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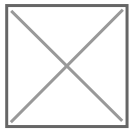
Migrant girls, who are asylum-seekers sent back to Mexico from the U.S. under the Trump adı

Migrant girls, who are asylum-seekers sent back to Mexico from the U.S. under the Trump administration's "Remain in Mexico" policy, are seen playing at a provisional campsite near the Rio Bravo in Matamoros, Mexico, Feb. 27, 2020. The policy is officially named Migrant Protection Protocols, or MPP. (CNS photo/Daniel Becerril, Reuters)



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Immigrant advocates recently walked away from an online meeting with Biden administration officials to protest a move that will revive a Trump-era policy blocking people seeking asylum from entering the U.S.

During a Zoom meeting Oct. 16, one of the advocates read a statement expressing disappointment with the administration's latest decision and asked those on the call

to walk away from the virtual gathering.

It was the latest show of discontent among immigrant groups that once saw President Joe Biden as "an ally" on immigration issues.

"We had high expectations," said Hannah Hollandbyrd of Hope Border Institute in El Paso, Texas, one of the participants who left the call.

On Oct. 14, officials from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security said in a court filing that they were ready to begin sometime in November implementing once again the Migrant Protection Protocols, also called MPP or the "Remain in Mexico" policy.

Even though they called the policy inhumane in the past, Biden administration officials said they are trying to comply with a court order to restart MPP. They held an online event Oct. 16 with border advocates, such as Hope Border Institute, to discuss the developments.

But during the meeting, representatives of border groups that help asylum-seekers and which include Catholic organizations, told officials they wanted to "express our anger and disappointment with the administration's decision to break a promise."

They were referring to Biden's campaign promises to walk away from Trump-era immigration policies, which he, instead, has kept in place.

The coalition Welcome with Dignity, in a statement released Oct. 16, said it told participants to leave the meeting and change their Zoom backgrounds to black squares with text that read "End MPP: Restore Asylum Now" and "Protect Black Immigrants."

Luis Guerra, a strategic capacity officer with the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, said in an Oct. 19 phone interview with Catholic News Service that the meeting was "quite short" before he and others decided to leave with the intent of sending a message "loud and clear" to the Biden administration.

"We think it's all about political calculations," Guerra said, though he declined to speculate about the administration's intentions.

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In a statement explaining its stance, Welcome with Dignity said the administration was playing politics with human lives by participating in MPP's restoration.

The policy forces migrants looking for asylum in the United States to stay on the Mexico side of the U.S. southern border until their cases can be adjudicated in U.S. immigration courts. The waits are long and often force migrants to remain in dangerous border cities.

The policy began under President Donald Trump in late 2018 and was paused by Biden as soon as he took office in January. The administration formally moved to end it in June, but in August, a District Court judge told administration officials they had not ended it properly and ordered its restitution.

The U.S. Supreme Court upheld the judge's ruling.

DHS officials said they would continue to seek the end of MPP. However, they said that, in the meantime, they were taking necessary steps to comply with the court order and were seeking the participation of the Mexican government to go forward in November.

"We have been clear with the administration on this for months and strongly disagree that you are compelled to act this way by the court ruling. We respect you personally, your effort and commitment, and your individual values, but we have sadly reached a turning point," said Welcome with Dignity's statement. "There is no improved version of MPP. It is not possible to make the inhumane humane, (the) unfair fair or to breathe life into a deadly program."

The coalition's statement said the border groups on the Zoom call "have been working with people seeking asylum for years at the southern border and made clear to the government that any form of MPP is untenable and cruel."

To those like Hollandbyrd, it's part of the Biden's administration pivot to a policy of deterrence. She told CNS Oct. 20 that the administration has been focused on driving the message of deterrence "to avoid the perception that border is out of control."

"We're still open to them shifting their approach, recognizing you cannot deter your way out of this problem," Hollandbyrd added.

The administration also has been taken to task for not lifting a public health measure called Title 42, which has been used to turn away migrants at the border, with the exception of unaccompanied minors and some families, as part of efforts to contain the coronavirus.

The Trump administration implemented it at the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, saying it was necessary to protect the country from the coronavirus.

The Biden administration has kept it in place, saying the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will determine its end because it's a public health measure, not an immigration policy.

"We can no longer come into these conversations in good conscience when the Biden administration continues to perpetuate illegal and inhumane Trump-era immigration policies, such as Title 42 and now MPP," said Welcome with Dignity's statement to the Biden administration. "Advocates engaged with many of you during the transition and beginning of the administration.

"We even provided the administration with a road map that included solutions and how to restore the asylum system."

"Yet," the statement continued, "you continue to play politics with human lives; your policies are sending people to their death. We refuse to be complicit in deterrence-based border policies. We continue to witness firsthand people crushed under them, every day. We cannot allow our efforts to help the victims of these policies to be used in any way to prolong them."

Guerra said some groups see the administration "moving backwards." Others say the administration is crafting the message of immigration deterrence out of fear of political repercussions if they appear soft on border issues.

"We've seen this mistake before," said Guerra, adding that by wanting to seem tough, officials put lives in danger.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Migration has opposed MPP and Title 42. In late June, El Paso Bishop Mark J. Seitz reminded Vice President Kamala Harris of the bishops' conference stance when she toured the border region.

The border groups said they would "not engage with the administration around conversations on how to make MPP a palatable form of inhumanity."

"We demand that you issue a new termination memo and develop a concrete plan that ends MPP and starts moving us toward a fair, just, and welcoming system," their statement said.

"We as border advocates, legal service providers and national allies," it added, "will not engage further in this conversation until the administration is ready to deliver on their day-one campaign promise: Do everything in your power to end MPP, issue a new termination memo and start moving us toward a system grounded in empathy, dignity and respect."

In an Oct. 15 tweet, DHS said it would issue another memo terminating MPP but not "until the current injunction is lifted."

Hollandbyrd urged faith leaders involved in immigration issues "to be very loud" when speaking with administration officials on the issue.

"As advocates, it was powerful to walk out, to take a stand. ... We need others to raise their voices, especially the faith community to reach out to elected officials," she said.