

President Donald Trump promises to deport ‘millions and millions of criminal aliens’ but the evidence from church-affiliated shelters on either side of the US–Mexico border is that he is scrambling to find the numbers that will satisfy his Maga base / **By MICHAEL TANGEMAN**

Where have all the migrants gone?

CUADRUÁREZ, Mexico. They stand silently, facing the altar and the massive raised platform next to Chamizal park and within sight of the Rio Grande river, where in February 2016 Pope Francis celebrated Mass, delivering a homily exhorting the powerful on both sides of the border to treat poor and long-suffering migrants and refugees with compassion and dignity.

Eleven huge white field tents of waterproof canvas now stand here arrayed in the sun, anticipating the arrival of thousands of immigrants that the US administration of President Donald Trump says will soon be deported, dumped unceremoniously over the border into Mexico from the United States.

Across that border, in El Paso, Texas, the construction of a 10,000-bed immigration detention centre at the massive 1,700 square-mile Fort Bliss army base is about to begin, announced during a 26 March visit to the base by Trump’s newly appointed secretary of the army, Daniel Driscoll. Four days later, the first two of eight M1126 “Stryker” armoured fighting vehicles arrived at El Paso, visibly underscoring preparations for Trump’s promised “hardening” of the US border. It was all part of the pledge made to his supporters in November to deliver the “largest deportation programme in American history”.

But nearly three months into Trump’s second presidential term, the volumes of immigrants he intends to deport are virtually nowhere to be seen, on either side of this nearly 2,000-mile-long border. By all accounts, the number of migrants crossing into the US began trending downward as early as January 2024, long before national election results became clear in November. As a result, say Catholic Church-affiliated shelters in the sister cities of Ciudad Juárez and El Paso, the number of migrants and refugees they are housing has dropped to a figurative handful.

In fact, says Ruben García, long-time executive director of the diocese-affiliated Annunciation House in El Paso, there is “a real disconnect” between the current reality on the ground and Trump’s message to his Maga base of an ongoing “invasion” of undocumented immigrants. “The flow (of migrants) is no longer happening,” García said. “But they’re still beating the drum on this, trying to find people to deport so they can keep the message alive.”

Immigration across the US southern border has seen a veritable seesaw in the numbers



PHOTO: MICHAEL TANGEMAN

of migrants from various countries seeking entry and requesting asylum in recent years, punctuated by a series of policy missteps and stopgap programmes put in place by the administrations of Trump, Barack Obama and Joe Biden. Shelters on both sides of the border have been overwhelmed at times by successive waves of migrants and asylum seekers. One such wave came with the arrival of thousands of Central Americans in 2013-14, mostly women and unaccompanied minors fleeing organised crime and drug-related violence in Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. Then in 2022-23, large numbers of Venezuelans began arriving, having braved travel through Colombia, across the dangerous Darién Gap, through Central America and Mexico, to seek refuge from violence accompanying political upheaval and a collapsed economy in their country.

THROUGHOUT THIS PERIOD, migrants whose requests for asylum were approved typically received renewable Temporary Protected Status (TPS) documents, allowing those deemed unable to return home safely to remain in the United States legally. Since 1990, more than 600,000 foreign nationals

Barbed wire runs along the US side of a section of the Rio Grande forming part of the international border

from 16 countries have received TPS protection, the largest number from El Salvador, Haiti and Venezuela.

Ivonne López, coordinator of the diocesan-run Casa Migrante (Migrant House) shelter in Ciudad Juárez, remembers the big wave of Venezuelans arriving during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the Trump administration used the little-known Title 42 section of the US Health Code to close the border entirely and expel unauthorised border crossers and asylum seekers. “They all gathered in the freezing cold, standing on the international bridges, waiting to enter the United States,” she recalled. Municipal authorities in Juárez asked Casa Migrante for help, and the 560-capacity shelter housed up to 1,783 Venezuelan migrants for months on end. Likewise, across the border in El Paso, García’s Annunciation House organised a network of 25 church-affiliated “hospitality shelters” from El Paso to Las Cruces and Albuquerque, in the neighbouring state of New Mexico, housing thousands of

Venezuelans and other migrants granted TPS entry.

After Biden defeated Trump in 2020, a court order left Title 42 in place until May 2023, when Biden implemented a new set of policies – including a requirement that asylum seekers use an online app known as “CBP One” to solicit an appointment for a hearing on their case prior to arriving at the border. The efficiency of CBP One in regulating requests for asylum, combined with Mexican authorities’ interdiction of migrant movement within their country and pressure by the Biden administration on Colombia and Panama to stop the trafficking of migrants across the Darién Gap, led to a sharp tapering of migrant arrivals.

Data from the US Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) show so-called “encounters”, or apprehensions of migrants illegally crossing the border, plummeting from a monthly high of 302,000 in December 2023 to just over 106,000 on the eve of the November 2024 US election. By the time Trump took office in January, the number of monthly encounters had fallen to 61,447.

“In 2024, all of our hospitality sites started shutting down. There weren’t any refugees, none. We went from 25 hospitality sites to six,” said Ruben García. “And by the end of 2024, every single hospitality site, with the exception of Annunciation House, was closed.” Only 40 refugees who hold TPS status are residing at Annunciation House’s Casa Papa Francisco shelter, he noted. And across the border in Juárez, only 48 migrants remain at Casa Migrante, Ivonne López told me.

UPON TAKING OFFICE in January, Trump ordered military equipment and personnel to the border and pledged mass deportations, while immediately cancelling asylum applications and terminating Biden’s CBP One appointment system – dashing the hopes of many migrants awaiting appointments to petition for asylum. “We came hoping to cross, but it’s no longer possible. We don’t know what we’ll do ... wait to see if there’s another opportunity to cross, God willing,” said Daniela, 21, who made the trek from Colombia through Central America and Mexico to the border, along with her daughter Dayeli, now two years old, her husband and his brother. “Before, you just waited for your appointment. Now, there are none available,” she told me. Migrants like her, stuck in Ciudad Juárez, “look for a little work, sell things on the street, and wait. That’s just how it is.”

At the food dispensary and kitchen operated since 2018 by Columban missionaries next to the downtown Cathedral of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Juárez, migrants stranded in the city continue to arrive for hot meals on weekdays and about 100 families stop by for twice-weekly grocery pickups, according to the programme’s coordinator, Cristina Coronado.

The Columbans also operate two small shel-

ters for unaccompanied minors and women, while medical attention is provided by Doctors Without Borders at a clinic alongside the kitchen. Assistance in applying for permission to remain in Mexico is available through lawyers working with the International Rescue Committee (IRC). In all, said Coronado, the programme serves as many as 2,500 migrants and refugees remaining in the city.

“Some people have stayed on here, waiting for the Mexican government to grant them permission to remain,” Coronado told me. Noting that there is next to no gainful employment for them along the border, she said many migrants have moved back into central Mexico seeking work, while others take up Mexico’s offer of voluntary repatriation flights. “But there are many who can’t return to their countries,” she said.

“They left because of the violence and even though they’re offered the option to return to their countries, they no longer want to go, they no longer can go back.”

In El Paso, Bishop Mark Seitz has spoken out sharply against the Trump administration’s militarisation of the border, calling it “simply empire masquerading in the guise of security for the benefit of a select few”. He asks, “Why are we spending billions of dollars

to ‘harden our border’ and why are we deploying thousands of soldiers to this place right now? Who benefits?”

Nearly as perplexing, says Annunciation House director García, is where and how Trump will find the vast numbers of undocumented migrants and refugees he intends to deport back across the border. “He can’t find them along the border and it will be hard to find them among the 11 or 12 million migrants spread out, embedded in local communities across the country,” García said. “So now he is trying to cancel all the migrants who came in with sponsorship, even during his first administration – Nicaraguans, Cubans, Haitians, Venezuelans – 535,000 of them. He’s cancelling the Temporary Protective Status of Salvadorans – cancelling them all, because he can’t find that many new migrants to deport,” García said.

With judges now frustrating Trump’s efforts through temporary restraining orders to delay the deportation of these groups, who are already in the US legally, García says Trump will only become more desperate. “He’s going after everybody, anybody he can,” García said, because “he needs to produce very large numbers to satisfy his base, to show them ‘I’m protecting you.’”

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