



BIDEN PLAN AIMS TO STEM BORDER MIGRATION AS RESTRICTIONS END - ASSOCIATED PRESS

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Photo: President Joe Biden walks along a stretch of the U.S.-Mexico border in El Paso Texas, Jan. 8, 2023

With COVID-19 immigration restrictions set to expire, the Biden administration on Thursday announced measures meant to stop migrants from illegally crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, both by cracking down on many of those who do come, and by creating new pathways meant to offer an alternative to the dangerous journey.

The effort includes opening processing centers outside the United States for people fleeing violence and poverty to apply to fly in legally and settle in the United States, Spain or Canada. The first processing centers will open in Guatemala and Colombia, with others expected to follow.

The administration also plans to swiftly screen migrants seeking asylum at the border itself, quickly deport those deemed as not being qualified, and penalizing people who cross illegally into the U.S. or illegally through another country on their way to the U.S. border.

But it is unclear whether the measures will do much to slow the tide of migrants fleeing countries marred by political and economic strife. Further increasing the pressure is the looming end of public health rules instituted amid the pandemic that allowed for quickly expelling many migrants and set to expire on May 11.

"This is a hemispheric challenge that demands hemispheric solutions," said Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas during a news conference as he laid out how the U.S. is working with other countries in the region.

Mayorkas also warned that migrants and human smugglers should not interpret the upcoming deadline to mean that everyone should come: "Let me be clear, our border is not open and will not be open after May 11."

Immigration has vexed Biden throughout his presidency, with top GOP leaders hammering him as soft on border security. Immigrant advocates, meanwhile, argue that the president is abandoning humanitarian efforts with stricter measures meant to keep migrants from coming illegally.

The topic isn't going away. As he announces his 2024 reelection bid, Biden is trying to strike a balance that could be difficult to achieve, particularly if crowds of migrants end up in border facilities after May 11.

The administration has also repeatedly pointed to Congress, saying it has been unable to come to an agreement on comprehensive immigration reform.

The efforts announced Thursday build on a carrot-and-stick approach to immigration that the administration has been increasingly using, whereby they offer incentives like humanitarian parole visas for hundreds of thousands of people and harsh consequences for many who come to the border. Those have so far included:

- Processing centers: The administration will open migration centers in numerous countries starting with Guatemala and Colombia to be run by the International Organization of Migration and the U.N. agency tasked with helping refugees. There potential migrants can get information on various ways they can migrate to the United States, such as applying for refugee status or a worker program. The administration said both Canada and Spain have said they'd take migrants referred from these centers, although no specific numbers were given. The U.S. also said it would double the number of refugees taken from Central and South America. No specific number was given there, either, but during fiscal year 2023 the U.S. pledged to accept 15,000 refugees from Latin America and the Caribbean.
- Stiffer, faster penalties: The administration says it will process asylum-seekers who come to the southern border faster — in days, not weeks — with the goal of sending people back quickly who don't clear initial screenings. Those removed from the country would be barred from entering the U.S. for five years. The administration says it aims to dramatically increase flights on which migrants are sent home from the U.S. Officials also said a previously announced rule which would limit asylum for those who pass through another country without first seeking protection there, or who enter the U.S. illegally, is also set to go into effect before the May 11 deadline passes.
- No family detention: The administration stopped short of saying they'd detain families crossing the border illegally. That step would have sparked widespread condemnation from immigration advocates and Biden allies. But they said they'd monitor families through things like curfews and GPS monitoring and stressed that families would be removed if found unqualified to stay in the U.S.
- Family reunification: DHS is creating a new family reunification parole process for people from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Colombia. And the agency is "modernizing" the existing family reunification process for people from Cuba and Haiti.
- Smuggler crackdown: Mayorkas stressed efforts to more strictly combat smuggling networks that facilitate travel from across the region to the U.S. border.

Andrew Selee, who heads the Migration Policy Institute, said the plans announced are the "clearest we've seen of a strategy" from the administration on how to deal with immigration. But he cautioned that it would still require a lot of time and commitment for the plan to be successful.

"I think it's the closest we've seen to a comprehensive plan," Selee said. He said the administration was betting a lot on the processing centers, and said potentially they can serve to give people information about migration options in a way that a U.S. Embassy, for example, cannot.

But Selee said they would have to be closely linked to local networks in various countries so prospective migrants know about them, and so local organization who know the people who are most desperate to flee can refer them to the centers.

Thursday's announcement was met with criticism by many immigration advocates, including members of the president's own party who have been troubled by Biden's increasing efforts to make it harder to access asylum at the border.

Sen. Bob Menendez, a New Jersey Democrat, said he was "disappointed" in the plan, especially after spending recent weeks urging the White House to adopt a different immigration strategy, including extending temporary protected status to people from several Central American countries. He also cast doubt on how parts of the plan would be implemented.

"The question is, how are we going to set up those processing centers? What are the entities that will be there to make sure that a person is being processed in the appropriate way? What are we doing with third countries to be able to accept individuals and make sure that they are safe?" said Menendez.

Many groups that work to assist refugees and other migrants said they welcomed some aspects of the president's plan, such as allowing in more refugees from South and Central America and speeding up family reunification efforts. But they said that shouldn't come at the expense of people applying for asylum at the border.

The International Refugee Assistance Program said in a statement that it is concerned at the lack of details in the plan, how it will be implemented and where the money will come from. The group also said that the U.S.'s refugee resettlement program is still struggling to recover after cuts during the Trump administration.

"We have more questions than answers," said Lacy Broemel, a program policy analyst.

Others, including right-leaning groups already intensely critical of Biden, lambasted the plan, saying that faster processing of migrants simply means they're entering the country faster. The Federation for American Immigration Reform said the initiatives amount "to a massive and illegal scheme designed to accommodate unlimited numbers of migrants."

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Spagat reported from San Diego. Stephen Groves in Washington and Valeria Gonzales in McAllen, Texas contributed to this report.