News

Asylum-seeking migrants' families go under a barbed wire fence while being escorted by a loc

Asylum-seeking migrants' families go under a barbed wire fence while being escorted by a local church group to the location where they turn themselves in to the U.S. Border Patrol, after crossing the Rio Grande river into the United States from Mexico, in Roma, Texas, April 16, 2021. (OSV News photo/Go Nakamura, Reuters)

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July 20, 2023

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Catholic migrant advocates condemned a report alleging inhumane treatment of migrants seeking to cross the border into Texas, including an allegation that the state directed its personnel to withhold water from migrants despite extreme heat.

The Houston Chronicle reported July 17 it obtained a July 3 email this month showing a trooper-medic sharing concerns with a supervisor in the Texas Department of Public Safety over the treatment of migrants at the border in Eagle Pass, Texas. The email suggested that troopers involved in Texas Republican Gov. Greg Abbott's border security initiative, Operation Lone Star, have been given a directive not to give migrants water.

"Due to the extreme heat, the order to not give people water needs to be immediately reversed as well," the trooper wrote, adding, "I believe we have stepped over a line into the inhumane."

Dylan Corbett, executive director of Hope Border Institute, told OSV News July 19 that "what we're seeing is essentially a military occupation of the border by the governor."

"In El Paso, there is an embarrassing spectacle of state police, guardsmen, concertina wire, additional fences and military humvees, all positioned against the most vulnerable," Corbett said. "The strategy of the governor is to cause pain. And this is killing people."

Corbett said that in June alone, 70 people "that we know of died crossing the border."

"Just recently, the bishop had to administer last rites to a teenager who collapsed in the desert and died," he said. "This is what happens with brutal policies of deterrence at the border."

The July 3 email suggested state officials have set "traps" of razor wire-wrapped barrels in parts of the river with high water and low visibility, according to the Chronicle's report. The trooper argued in the email that the wire has increased the risk of drownings by forcing migrants into deeper, more dangerous, parts of the river.

The email said a pregnant woman having a miscarriage was found late last month caught in the wire, describing her as doubled over in pain. A father was found carrying his teenage son after he broke his leg navigating around the wire, while a 4-year-old girl passed out from heat exhaustion after she tried to go through it but was pushed back by members of the Texas National Guard.

CLINIC (the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc.) condemned the allegations in the report, saying they "represent the very worst of the U.S. immigration system, which dehumanizes the vulnerable and desperate people caught within it."

"People of faith and conscience cannot look away from the fact that these actions are done by government employees in our name," Anna Gallagher, CLINIC executive director, said in a July 20 statement to OSV News. "Either we believe that all people bear untouchable dignity, or we don't. Permitting this despicable behavior denies

that truth and rejects the deepest principles of our Catholic faith and our nation's values."

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In a July 18 joint statement with Texas Border Czar Mike Banks, Texas Department of Public Safety Director Steve McCraw, and Texas Adjutant General Major General Thomas Suelzer, Abbott's office said, "No orders or directions have been given under Operation Lone Star that would compromise the lives of those attempting to cross the border illegally."

The statement said Texas's Department of Public Safety and Military Department take steps to "monitor migrants in distress, provide appropriate medical attention when needed, and encourage them to use one of the 29 international bridges along the Texas-Mexico Border where they can safely and legally cross."

However, the statement also argued that the "absence of these tools and strategies" in Texas' approach to the border "including concertina wire that snags clothing -- encourages migrants to make potentially life-threatening and illegal crossings."

Abbott's office stated all personnel "assigned to Operation Lone Star are prepared to detect and respond to any individuals who may need water or medical attention."

Asked about the report at a July 18 press briefing, White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said if the report is true, "it is abhorrent, it is despicable, it is dangerous."

"And we're talking about the bedrock values of who we are as a country," she said.

In a press statement, Domingo Garcia, national president of the League of United Latin American Citizens, said the group "condemns the inhumane treatment of innocent people and denounces the use of razor wire, buoys, and any other barriers that jeopardize the safety of women and children seeking asylum."

"These are Christian refugees, and they deserve to be treated with dignity and respect," he said, adding, "What would Jesus say about such treatment of the most vulnerable in society?"