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Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey dispatches National Guard to border; state of emergency declared in 6 counties

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Gov. Doug Ducey will dispatch National Guard troops to the southern border in response to a recent increase in migrants being apprehended by the Border Patrol, his office announced Tuesday.

The Republican leader also declared a state of emergency in four border counties — Cochise, Pima, Santa Cruz and Yuma — as well as in Maricopa and Pinal.

"The U.S. Border Patrol is overwhelmed. Local law enforcement and mayors are calling out for help," Ducey said in a video outlining his rationale.

"Citizens in our border communities are concerned for their safety, and nonprofits, left to pick up the pieces of broken federal policies, are strained ... and yet we still haven't received an adequate response from the (Joe) Biden administration."

The governor for weeks has held Biden solely responsible for the migrant surge, pointing to the Democrat's decision to reverse a series of aggressive immigration policies implemented by his predecessor.

During a visit to the U.S.-Mexico border last month, Ducey blasted Biden and his administration for being "totally divorced from the reality on the ground."

Upon his return, he slammed Vice President Kamala Harris as the "worst possible choice" to lead the administration's response and requested federal funding to dispatch National Guard troops.

That money apparently did not come through.

While Ducey has blamed the Biden administration solely for the recent increase in Border Patrol apprehensions, analysts say the increase is the result of a mix of factors, including a bottleneck of asylum seekers mostly from Central America. They have grown increasingly frustrated after being stuck in Mexico for more than a year waiting for hearings in U.S. immigration courts under policies implemented by former President Donald Trump.

Many of the asylum seekers are living in squalid camps and in dangerous conditions in Mexico.

The Biden administration has gradually rolled back the so-called Remain in Mexico policy implemented by the Trump administration, allowing some asylum seekers to enter through ports of entry, where they are processed and then later released in border communities, leading to some of the strains.

Border Patrol apprehensions also have historically increased in the spring as labor demands in the U.S. draw migrant workers without documents to enter illegally.

But under a provision known as Title 42 implemented by the Trump administration last year amid the coronavirus pandemic and kept in place by the Biden administration, most migrants arrested by the Border Patrol are quickly expelled.

Many of the migrants turn around and re-enter illegally, sometimes multiple times, adding to Border Patrol apprehensions, according to an analysis by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.

Without these repeat crossers, Border Patrol apprehensions "would look nearly identical to fiscal year 2019 before the pandemic," according to a blog post by David Bier, an immigration policy analyst at Cato.

Bier also has blamed Title 42 for an increase in unaccompanied minors apprehended by the Border Patrol. Under a court ruling, unaccompanied minors seeking asylum in the U.S. can no longer be quickly expelled under Title 42.

As a result, asylum-seeking families who arrive at the border are instead sending their children to cross the border alone, Bier said.

Mixed feelings on Guard involvement

Arizona will provide up to \$25 million for the deployment, which could involve up to 250 Guard members, the Governor's Office said Tuesday.

Troops are expected to provide support for local law enforcement, installing and maintaining border cameras, monitoring and collecting camera data, and analyzing satellite imagery. They also may assist with medical operations in detention centers, according to Brig. Gen. Kerry Muehlenbeck, the state's adjutant general.

When the troops will go to the border is under evaluation, so the deployment won't happen for at least a few days, said Ducey's spokesman, C.J. Karamargin.

In a statement, Yuma County Sheriff Leon Wilmot said the deployment would "help ensure Yuma and other border communities are further protected from dangerous and illegal activity."

"By deploying National Guard assets, the governor will allow me to deploy more first responders to mission-critical tasks, where we will work side by side with our federal partners to target, apprehend and prosecute transnational criminal organizations," he said.

Ducey's decision to deploy the National Guard to Arizona's border with Mexico also received support from Arizona's two U.S. senators, both Democrats.

"I welcome the governor's action to provide logistical support to Arizona communities, and look forward to hearing more details about how the National Guard will assist," U.S. Sen. Kyrsten Sinema said in a written statement.

"I will continue working closely with Arizona leaders and organizations to support our border communities, secure the border, prevent the spread of COVID-19 and treat all migrants and unaccompanied children fairly and humanely."

U.S. Sen. Mark Kelly agreed with Ducey that "there is a crisis on the border."

He said he has pushed the Biden administration for additional resources, staffing, transportation and testing necessary to provide a "secure, orderly process that does not fall on Arizona communities."

"In visiting the Yuma Sector and speaking with Border Patrol and other local leaders, it's clear that their resources and staffing are strained," Kelly said in a written statement.

"There are important missions that the Arizona National Guard can perform at the border and the governor calling them up will provide assistance to both local law enforcement and the Department of Homeland Security."

Tucson Mayor Regina Romero, however, accused Ducey of "playing politics with the National Guard, and wasting Arizona tax dollars in the process."

"If Gov. Ducey was truly committed to helping, he would be supporting the efforts of local governments and (non-profit groups) to provide humanitarian care," including housing asylum seekers at local hotels, Romero said in a written statement.

"Unfortunately, the governor is more concerned with raising his national profile than actually working to resolve this issue."

Sending National Guard troops to the border "will do nothing to alleviate the current situation," Romero said.

She said she also fears that deploying troops to the border will "stoke unjustified fears about asylum seekers, who are in search of a better life for them and their families."

Other southern Arizona leaders also have bristled at the idea, dismissing it as political posturing meant to score points with the GOP and distract from Ducey's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Democratic U.S. Rep. Raúl Grijalva, for instance, whose district includes portions of Arizona's border, has urged Ducey to instead prioritize funding for local governments and nonprofit groups that have been providing assistance to asylum seekers near the border.

Overwhelmed Border Patrol agents have released migrants in Yuma, Ajo and Gila Bend, often in small, rural communities that lack the infrastructure to house or transport them.

Ducey will visit Yuma County on Wednesday "to get more details from community leaders and law enforcement officials about what they're seeing on the ground," his office said. Senate President Karen Fann, R-Prescott, is also expected to attend.