



750 people from Central America surrender to Yuma-area BP over weekend

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March 11, 2019

Almost 750 people, mostly families from Guatemala, waded through the Colorado River and crossed into the United States before surrendering to Yuma-area Border Patrol agents over the weekend, authorities said.

The groups arrived just days after U.S. Customs and Border Protection announced new apprehension numbers which showed that in February, 66,450 people were taken into custody in February — the largest number of people apprehended in a single month in 11 years.

Of those, nearly two-thirds were families with children or unaccompanied minors, CBP said. Most of the recent Central American entrants are seeking asylum in the United States.

On Saturday and Sunday, dozens of small groups of people, numbering 20 to 30 people, crossed into the United States in an area near Yuma where the Morelos Dam diverts much of the Colorado River to the west, making the water shallow enough to cross, said Jose Garibay, a Border Patrol spokesman.

Nearly three-quarters of the people were families, while the rest were either children traveling without parents or guardians, or single adults, Garibay said. Around 87 percent hailed from Guatemala, while the rest were from Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador or Ecuador, he said.

After wading through the river, the groups would walk beneath or over vehicle barriers, and surrender to Border Patrol agents, Garibay said.

Over the past eight months, Border Patrol agents in Arizona have reported encountering large groups of immigrants in remote areas, including the desert east of San Luis, areas along the Colorado River where pedestrian barriers give way to vehicle barriers, and in the rugged desert near Lukeville along the Organ Pipe Cactus National Wildlife Refuge.

During a press conference on Tuesday, CBP Commissioner Kevin McAleenan told reporters, "This increased flow presents currently at our highest levels in over a decade both a border security and a humanitarian crisis."

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This echoes a long-running complaint from Trump administration officials, who have remained focused on deterrence and have repeatedly attempted to install new legal blocks to keep

immigrants, especially families from Central America, from entering the United States and seeking asylum.

Many of these tactics have been blocked by federal judges as part of several different lawsuits, however, the administration continues to press forward, even as the number of families and unaccompanied minors grows, and agents at remote stations struggle to deal with medical issues, leading to the deaths of two children, an adult male, and a woman's miscarriage in the El Paso Sector.

While CBP has blamed smugglers for families entering the desert, analysis by academics and civil rights groups have blamed the agency's policy of "metering"—or limiting the number of people who can enter a port for an interview with immigration officers—on the shift of families to remote areas.

In a report published by the Roger Strauss Center for International Security and Law in December, the authors reported that eight U.S. ports were "metering" ports by blocking people from approaching the port, limiting the number of people who could enter and request for asylum. The authors noted that in at the ports in Nogales, interviews maxed out at 20 people per day, requiring families seeking asylum to wait weeks, if not months in Mexico's border cities.

During a hearing in December, Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen said that the ports had reached their capacity, but research from the Cato Institute showed that CBP officials actually dealt with more people in 2016 under the Obama administration. And, CBP's own data shows that while apprehensions by BP agents increased 38 percent, the number of people classified as "inadmissible" at the ports declined six percent.

And, in September, the Inspector General's office at DHS made a similar conclusion noting that "the fact that both aliens and the Border Patrol reported that metering leads to increased illegal border crossings strongly suggests a relationship between the two."

In the Yuma Sector, agents said in February they took into custody 17,578 people traveling as families and 2,760 unaccompanied minors, a significant increase over an already busy January.

Compared to last year, which included a historic decline in the number of people apprehended by CBP, the number of families taken into custody in the Yuma Sector has more than doubled and the number of unaccompanied minors has increased 36 percent.

Garibay said that people entering the United States now are not asking for asylum or some form of protected status but are instead making those claims later with officials at U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. "They're being coached by smugglers that just coming with a kid in their arms is enough to get them released," he said, alluding to the Flores Settlement, the result of a legal agreement between the U.S. government and civil rights groups that limits how long families with children can be held in detention to 20 days.

In the last several months, Trump administration officials have complained about the Flores Settlement, and have attempted to rescind its protections through a federal court, however, a federal judge has so-far denied their claims.

After people are held in BP custody they are transferred to ICE, and families with children are released, often with documents called notices-to-appear, which includes a court date, as well as ankle monitors.

From December 21 to March 5, 2019, ICE's Enforcement and Removal Operations has "processed" and released around 14,500 people, most of them to charitable organizations in Phoenix and Tucson, said Yasmeen Pitts-O'Keefe, an ICE spokeswoman.

Garibay said that 137 people needed medical treatment for a range of "medical ailments" including pregnancy complications, lacerations, blisters, respiratory issues, as well as contagious diseases like chicken pox, lice and scabies.

Some were treated by "medically certified agents," or medical personnel at the stations, while others were transported to a local hospital for treatment, he said.