



Trump doubles down on push for border wall in televised address

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U.S. President Donald Trump blamed unauthorized immigrants for killing Americans, taking their jobs and flooding his country with drugs as he doubled down on demands that Congress hand over US\$5.7-billion for a wall on the border with Mexico in a nationally televised address.

In a 10-minute Oval Office speech, Mr. Trump tried to rally his base and hold his Republican Party together amid a government shutdown he triggered over congressional refusal to fund the wall.

“Some have suggested a barrier is immoral,” Mr. Trump said. “The only thing that is immoral is for the politicians to do nothing and continue to allow more innocent people to be so horribly victimized.”

Democratic leaders on Tuesday rejected the President’s demands, and accused him of unfairly targeting asylum-seekers.

“The women and children at the border are not a security threat,” Speaker Nancy Pelosi said in a televised rebuttal, as she accused Mr. Trump of “manufacturing a crisis.” Added Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer: “The symbol of America should be the Statue of Liberty, not a 30-foot wall.”

In his speech, the President described several murders committed by immigrants, lamented the quantities of heroin arriving from Mexico and claimed that “all Americans are hurt” by migrants coming to work in the U.S.

In fact, a study by the libertarian Cato Institute last year found that crime rates among immigrants in Texas – both legal and unauthorized – were lower than those among native-born Americans. The U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency found that 90 per cent of smuggled heroin went through designated ports of entry such as border crossings, and air or seaports, which means it would not be stopped by a wall.

The President also repeated an assertion that the wall will be paid for by Mexico through the new U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement. The trade pact contains no provision for Mexico to pay for the wall.

Mr. Trump, however, stopped short of declaring a state of emergency that would give him the power to divert money from the military to build the wall. Such a move would likely be met with a court challenge.

The government has been partly shuttered since Dec. 22, when Mr. Trump announced he would not sign a funding bill that did not contain wall funding.

So far, there appears to be no way out of the crisis, with the Democrats, who control the lower house of Congress, insisting a wall would be both ineffective and unethical.

Some Democrats have in the past been willing to negotiate some sort of wall funding in exchange for presidential backing of immigration changes that would allow people brought to the U.S. illegally as children receive legal status. But the party now uniformly opposes the wall.

Matt Dallek, a political historian at George Washington University, predicted that as the shutdown drags on, pressure will mount on Mr. Trump to back down from his demands.

“He’ll probably do what he’s done so often, which is when he takes a stand on an issue that is deeply unpopular, and is boxed in, he just kind of caves,”

Mr. Dallek said Republican senators had reached a bipartisan deal to fund the government before Mr. Trump triggered the shutdown. Nearly half the GOP Senate caucus is up for re-election next year, putting added pressure on them to get the shutdown over with. The Democrats would need to persuade enough Republicans in both houses to vote with them to reach a two-thirds majority that would pass a spending bill over Mr. Trump’s veto.

The wall was the first major promise of Mr. Trump’s presidential campaign, and a rallying cry for his supporters. But he took little action to get it built during his first two years in office. His insistence on it now appears to be an attempt to galvanize his base after Republican losses in the fall midterm elections and ahead of the President’s own re-election campaign next year.

The number of people arrested trying to cross the border has dropped 75 per cent since its high in 2000. But recent years have seen an uptick in asylum seekers fleeing Honduras and other Central American countries and arriving at the U.S. border. A lack of resources to process their refugee claims, along with a Trump administration policy of laying criminal charges against anyone crossing illegally, has led to long queues at border crossings and the separation of children from parents in detention facilities.

“There is a crisis, but it’s not one of terror. It’s one of increasing numbers of families coming,” said Sarah Goodman, a political scientist at the University of California, Irvine, who specializes in immigration policy.