News



Asylum-seekers wait on the banks of the Rio Grande in Piedras Negras, Mexico, Sept. 26, 2023, after crossing during their journey through Mexico to Eagle Pass, Texas. U.S President Joe Biden June 4 signed an executive order temporarily shutting down asylum requests. (OSV News/Daniel Becerril, Reuters)

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President Joe Biden June 4 signed an executive order aimed at reducing unauthorized border crossings by asylum-seekers. The move was expected and comes as Biden faces increasing political pressure on the issue of migration in the midst of his reelection bid.

Catholic immigration advocates expressed concern about the impact Biden's order could have on asylum-seekers at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Bishop Mark J. Seitz of El Paso, chairman of the Committee on Migration for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said in a statement that the group is "deeply disturbed by this disregard for fundamental humanitarian protections and U.S. asylum law."

J. Kevin Appleby, senior fellow for policy at the Center for Migration Studies of New York and former director of migration policy for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, told OSV News, "This action will drive desperate asylum-seekers to more remote areas of the border, leading to the loss of life, and strengthen smuggling networks, who will charge enormous sums to get people across the border undetected."

In its announcement, the White House said Biden's order would "bar migrants who cross our Southern border unlawfully from receiving asylum."

The order would temporarily shut down asylum requests once the seven-day average number of daily encounters with noncitizens between official ports of entry is over 2,500. Asylum requests would be reopened once daily encounters dropped below 1,500 — something that has not taken place since July 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The order, however, excludes "unaccompanied children ... from non-contiguous countries" in calculating the number of encounters.

The White House announcement said Biden "believes we must secure our border."

"That is why today, he announced executive actions to bar migrants who cross our Southern border unlawfully from receiving asylum," it said. "These actions will be in effect when high levels of encounters at the Southern Border exceed our ability to deliver timely consequences, as is the case today. They will make it easier for immigration officers to remove those without a lawful basis to remain and reduce the burden on our Border Patrol agents."

The White House also took aim at congressional Republicans for ultimately coming out against a bipartisan border security package previously negotiated by Sens. James Lankford, R-Okla., Chris Murphy, D-Conn., and Kyrsten Sinema, I-Ariz. The legislation failed to advance in February after former President Donald Trump, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, despite his own hard-line stance on immigration policy, argued passing the bill would aid Biden in the November election. It also failed to advance in May when even some of its original negotiators did not support bringing it up for another vote.

That legislation would have implemented strict new migration policies for the U.S.-Mexico border, among other measures. But Catholic migration advocates previously expressed concern about the implications of the legislation, particularly for people seeking asylum.

In its announcement, the White House argued, "We must be clear: this cannot achieve the same results as Congressional action, and it does not provide the critical personnel and funding needed to further secure our Southern border. Congress still must act."

Sister Norma Pimentel of the Missionaries of Jesus, who is the executive director of Brownsville, Texas-based Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley, told OSV News she is concerned about particularly women and children who will be denied asylum because they are often "exposed more to more danger" on the journey to the border.

"They're more exposed to the dangers of human trafficking, and that worries me a lot," she said.

Pimentel added that elected officials should prioritize policies that protect vulnerable people, and Catholics must advocate for humane responses to migration.

"We're not helping them because they're immigrants, we're helping because they're here — they're here and in our communities here at the border," she said. "And there are people suffering and so we have a responsibility before God to respond correctly."

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In his statement, Seitz added, "There is a crisis of conscience at the U.S.-Mexico border."

"When vulnerable families seeking safety and the means for a dignified life are labeled 'invaders' or 'illegals', terms that mask their humanity, we have strayed from the path of righteousness, succumbed to our fear of the 'other', and forsaken the values upon which our nation was founded," he said. "This sentiment in no way violates a country's right and responsibility to maintain its borders and regulate immigration in furtherance of the common good. Nevertheless, as defenders of human life and dignity, which we hold sacred and inviolable from the moment of conception, we cannot accept unjust conditions on the right to migrate for those fleeing life-threatening situations. We especially worry for those compelled by these policies to traverse more treacherous terrain, further endangering their lives and the lives of Border Patrol agents."

Seitz said, "For those concerned about violent gangs, drug smugglers, and human traffickers, we join you in opposing those evildoers. At the same time, we ask: What fate awaits the families who flee for their lives from the same predatory actors, only to be returned to their grasp once they reach our borders?"

"Imposing arbitrary limits on asylum access and curtailing due process will only empower and embolden those who seek to exploit the most vulnerable. These measures will not sustainably reduce the increased levels of forced migration seen worldwide," he added. "Mindful of challenges faced by American communities and consistent with our longstanding and repeated calls for bipartisan reform of our broken immigration system, we strongly urge the President to reverse course and recommit his administration to policies that respect the human life and dignity of migrants, both within and beyond our borders."

Dylan Corbett, executive director of the Hope Border Institute, said in a statement the Biden administration's "proposed actions are a real step backward in our nation's commitment to human rights and asylum protections as well as a humane and orderly process at the border."

"Political considerations cannot override the moral imperative to offer protection to those fleeing persecution and violence," Corbett said. "Instead, we can choose to lead with compassion, justice and respect for human dignity."

Appleby told OSV News the June 4 executive action "also likely violates domestic and international law and will certainly be challenged in the courts."

Anna Gallagher, executive director at Catholic Legal Immigration Network Inc., or CLINIC, said in a statement the organization was "appalled that the United States is abandoning its commitment to humanitarian protection and national and international asylum law."

"This move to drastically reduce asylum access is dangerous, immoral, and illegal," Gallagher said.

"The policy will strip countless migrants of their legal right to seek asylum with due process, and as a result many lives will be endangered and lost, and families separated," she said.

The American Civil Liberties Union indicated it intends to sue over the order, writing on X, formerly Twitter, "We will be challenging this order in court."

Appleby noted the order "comes at a peculiar time, as arrivals at the border have gone down significantly."

U.S. officials have observed a dip in unauthorized border crossings in March and April after a surge the previous year.

"The human and moral costs of the policy will exceed any perceived political gain for President Biden," Appleby said.

A Gallup poll released April 30 found that Americans said the most important problem facing the U.S. is immigration, marking the third consecutive month immigration topped that list, which it said was "the longest stretch for this particular issue in the past 24 years."

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