

# Central American caravans advance amid shifting border policies

Thousands head north, some obtaining humanitarian visas in Mexico, while others fear US's 'Remain in Mexico' policy.



Families rest in the Huixtla town plaza Sunday after their 41 kilometer trek north from Tapachula, in southern Mexico [Sandra Cuffe/Al Jazeera]

**Tapachula, Mexico** – The church bells were chiming at 3am, but Juan Alberto Orellana was already awake. He and other Central American migrants and refugees were preparing to head north on Sunday from Tapachula, in southern Mexico.

The central plaza was abuzz with activity as people got up from their pieces of cardboard, blankets, and patches of dirt and concrete. For the hundreds of people who slept in the plaza and others arriving from other neighbourhoods, getting ready did not take long.

Like most people, everything Orellana brought with him from Honduras fitted into

a small backpack. He left home on January 19, fleeing poverty. Work in the banana plantations around his Honduran hometown of Olanchito did not pay enough to get by, he said.

“People cannot live in Honduras,” Orellana told Al Jazeera in the plaza on Sunday, as he waited to begin the collective trek north.

“The cost of living is really high,” he said, adding that the high rate of violent crime was also a factor in his decision to leave Honduras.

Orellana joined the roughly 2,000 migrants and refugees leaving Tapachula on foot. Many hoped to make it to the US, while others planed to remain in Mexico, but the destination on Sunday was Huixtla, a town 41km up the highway in the state of Chiapas.

Tens of thousands of Central Americans have fled over the past four months in a series of highly visible large groups called caravans. The overwhelming majority are from Honduras, followed by El Salvador and Guatemala.

The group that set out on Sunday from Tapachula was part of the latest wave of the ongoing exodus. A caravan left Honduras on January 15, and other groups, families and individuals have been streaming up to the Tecun Uman border crossing between Guatemala and Mexico ever since.

## **Humanitarian visas**

During the second half of January, migrants and refugees benefitted from a temporary special policy established by the Mexican government, under a new administration that took power on December 1. The government has been issuing renewable one-year humanitarian visas that permit people to live, work and travel throughout Mexico.

Between January 15 and 29, Mexican officials processed 15,552 humanitarian visa requests at the border. The National Immigration Institute announced on Sunday it had issued 11,255 visas, having fully processed 72 percent of the applications.

Most of the 2,000 Central Americans who departed from Tapachula on Sunday had obtained humanitarian visas. For many of them, travelling with a caravan was not a choice; they could not afford transportation.

Migrants and refugees spread out for kilometers along the highway a few hours into the walk, taking breaks in the shade of mango trees. Eventually, Kenia Marisol Alvarado and many others got rides to Huixtla from passing trucks.

Alvarado left home in a remote rural area of the Santa Barbara department of Honduras more than two weeks ago with her husband and their eight-year-old son. She and her husband both worked as agricultural day labourers when they could, but the work was sporadic and only paid six dollars a day.



Kenia Marisol Alvarado, her husband and son, and another family walk into Huixtla after a truck driver dropped them off at the highway turn-off [Sandra Cuffe/Al Jazeera]

Like many Central Americans who have been issued humanitarian visas, Alvarado and her family are planning on staying in Mexico. But they have no savings and had never left Honduras before, so they are travelling up into Mexico with the caravan until they can get their bearings and figure out the best place to look for work to support themselves and the other two children, aged three and six, they left with relatives back in Honduras.

“We came to work and also to be able to pay school costs for our kids. The situation [in Honduras] is extreme. There is no work,” Alvarado told Al Jazeera.

Alvarado’s family and another family with young children were dropped off at the highway turn-off to Huixtla by a passing pickup truck driver. Alvarado’s son was

in good spirits. “That’s an A!” he exclaimed excitedly, pointing at the last letter in the town name, spelled out in large rainbow letters at the side of the street into town.

The family does not have to worry about immigration checkpoints because they have humanitarian visas. But not everyone in the caravan has them. The Mexican government ended its temporary special policy without warning after two weeks, suddenly announcing January 29 that it would accept no new applicants.

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*KENIA MARISOL ALVARADO, CENTRAL AMERICAN CARAVAN PARTICIPANT*

Central Americans were still streaming to the Tecun Uman border crossing and many are still stuck in limbo, while others have crossed into Mexico without processing. Further north, another caravan is travelling up through Mexico without humanitarian visas.

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For years, Mexico has been deporting more Central Americans than the US. Past experiences and policies led many Central Americans to believe the visa request process was a ruse to deport them, and hundreds of people avoided the process and crossed into Mexico. By the time the group arrived in Mexico City last week, they numbered more than 2,500.

Mexican immigration officials set up in the capital city stadium serving as a migrant and refugee shelter and once again offered humanitarian visas to only those part of the group. As of Sunday, 661 people had taken them up on the offer and 590 had already been issued visas at the stadium, according to the National Immigration Institute.

## **‘Remain in Mexico’ policy**

Some 1,400 people from the advance caravan had already arrived Sunday in El Saltillo, Coahuila, in northern Mexico. Instead of following in the footsteps of every caravan last year and heading to Tijuana, they will go to a Mexican city bordering Texas, either by Eagle Pass or Laredo, according to Agencia Reforma, a Mexican newswire.

The migrant and refugee caravan that departed Sunday from Tapachula has tentative plans to go to Tijuana, but news of violence, deteriorating shelter conditions, lack of employment opportunities and long wait lists to seek asylum in Tijuana has travelled south. Several people travelling with the group, as well as others leaving independently told Al Jazeera they will head to other border



areas instead.

Tijuana is now the site of the controversial Remain in Mexico policy, under which the US returns asylum seekers to Mexico to await court dates and the outcome of their cases. Implementation of the policy, now dubbed the Migration Protection Protocols, began last week and is currently only in effect at the San Ysidro port of entry between Tijuana and San Diego.

The policy has come under fire from immigrant rights and support groups. Homicides in Tijuana homicide rate hit an all-time high last month, and the regulations could also push migrants and refugees to travel to other border areas along routes controlled by criminal and paramilitary groups.

On Friday, Mexico detained and deported Nora Phillips, the legal director of Al Otro Lado, an immigrant rights group that works closely with and litigates on behalf of Central American migrants and refugees in Tijuana. Her passport was flagged for unconfirmed reasons, as was that of the group's policy director Erika Pinheiro, who was denied entry to Mexico last month.



*Al Otro Lado@AlOtroLado\_Org*

*ALERT!! Our Legal Director and Litigation Director have been REMOVED from Mexico. Apparently the US govt issued security alerts on our passports to prevent us from traveling. Our Legal Director is being returned on a flight that lands at LAX terminal 2 at 12:10. Please SHOW UP*

US President Donald Trump continues to focus on the border. Claiming the advancing caravans are a threat to security, he persists in his demand for border wall funding. If not met, he could once again shut down the federal government this month. He has also threatened to declare a national emergency to build the wall – a move that would likely be met with legal challenges.

“With Caravans marching through Mexico and toward our Country, Republicans must be prepared to do whatever is necessary for STRONG Border Security. Dems do nothing. If there is no Wall, there is no Security,” Trump tweeted on Sunday.

# **‘To avoid gangs, you had to leave’**

Danilo Rivera wants to make it up to the border, but he does not plan to cross into the US. More than anything else, he just wants to see his kids again.

Rivera first left San Pedro Sula, Honduras in 2001, when he was 21 years old. Fleeing street gangs establishing themselves in the country, he made it to Los Angeles, where he lived for 15 years.

“The only way to stay out [of the gangs] was to leave my country,” Rivera told Al Jazeera in the Huixtla town plaza, where other migrants and refugees were arriving and seeking out shaded areas to rest.

In 2016, Rivera’s wife was expecting their second child. Rivera returned to Honduras to apply at the US Embassy for residency as the spouse of a US citizen. But he had been unable to cover the lengthy and costly process of applying for a pardon for a drug possession charge years earlier, and his application was rejected.

Rivera has been trying to make it back to his kids ever since. He made his way up through Mexico three times over the past three years, successfully evading Mexican immigration officials. But he was apprehended in the US and deported every time.

Rivera left San Pedro Sula for a fourth time in recent years on January 17, on the heels of the caravan that departed two days earlier. He expected to have to once again ride the dangerous La Bestia train and hope to make it to the US undetected by Mexican immigration officials.

The humanitarian visa policy came as a surprise. Rivera’s plan now is to settle in Mexicali and find work. He will remain separated by the border from his family, but he is hopeful that his now ex-wife will bring their two children, aged three and 10, to visit.

“I want to thank Mexico for this opportunity,” said Rivera. “It’s a dream I had not anticipated.”

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