

El Paso Is on Edge After a Child's Death and the Release of Hundreds of Migrants



A group of immigrants from Honduras wait for a bus to Dallas inside the Greyhound station in El Paso. Hundreds of asylum seekers have been released in the last few days. Credit: Ivan Pierre Aguirre for The New York Times

EL PASO — The death this week of a second Guatemalan child in United States custody and the unusual release of hundreds of asylum seekers in downtown El Paso have put officials in this border city on edge.

Shelters, they said, are already overwhelmed in their ability to take in the migrants.

The release of dozens of families in a city park on Christmas Day stands in sharp contrast to the past, when immigration officials coordinated such moves with a network of shelters that have been assisting refugees for decades.

Along with the deaths of two detained migrant children in the last three weeks,

the abrupt release has a web of organizations assisting migrants on both sides of the border concerned that more people could fall ill.

The leaders of organizations assisting immigrants are questioning why federal officials released the asylum seekers at a time when President Trump was criticizing Democrats over their resistance to funding a border wall. Some immigration advocates argued that the administration's policies are effectively making thousands of Central American asylum seekers pawns in the standoff in Washington.

"Frankly, this is a manufactured crisis placing innocent children at risk of death," said Fernando Garcia, director of the Border Network for Human Rights.

Mr. Garcia dismissed the administration's assertion of heightened security risks on the border, emphasizing that the overall number of illegal border crossings are at a historic low while spending on the Border Patrol has surged.

But Katie Waldman, a spokeswoman for the Department of Homeland Security, insisted in a statement that the country was experiencing an "immigration crisis," laying the blame on judges seeking to protect the rights of detained migrant children. Ms. Waldman said such legal rulings reward parents for "bringing their children with them to the United States."

"As long as activist judges continue to set national immigration policy they continue to put family units and innocent children in harm's way," Ms. Waldman said.

The death of the 8-year-old Guatemalan boy follows that of a 7-year-old girl from the same country while also in the custody of the Border Patrol. Kirstjen Nielsen, the secretary of homeland security, said in a statement this week that the boy's death was "deeply disturbing." Still, Ms. Nielsen, who is set to visit El Paso on Friday to review immigrant detention facilities, avoided putting the blame on federal facilities.

Events in El Paso played out on Thursday as Mr. Trump repeated claims that illegal immigrants bring crime into the United States, despite studies showing otherwise.

The president cited a case in California in which a police officer was killed on

Wednesday by a suspect thought to have entered the country illegally. The president repeated his call to build a wall on the border, with a partial government shutdown over funding for that project appearing likely to stretch into the new year.

The criticism from immigration advocates comes at a delicate time when shelters around El Paso are struggling to absorb Central American migrants released by Immigration and Customs Enforcement. While the administration has sought to limit asylum seekers, the dynamics of border crossings have shifted, with fewer single men from Mexico making the journey north, replaced by more families from Central America.

At the same time, shelters across the border in Ciudad Juárez are saying they are similarly overwhelmed after the Trump administration said that it had reached an agreement with Mexico's government for Central American migrants to wait in Mexico while authorities analyze their asylum claims.

Amid confusion, the Casa del Migrante, a prominent shelter in Juárez operated by Roman Catholic officials, stopped accepting more refugees, citing capacity and resource constraints.

On the American side of the border, Ruben Garcia, the director of Annunciation House, El Paso's largest operator of shelters for migrants, described frustration over Washington's handling of migrants from Central America.

In a news conference on Thursday, Mr. Garcia, one of the most prominent figures assisting immigrants in the United States, said he could "foresee the creation of refugee camps in a city like Juárez" in case the Trump administration further tightens the admittance of Central Americans requesting asylum.

In recent days, Mr. Garcia said, the mercurial policy shifts by the federal government have left his organization in chaos. On Christmas Eve, for instance, ICE surprised many in El Paso by abruptly releasing hundreds of migrants near a bus station downtown.

While Mr. Garcia said he was somewhat encouraged by ICE's decision to resume coordinating the release of migrants with his organization, other immigration advocates said they were overwhelmed.

Dylan Corbett, executive director of the Hope Border Institute, a nonprofit organization assisting immigrants, said he had helped a boy suffering from dehydration after he was released from an detention facility who was about the same age as the boy who died in Alamogordo, N.M. Firefighters in El Paso provided first aid to the boy before he was transferred to a nearby hospital, Mr. Corbett said.

“People are emerging from ICE detention hungry, thirsty, sometimes sick,” Mr. Corbett said. “Some haven’t bathed for over a week.”

The Border Patrol said in a statement that deaths in its custody were “extraordinarily rare,” while offering condolences to the Guatemalan boy’s family. The agency added that it would conduct secondary medical checks on all children in its custody, in addition to reviewing its policies in connection to detained children under the age of 10.

With shelters at capacity, Mr. Garcia explained how his organization managed to find rooms for the refugees in hotels in El Paso, relying on donations to pay for the temporary lodging. He said that Annunciation House is now providing temporary shelter to about 2,300 migrants each week, the highest number in the four decades Mr. Garcia has been doing such work.

Eyeing the volatility of both asylum requests and the administration’s immigration policies, Mr. Garcia added that he soon hoped to be able to receive about 3,000 migrants a week at shelters in El Paso and Las Cruces, N.M.

Source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/27/us/immigrants-el-paso-release-death.html>

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