

U.S. AUGUST 21, 2019 / 5:21 AM / UPDATED 18 MINUTES AGO

Thousands of Central American migrants take free rides home courtesy of U.S. government

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8 MIN READ



(Reuters) - More than 2,000 Central American migrants seeking to settle in the United States have given up and accepted free rides home under a 10-month-old program funded by the U.S. government and run by a United Nations agency, according to a U.N. official.

A migrant child stands inside a shelter in Tijuana, Mexico, July 20, 2019. REUTERS/Carlos Jasso

The “Assisted Voluntary Return” program has paid for buses or flights for 2,170 migrants who either never reached the United States or were detained after crossing the border and then sent to Mexico to await U.S. immigration hearings,

according to Christopher Gascon, an official with the U.N.'s International Organization for Migration (IOM).

The \$1.65 million program, funded by the U.S. State Department, is raising concerns among immigration advocates who say it could violate a principle under international law against returning asylum seekers to countries where they could face persecution.

The returned migrants have not been interviewed by U.S. asylum officers. But Gascon said his agency screens all participants to ensure they are not seeking U.S. asylum and want to go back.

Gascon, head of the IOM's Mexico mission, said the program provides a safer and more humane means of return than the migrants could arrange on their own.

The effort [here](#), whose scope and controversial aspects have not been previously reported, is the first by the State Department and UN to target Central American migrants in Mexico on such a large scale. The State Department would not comment on the record about its role.

Gascon said the State Department reached out to the IOM last year as caravans of thousands of Central American migrants traveled through Mexico toward the U.S. border.

U.S. President Donald Trump called the caravans an "invasion" and has made stemming immigration a centerpiece of his administration and 2020 re-election campaign.

Migrant advocates are particularly concerned about 347 people returned by the IOM who had been stuck in Mexico under a controversial Trump administration policy known as the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP).

Under that policy, which began Jan. 29, some migrants who make it across the U.S.-Mexico border are given a notice to appear in U.S. immigration court, then are then turned back to Mexico to wait the months it can take for their court cases to be resolved. In the past seven months, more than 30,000 migrants have been sent back under MPP, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection.

(For a graphic on the Migrant Protection Protocols, see reut.rs/2MszcN)

Advocates say that the migrants often face danger and destitution in Mexican border towns, leaving them no good options.

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“How can it be a voluntary decision (to return home) given the conditions they face in Mexico? It’s a choice between two hells,” said Nicolas Palazzo, an attorney with El Paso-based Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center.

Besides any danger they might face back home, there is another significant downside to leaving: If migrants do not show up for a U.S. court hearing, they can be ordered deported “in absentia,” reducing their odds of ever being granted refuge in the United States.

AFRAID TO GO, AFRAID TO STAY

Denia Carranza, a 24-year-old Honduran returned to Mexico to await a court hearing set for October, decided instead to board a bus back home last week.

She said she and her 7-year-old son had fled her hometown and a good job at a shrimp packing company after gang members threatened to kill her if she did not deal drugs to fellow employees. She had hoped to apply for U.S. asylum.

But she said she was frightened in Ciudad Juarez - a battleground for drug cartels where the bulk of migrants await their hearings. Also, she had no job and no way to provide for her son.

“I am scared of going back to Honduras. But I am more afraid to stay,” she said.

The U.S.-based nonprofit Human Rights First said it had documented more than 100 violent incidents perpetrated against migrants waiting in Mexico for U.S. court hearings this year, including rape, kidnapping, robbery, assault and police extortion.

The IOM documented 247 deaths of migrants near the US-Mexico border this year through Aug. 15.

In a July 30 letter to the IOM’s Director General, 30 U.S. and international advocacy organizations said they feared the U.N. organization was returning migrants to countries they had fled “out of desperation, not choice, and where they may not fully understand the consequences of failing to appear whenever summoned by a U.S. immigration court.”

There is no way of knowing how many of the migrants who opt to go home with IOM help might have been able to present a successful asylum claim. U.S. courts ultimately deny most such claims brought by Central Americans and the Trump administration has said many are fraudulent.

Migrants who are sent to Mexico under MPP may or may not be seeking U.S. asylum, but they generally have no opportunity to initiate such claims before being sent back across the border. The policy cuts out a traditional asylum screening step in which migrants are interviewed to establish whether they have a “credible fear” of returning home.

SEEING ‘REALITY’

When the U.S. State Department approached IOM last fall, Gascon said, part of the goal was to counter what is saw as misinformation about how easy it was to get into the United States.

Slideshow (35 Images)

IOM set up kiosks at a stadium in Mexico City, which was along the caravan route, and on the U.S.-Mexico border. It also helped spread the word about free rides back in migrant shelters.

“When they saw the reality, some decided to go home,” he said of migrants.

Three quarters of the migrants in the voluntary return program went back to Honduras, a fifth to El Salvador and the rest to Guatemala and Nicaragua, according to IOM figures through July 26 of this year. More than half were “family units” and about 100 were unaccompanied minors. Most of the migrants have been sent back from Mexico, and a small fraction from Guatemala.

The IOM screens all migrants who ask to go home, but those awaiting U.S. hearings in Mexico also undergo an orientation program with Grupo Beta, an arm of Mexico’s National Migration Institute, to ensure migrants understand their options, Gascon said.

So far, Gascon said, two people awaiting U.S. court hearings in Mexico who wanted a ride back were instead referred to the Mexican government to gauge their eligibility for asylum in Mexico.

But advocates said they worried that Grupo Beta is not the best partner for IOM to ensure migrants’ safety.

“Many organizations have documented time and again that Mexican migration officials don’t refer people to (the national refugee office), they don’t register fears of return, and they have even pressured people to withdraw (asylum) claims,” said Kennji Kizuka, a researcher at the nonprofit Human Rights First.

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Mexican migration officials did not respond to a request for comment.

More than a dozen migrants awaiting U.S. hearings at the Casa de Migrante shelter in Ciudad Juarez told Reuters the weekly south-bound bus rides held some appeal. Though reluctant to give up on their American dreams, many didn't have lawyers and saw little prospect for success.

"All that effort we made to get here from Honduras and now we're going back," said Angel Estrada, who had hoped to get care in the United States for his 9-year-old son, who has hemophilia. "It's really sad."

PHOTO ESSAY: U.S. buys tickets home for Central American migrants - reut.rs/2ZeyOoV

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