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A woman leans on an ambulance in severe distress, clutching a cellphone, in red emergency

A Venezuelan migrant mourns outside an ambulance for her injured husband while Mexican authorities and firefighters remove injured migrants, mostly Venezuelans, from inside the National Migration Institute building during a fire, in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, March 27, 2023. At least 39 people at the immigration detention center on the U.S. border died in the fire that broke out at the facility overnight, according to a statement issued by the center. (OSV News photo/Jose Luis Gonzalez, Reuters)



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A fire in a Mexican immigration detention center has claimed the lives of at least 38 migrants, who appeared to be abandoned by guards as flames engulfed their locked cells, according to a leaked video from the facility near the U.S. border in Ciudad Juárez.

The tragedy provoked sorrow and outrage from Catholic leaders and laity working on migration matters in the United States, Mexico and across Central America, along with calls for a rethinking of immigration policy that criminalizes migrants streaming through Mexico toward the U.S..

"The pain and suffering from abandoning their homes is already too much, and we cannot allow their transit through Mexico to become an ordeal for those who leave their family and country in search of a better life," said a March 28 statement from the Mexican bishops' conference.

"As the church, we will always remain at the side of those who suffer most, of the excluded, of the poor and the neediest persons."

The blaze broke out shortly before 10 p.m. on March 27 in a section of the center holding 68 male migrants, according to Mexico's National Immigration Institute. The victims hailed from across Latin America, including 28 Guatemalans, 12 Venezuelans, 12 Salvadorans and one each from Colombia and Ecuador.

President Andrés Manuel López Obrador said March 28 that the migrants had ignited a mattress to protest their pending deportations.

"They put mattresses in the shelter doorway and ignited them," the president said. "They didn't imagine it would provoke this terrible accident."

The president's comments drew rebuke from Catholics, who pointed out the migrants had been detained and were being blamed for their own deaths.

"We do not share the idea that the president calls migrant detention centers, 'shelters'. We ask that he refrain from using language that distorts reality," the Mexican bishops' migrant ministry said in a March 28 statement.

"Enough with the euphemisms. We must not accept nor tolerate soft expressions or decorous words that are given to what truly constitutes a detention center, which does not offer dignified or safe conditions," the Guatemalan bishops' migrant ministry said in a March 27 statement.

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"Immigration stations are not shelters but detention centers where the human rights of people in forced mobility are violated."

Catholic migrant aid group the Hope Border Institute in El Paso, Texas, which borders Ciudad Juárez, said in a March 27 statement, "Those who blame the victims of the fire obscure the fact these deaths are an indictment of the policies and structures implemented at large by both governments."

A leaked video -- authenticated by Interior Minister Adán Augusto López -- showed guards seeming to walk away as the fire grew in ferocity. A desperate migrant kicked the door to no avail.

The official statements raised questions such as how the migrants would have lit the fire, as all items are taken away from them upon being detained, according to a source familiar with the facility. "There are no mattresses there," said the source, who works with migrants and asked for anonymity to speak candidly.

The tragedy underscored the difficulties confronting migrants trying to reach the United States via Mexico.

It also followed measures from the U.S. government to return potential asylum-seekers arriving at the southwestern border to Mexico, where they must apply for appointments via an application -- a process some advocates for migrants describe as frustrating and slow.

"The Ciudad Juárez tragedy is not an accident," tweeted Brenda Estefan, a former security attaché at the Mexican Embassy in Washington, who observed that responsibility for migration enforcement is being transferred to Mexico without an increase in capacity for meeting migrant needs.

She added, "Mexico has chronic institutional weaknesses in migration matters which are aggravated by the scant resources" for Mexico's immigration and refugee agencies as ever more migrants arrive in border cities.

While the fire was the deadliest migrant tragedy in years, it follows other migrant deaths. Earlier this month, two migrants suffocated to death aboard a freight train in Texas while 15 suffered injuries. In February 2023, 17 migrants from Venezuela, Colombia and Central America died in a bus crush in Mexico's Puebla state.