

Mexico Locks up Hundreds of Refugees Headed North



Mexican National Guard members blocked a refugee caravan near Tuzantan, Chiapas, on Saturday and arrested hundreds of asylum-seekers. (AP photo/Isabel Mateos)

TAPACHULA, Mexico (AP) — Hundreds of immigrants from Africa, the Caribbean and Central America were corralled and detained in southern Mexico on Sunday after a futile attempt to head north as part of a caravan aiming to reach the United States.

The group set out before sunrise Saturday from Tapachula, near the Guatemalan border, where many had been marooned for months trying to get transit visas. They carried heavy backpacks, babies, and parcels on their heads.

Just before dusk, after having trudged more than 20 miles north, they were surrounded by hundreds of National Guard agents and police who persuaded the exhausted marchers to board vans back to Tapachula. Children cried and women complained angrily about waiting months for papers. It was unclear if any would be deported.

The crackdown on the caravan, many of whose members were of African descent, underlined the sharp reversal from Mexico's immigration policy a year ago, when officials looked the other way as caravans headed toward the United States. But

under pressure from Washington, the nominally liberal government of President Andrés López Obrador has been taking a tougher stance in dealing with immigrants, and many Mexicans are being less welcoming.

Salva Lacruz, from the Fray Matías de Córdova Human Rights Center in Tapachula, called the roundup a “human hunt” and said officials waited until the refuge-seekers had tired out before forcing them into vans.

Sending them back south was an “exercise in cruelty,” Lacruz said, saying the people have come to Mexico because “they need international protection.”

About half of the people in the caravan were black, including Haitians, estimated Lacruz, who accompanied the group.

Wilner Metelus, a Mexican activist who was born in Haiti, described the government’s behavior toward Africans and their descendants as “shameful.”

“Today the Afro-descendants are alone,” he said.

“Migrants of African descent don’t represent a threat to Mexicans. Many of them are highly educated and could offer a lot to the country,” Metelus said.

Despite its birth as a mestizo culture under the Spanish conquest, racial prejudice against indigenous and dark-skinned people is rampant in Mexico.

The National Migration Institute said in a statement Saturday that each member of the caravan “will be treated in a personalized manner” and that some will be returned to their countries of origin.

The situation in Mexico has changed dramatically since a caravan set out exactly a year ago from San Pedro Sula, Honduras. That group swelled at its height to 7,000 people, who banded together to find safety in numbers as they trudged through Guatemala and then Mexico in an attempt to reach the United States.

Mexican townspeople greeted that caravan with fruit, tortillas, and water, and mayors cleared space for the large group to sleep in town squares. Some cities received the caravan with live music.

The caravans’ passage north earned Mexican officials the ire of U.S. President Donald Trump, who threatened to close the U.S.-Mexico border if Mexico failed to

stop the flow of migrants.

Mexico's export-driven economy is highly dependent on commerce with the United States, and the government has become far less hospitable to refugee-seekers. In June, officials broke up a large caravan, pulled people heading north from trains and detained two immigrant advocates for questioning. Immigrants have received less help from townspeople, while governments in Central America have agreed to work to slow the tide of immigration.

"It seems like there is increased enforcement across the region in response to U.S. pressure," said Maureen Meyer, director for Mexico and immigrant rights at the Washington Office on Latin America.

Emigrants from conflict-wracked African countries set their sights on the Americas after doors began to shut in Europe. A typical journey from Africa involves a flight to Brazil, which has been amenable to granting visas, followed by a long and perilous trip north. The worst patch, many Africans say, is the trek through Panama's Darien Gap, a dense tropical forest inhabited by venomous snakes and ruthless robbers.

Southern Mexico has become a frustrating way station for thousands of Africans, most of whom would prefer to start anew in the United States or Canada because of language and cultural barriers in Mexico.

"These are individuals that have gone through numerous horrors both in their home countries and then on their journey," Meyer said.

Most of the Haitians arriving at Mexico's southern border have lived in South America for several years after some nations granted them protected immigration status. Now such policies are less favorable, propelling the Haitians to seek a new home as their country is mired in an intense political crisis. Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.

Mexico has offered refugees the possibility of obtaining work and residency permits to stay in southern Mexico, far from the U.S. border. But those asylum permits are slow coming in an overstretched immigration system. Also, southern Mexico is the country's poorest region, so job opportunities there are scarce.

Hundreds of Africans stranded in Tapachula opted against joining the caravan on

Saturday and continue to bide their time on the streets.

Joseph Pele Meza, a father of two from Congo, said it's important to respect Mexican laws and wait for a permit to head north.

"Here I am waiting calmly," he said Sunday. "We just ask the authorities to open their hearts, to open the doors to give us documents."

(Courthouse News contributed to this report.)

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