



AS MIGRANTS OVERWHELM A TEXAS BORDER CITY, OTHERS WAIT IN MEXICO FOR APPOINTMENTS TO ENTER THE US - ASSOCIATED PRESS

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Photo: Migrants who crossed the Rio Grande from Mexico to the U.S. work their way through concertina wire

Waiting three weeks and counting to cross into Texas, Lila sat in a shelter on the Mexico border Friday feeling trapped: The cartels make it too dangerous to turn around and the U.S. government offers no guarantees if she keeps going.

"They don't ask for papers. They ask you for money," said Lila, a 39-year-old from Honduras, describing officers who pulled her off buses as she made her journey north. She insisted only her first name be used because she fears retaliation from the cartels.

Her lack of good options reflected feelings of wide frustration — among both migrants and officials in U.S. cities — as the arrival of large groups of migrants this week overwhelmed Border Patrol agents. More than 8,000 migrants turned up this week at the Texas border city of Eagle Pass, across from Piedras Negras, where Lila and her Cuban partner waited for an appointment to seek asylum in the U.S.

Many others are not waiting and crossed through the Rio Grande, including a 3-year-old boy who authorities say drowned. An international bridge remained closed Friday as agents are reassigned to handle the large numbers in Eagle Pass, which for two years has been the epicenter of Republican Gov. Greg Abbott's border mission known as Operation Lone Star. That has included a floating barrier in the Rio Grande.

Residents of Eagle Pass and Piedras Negras said that though their communities have been part of the immigration route for years, the size of the groups now is unusual. Migrants who arrived this week said they formed organically along the way.

"Reynosa is really tough. Juarez is dangerous right now, too," said Eric Flores, a 39-year-old from Honduras.

Migrants were stopped at the border 142,037 times during the first 17 days of September, up 15% from 123,777 the same period last month, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection figures released Thursday by Mexican President Andres Manuel López Obrador. Those figures include up to 1,450 people admitted daily with a mobile app for asylum appointments, called CBP One, but the vast majority are illegal entries.

Flores said he arrived on a train from Mexico City in a group of about 3,000 people. The group dispersed to different border cities, Flores said, and he ended up at a Catholic shelter in Piedras Negras where he heard he could find safety. He was among just under 200 migrants who roamed the grounds of the Casa de Migrante Frontera Digna on Friday.

Some migrants who arrive at the border stop only for a quick meal before crossing the Rio Grande. Others, like Flores, wait for an appointment.

"We're waiting for God to give us a sign and that we get an appointment approved so we can cross legally," he said. "What we want is the American dream, to work and provide for our families, not to hurt the country."

After rolling out CBP One this year, the Department of Homeland Security touted the app as a key tool in creating a more efficient and orderly system at the border.

Mexico's top diplomat, Alicia Bárcena, said at a news conference in New York that migrant shelters in Ciudad Juarez, across from El Paso, Texas, are 95% full. She said the Mexican government is "very worried" about the border closures and the increase in migrants. She said more should be done to limit migration through the Darien Gap.

The unfolding response in Eagle Pass, where the mayor declared an emergency, illustrates how Border Patrol agents have become overwhelmed in recent days by asylum-seekers on parts of the U.S. border with Mexico. In San Diego and El Paso, officials this week also closed border crossings so agents could help with the influx.

The large crowds of migrants wading through the river and crossing into Eagle Pass were no longer visible by Friday. Yet, residents in Eagle Pass were still dealing with the impact.

It all started Wednesday when Eagle Pass announced one of two international bridges would close at 6 p.m.

Claudia Gutierrez, a manager at a store in downtown Eagle Pass, rushed to Mexico to make a delivery and was on the bridge heading back to the U.S. by 4 p.m. She spent two hours in line before everyone was told they would need to reroute to the other international bridge where there was a four-hour queue. Gutierrez, who has dual citizenship, spent the night in Mexico.

"A lot of people were upset because they were going to work ... but they ended up losing that day of work," Gutierrez said.

Students who cross from Mexico into the U.S. every day were also affected.

Laura Salazar, 22, typically drives her younger brother, Victor, and cousin, America, to school, as she did on Thursday when it took them an hour and 15 minutes to cross from Piedras Negras. The long wait time convinced them to try the pedestrian bridge. It only took them about 15 minutes to cross into Eagle Pass in the morning, but the 25-minute walk to school was harder to get done in time.

"We had to use other modes of transportation to get to school once we were on this side because otherwise, we wouldn't have made it," Victor said.

The closures this week extended to an international railway in Eagle Pass. Union Pacific Railroad Co. said the track would reopen at midnight Saturday as roughly 2,400 rail cars remained unable to move on both sides of the border.

After a dip in illegal crossings that followed new asylum restrictions in May, President Joe Biden's administration is again on its heels. Democratic mayors and governors are seeking more relief for hosting asylum-seekers. Republicans are seizing on the issue ahead of 2024 elections.

In August, the Border Patrol made 181,509 arrests on the Mexican border, up 37% from July but little changed from August 2022 and well

below the high of more than 220,000 in December, according to figures released Friday. People in families with children fueled the increase, with 93,999 arrests — the highest on record — up from 60,454 in July and 31,487 in June.

"Our operational tempo along the border has increased in response to increased encounters, and we remain squarely focused on our broader security mission and enforcing U.S. immigration laws," said Troy Miller, acting CBP commissioner.

Alicia, a 36-year-old Honduran, and her family were lucky enough to get a hard-fought slot to present themselves at the port of entry in Eagle Pass on Sunday. She withheld her name for fear of retaliation from the Mexican government.

At the start of the week, Alicia took off from Monterrey with her husband, teenage daughter, son, and granddaughter heading to Piedras Negras. Despite proof of the CBP One appointment that is supposed to allow them to travel through Mexico, she said the family immediately encountered corrupt officers.

The first checkpoint had a toll of about 1,000 pesos — about \$58 — to cross. At the second checkpoint, Alicia said her family and other migrants were corralled by a soldier who said only those who "collaborated" would be allowed to move forward. A kind of bidding war erupted, she said, with the soldier asking the group who wanted to make a first offer.

When the soldier saw her stash of money, Alicia said, he grabbed the pesos that were supposed to feed her family on the journey.

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Associated Press reporter Elliot Spagat in San Diego contributed to this report.