News



A picture of Jakelin Caal, a 7-year-old girl who died in U.S. custody after crossing illegally from Mexico to the U.S, is seen during a Dec. 15 protest held in El Paso, Texas, to demand justice for her. (CNS/Jose Luis Gonzalez, Reuters)

by Catholic News Service

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The death of a 7-year-old Guatemalan girl "represents an egregious disregard for the safety and care of persons in the custody of U.S. officials," the National Council of Churches said.

The Washington-based organization said it joined "in prayer for this girl's family members who grieve her loss.

"We also pray for all of those making the treacherous journey across the desert and are reminded of Abraham, Sarah, Mary, Joseph and countless others who made similar journeys in the light of hope," it said in a statement issued Dec. 14, the day news reports circulated about the girl, identified by the Guatemalan government as Jackeline Caal, who died the first week of December.

The Washington Post reported that she and her father, Nery Caal, 29, were taken into custody Dec. 6 around 10 p.m., south of Lordsburg, New Mexico. They were among 163 migrants who turned themselves in at the border.

"Some seven hours later, she was put on a bus to the nearest Border Patrol station but soon began vomiting (and having seizures). By the end of the two-hour drive, she had stopped breathing," the Post reported. Border Patrol agents administered CPR and she was flown to a hospital in El Paso, Texas, where she later died.

Officials said the girl initially appeared healthy and that an interview raised no signs of trouble, according to the news story. Her Spanish-speaking father signed a form indicating she was in good health, authorities said, but critics of the Border Patrol and the Trump administration later said the father speaks a Mayan dialect that officials supposedly didn't really understand.

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"It's heart-wrenching, is what it is. And my heart goes out to the family, for all of DHS," Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen Nielsen said in an interview with Fox News. "This is just a very sad example of the dangers of this journey. This family chose to cross illegally."

"What happened here is that they were 90 miles away from where we could process them. They came in such a large crowd that it took our border patrol folks a couple

times to get them all," she said. "We gave immediate care. We'll continue to look into the situation. But again, I cannot stress how dangerous this journey is when migrants choose to come here illegally."

The DHS inspector general said Dec. 14 it would investigate the circumstances of the child's death.

In its statement, the National Council of Churches urged Congress to take up comprehensive immigration reform and called on President Donald Trump "to end policies that place persons in harm's way as they seek relief from the circumstances that caused them to leave their home countries."

"As we approach Christmas it is heartbreaking to consider there are many thousands of families in desperate need of the assistance of our nation," the council added.