



Deadly migration center fire shuts down one of the GOP's most dishonest claims

By Julio Ricardo Varela,

April 1, 2023

At least 38 people died this week in a fire at a migration center in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, across the Rio Grande from El Paso, Texas. Despite Mexico President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's claim Tuesday that the deaths were inevitable because migrants protesting their deportation caused the fire, a surveillance video provided to Telemundo suggests Mexican government officials abandoned those who were locked up and couldn't escape. The video also causes us to question if migrants even started the fire.

Surveillance video provided to Telemundo suggests Mexican government officials abandoned those who were locked up and couldn't escape.

By Thursday, the Mexican government had issued six arrest warrants on charges of "intentional homicide," including three for officials from Mexico's National Migration Institute, the agency that runs the facility that for the most part is a detention center for migrants waiting to claim asylum in the United States.

"They're killing us, but they're also killing us psychologically," one migrant from Venezuela in Juárez told The Guardian this week. "There's immigrant children who have been detained more times than any criminal." It's "like a jail," another migrant in Juárez told Telemundo.

While the deadly fire was shocking, it's not even the deadliest U.S.-border migration tragedy of the past year. In June, 53 migrants were found dead inside an abandoned tractor trailer in San Antonio. As I said then, our enforcement-first immigration policy is designed for people to die.

How then do we fix such a broken system? How do we finally bring the countless examples of migrant tragedies to an end?

We open our borders.

Of course, Republicans love to claim that our borders are open already. “It is open. The border is dangerous,” Rep. Andy Biggs, R-Ariz., said in February during a Housing Judiciary Committee hearing about President Biden and the border. “Drugs pour across, international terrorists, criminal gang members, people from all over the world.”

This week Sen. John Kennedy, R-La., blasted U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas on Fox News when he said that “either Secretary Mayorkas believes in completely open borders, or he is not qualified to manage a Chuck E. Cheese.”

If the border is open, then why were 53 dead bodies found in a truck in Texas last year? Why were asylum seekers in Ciudad Juárez unable to escape a fire? Those deaths aren’t signs that we have an open border; they’re signs that we *need* to have an open border.

The belief in “the free movement of goods, services and people across borders” is not a new idea. People have made this argument before. A notable example is Amnesty International, which states in its section about refugees, asylum seekers and migrants that it campaigns “for a world where human rights can be enjoyed by everyone, no matter what situation they are in” and condemns “any policies and practices that undermine the rights of people on the move.”

Instead of making the case that our borders should be open and that an untold number of people will die so long as we maintain our enforcement-first approach, Democrats have largely spent their time in a debate that centers on whether they or Republicans are tougher on immigration policy. That’s a waste of time. Even worse, the debate presupposes that migrants have no humanity and that their attempts to pursue a better life for themselves and their families must be criminalized.

Arguments that our border should be more open should find support from a range of Americans, including progressive voters, libertarian voters and those with a faith-based worldview.

Arguments that our border should be more open should find support from a range of Americans, including progressive voters, libertarian voters and those with a faith-based worldview. However, such arguments are rarely given time in the American media ecosystem because they are deemed too radical or extreme. Even when those arguments include research from economists who say an open border policy would greatly benefit a nation’s economy, they just get pushed aside.

Part of it is just politicians focusing on the people who can vote for them. “Politicians represent the interests of people who already live in the country and vote in elections, not the interests of foreigners who could potentially immigrate,” Sergio Rebelo of the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University pointed out in 2020.

But we can’t ignore the more troubling reason. The lie that we have open borders has become central to Republican fear-mongering. Their lies that we have open borders elicit hysteria of drug-packing Brown migrants invading this country to eliminate the American way of life, an argument that could only resonate in a country that largely criminalizes drugs in the same way it does migration.

A 2021 poll from the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, found that 72% of strong liberals favored open borders, but that 54% of moderate liberals and 82% percent of conservatives who opposed the idea.

The lie that we have open borders has become central to Republican fear-mongering.

We knew conservatives were in opposition to more open borders. The disappointment is that even though there’s evidence that the most committed liberals support the idea, Democrats don’t even dare to raise the idea. They’ve allowed Republicans and anti-migration voices to dictate the terms of the discussion.

When 38 migrants die in a fire months after 53 migrants die in the back of a truck, it’s time for Democrats, including President Joe Biden and Mayorkas, to think differently. To be more welcoming and moral. To promote the American belief that immigrants have made this country great.

When Republicans say we have an open border, Democrats should stop arguing back that that’s not true. They should do something different. They should push to actually open it