

Mass Migrant Crossing Floods Texas Border Facilities

The arrival of up to 1,000 migrants, the latest big group to have crossed the border, was one of the largest single crossings in recent years in West Texas, which has seen a surge in migration.

By David Peinado For The New York Times



By **Simon Romero, J. David Goodman and Eileen Sullivan**

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EL PASO — After nightfall on Sunday, hundreds of migrants stepped across the Rio Grande and into El Paso, a caravan of people mainly from Nicaragua whose crossing was among the largest in recent years along the West Texas border.

Their arrival en masse into the United States surprised even those in El Paso, which has in recent months found itself overwhelmed by a steady stream of many migrants from Central and South America, more than 50,000 people in October alone.

Like the migrants from Venezuela who flooded into El Paso this year, those arriving from Nicaragua cannot be rapidly expelled under a pandemic-era public health policy known as Title 42, which federal authorities employ with migrants from other countries, such as Mexico.

And so the scenes unfolding in El Paso offered a preview of the challenges that border officials could soon face all along the southern border after the policy comes to an end, as it is expected to, absent court intervention, next week.

Most of those who arrived on Sunday turned themselves in to federal authorities for processing. Soon, most of them would join the thousands of others who have crossed in recent days, many of whom have been released to seek help and food, some clustering at the downtown bus station, some sleeping on cardboard during a night when temperatures dipped toward freezing.

“I’m going to Nashville,” said Gabriel Moreno, 21, who left a poor-paying job in a textile factory in Nicaragua, was robbed as he crossed Mexico and, on Monday, was among those at the bus station in El Paso looking to keep going farther into the United States.



Gabriel Moreno outside of a Greyhound bus station in downtown El Paso where immigration authorities have been dropping off migrants. Paul Ratje for The New York Times

Because of strained diplomatic relations with the authoritarian regime in Nicaragua, the United States is limited in its ability to expel Nicaraguans under the public health authority and cannot repatriate the country's citizens. And so far, Mexico has not agreed to accept them if they are expelled from the United States.

As a result, most of the Nicaraguans apprehended are released on a short-term parole with a tracking device or sent briefly to Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention where they are typically released after a few days. All will eventually be called to immigration court to face deportation orders.

Over the weekend, a huge number of people arrived in El Paso, roughly 2,000 each day, according to officials. The group of about 800 to 1,000 people that crossed on Sunday night appeared to have been the largest.

Blake Barrow, the director of the Rescue Mission of El Paso, said his shelter was "bursting at the seams" as the migrant influx continued. "The numbers are like nothing I've seen for the last 25 years," he said.

As recently as August, he said, nearly all of the people receiving assistance at the shelter were U.S. citizens experiencing homelessness. "Now, that number is down to about 30 percent," Mr. Barrow said. "The whole dynamic has changed with the large numbers of people from countries like Nicaragua."

Mr. Barrow said he had people sleeping anywhere that he could find for them. "Honestly, I don't know how to address this problem," he said. "The situation is overwhelming us."

The number of arrivals extended far beyond the large caravan that arrived on Sunday and did not appear to be abating. Rosario Sosa, who runs a network of shelters including in Ciudad Juárez, across the border from El Paso, said migrants were still crossing the border on Monday afternoon. Across the river, a line had formed as the latest arrivals waited to be processed by U.S. authorities.

"The queue right now is endless," he said.



Daniel Salazar, 42, and his son Luis Alexander Calero, 20, from Nicaragua, were part of large group that arrived in Juárez on Sunday after making their way through Mexico. They said they were kidnapped for days, after which they were released and made their way to the border in a caravan of buses. Paul Ratje for The New York Times

It was the second time in recent months that large migrant crossings threatened to overwhelm the resources of the impoverished border town and the federal immigration authorities who are already strained by what has been a steady arrival of migrants throughout the year. More than 5,000 migrants were in the Border Patrol's central processing center on Monday, according to El Paso officials.

"We're feeling it. It's straining resources," said State Senator César J. Blanco, who represents the area and urged the state and federal governments to send humanitarian aid. He said El Paso had become a de facto entry point for desperate migrants, much like Ellis Island. "Whether we want it or not, it is," he said.

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On Monday, migrants, most of them from Nicaragua, could be seen huddling on street corners or waiting outside a bus station.

"I have five people staying with me right now in my place, and I opened my truck up for another three to sleep there," said Almaraz Saucedo Isidro, who lives in the apartments across the street from the station. "It's cold, and they don't have food or warm clothes, and they were just dropped off."

The region around El Paso has seen a sharp increase in the number of people attempting to cross from Mexico in recent months, with 53,000 encounters recorded by border agents there in October, the most recent month for which data is available. That is more than on any other section of the U.S.-Mexico border. Federal agents have recorded a record number of encounters along the entire southern border,

nearly 2.4 million in a yearlong period.

The secretary of homeland security, Alejandro N. Mayorkas, was expected to hold a series of previously planned meetings in El Paso on Tuesday. No public events were scheduled.

The images of large numbers of migrants wading across low sections of the Rio Grande in El Paso immediately recalled previous moments of crisis at the southern border, most recently in the small city of Del Rio, Texas, where more than 9,000 migrants, mostly from Haiti, crowded in squalid conditions in a temporary camp under a bridge along the river last year.

Last week, El Paso saw nearly 7,000 migrants released from federal immigration custody, a weekly total that surpassed even those seen during the surge of Venezuelan arrivals this year. Most of those released in El Paso eventually make their way out of the city, but they often seek food, shelter and assistance before doing so.



Kenia Centenos, left, from Nicaragua, rested on cardboard next to a gas station in El Paso, where she slept the night before while waiting for money to be sent to her so she can buy a ticket to Houston. Paul Ratje for The New York Times

John Martin, the deputy director of the Opportunity Center for the Homeless in El Paso, said he had been told on Monday that another 2,500 migrants would be released in the coming week. The center, which primarily focuses on the local homeless population, has several locations, and Mr. Martin said most of them were over capacity.

The scenes — of the mass nighttime river crossings, of migrants sleeping on city streets — provided a potential window into the situation that border authorities have been bracing for as early as next week, when the Title 42 pandemic health policy is set to expire. The policy, put in place by the Trump administration and continued under President Biden under a court order, has allowed U.S. authorities to rapidly expel migrants, even those seeking asylum, in order to help prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

However, the United States is limited in its ability to expel citizens of certain countries, like Nicaragua, with which the United States does not have repatriation agreements. Eventually, those citizens will face removal proceedings in immigration court.

The group arriving on Sunday included migrants who had been traveling from several Central and South American countries, as well as Haiti, and who had been granted temporary legal status in Mexico that allowed them to travel freely in that country for 180 days, said Santiago González Reyes, the head of the human rights offices in Ciudad Juárez, across the border from El Paso.

Also among those in the caravan: migrants who had been part of a large group that was kidnapped while en route and extorted for money, before the Mexican authorities were able to free them, said Marcos Chávez Torres, the mayor of Jiménez, a town in the state of Chihuahua.

The government in Chihuahua had bused a caravan of about 1,100 migrants into Juárez on Sunday afternoon, Mr. González said. The buses, about 19 of them, were paid for by the Mexican government, he said, which had reasoned that the migrants would have walked north anyway and provided a police escort to keep them safe.

The group did not stay long in Juárez. Around 4 p.m., the migrants decided to cross the border en masse, he said, and hundreds more joined them. "They left on foot and crossed the river," Mr. González said.

The processing center in El Paso is currently over capacity, a circumstance that border officials there have managed previously.



Migrants waiting to board a Customs and Border Protection transport bus in El Paso. Paul Ratje for The New York Times

Felix Acuna, 41, who arrived on Sunday at the border after a 25-day journey from Nicaragua, was detained by federal authorities for seven hours before being released and told to call for a court date in two weeks. Mr. Acuna said he was trying to connect with his family in Miami and eventually get a bus ticket there.

"It's very difficult right now in Nicaragua — there is no work. I came here to find work because I have four daughters back home," said Mr. Acuna.

Until recently, El Paso had been paying to bus migrants out of the city to destinations in the north and east. By September, the number of crossings in the city had been as high as 2,000 a day on some days, mostly by Venezuelans.

Local officials halted their busing program — which took nearly 14,000 people out of the city, including 10,000 to New York — in October after the Biden administration changed its policy and began applying the Title 42 health order to the large number of Venezuelans who were then arriving at the border, most of whom had previously been allowed to stay and pursue asylum claims.

An administration official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because the official was not authorized to speak publicly, said the federal government had been responding to the migration spikes on a country-by-country basis and had not yet developed an overall strategy.

In downtown El Paso on Monday, few of the migrants who had gathered around the bus station ventured into the surrounding area.

On a bench, Carmen Tercero, 37, sat next to her two daughters, who are 8 and 17. After traveling from Nicaragua and across Mexico, they had crossed the border last week and were released from a processing center on Monday morning.

“All I want is a better life for my daughters,” said Ms. Tercero, who worked at a beauty salon in Managua. “I’ll cross the border a hundred more times if that’s the way to help them,” she added, as they awaited a bus to Houston where Ms. Tercero’s sister lives.

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