



A Haitian odyssey: from Chile to Texas. Why was the Biden administration so caught off guard?

David C Adams
September 26, 2021

Adjusting to his new life in Rhode Island, Haitian migrant, Casto Gustin, reflects on the recent 9,000-mile perilous odyssey he survived with his wife and two year-old daughter. “Everything worked out well,” he says with relief during a phone interview.

Their extraordinary journey, which began in Santiago, Chile on July 3, and ended a month later after reaching Del Rio, Texas, is suddenly a familiar migrant story after 15,000 Haitians ended up at camped out under a bridge near the U.S. border last week.

“We were lucky. When we got to Del Rio there was hardly anyone there and we were processed quickly by immigration authorities,” the 25-year-old added in almost fluent Spanish, picked up after four years of living in Chile.

The mass migration of Haitians to the Texas border was entirely predictable and yet appeared to catch the U.S. government by surprise, experts say, raising troubling questions about the White House’s handling of the response.

The U.S. news media, including Univision, had been tracking the movement of the Haitians for several months, especially the large numbers making the perilous trek across the Darien Gap.

According to Panamanian authorities, approximately 80,000 people – 70 per cent of them Haitian - have crossed into Panama from Colombia so far this year. The pace picked up in the summer, with as many as 20,000 in August.

The bridge at Del Rio

The lack of preparation led to the inhumane conditions under the bridge in Del Rio, Texas, as well as the shocking scenes of Border Patrol agents on horseback trying to intimidate migrants from crossing the Rio Grande.

So, why was the Biden administration so caught off guard, especially after previous experiences with migrant ‘caravans’ from Central America?

“What continues to surprise me is that neither the U.S. nor Mexico, seem to have any intelligence and capability to monitor how people are being smuggled across Mexico,” said **Ali Noorani, president of the National Immigration Forum**. “Unless 3,000 Honduras line up in a caravan, pushing strollers, are both Mexico and the United States incapable of understanding how people are moving in large numbers?” he added.

A confluence of factors appears to have caused the sudden sharp increase at Del Rio, according to interviews with Haitian migrants, U.S. officials, Haiti analysts and immigration experts. That included many migrants losing their jobs in Latin America due to covid-19, as well as confusion over the Biden administration’s immigration policies.

Thousands of Haitians have been stuck in Mexican border towns since 2016, when the Obama administration ended a policy that initially allowed them in on humanitarian grounds following the devastating 2010 earthquake in the Haitian capital, Port-au-Prince, that killed 250,000 people. Thousands more emigrated to Chile and Brazil one day hoping to make it to the United States.

Online messages touting the Mexican town of Ciudad Acuña, across from Del Rio, started after President Joe Biden took office and began reversing some of the Trump administration’s immigration policies. Some social media posts recommending it appear to have come from human smugglers seeking to drum up business, according to immigrant advocates.

TPS confusion

On August 3, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas announced the extension of **Temporary Protected Status (TPS)** for Haitians living in the United States. This appears to have been what sparked the rush for the border under the mistaken belief that new arrivals would be eligible. In reality, the temporary protections were limited to those residing in the U.S. before July 29, but information about that cut-off date did not appear to get through.

Mayorkas acknowledged that this week, saying “we are very concerned that Haitians who are taking the irregular migration path are receiving misinformation that the border is open,” or that they qualify for protected status despite the expired deadline.

“I want to make sure it is known that this is not the way to come to the United States,” he said.

U.S. federal agencies continue to sort out the migrant crisis at the border, allowing some – like Gustin Casto - to apply for asylum while deporting others back to Haiti and leaving many stranded in Mexico, Central America and Colombia.

Department of Homeland Security officials said Thursday that they were also “actively investigating” how so many Haitian migrants were able quickly make their way through Mexico to Del Rio, Texas, without being detected.

On a background call with reporters Thursday, an official with the DHS said that the department has been “ **closely following the movement of migrants**” through the hemisphere. “We did not, however, have any intelligence that suggested we would be seeing the surge in numbers we saw over the past week,” the official said.

“They knew exactly where they were”

Others say it's less about tracking migrants and more about having the tools to find them again. “They knew exactly where they were at any time. It’s just that there were no tools to push back in each country,” said one immigration expert who works closely with U.S. officials in the region. “Since this movement has been going on for years, why didn’t the government mobilize more efforts” to find solutions, the expert added, saying both the Trump and Biden administrations were to blame.

Rather than enforce their own immigration laws, officials in Central America in particular are letting migrants illegally flow through their territory, facilitating at least 650 people by bus per day, one official in the region told **Univision News**.

Haitians began crossing at Del Rio this year, but their numbers ballooned after a Biden administration program that briefly opened the door to some asylum seekers ended, according to the San Diego-based **Haitian Bridge Alliance**, which advocates for Haitian migrants. The program allowed in a select number of people deemed by humanitarian groups to be at high risk in Mexico.

"All my friends leaving"

Gustin was one of those who saw the opportunity. "I saw all my friends leaving. I thought, I'm not going to be left alone," he said.

After four years in Chile he hadn’t planned on leaving so soon as he had already obtained a commercial truck drivers’ license. But he had gone months without work because of covid-19 and was growing desperate. "The dream of Haitians is to go to the United States," he said. "In Chile there is no future. Discrimination is very deep and the covid ended with the jobs," he said. he added.

He said he encountered racism on public transportation, especially from older Chileans. “When you sit down next to them on the bus they stand up and move away because they don’t want to be near you,” he said.

So, he packed his things and began planning how to get to the United States, with the help of his uncle, a U.S. citizen in Rhode Island.

He and his wife made a careful plan using a mix of cheap airline flights, bus, ferry, canoe, and the most dangerous leg, a four-day trek through the Darien Gap, a sparsely populated jungle with no roads that separates Colombia and Panama.

Including bribes to policeman in Mexico and Central America, the total cost would be \$7,000, for Casto and his family; wife, Rose Alexis and their daughter May-Caína.

The journey

They departed Santiago on July 3 on a domestic flight to the northern city of Iquitos, and from there took another cheap flight to La Paz, Bolivia. Next came a long bus ride to Lima, Peru and then another low-cost airline flight to Bogota, Colombia. After catching a bus to Necocli on the north coast, they caught a ferry across the Gulf of Urabá to Capurganá in Choco, the extreme northwest of Colombia, near the border with Panama.

For the next stage of the journey, Gustin paid a local guide, armed with a shotgun and pistol, to hike through the Darien to reach the Panamanian hamlet of Bajo Chiquito, where they were processed by the Panamanian border police, SENAFRONT. "There were a lot of people on the path there. It took us four days. It was the hardest part. I was afraid for my wife," he said. Gustin explained that the guides showed no mercy to anyone who couldn't keep going, demanding extra payment for those who couldn't carry their own backpacks.

"They kill you if you can't pay," he said.

Others have told stories of rape, murder and robberies of migrants crossing in the Darien, which can take up to eight days. Thankfully, Gustin said his trip went smoothly. “If you pay for a guide it’s safer - and faster,” he added.

Telephone, online banking

His other main worry was his phone. He said he has no photos from the Darien because he kept the phone tightly wrapped in plastic from the rain and humidity. “If I lose the phone, that’s it, there no way to continue (the journey). It's my bank, and all my messages,” he explained, saying he paid for everything – except food and bribes - online.

A Univision team visited Bajo Chiquito around the same time on July 29, and witnessed a stream of Haitians arriving, as well as some Cubans, Venezuelans and Africans. Only the Haitians,

Cubans and Venezuelans were allowed to enter Panama, given special consideration due to the humanitarian and political situations in those countries.

Panamanian officials said they were seeing between 400 and 1,200 migrants arriving daily trying to reach the U.S.

From there, Casto and his wife paid \$25 each for a four-hour ride by piragua up two rivers, the Turquesa and the Chucunaque to a Migrant Reception Station in Lajas Blancas, on the Pan-American highway.

There began the long bus journey across Central America and Mexico to the border, which ended up costing the family \$3,000 due to the numerous bribes demanded by police. After crossing the border on August 4, Casto said his family was granted humanitarian parole and allowed to fly to Rhode Island where they are staying with an uncle while he waits for his immigration status to be determined.

One crisis after another

By Friday, the Del Rio migrant camp was empty and heavy machinery was being used to clear it of trash. But critics say the Biden administration could have avoided the crisis by having a plan in place. “This government doesn't focus on anything unless there's a crisis immediately,” said **Alex Nowrasteh**, an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute in Washington DC.

He compared the Haitian border crisis to the way in which the advance of the Taliban in Afghanistan caught the Biden administration by surprise. “There's been stuff happening on the border forever. This is just institutionally how the U.S. political system functions. It only reacts to crises in front of their face,” he added.

Some say an ‘all of government’ approach needs to be taken to prepare for the next crisis. “I think DHS and the State Department really need a joint task force for the management of migration as opposed to a crisis response,” said Noorani.

Political game

The Biden administration also seems to be obsessed by electoral costs and considerations, said **Jake Johnston**, a Haiti expert at the Center for Economic and Policy Research in Washington DC.

“They're trying to not totally piss off Republicans and not totally piss off all Democrats and their base. You just can't have it every way, you know,” he said. “They're too careerist and too political, and so they're trying to do everything through a lens of political damage. And it's just like that's not going to cut it in terms of creating good policy,” he added.

After the crackdown by immigration officials in Del Rio this week, cases like Gustin's family may be sharply reduced. But U.S. officials are still tracking large groups of Haitians in Latin America, including more than 20,000 in Colombia, who may soon try to reach the U.S., according to an internal document **reported by NBC News**.

DHS is also monitoring groups of about 1,500 in Panama and 3,000 in Peru, the document said.

Wait and see

Many may now choose to stay where they are. One of Casto's friends who stayed behind in Chile said he is taking a wait-and-see attitude. "I'm waiting for more news before I decide," said Nixon Pilorge, 29.

Also married, Pilorge said he was aware that waiting until his wife is pregnant, or gives birth, might give them a better chance of humanitarian parole at the border. His wife's grandfather lives in New York.

He also said he needs to save money for the journey.

On a positive note, after so many Haitians left Chile he said it might at least be easier to find work.