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U.S. law enforcement officers in Del Rio, Texas, stand near a young migrant woman bathing in the Rio Grande Sept. 19. (CNS/Reuters/Daniel Becerril)



by Dylan Corbett

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Images coming out of Del Rio, Texas, in the past week shocked the world. The use of horses and riding reins by Border Patrol agents as weapons against Haitian fathers trying to bring bags of food to their starving families was astonishing and revolting.

On the floor of the Senate, Democratic Majority Leader Chuck Schumer condemned the actions of Department of Homeland Security personnel on the ground and said, "the horrible treatment of these innocent people who have come to the border must stop immediately." Vice President Kamala Harris also expressed "grave concerns" to Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, who promised a quick and thorough investigation.

The terrifying images of brute force deployed against families and the most vulnerable should prick our national conscience. The forced return of Haitians to a country reeling from the effects of the pandemic, a recent earthquake and a near absence of law and order following the recent assassination of President Jovenel Moïse is morally indefensible.

But it is not enough for the White House and elected leaders to voice "grave concerns," as if what occurred were an isolated episode.

What happened in Del Rio is the most visible manifestation of a violence that occurs every day all along the border under a policy known as Title 42. Title 42 is a pandemic-related health order that has served as a pretext for the U.S. government to ignore its obligations to provide protection for asylum seekers at the U.S.-Mexico border. The administration's use of Title 42 against families at the border was found to be illegal by a federal court on Sept. 16.

Under Title 42, which public health experts have roundly condemned as "xenophobia masquerading as a public health measure," the United States has carried out more than 1 million expulsions, including the forced removal of pregnant women and single-parent families. Two out of three persons expelled to Haiti under Title 42 have been women and children.

Policies like Title 42 are also a piece with hardline tactics deployed at the border over the past several decades by both Republican and Democratic administrations. The only discernible through line over the years is a strategy to "manage" the border by criminalizing more and more categories of migrants — building systems to detain and deport and hardening borders with walls, technology and ever-increasing budgets and personnel for border enforcement agencies.

The strategy reached its culmination under the Trump administration with policies like family separation and Title 42.

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The intent of these tactics is always to send the same message. As Harris shockingly said to Guatemalans contemplating the harsh reality of forced displacement earlier this year: "Do not come. Do not come. If you come to our border, you will be turned back."

President Joe Biden ran on a promise to inject humanity into our immigration systems and restore asylum protections at the border. But afraid of being outflanked by the political right, this administration has kept Title 42 in place.

It has also extended the cruel logic of the U.S.-Mexico border southward by enlisting Mexico and Guatemala in hardline enforcement strategies. These actions threaten to derail the administration's critical root causes agenda by subordinating it to the politics of immigration.

Under pressure from the Biden administration, immigration enforcement agents have turned the southern Mexican city of Tapachula into what some have called the largest open-air prison in the world. The bishop of Tapachula, Jaime Calderón, recently described these brutal actions to contain migration as "a true manhunt, scaring, ambushing and dividing them up through the excessive use of force."

What happened in Del Rio was horrifying. It potentially represents one of the largest mass expulsions in U.S. history and it made visible the inescapably racialized character of American immigration enforcement. But the events can only be understood within the context of the broader "Do not come" strategy that this administration has chosen to embrace.

Forced displacement will continue to be a reality in the Western Hemisphere for years to come. We need to set our immigration policy on more secure moral foundations. As Pope Francis said in his encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti*, the criterion for judging every political project must be "the decision to include or exclude those lying wounded along the roadside."

Miami Archbishop Thomas Wenski was one of those who perceived the reality of what happened in Del Rio. As he noted during the celebration of the Eucharist at his cathedral over the weekend, these families from Haiti were as "Hebrews on their trek through the Sinai seeking the Promised Land."

Rather than running scared, the administration should show bold leadership by repudiating anti-immigrant policies like Title 42, confronting the racialized legacy of immigration enforcement, and restoring protections at the border. The administration must also credibly follow through on addressing root causes and update asylum law to reflect the real drivers of forced migration today, including environmental displacement.