Opinion
Editorial



Angie Milagros Infante, mother of Rannier Requena Infante, who died at a migrant facility fire March 27 in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, embraces relatives after recognizing the body of her son at a morgue in Caracas, Venezuela, April 17. (AP/Jesus Vargas)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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Two weeks before Easter, 38 migrants from Central and South America died in a tragic fire at a detention center in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, across the border from El Paso, Texas. Criminal charges have been filed against Mexico's top immigration official, and other officers may face charges, after security camera video showed guards walking away from the fire, leaving migrants to die in their cells.

The fire was allegedly caused by a migrant protesting what he thought were plans to move or deport those incarcerated at the prison, leading some to blame the victims for this devastating loss of life.

But as Hope Border Institute rightly pointed out in its statement*, that would distract from the reality that these deaths are "an indictment of the policies and structures implemented at large by both governments."

It's undeniable that the United States' expansion of Title 42 and other deterrence policies have led Mexico to increase detention in overcrowded and underresourced facilities such as the one with the deadly fire.

That such policies have continued and even expanded under a Democratic U.S. president is an embarrassment. We agree with the 15 Catholic organizations that recently wrote to President Joe Biden to protest this administration's increasingly aggressive posture toward migrants and asylum-seekers.

"For the last 30 years the U.S. government has approached the border from a policy framework of deterrence and this model has spread not only to Mexico but worldwide," said the April 6 letter. "Nonetheless, this approach has not resulted in a safe and secure border but instead has only brought pain and suffering upon the most vulnerable."

The letter was signed by Pax Christi USA, Network Lobby for Catholic Social Justice, Jesuit Refugee Service, Catholic Legal Immigration Network (CLINIC) and other groups that work with refugees and asylum-seekers.

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Among the "deterrence policies" mentioned in the letter is the Biden administration's expansion of Title 42 first to Venezuelans, then to Nicaraguans, Cubans and Haitians. Title 42 of the Public Safety Act was invoked during the Trump

administration to prevent asylum-seekers from entering the U.S. because of the coronavirus pandemic. The Biden administration's expansion is paired with slightly increased opportunities for those seeking asylum to enter legally.

Yet the letter from the Catholic organization says, "The limits to asylum proposed in the rule are not pathways that promote a safe and orderly system, but instead are unjust restrictions that result in death."

The group also raised concerns about the use of the CBP One phone app, which the Biden administration has implemented to screen potential asylum seekers at border crossings. Migrants, shelter managers, immigration lawyers and Mexican government officials say the app has made the process more complicated. Previously, people seeking the humanitarian exception only needed to turn themselves in to an agent at the border.

In addition, the letter to Biden criticized a new proposed rule by the Biden administration, "Circumvention of Lawful Pathways," which would further restrict asylum-seekers at the border.

On the campaign trail, candidate Biden promised to fix the nation's broken immigration system and criticized the Trump-era policies that he is now continuing and expanding. Some of Biden's initial executive orders were a decent start, but by summer of 2021, NCR was editorializing that the Biden administration needed to do better.

Instead, it has gone the other direction — most likely for political, not ideological, reasons.

So again we call for comprehensive immigration reform that includes a fair and humane system for those seeking asylum — which we must remind is a legal option for people fleeing dire and dangerous circumstances in their home countries. Sadly, we recognize that such reform is politically impossible with the current makeup of Congress.

If Biden is looking for a moral vision in which to ground such policies, he need look no further than his own faith. As Pope Francis said in a 2018 homily about migrants and refugees, Jesus calls us to "overcome our fears so as to encounter the other, to welcome, to know and to acknowledge him or her."

This is not just on Biden. It is a challenge for both parties — and for all Americans — to reject the politics of fear-mongering and get back to a politics of hope. Only then will we be able to create immigration policies that are truly humane and that reflect our history as a nation of immigrants.

**Correction: An earlier version of this editorial noted that Hope Border Institute was a ministry of Catholic Charities. That is not the case.*

A version of this story appeared in the **April 28-May 11, 2023** print issue under the headline: Biden needs to keep promises on immigration.