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Biden pushing for major immigration reforms, but another humanitarian crisis at the border could derail his agenda

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President Joe Biden is expected to announce more executive actions on immigration in the coming days and is under pressure from immigrant and human rights groups to end or roll back former President Donald Trump's emergency coronavirus pandemic order that virtually closed the southern border.

Critics contend Trump used the coronavirus pandemic as an excuse to keep out asylum seekers. The emergency order allows federal authorities to quickly expel migrants who enter without documents. Since it began in March, the United States has expelled more than 393,000 migrants apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico border.

But abruptly ending the emergency order at the border, combined with several executive orders Biden signed on his first day in office that rolled backed or reversed several of Trump's restrictive immigration policies, could fuel another large wave of migrants.

Biden's actions included stopping construction of Trump's signature border wall, and temporarily pausing some deportations. A large wave of migrants could lead to another humanitarian crisis at the southern border similar to the ones in 2018 and 2019, analysts say.

A humanitarian crisis at the border, especially so soon into his presidency, would most likely derail much of Biden's pro-immigration agenda including his top goal: passing immigration reform legislation that offers legalization and citizenship to millions of undocumented immigrants.

"If there is another humanitarian crisis at the border, it would have negative impacts not only on the migrants themselves. It would also lessen the likelihood of getting Republican support in the future for bigger immigration legislation," said Ariel Ruiz Soto, a policy analyst at the nonpartisan Migration Policy Institute.

Alex Nowrasteh had a similar assessment.

"It absolutely could send large waves of asylum seekers and unauthorized immigrants to the border," said Nowrasteh, director of immigration studies at the Libertarian Cato Institute. "I think it would undermine most of (Biden's) plans. ...The research in political psychology is very clear on this. American voters want order on the border. They don't mind if the border is relatively open so long as it's orderly and controlled."

Trump, and several of his top border officials, spent months warning the incoming Biden administration about the risks of undoing some of his policies, cautioning that it could lead to a new humanitarian crisis.

Whether large waves of migrants make it to the U.S. border will depend on whether the governments of Mexico and Guatemala keep up agreements with the U.S. under the former Trump administration to stop migrants at their borders, he said.

"If Mexico continues to try and stop these caravans, break them up and enforce immigration laws for itself and for the United States, then it's not going to be nearly as big," Nowrasteh said. "So if they stopped, it would be huge. I think there would be a huge surge."

Ali Noorani, executive director of the National Immigration Forum, which supports Biden's immigration agenda, said the challenge will be for the Biden administration to begin reopening the border to asylum seekers without sending a message that could be exploited by criminal smuggling organizations, triggering a large wave of migrants.

"The people smugglers and the traffickers, they will take advantage of any perception that a Biden administration provides to exploit migrants," Noorani said. "That is a big reason why the (previous) flows happened the way they did, because the cartels are able to monetize that journey."

There already are signs that a humanitarian crisis could be brewing, from migrant caravans forming in Central America to frustrated asylum seekers stuck in Mexico protesting at the U.S. border.

On Dec. 29, more than 100 asylum seekers, mostly from Cuba, blocked a binational bridge in Juarez across from El Paso in hopes that the new Biden administration would roll back a Trump administration policy that requires them to wait in Mexico for immigration court hearings in the U.S. The Biden administration has stopped enrolling new migrants in the Migrant Protections Protocols program, also known MPP and Remain in Mexico, but 70,000 people are still forced to wait in Mexico for hearings and have not yet been allowed into the U.S.

In early January, thousands of migrants traveling in a caravan left Honduras headed to the U.S. in hopes that they would be welcomed by the new Biden administration. About 9,000 migrants mostly from Honduras crossed into Guatemala, where they clashed with security forces days before Biden's inauguration. They were turned back and thousands have since been deported to Honduras and several other countries, the Los Angeles Times reported.

During the first three months of the 2021 fiscal year, October through December, the number of unauthorized single adult migrants encountered by Border Patrol agents has increased 178% to 180,633 compared to the same period the year before, according to Customs and Border Protection data. Border Patrol agents are encountering more single adult migrants in every single sector. There are signs that the numbers have gone up because Border Patrol agents are encountering many of the same migrants over and over. Migrants from Mexico and other Central American countries are quickly expelled to Mexico under Title 42 of the Centers for Disease Control emergency coronavirus pandemic rule implemented by the Trump administration, according to migrant aid groups at the border. Many of those sent across the border to Mexico turn around and attempt to come right back. Border Patrol agents in the El Paso sector say unauthorized migrants are taking advantage of the quick expulsions under Title 42 to

cross again and again in an attempt to enter the U.S. illegally. Agents are routinely picking up single adults with 10 crossing attempts on their record.

And on Saturday, the bodies of 19 migrants presumed to be headed for the U.S. were found shot and burned inside several vehicles in a town in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas near the Texas border, according to the Associated Press. The area where the bodies were found is located in a well-known smuggling route where turf battles between rival cartels are common.

The Mexican government is conducting DNA tests to determine the identities of the migrants, but several families in Guatemala believe the slain migrants are from towns in the largely indigenous department/state of San Marcos near Guatemala's border with Mexico, according to El Economista.

Polleros in Guatemala, as human smugglers are known in Spanish, have been charging poor migrants in rural areas \$1,000 down payments to guide them to the U.S., said Antonio Velasquez, president of Organization Maya Chapin of Guatemala in Arizona, a grassroots group based in Phoenix.

Relatives and friends in Guatemala told Velasquez that smugglers are falsely telling poor people in rural areas that the new Biden administration is giving legal papers to migrants even though Biden's immigration proposal is a long ways from becoming law and would only benefit undocumented immigrants already in the U.S., not those who arrived after Jan. 1.

"They are promising people that they will be given papers" if they reach the U.S., "something that isn't true," Velasquez said.

Velasquez said he is trying to spread the word to migrants in Guatemala not to put their lives at risk in light of the migrants found massacred in Mexico.

"We are telling people, especially the young people, not to take the risk," Velasquez said. "It's not easy. We have seen how dangerous the trip is."

Ruiz Soto at the Migration Policy Institute said it's too early to tell whether another humanitarian crisis could be brewing at the border.

A lot will depend on whether Mexico and Guatemala continue to stop migrants from passing through their countries.

U.S. officials have been trying to send a messages to migrants not to come, he said.

On Friday, Jan. 22, U.S. Ambassador to Guatemala William Popp warned that migrants who arrive at the U.S. border without documents would be expelled immediately because of the coronavirus pandemic.

"Our message is clear," Popp said during a news conference in Guatemala. "Our border remains closed for those who try to enter in an illegal manner."

Mexican and Guatemalan officials also are pressuring the Honduran government to do more to stop migrant caravans citing the pandemic, Ruiz Soto said.

"In regards to the caravan of irregular migrants from Honduras, which began its movement on January 15, the government of Mexico calls on the countries of the region to responsibly apply

the locally established migration and health protocols, in order to to avoid health risks derived from the COVID-19 pandemic for migrants and the population of transit communities," Mexico's secretary of exterior relations said [a statement](#).

Photos and [videos](#) posted on social media show [police and soldiers in Guatemala](#) using force to disperse the caravan. Soldiers deployed along Mexico's southern border stopped migrants from crossing a river dividing Mexico and Guatemala.

Javier Osorio, a professor at the University of Arizona who studies patterns in migration from Central America, said migrants may stop heading to the U.S. in caravans, which originally were formed to protect migrants from criminal attacks, in response to the recent crackdowns. Migrants may return to traveling in small groups that are more difficult to detect.

"If that safety in numbers eventually becomes an obstacle because they are easily spotted, and they can send a large military or police force to stop and deter them, then maybe an advantageous strategy is to break those big groups down into fragments and individuals just crossing on their own in different ways," he said. "That will make it very hard for authorities to either detect or deter these types of crossings."

Messages from top officials alone are not going to stop migrants from trying to reach the U.S., Ruiz Soto said.

That is because there are still tremendous pressures pushing migrants in the Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras to flee their countries, including extreme poverty, gang violence, economic insecurity, and corruption.

The coronavirus pandemic has further hurt the economies in those countries, increasing poverty. Back-to-back major hurricanes also devastated parts of Central America in November, especially Honduras and Guatemala, Ruiz Soto said.

"The question is, Is the message going to be enough to reach migrants the way that it needs to be intended? And is that going to be enough to actually deter future flows? Because of the conditions on the ground, I don't think that's going to be the case. But what we'll continue to be in existence is going to be the heavy control presence in Mexico and Guatemala."

He said it's notable that the Biden administration has continued to force asylum seekers to wait in Mexico for their immigration court hearings instead of allowing them to enter the U.S. and kept in place the Trump administration's coronavirus emergency order at the border in place.

Ruiz Soto expects any changes in those policies to be phased in gradually rather than all at once.

Long term, Biden's proposed immigration reform legislation calls for investing about \$4 billion in Central America to address some of the root causes forcing people to migrate, Ruiz Soto said.

Ramon Marquez Vega agrees. He leads Ayuda en Accion, a nonprofit that works with migrant shelters in Mexico.

"In 2019, the pressure from President Trump caused those flows to decrease, and then the pandemic came," Marquez Vega said. "You have to consider that the root causes that are causing this displacement are not lessening. Consider that COVID has further exposed social and economic issues, and now you add Hurricanes Eta and Iota in November."

A recent USAID report estimates the two hurricanes impacted nearly 9 million people in Central America and losses are projected to surpass the \$6 billion from Hurricane Mitch in 1998.

Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., is calling on the Biden administration to extend Temporary Protected Status to Central Americans affected by the hurricanes allowing them to live and work legally in the U.S..

“Let me just quote what Admiral Craig Faller, who’s the head of Southern Command ... said about these two hurricanes,” Kaine said. “Quote ‘The devastation is beyond compare, when you think about COVID and the double punch of these two massive, major hurricanes back to back, there are some estimates of up to a decade to recovery in the Northern Triangle countries.’”

Oscar Chacon, with Chicago-based Alianza America, said providing people impacted by the storms with Temporary Protected Status would help keep migration safe and orderly.

It would also help these countries economically through the billions of dollars in remittances migrants send each year, he said.