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Migrants, mostly from Venezuela, are seen from Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, as they gather near the U.S. border wall Sept. 24, after crossing the Rio Grande with the intention of turning themselves in to U.S. Border Patrol agents to request asylum. (OSV News/Reuters/Jose Luis Gonzalez)

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The U.S. government is moving ahead with plans to extend a border wall in South Texas, an action long opposed by the U.S. Catholic bishops.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security publicized a decision Oct. 5 to waive 26 federal laws — most of them involving environmental reviews — to allow the building of 20 more miles of the wall along the U.S.-Mexico border.

However, President Joe Biden has said he does not believe border walls work to prevent migrants from entering the United States illegally, and he has been consistently opposed to their construction, ordering a construction pause on his first day in his post in 2021.

Speaking with reporters Oct. 5, Biden said he had no choice but to allow the building to move forward. "The money was appropriated for the border wall," he said. "I can't stop that."

The funds were appropriated in 2019 under the Trump administration. Biden was unsuccessful in getting lawmakers to redirect them, and the funding requires the money to be used for the wall, with construction to be completed this year.

The DHS announcement said the construction will be in Starr County, Texas, which the Border Patrol says is part of a sector in the Rio Grande Valley with "high illegal entry." Government data for the current budget year recorded 245,000 illegal entries in the sector, which includes more than 20 Texas counties.

"There is presently an acute and immediate need to construct physical barriers and roads in the vicinity of the border of the United States in order to prevent unlawful entries into the United States in the project areas," Alejandro Mayorkas, secretary of Homeland Security, stated in the DHS notice.

In a separate statement Oct. 5, Mayorkas clarified that "there is no new Administration policy with respect to border walls" and the suggestion that the Biden

administration has changed its policy is inaccurate.

"From day one, this Administration has made clear that a border wall is not the answer. That remains our position and our position has never wavered. The language in the Federal Register notice is being taken out of context and it does not signify any change in policy whatsoever," he said.

In February 2019, two leading U.S. bishops said they opposed President Donald Trump's plan to redirect federal funds previously appropriated elsewhere to build a border wall.

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"We are deeply concerned about the President's action to fund the construction of a wall along the U.S./Mexico border, which circumvents the clear intent of Congress to limit funding of a wall. We oppose the use of these funds to further the construction of the wall," Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston, who was then president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and Bishop Joe Vásquez of Austin, Texas, then-chairman of the conference's Committee on Migration, said in a joint statement. "The wall first and foremost is a symbol of division and animosity between two friendly countries. We remain steadfast and resolute in the vision articulated by Pope Francis that at this time we need to be building bridges and not walls."

Other bishops joined their voices to that position, with a dozen signing a statement soon after to oppose a southern border wall. They called it "an ineffective use of resources" that would "destroy parts of the environment, disrupt the livelihoods of ranchers and farmers, weaken cooperation and commerce between border communities, and, at least in one instance, undermine the right to the freedom of worship."

"The truth is," the statement continued, "that the majority of persons coming to the U.S.-Mexico border are asylum-seekers, many of whom are women and children from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador who are fleeing persecution and violence in their home countries. Along their journey to safety, they encounter many dangers. A wall would not keep them safe from those dangers. Rather, a wall would further subject them to harm by drug cartels, smugglers and human traffickers."

They pointed to the effects of a border wall constructed in the 1990s in the San Diego area, which they said resulted in smugglers driving migrants to cross the border in remote areas such as the Arizona desert.

The decision to continue wall construction comes as Republicans in the House and Senate are seeking to defund nongovernmental organizations that provide services to migrants along the border.

On May 11, the House of Representatives passed the Secure the Border Act just before the expiration of the Title 42, a COVID-19-era health policy providing for the immediate expulsion of migrants to Mexico.

Passage of the Secure the Border Act in the Democrat-controlled Senate is uncertain. Two Republicans, Sens. Chuck Grassley of Iowa and Ted Cruz of Texas, have introduced a Senate version of the act. Like the House bill, it would require border wall construction to resume.

"President Biden's refusal to enforce the law at our southern border has allowed drug trafficking, human smuggling and illicit cartel activity to poison the United States. Every state in the nation, including Iowa, is now a border state," Grassley said in a statement.

Cruz said the bill would stop the border crisis "dead in its tracks by building the wall, ratcheting up asylum standards, increasing the number of Border Patrol agents, and implementing effective border security policies."

Bishop Mark Seitz of El Paso, Texas, in a letter to Congress in May, said the bill would "fundamentally weaken our nation's decades-long commitment to humanitarian protection."

In a similar letter sent Sept. 28 to U.S. senators about the bill, Seitz reiterated that position, noting in both letters, "We have long opposed the construction of a wall spanning the entire U.S.-Mexico border, especially with the dangers it poses to human life and the environment."

Seitz is chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Migration.

Catholic assistance to migrants along the U.S.-Mexico border includes the Kino Border Initiative's shelter and legal assistance in Nogales, Mexico, and the Hope Border Institute, which operates in Juárez, Mexico, in collaboration with the El Paso

Diocese to provide food and clothing.

Dylan Corbett, Hope Border Institute executive director, issued a quick response to both the wall expansion and the recent negotiations to increase deportation flights to Venezuela. "The social and political crisis in Venezuela is real and deep," he said. "In the last decade, close to 8 million people have been forced to flee.

"The time and energy this administration is spending defending border walls and deploying our chief diplomats and policymakers to negotiate with Mexico and the Maduro Administration to keep people out is misguided and will again prove ineffective," he continued.

He said the crisis "requires leading with political courage, creativity and compassion."