



BIDEN INSPECTS US-MEXICO BORDER IN FACE OF GOP CRITICISM - ASSOCIATED PRESS

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President Joe Biden walked a muddy stretch of the U.S.-Mexico border and inspected a busy port of entry Sunday on his first trip to the region after two years in office, a visit shadowed by the fraught politics of immigration as Republicans blame him for record numbers of migrants crossing into the country.

At his first stop, the president observed as border officers in El Paso demonstrated how they search vehicles for drugs, money and other contraband. Next, he traveled to a dusty street with abandoned buildings and walked along a metal border fence that separated the U.S. city from Ciudad Juarez.

His last stop was the El Paso County Migrant Services Center — but there were no migrants in sight. As he learned about the services offered there, he asked an aid worker, "If I could wave the wand, what should I do?"

Biden's nearly four-hour visit to El Paso was highly controlled. He encountered no migrants except when his motorcade drove alongside the border and about a dozen lined up on the Ciudad Juárez side. His visit did not include time at a Border Patrol station, where migrants who cross illegally are arrested and held before their release.

The visit seemed designed to showcase a smooth operation to process legal migrants, weed out smuggled contraband and humanely treat those who have entered illegally, creating a counter-narrative to Republicans' claims of a crisis situation equivalent to an open border.

But his visit was likely do little to quell critics from both sides, including immigrant advocates who accuse him of establishing cruel policies not unlike those of his hard-line predecessor, Donald Trump.

In a sign of the deep tensions over immigration, Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, a Republican, handed Biden a letter as soon as he touched down in the state that said the "chaos" at the border was a "direct result" of the president's failure to enforce federal laws. Biden later took the letter out of his jacket pocket during his tour, telling reporters, "I haven't read it yet."

House Speaker Kevin McCarthy dismissed Biden's visit as a "photo op," saying on Twitter that the Republican majority would hold the administration "accountable for creating the most dangerous border crisis in American history."

El Paso County Judge Ricardo Samaniego welcomed Biden's visit, but said a current lull in arrivals prevented the president from seeing

how large the group of newcomers has been.



"He didn't get to see the real difficulties," said Samaniego, who was in the local delegation that greeted Biden. "It was good that he was here. It's a first step. But we still need to do more and have more time with him."

Elsewhere in El Paso where Biden did not visit, hundreds of migrants were gathered Sunday outside the Sacred Heart Catholic Church, where they have been sleeping outdoors and receiving three meals a day from faith groups and other humanitarian organizations.

The migrants included several pregnant women, including Karla Sainz, 26, eight months along. She was traveling in a small group that included her 2-year-old son, Joshua. Sainz left her three other children back home in Venezuela with her mother.

"I would ask President Biden to help me with a permission or something so we can work and continue," she said.

Juan Tovar, 32, one of several people in her group, suggested he also had political reasons for leaving his home country.

"Socialism is the worst," he said. "In Venezuela, they kill us, they torture us, we can't talk bad about the government. We are worse off than in Cuba."

Noengris Garcia, also eight months pregnant, was traveling with her husband, teen son and the small family dog from the tiny state of Portuguesa, Venezuela, where she operated a food stall.

"We don't want to be given money or a house," said Garcia, 39. "We just want to work."

Asked what he's learned by seeing the border firsthand and speaking with the officers who work along it, Biden said: "They need a lot of resources. We're going to get it for them."

El Paso is currently the biggest corridor for illegal crossings, in large part due to Nicaraguans fleeing repression, crime and poverty in their country. They are among migrants from four countries who are now subject to quick expulsion under new rules enacted by the Biden administration in the past week that drew strong criticism from immigration advocates.

Biden's recent policy announcements on border security and his visit to the border were aimed in part at blunting the impact of upcoming investigations into immigration promised by House Republicans. But any enduring solution will require action by the sharply divided Congress, where multiple efforts to enact sweeping changes have failed in recent years.

From Texas, Biden headed south to Mexico City, where he and the leaders of Mexico and Canada will gather on Monday and Tuesday for a North American leaders summit. Immigration is among the items on the agenda.

The numbers of migrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border has risen dramatically during Biden's first two years in office. There were more than 2.38 million stops during the year that ended Sept. 30, the first time the number topped 2 million. The administration has struggled to clamp down on crossings, reluctant to take measures that would resemble those of Trump's administration.

The policy changes announced this past week are Biden's biggest move yet to contain illegal border crossings and will turn away tens of thousands of migrants arriving at the border. At the same time, 30,000 migrants per month from Cuba, Nicaragua, Haiti and Venezuela will get the chance to come to the U.S. legally as long as they travel by plane, get a sponsor and pass background checks.

The U.S. will also turn away migrants who do not seek asylum first in a country they traveled through en route to the U.S. Migrants are being asked to complete a form on a phone app so that they they can go to a port of entry at a pre-scheduled date and time.

Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas told reporters aboard Air Force One that the administration is trying to "incentivize a

safe and orderly way and cut out the smuggling organizations," saying the policies are "not a ban at all" but an attempt to protect migrants from the trauma that smuggling can create.



The changes were welcomed by some, particularly leaders in cities where migrants have been massing. But Biden was excoriated by immigrant advocate groups, which accused him of taking measures modeled after those of the former president. Administration officials disputed that characterization.

For all of his international travel over his 50 years in public service, Biden has not spent much time at the U.S.-Mexico border.

The only visit that the White House could point to was Biden's drive by the border while he was campaigning for president in 2008. He sent Vice President Kamala Harris to El Paso in 2021, but she was criticized for largely bypassing the action, because El Paso wasn't the center of crossings that it is now.

Trump, who made hardening immigration a signature issue, traveled to the border several times.

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