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U.S. LEGAL NEWS

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U.S. to test some immigrants for coronavirus before deportation

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WASHINGTON/NEW YORK (Reuters) - The United States plans to begin testing some migrants in detention for COVID-19 before deporting them, an official familiar with the effort said on Thursday, after infections among deportees in Guatemala, Haiti and Mexico.



FILE PHOTO: A member of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Removal Operations (ERO) (San Francisco and Northern California) Fugitive Operations teams is pictured during an operation in San Jose, California, U.S. September 25, 2019. REUTERS/Kate Munsch/File Photo

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) will acquire 2,000 tests per month from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to screen deportees, the official said, without mentioning the timing.

The agency is unlikely to have enough tests for all deportees and will need to prioritize, the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

ICE and HHS did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The move comes amid criticism from foreign governments about receiving migrants infected with the coronavirus, which causes the respiratory illness COVID-19.

Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Haiti, Jamaica and Ecuador have all asked for testing, the U.S. official said.

“They all want it. Who wouldn’t?”

Guatemala said it would stop receiving deportees from the United States after dozens of returning migrants tested positive.

As of Thursday, President Alejandro Giammattei said at least 85 deported Guatemalans had tested positive, around a fifth of all the reported cases in the Central American country.

Cases of infection among deportees have also been reported in Haiti and Mexico.

Giammattei said last week the Guatemalan suspension would remain in place until the United States was able to certify people were being sent back virus-free.

Later on Thursday, his government said a flight carrying deportees, including unaccompanied minors, would be allowed to arrive on Friday due the vulnerable state of those deported after they were apprehended at the U.S.-Mexico border.

It called the flight an exceptional “humanitarian” act, and said the pause on deportee flights remains in place.

ICE moved to step up testing to avoid risking more countries’ pulling back cooperation with deportation flights, the U.S. official said.

“The news articles about COVID spread in ICE facilities and individuals who tested positive after being removed are making governments nervous about continuing to accept flights,” the official said.

More than 250 immigrant detainees in U.S. custody have tested positive for COVID-19. But only some 425 tests had been conducted on the more than 32,000 detainees nationwide, an ICE spokeswoman said on Wednesday.

Dozens of unaccompanied migrant children in HHS custody have also tested positive for the virus, the agency has said.

As of this month, there were some 4,600 Guatemalan adults and more than 1,100 children in U.S. custody, according to a Guatemalan government document.

ICE removed more than 267,000 people in fiscal year 2019, which began in October 2018.

In the midst of the pandemic, deportations continued, even as the administration of President Donald Trump took extreme measures to cut off the country’s border to immigrants and travelers.

From March 21 to April 20, as coronavirus cases were rapidly rising in the United States, more than 1,400 deportees were sent to Guatemala, including families and unaccompanied minors, according to Guatemalan Health Minister Hugo Monroy.

There were a significant number of people infected on several ICE flights, one in late March and two last week, Monroy said. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention was deployed to review cases on the flights but the agency declined to provide more details on the investigation.

Guatemala’s foreign minister, Pedro Brolo, told lawmakers on Monday the government had pushed the United States to do more.

Reporting by Ted Hesson in Washington and Mica Rosenberg in New York; Additional reporting by Sofia Menchu in Guatemala City; Editing by Richard Chang, Leslie Adler and Michael Perry

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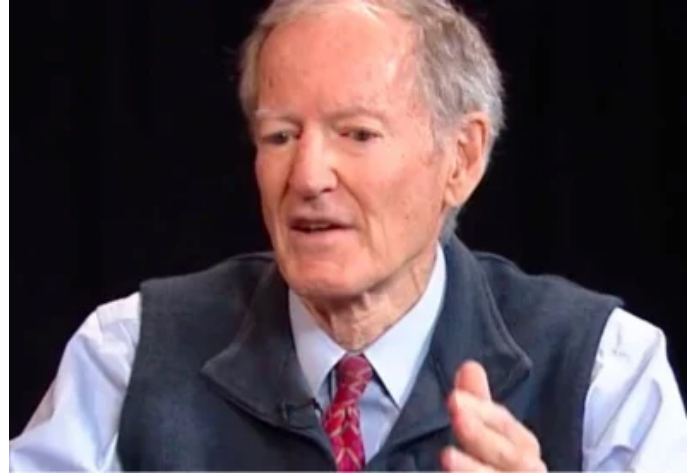
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