

Texas trooper alleges inhumane treatment of migrants by state officials along southern border

Camilo Montoya-Galvez : 10-12 minutes : 7/18/2023

Politics

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Efforts by Texas state officials to deter illegal crossings along the U.S.-Mexico border have placed migrants, including children, at risk of drowning or being cut by razor wire, a state trooper said in an internal message this month that raised concerns about practices he called inhumane.

The trooper also claimed that Texas officials have received directions to withhold water from migrants and to push them back into the Rio Grande.

The [internal complaint](#), now under investigation by state officials, raises further questions about how Texas officials are treating migrants caught up in a sprawling border effort, known as Operation Lone Star. Gov. Greg Abbott, a Republican, has said the operation is necessary to counter what he has deemed to be lax Biden administration migration policies.

At the direction of Abbott, Texas state officials and National Guardsmen have been setting up razor wire and more recently, river buoys, to repel migrant crossings along the Rio Grande. The broader state operation has also included efforts to arrest migrant adults on state trespassing charges and to transport migrants by bus to Democratic-led cities, including Chicago, New York City and Washington, D.C.

Nicholas Wingate, a medic and trooper for the Texas Department of Public Safety, wrote an email to his superiors earlier this month detailing his concerns about a series of events he witnessed near Eagle Pass, Texas, that he said placed migrants, including children, in danger. The message was [first reported](#) by the Dallas Morning News.

The allegations



Migrants walk between razor wire and a string of buoys placed on the water along the Rio Grande border with Mexico in Eagle Pass, Texas, on July 16, 2023, to prevent illegal immigration entry to the U.S. SUZANNE CORDEIRO/AFP via Getty Images

In one instance, Wingate said, he and other troopers encountered a group of about 120 "hungry" and "exhausted" migrants, including children and babies. He said an officer ordered him and other troopers to push the migrants, who were already on U.S. soil, back into the Rio Grande so they would return to Mexico.

"We decided that this was not the correct thing to do[, w]ith the very real potential of exhausted people drowning," Wingate wrote. "We made contact with command again and expressed our concerns and we were given the order to tell them to go to Mexico and get into our vehicle and leave."

Wingate said federal Border Patrol agents processed the migrants after he left.

In another event, Wingate wrote, a 4-year-old migrant girl was "pressed back" by soldiers from the Texas National Guard as she tried to cross a section of sharp razor wire. The child fainted, Wingate said, noting she was exhausted amid 100 degree temperatures. Wingate said his team treated the girl and transferred her to an emergency medical services unit.

Wingate also recounted treating a migrant father who reported that his left leg had been lacerated when he rescued his son, who had gotten stuck in the river on a barrel fitted with wire. In another instance, a 15-year-old migrant broke his right leg after he and his father were forced to cross in an area of the river that was "unsafe to travel" because of the razor wire officials had set up.

Later that day, Wingate added, he and his team rescued a 19-year-old pregnant migrant who had gotten stuck in the wire. He said the migrant was in "obvious pain" and having a miscarriage.

Razor wire placed by Texas officials, the trooper also reported, was forcing migrants to cross the Rio Grande in parts that are unsafe, especially for families traveling with children. He referenced reports of a mother and her two sons drowning earlier this month.

Discarded clothes on a razor wire fence in front of the Rio Grande in an area where migrants cross in Eagle Pass, Texas, on Dec. 19, 2022. VERONICA G. CARDENAS/AFP via Getty Images

In the message, Wingate underscored that he supports Operation Lone Star and efforts to secure the U.S.-Mexico border and keep "bad people" out.

But, he said, "I believe we ... have stepped over a line into the in humane. We need to operate it correctly in the eyes of God. We need to recognize that these are people who are made in the image of God and need to be treated as such."

Wingate said Texas officials should be constantly patrolling areas outfitted with razor wire to ensure they can identify migrants in distress. The areas should also be lighted, he said, "so people can see the wire and not stumble into it as a trap." The river barriers, Wingate added, should be discarded altogether.

"The wire and barrels in the river needs to be taken out as this is nothing but [an] in humane trap in high water and low visibility," he wrote. "Due to the extreme heat, the order to not give people water needs to be immediately reversed as well."

Texas officials respond

Travis Considine, a spokesman for Texas DPS, said the agency's inspector general is investigating Wingate's reports. But he denied several claims made by the trooper.

"There is not a directive or policy that instructs Troopers to withhold water from migrants or push them back into the river," Considine said in a statement to CBS News.

Emails shared by Considine show that Wingate's reports were elevated to the leadership at Texas DPS. In response to the complaint, DPS Director Steven McCraw said his regional directors had reminded troopers to look out for migrants in distress when trying to repel illegal border crossings. Texas' goal, he said, is to prevent migrants from crossing in between ports of entry and to divert them there.

"The priority of life requires that we rescue migrants from harm and we will continue to do so. In fact, Texas Troopers and Texas National Guard Soldiers have saved the lives of numerous migrants at the risk of their own safety, and one soldier died during a water rescue attempt," McGraw wrote.

"No orders or directions have been given under Operation Lone Star that would compromise the lives of those attempting to cross the border illegally," the governor's office, the public safety department and the state adjutant general's office said in a joint statement Tuesday.

Once migrants are on the U.S. side of the southern border — which, in Texas, is in the middle of the Rio Grande — federal border officials are bound by law to process them and determine whether they should be deported, detained, transferred to another federal agency or released with a court hearing. If migrants ask for asylum, the federal government must review their claims.

State officials do not have the legal authority to deport migrants and are not authorized to enforce federal immigration laws or trained in U.S. asylum law.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said the events described by Wingate, if accurate, were "atrocious, barbaric, and downright wrong."

"It would also not be surprising coming from a Governor who abandoned migrant children on the side of the road in below freezing temperatures on Christmas Eve," Jean-Pierre [wrote](#) on Twitter, an apparent reference to Texas [dropping migrants off](#) outside the vice president's residence in Washington, D.C., last year.

Erin Heeter, a spokesperson for the Department of Homeland Security, called the report troubling, and if true, "cruel and inhumane."

"Enforcing immigration law is a federal authority, and DHS continues to prioritize the well-being of those we encounter and those in our custody through the implementation of our plan to safely and humanely manage the Southwest Border," Heeter said. "We can both enforce our laws and treat human beings with dignity."

Asked about the concerns raised by Wingate, Andrew Mahaleris, a press secretary for Abbott, said Texas is focused on deterring illegal border crossings.

"The absence of razor wire and other deterrence strategies encourages migrants to make unsafe and illegal crossings between ports of entry, while making the job of Texas National Guard soldiers and DPS troopers more dangerous and difficult," Mahaleris said. "President Biden has unleashed a chaos on the border that's unsustainable, and we have a constitutional duty to respond to this unprecedented crisis."

Migrant apprehensions along the U.S.-Mexico border soared to record levels in 2022, posing dire humanitarian, operational and political challenges for the Biden administration, which Republican lawmakers and state officials have accused of being too lenient on migrants.

In recent weeks, however, illegal border crossings have plummeted to the lowest level in two years. The Biden administration said the sharp drop stems from its efforts to expand opportunities for migrants to enter the U.S. lawfully, while imposing stricter asylum rules for those who cross the border illegally.

Patrick Torphy contributed reporting.

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