

Humanitarian visas issued by Mexico to foreign nationals plummeted from more than 11,000 in January to fewer than 1,500 in April, according to INM.

"Not offering those documents is one paperwork way to keep people from going north," said Stephanie Leutert, director of the Mexico Security Initiative at the University of Texas' Robert Strauss Center for International Security and Law. "If they don't have those documents, they can be apprehended and deported."

Traveling in Mexico without a permit, Cuban Yoandri Fernandez said he survived several immigration checks by authorities on the bus ride north to Juárez by keeping quiet, to not give away his accent and nationality.

"We have been so lucky that we got here," he said, as he waited with Cuban friends outside a Chihuahua state-run center for migrants in Juárez one afternoon last week. "Many others were detained or deported."

How long will it last?

Experts expressed skepticism that Mexico's current efforts to stem illegal immigration would endure, yield the promised results — and not give way to corruption.

Previous crackdowns on unauthorized migration — including Mexico's "Operation Seal the Border" in the 1990s and its "Southern Plan" in the 2000s — were short-lived and plagued by allegations of abuse by authorities, said Pete Hermansen, a retired Border Patrol director of special operations.

Hermansen said he believes the current crackdown is little more than "a giant pile of lip service to get the Trump administration to sign documents" to cool off the tariff threat.

"Depending on how many they deploy and where they deploy them, there will be corruption," he said. "You'll see migrants getting robbed. It's just another layer of quasi-enforcement that comes with all of the negatives associated with that line of effort."

Carlos Archuleta, a retired agent of Homeland Security Investigations, served two tours in Mexico and worked with the country on both of its earlier enforcement efforts.

"I know the Mexican government has the capacity to conduct enforcement actions," he said. "I just don't know if the will is there."

Marta Esquivel, a sister of the Buen Pastor migrant shelter in Juárez, said she has never seen immigration enforcement like this in Juárez.

"We're told that whoever gets close to the river, they're going to grab them and deport them," she said.