News

Three men in bright yellow vests address large orange buoys spaced closely in the river

Workers install connected buoys, a measure by Texas authorities in an attempt to deter migrants from crossing the border, in the Rio Grande in Eagle Pass July 24, 2023. The U.S. Department of Justice sues Texas over its floating barriers on the Rio Grande.(OSV News photo/Go Nakamura, Reuters)

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The Justice Department on July 24 sued Texas Gov. Greg Abbott over a floating barrier recently installed on the Rio Grande, part of the Republican governor's latest attempts to stop migrants from crossing into the U.S. from Mexico as part of his "Operation Lone Star" program.

The lawsuit argues the approximately 1,000-foot line of buoys, each 4 to 6 feet in diameter and strung together, was unlawfully installed, and raises diplomatic, humanitarian and environmental concerns.

The complaint, lodged in U.S. District Court in the Western District of Texas, seeks the removal of the line, which was installed between the border cities of Eagle Pass, Texas, and Piedras Negras, Mexico.

"We allege that Texas has flouted federal law by installing a barrier in the Rio Grande without obtaining the required federal authorization," Associate Attorney General Vanita Gupta said in a statement.

"This floating barrier poses threats to navigation and public safety and presents humanitarian concerns," Gupta said. "Additionally, the presence of the floating barrier has prompted diplomatic protests by Mexico and risks damaging U.S. foreign policy."

Assistant Attorney General Todd Kim of the Justice Department's Environment and Natural Resources Division said in a statement the Rivers and Harbors Act "is clear in prohibiting the placement of any unauthorized barriers or obstructions in the Rio Grande and other navigable waters of the United States."

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"We intend to seek the appropriate legal remedies, including the removal of such obstructions in the Rio Grande," Kim said.

In response to news of the lawsuit, Abbott's office released a July 24 letter the governor wrote to Biden in which Abbott wrote, "If you truly care about human life, you must begin enforcing federal immigration laws."

"By doing so, you can help me stop migrants from wagering their lives in the waters of the Rio Grande River," the letter stated. "You can also help me save Texans, and indeed all Americans, from deadly drugs like fentanyl, cartel violence, and the horrors of human trafficking. To end the risk that migrants will be harmed crossing the border illegally, you must fully enforce the laws of the United States that prohibit illegal immigration between ports of entry. In the meantime, Texas will fully utilize its constitutional authority to deal with the crisis you have caused."

Abbott's administration is facing allegations of inhumane treatment of migrants seeking to cross the border into Texas as part of its Operation Lone Star. A recent report alleged that the state directed its personnel to withhold water from them despite extreme heat, and that state officials have set "traps" of razor wire-wrapped barrels in parts of the river, which in turn have increased the risk of migrants drowning by forcing them into deeper, more dangerous parts.

In response, the Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops stated July 20, "The fact that they (migrants) were born in a place which could not provide these basic human rights does not give anyone the right to treat them inhumanely."

"For decades, the United States' migration policies have failed to address sufficiently the root causes of migration," the conference said. "They have failed to uphold our country's principle to welcome all who seek a life free of tyranny."