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The reality on the border differs widely from Trump's 'crisis' description

By MOLLY O'TOOLE, MOLLY HENNESSY-FISKE and KATE MORRISSEY
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President Trump speaks from the Oval Office in a prime-time address about border security Tuesday.

On Tuesday in the Mexican border city of Matamoros, a group of 55 asylum seekers camped at the foot of bridges, waiting to cross into Brownsville, Texas. The group, including a deaf man and half a dozen children, face an average wait of six weeks. Farther west in Nogales, on the border with Arizona, about 150 asylum seekers waited to enter the United States.

In Juarez, across from El Paso, U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials turned one Guatemalan father away six times over three days in October. The smuggler he'd paid to get him and his two young daughters to the United States gave him a choice: Continue waiting on the bridge to Texas, alone, or take a raft illegally across the Rio Grande with the children. With one of his daughters sick, he chose the river and surrendered to the Border Patrol to apply for asylum.

In San Diego, Central American families who have traveled north as part of the most recent caravan have been ducking through known gaps in a fence at

Tijuana. Border Patrol agents wait on the other side for them to turn themselves in and claim asylum.

In a nationally televised speech from the Oval Office, President Trump is expected to address what administration officials repeatedly have called a "humanitarian and national security crisis" at the southern border.

Yet from Mexico City to the U.S.-Mexico border, to inundated U.S. immigration courts and interior checkpoints, current and former officials, as well as outside experts, say that to the extent the border faces such a crisis, it's largely of the administration's own making.

"It's a self-imposed crisis," said Stephanie Leutert, director of the Mexico Security Initiative at the University of Texas at Austin, who spoke to the Guatemalan father.

Apprehensions at the border — the most common measure of illegal immigration — are near historic lows.

From the 1980s to the mid-2000s, apprehensions routinely reached more than 1 million migrants a year. In the fiscal year that ended in September, 521,090 people were apprehended or stopped at the border.

"There is absolutely not a border-security crisis right now," said Chris Wilson, deputy director of the Mexico Institute at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington. "Apprehensions are way down from their peak."

Everard Meade, director of the Trans-Border Institute at the University of San Diego, said "the administration has tried to keep this impression that the border is overwhelmed, even though empirically it's not."

Nor is there significant evidence of a terrorist threat at the border — something that Trump and other administration officials have implied.

As recently as July 2017, the State Department said there was "no credible information that any member of a terrorist group has traveled through Mexico to gain access to the United States."

Homeland Security data for fiscal 2017 show that U.S. officials encountered 2,554 people on the terrorist watch list trying to enter the United States. The vast majority, however, were attempting to enter at airports or by sea, not by crossing the border from Mexico.

Wilson said there had been no clear increase since 9/11 on the numbers of "special interest" foreigners at the border — a category defined broadly as anyone from a country that has produced or promoted terrorism — and though it remains an area of concern, there's never been a terrorist attack by someone who entered the United States from Mexico.

"In every national security risk assessment, you have to direct resources to where they will be most effective," he said. "When it comes to combating terrorism and protecting the homeland, the southern border is not high on the list."

What has changed at the border in the last couple of years is a significant shift in who is coming, and why. In November, Border Patrol agents apprehended 25,172 family members on the border, a record, and 5,283 unaccompanied minors, most seeking asylum.

Even if migrant children traveling north without adults keep pace, they won't come close to the height of the so-called unaccompanied minors crisis in 2014, when they reached more than 67,000. But the number of children and adults seeking asylum has grown dramatically. In fiscal 2013, there were only about 43,000 asylum applications. In fiscal 2018, there were 160,000, an increase

contributing to a current backlog of roughly 800,000 asylum cases, Wilson said.

"If there's a crisis right now," Wilson said, "it's in our asylum system."
At ports of entry and detention centers, U.S. immigration and border enforcement personnel say a system designed in the 1990s for single adult Mexican males has been overwhelmed by Central American families and unaccompanied minors. Two migrant children died in U.S. custody last month, the first such fatalities in more than a decade, according to the administration. But although the numbers themselves are daunting, several actions by the administration may have worsened the problem.

Thousands of migrants fleeing violence and poverty in Central America have amassed at the U.S.-Mexico border, waiting weeks or sometimes months in dangerous Mexican border towns for the chance to claim asylum in the United States. At ports of entry, U.S. officials have been "metering" asylum seekers, at times turning them away and telling them that facilities are "at capacity."

Last month, the administration announced what they called a historic policy shift to force migrants to wait in Mexico while their U.S. cases are processed. Although there's little sign the "Remain in Mexico" strategy is being implemented, increasingly, migrants stuck at the border are resorting to smugglers or more remote areas to cross illegally, according to observers.

The large number of unaccompanied children trying to enter the U.S. also stems, in part, from the administration's abrupt decision, early in Trump's tenure, to end Obama-era programs that enabled Central American minors to apply in their home countries for asylum in the United States. That move stranded thousands of children. Most of the 13,000 applicants came from El Salvador, a country with one of the highest homicide rates in the world for those under age 19.

Administration officials have recently discussed reinstating that program. Over the holidays, in Texas, Arizona, and California, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement released thousands of migrants to the streets and bus stations, without the advance notice typically given to local shelters, with many already at capacity.

Ruben Garcia, director of El Paso's main shelter network, Annunciation House, said the decision to suddenly release detainees in large groups without coordination felt calculated to send a political message.

"Why was it for 361 days immigration communicated with us, we had a system where they told us their capacity?" he said. "I see it as political. And that's very, very sad, that the administration is taking what are basically law enforcement agencies and politicizing them."

Dylan Corbett, director of El Paso-based Hope Border Institute, said a pregnant Honduran migrant told him that she too had tried to cross the border bridge but had been turned back into Juarez by U.S. Customs and Border Protection. She hid on a mountain at the edge of town, near a remote crossing favored by smugglers. While waiting to cross, she says she was raped. "Because we've made these policy choices to militarize the border," Corbett said, "we don't have the capacity to respond to the reality of the situation, which is these families."

Meanwhile, the current partial government shutdown has made the backlog of asylum claims worse.

With many immigration judges furloughed, and others forced to work, without pay, court backlogs have grown.

"Every day that we are not in court, thousands of cases will have to be rescheduled," said Ashley Tabaddor, president of the National Assn. of

Immigration Judges. “That means after two, three years of waiting, someone else will have to be bumped for them to be heard.”

O’Toole reported from Washington, Hennessy-Fiske from Houston and Morrissey from San Diego.

https://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-pol-trump-border-crisis-20190108-story.html