

WORLD NEWS

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Central American migrants plead to seek asylum in U.S., not Mexico

Julio-Cesar Chavez



EL PASO, Texas (Reuters) - Several Central American migrants seeking asylum in the United States were allowed to return there on Thursday after being forced to wait in one of Mexico's most violent cities, supported by faith leaders who oppose the controversial U.S. migration policy.

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A couple with three young children who fled violence in Honduras and a Salvadoran young man with cognitive disabilities crossed into El Paso from Ciudad Juarez, said Bishop of El Paso Mark Seitz, who helped plead their case with officials at the border.

Their return came on the same afternoon that the U.S. House of Representatives passed a \$4.6 billion aid package to address a migrant surge at the U.S.-Mexico border, galvanized in recent days by a photo of drowned migrants and reports of horrendous conditions for detained children.

The attention also put renewed concern on the policy that sends asylum seekers to Mexico border cities while waiting for U.S. courts to process their applications, known as Remain in Mexico or Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP).

The program started in January under the Trump administration and has drawn outrage from U.S. faith leaders, rights groups and others. It has now affected more than 15,000 asylum seekers, mainly from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

(Graphic: Trump ramps up returns of asylum seekers to Mexico)

Under a deal struck with Mexico on July 7 to stave off tariffs threatened by Trump, MPP is being expanded to more cities and applied to new nationalities including Cubans.

Although migration officials in El Paso initially said that the Honduran family and Salvadoran man had to continue to wait out the asylum process in Ciudad Juarez just opposite the border, Seitz said that he countered that the migrants had special circumstances and deserved to remain in the United States.

“Some calls were made higher up, and the word came down that they would be allowed to pass,” he said. “They’re going to have to prove their cases, but they’ll be able to do it in the loving arms of relatives.”

The Honduran family, with children ages 3, 5 and 9, had spent three months waiting in Ciudad Juarez, Seitz added.

“They are a family that has suffered beyond what most of us can imagine, the torture of children, and so

Dylan Corbett, executive director of the Hope Border Institute that helped coordinate Seitz's visit and connects migrants with attorneys, said it was still unclear if the migrants would be able to remain in the United States for the rest of their asylum proceedings.

In an open letter to U.S. President Donald Trump and other political leaders, a coalition of evangelical churches said it was "deeply troubled" by a policy it said left children vulnerable to violence and trafficking, as well as by reports of "inhumane" conditions in U.S. federal immigration facilities.

The Catholic diocese of El Paso, Texas separately denounced a critical lack of shelter, food, legal aid and basic services for asylum seekers returned to Mexico under the program and "distressing detention conditions" in the United States before they are returned.

Their critiques echoed U.S. asylum officers who have said that MPP was contrary to America's "moral fabric."

U.S. border patrol agents say they have apprehended 664,000 people along the southern border so far this year, a 144 percent increase from last year, and the highest number in over a decade. Officials say the system is overwhelmed.

In its letter, the Evangelical Immigration Table, a coalition including nine major U.S. church groups, said the policy restricts access to U.S. legal counsel and greatly reduces the possibility that migrant families "will be able to receive a truly just and fair chance at receiving asylum."

PILGRIMS

In court papers filed on Wednesday, a union that represents asylum officers at U.S. Citizens and Immigration Services, described the program as "fundamentally contrary to the moral fabric of our Nation," citing the American tradition of sheltering the persecuted stretching back to the arrival of "Pilgrims onto a Massachusetts shore in November 1620."

The new acting USCIS head pushed back against the union on Wednesday night on Twitter and later sent an official statement saying the court filing was a "cheap political stunt." Ken Cuccinelli, a Trump ally who was appointed on June 10, has echoed the president's line that the focus should be on weeding out fraudulent asylum claims.

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The union filed briefs in a case supporting a group challenging the legality of MPP in court. A group of 22 former senior U.S. officials also filed a brief against the policy on Wednesday, as did the United Nation's refugee agency, which concluded MPP was "at variance" with U.S. international obligations.

A U.S. appeals court has ruled that the Trump administration may continue sending asylum seekers to wait out their cases in Mexico while the government appeals a lower court ruling that found the policy violated U.S. immigration law.

Hundreds of asylum seekers are returned every day under the expanded program. They are likely to wait in Mexico for around two years because of a backlog in U.S. immigration courts.

Slideshow (5 Images)

Reporting by Julio-Cesar Chavez in El Paso; Additional reporting by Susan Cornwell and Richard Cowan in Washington and Kristina Cooke in San Francisco; Writing by Frank Jack Daniel and Daina Beth Solomon; Editing by Kim Coghill

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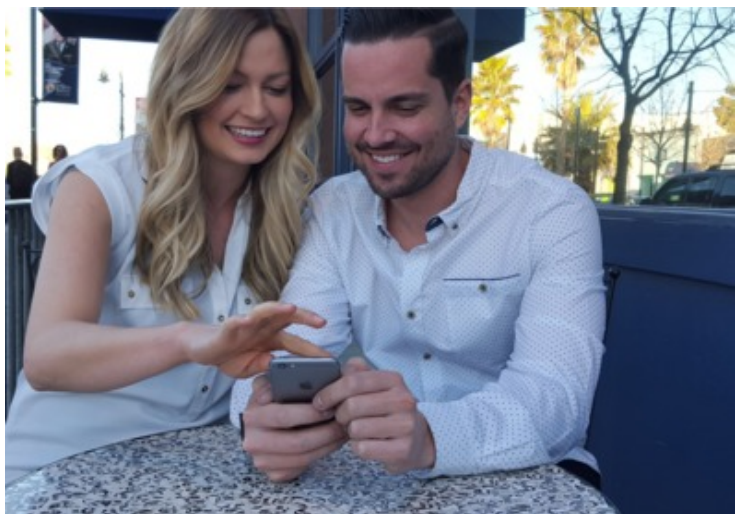
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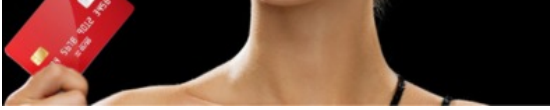
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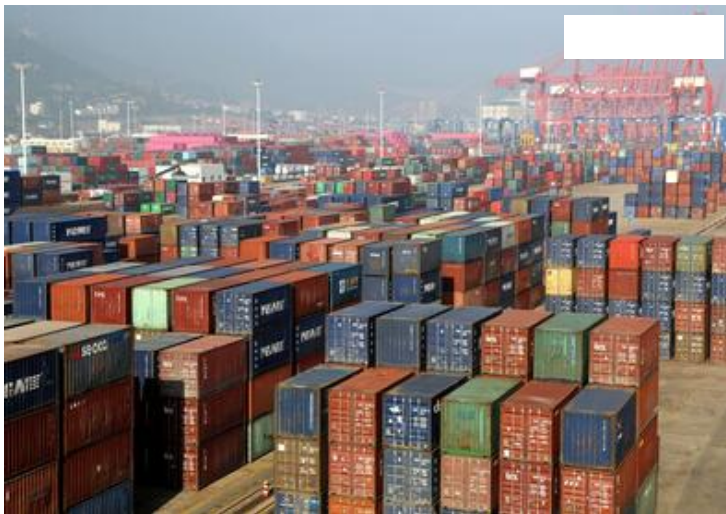
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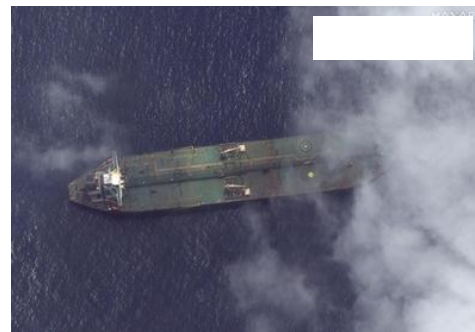
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