

Facing pressure from Trump, Mexico detains 2 migrant caravan organizers

MEXICO CITY

Mexican authorities have dramatically stepped up law enforcement pressure against Central American migrants in recent days in an effort to stave off a trade war with the United States.

As Mexican diplomats have met with U.S. officials in Washington this week to try to head off President Donald Trump's threats of a punitive tariff on all Mexican imports, authorities in Mexico have signaled that the country is serious about curbing a recent surge in migrants to the U.S. border.

Mexican military police Wednesday intercepted about 600 Central American migrants walking north on a highway in southern Mexico, and Thursday, Mexican officials announced federal charges against two prominent migrant activists and financial penalties against more than two dozen people suspected of helping migrants.

Irineo Mujica, the director of Pueblo Sin Fronteras, an activist group that has helped several large caravans of Central American migrants cross Mexico and reach the United States, was arrested in the northern border city of Sonoyta and charged with illegally transporting migrants. Another activist who has worked with caravans, Cristobal Sanchez, was arrested near the southern border and charged with smuggling migrants into Mexico.

Mexico's finance ministry announced it had blocked the bank accounts of 26 people who had participated "in the trafficking of migrants and the illegal organization of migrant caravans."

The efforts are a part of a broader Mexican crackdown on illegal immigrants, with detentions and deportations of Central American migrants in recent months up significantly compared with the same period last year.

But it has not been enough for Trump, who, angry about a recent surge of

migrants crossing the southern U.S. border, announced on Twitter that unless Mexico stops the migrants he will impose a 5% tariff on all Mexican imports starting Monday and then increase the taxes steadily to 25% by October.

On Thursday, White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said Trump's position had not changed.

"We are still moving forward with tariffs at this time," Sanders said.

Trump, who was traveling in Europe as part of the 75th anniversary of D-Day on Thursday, told reporters that U.S. and Mexican officials that had made some progress in their talks, but that Mexico must agree to do more. "They have to step up to the plate," he said of Mexican officials.

Mexican Foreign Secretary Marcelo Ebrard, who met with U.S. Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo for a second day of talks in Washington on Thursday, told reporters during a midday break that the two sides were making progress and might be able to define concrete positions soon.

He declined to comment on the Trump administration's request that Mexico agree to serve as a "safe third country," which would require Central Americans to apply for asylum in the first foreign country they enter after fleeing their homes.

Such an agreement would allow the U.S. to immediately deport Guatemalan asylum-seekers who arrive in the U.S. to Mexico - and to deport Honduran and Salvadoran asylum-seekers to Guatemala.

Ebrard has called the proposal a nonstarter, but he is believed to be considering it now as a way to head off Trump's tariffs, which would greatly destabilize Mexico's already sluggish economy.

By late Thursday, no agreement had been reached, said Roberto Velasco Alvarez, a spokesman for Mexico's Secretariat of Foreign Affairs.

"We continue to explore options to address the growing number of undocumented migrants that cross Mexico," he tweeted. "The U.S. position is focused on immigration enforcement measures, ours on development. We have not yet reached the agreement but we continue negotiating."

Mexico has sought U.S. support for an economic development plan for Central

America to help address migration.

Migrant advocates on both sides of the border have criticized Mexico for doing Trump's bidding on immigration issues, especially considering new President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's campaign vows to do more than his predecessors to respect the rights of Central American migrants.

Along with increasing deportations and detentions of migrants, Lopez Obrador accepted Remain in Mexico, a unilateral U.S. policy put into place this year that has forced thousands of Central American asylum-seekers to wait in Mexico while their cases are being heard in the United States.

"We had a lot of hope," said Alex Mensing, a U.S.-based member of Pueblo Sin Fronteras, or People Without Borders. "It's really disappointing to see this level of criminalization of migrants."

"It's not a coincidence," Mensing said of the actions taken Thursday against migrant activists in Mexico. "I think that the (tariff) threat is being taken seriously by Mexican authorities, and they felt the need to crack down on some of the people who have been speaking up against human rights abuses and standing up for migrants."

Pueblo Sin Fronteras, a small collective of volunteers based in the U.S. and Mexico, has drawn the ire of U.S. conservatives in recent years. The group organized a caravan to the U.S. border in 2017 and has helped guide several other large groups since. It says caravans shield participants from rape, kidnapping and other perils of the migrant trail.

Last year, Trump sent soldiers to the border in response to a caravan partly led by Pueblo Sin Fronteras. Vice President Mike Pence said asylum-seekers with the caravan were being "exploited by open-border political activists."

Documents leaked this year by NBC 7, a news channel in San Diego, showed that U.S. authorities had monitored Pueblo Sin Fronteras activists, as well as journalists and attorneys who interacted with the migrant caravan in the border city of Tijuana.

Mujica, who is a dual U.S.-Mexican citizen, has also been accused by U.S. prosecutors of conspiring with Arizona migrant activist Scott Warren to harbor

two migrants in the United States illegally last year.

Warren, a leader of the humanitarian group No More Deaths, which leaves water and other supplies along desolate stretches of the U.S.-Mexico border, is currently on trial on suspicion of shielding the migrants from authorities for several days. Warren has pleaded not guilty. He faces up to 20 years in federal prison.

On Thursday, Lopez Obrador told reporters at his daily news conference that Mujica and Sanchez had not been arrested to appease U.S. officials.

“We do not act like that,” he said. “We act with principles.”

At the news conference, Lopez Obrador also announced a “defense of Mexican dignity” rally on Saturday.

The event will take place in Tijuana, he said, to promote both Mexican sovereignty and friendship with the people of the United States.

Meanwhile, on the southern border, his administration’s increased enforcement has left thousands of migrants stranded in Tapachula, about 20 miles north of Guatemala.

“When I crossed I thought it would be easy to go directly to the United States, but now it’s too difficult,” said Osman Cruz, 36, a father of five from the Honduran city of La Ceiba who was among scores of Central Americans seeking shade from the blistering sun in the central plaza of Tapachula.

Cruz, whose wife and children remain in Honduras, arrived in early April, crossing on a raft across the Rio Suchiate, which marks the Guatemalan border, but has been stuck since. He, like many others, has applied for refugee status in Mexico, where he has found occasional construction jobs. But, ultimately, he still hopes to go to the United States.

“Here in Mexico when I work I only earn enough to buy some food and space on a floor to sleep at night,” he said.

(Linthicum reported from Mexico City, Wilkinson from Washington and McDonnell from Tapachula. Times staff writer Noah Bierman in Washington contributed to this report.)

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