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Flow of Central Americans to U.S. surging, expected to exceed 2014 numbers



Residents walk alongside a higher new metal wall installed by U.S. workers to replace fencing along the border between Juarez, Mexico, and Sunland Park, N.M., on Sept. 12. (Herika Martinez/Agence France-Presse/Getty Images)

By David Nakamura

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The Obama administration's efforts to stem the flow of Central American migrants illegally crossing into the United States have largely failed two years after a border crisis prompted President Obama to order an emergency response.

The number of families and unaccompanied minors arriving in 2016 is on pace to exceed the total in 2014, when U.S. Border Patrol stations were overwhelmed along the Rio Grande Valley in Texas. They are coming primarily from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, an area sometimes called the Northern Triangle.

Vice President Biden is expected to tout progress on strengthening border security and deepening economic ties when he meets Friday with the leaders of the Northern Triangle nations at the Inter-American Development Bank in Washington.

But human rights advocates said the continued influx from the region has demonstrated that the administration's deterrence policy has misdiagnosed the root causes and failed to adequately address the humanitarian needs.

Overall, 122,132 families and children, mostly from Central America, have been apprehended at the U.S. border with Mexico with a month remaining in fiscal 2016. That compares with a total of 132,259 in fiscal 2014, according to statistics from U.S. Customs and Border Protection. The renewed surge this year comes after a significant drop in 2015.

“Clearly, at this point, the deterrence strategy has failed,” said Kevin Appleby, director of international migration policy at the Center for Migration Studies. “There needs to be a paradigm shift here, with more of a focus on protection and less on the enforcement side. They need to treat this as a real refugee crisis. They’ve been in self-denial for a year or two on this issue.”

Unlike the situation in Syria, where millions have been displaced by a devastating civil war, the Obama administration has been reluctant to label the Central American exodus a refugee crisis. Under international legal standards, refugees are defined as those who flee government persecution. U.S. officials said the Central American migrants are primarily escaping economic hardship in societies with rampant violence and crime perpetrated by drug cartels and organized gangs.

In the aftermath of the 2014 border crisis, Obama initiated a government-wide response that included additional temporary shelter space and \$750 million in economic development aid for the migrants’ home countries. Most of those funds, however, have not been delivered to the region.

Under mounting pressure from advocates, the administration announced plans this summer to expand a State Department program launched in 2014 that allows Central Americans to apply for refugee status in the United States from within their home countries.

The administration also won a commitment from Costa Rica to accept 200 gravely endangered Central American minors while U.S. officials examine their cases.

So far, only a few thousand children have won refugee status under the new programs.

“We are committed to protecting Central Americans at risk and expanding resettlement opportunities in the region,” White House spokesman Peter Boogaard said in a statement. “The steps taken over the past year are another example of the creative solutions being taken across the federal government to make progress on this issue, consistent with existing statutory law, which limits who is admissible and eligible for humanitarian relief. While these efforts will not solve this challenge alone, they are a further example of the United States’ continued commitment.”

But the administration’s central focus has been on deterring Central Americans from attempting what Obama called a dangerous journey north under the guidance of human smugglers. The administration ramped up the number of immigration judges to adjudicate asylum requests and made clear, in advertisements in the Northern Triangle countries, that migrants who lose in court can be returned to their home countries.

Obama and Biden also pressured Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto to tighten his country’s borders with its southern neighbors and intercept migrants attempting the journey to the United States. In

January, as the numbers of Central American migrants surged again, the Department of Homeland Security conducted raids to round up several dozen of those who had outstanding deportation orders.

“The federal government has really tried to push the story in Central America that it’s just criminal gangs and general violence, but the evidence on the ground, if you look at news reports, is that gangs have gained a huge political dimension,” said Bryan S. Johnson, a New York-based immigration lawyer who has represented hundreds of Central Americans in court.

At a special U.N. refugee summit this week, Obama announced plans for the United States and 18 other countries to increase the number of refugees they will accept next year from across the world. The president specifically thanked Mexico for “absorbing a great number of refugees from Central America.”

But advocates emphasized that Mexico has deported many and granted refugee status to relatively few. In 2015, for example, Mexico granted refugee status to 1,013 migrants from the Northern Triangle, including 57 children, while deporting 175,000.

Appleby said the Obama administration’s strategy of enlisting Mexico to block the Central Americans “is part of the things we’re seeing around the world — externalizing the border. Extend the border, but don’t extend the protections.”



David Nakamura covers the White House. He has previously covered sports, education and city government and reported from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Japan.

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