

# US halts appointments using migrant phone app at Texas border crossing

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Guardian staff reporter



Humanitarian groups in Laredo, Texas, have warned CBP the certain were controlling access to the international crossing on the Mexican side. Photograph: Rick Wilking/Reuters

## US-Mexico border

Move follows reports of extortion by Mexican officials in Nuevo Laredo who threaten migrants with missing asylum appointments

Associated Press

The Biden administration has stopped taking mobile phone app appointments to admit asylum seekers at a Texas border crossing that connects to a notoriously dangerous Mexican city after advocates warned US authorities that migrants were being targeted there for extortion.

US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) gave no explanation for its decision to stop scheduling new appointments via the CBP One app for the crossing in Laredo, Texas.

Several asylum seekers told the Associated Press that Mexican officials in Nuevo Laredo, across the US-Mexico border from Laredo, Texas, had threatened to hold them and make them miss their scheduled asylum appointments unless they paid them.

Humanitarian groups in Laredo say they had recently warned CBP of the problems and that certain groups were controlling access to the international crossing on the Mexican side.

Migrant advocates say the situation in Nuevo Laredo, which is plagued by cartel fighting and other problems, casts doubt on the administration's argument that Mexico is a safe place for the record number of people fleeing violence in Central America and elsewhere.

#### 'I feel safe here': the people leaving everything behind to seek refuge in US

Rafael Álvarez, 29, who fled Venezuela, said that after he landed in Nuevo Laredo in early June, Mexican immigration authorities at the airport seized his travel documents, including a printout of the email confirming his CBP One appointment, and demanded he pay 1,000 Mexican pesos, about US\$57. He was held with other migrants.

"They would tell us covertly, 'You're going to put the money in this envelope and pass it to us,'" Álvarez said, recalling what officials told him and other migrants.

The officials, he said, threatened to hold them so they would have their appointments canceled. Álvarez, whose appointment was the next day, said he refused to pay and was eventually released, but five Russians who were held with him paid a total of 5,000 pesos, about \$290. They initially were asked to fork over double that amount, but they told officials they did not have that much, he said.

Álvarez said other Venezuelan friends who flew to Nuevo Laredo in late May also paid to have their documents returned.

Thousands of asylum seekers are stuck in Mexican border towns, waiting until they can get an appointment to seek refuge in the United States after being blocked during the Covid-19 pandemic by a public health restriction called Title 42 that was lifted last month.

Though the government opened some new avenues for immigration, the fate of many people is largely left to the CBP One app that is used for scheduling an appointment at a port of entry.

There have been widespread complaints by migrants about being forced to pay bribes to Mexico's immigration sector, where corruption is deeply ingrained.

Earlier this month, the Mexican newspaper El Universal published video it obtained that was taken through a bus window, showing a federal agent taking bills from migrants and stuffing them in his pocket as he checked passports.

The newspaper also obtained government documents through a freedom of information request that showed the agency had opened 119 investigations against agents between 2017 and 2023 for misconduct.

Rebecca Solloa of Catholic Charities in Laredo said her organization and others met with CBP officials in person and on Zoom to warn them that migrants have told them that groups in Nuevo Laredo control the bridge and extort migrants there.

The Department of Homeland Security said in an email to the AP that CBP One has been instrumental in creating a more efficient and orderly system at the border “while cutting out unscrupulous smugglers who profit from vulnerable migrants”.

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