News



Migrants seeking asylum line up while waiting to be processed after crossing the border Wednesday, June 5, 2024, near San Diego, Calif. (AP/Eugene Garcia)



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Leaders of Catholic organizations helping migrants at the U.S.-Mexico border are denouncing President Joe Biden’s new asylum restrictions as shelter directors brace for its impact on conditions.

"It’s going to cause a lot of pain and confusion," said Dylan Corbett, executive director at the Hope Border Institute, which supports migrants in El Paso, Texas, and Ciudad Juárez, on the Mexican side.

Biden’s measures temporarily block the processing of most asylum claims and will remain in place until two weeks after the seven-day average of migrants crossing the border without legal permission drops below 1,500. (The ban is then reinstated if the seven-day average rises above 2,500 migrants.)

The policy also requires migrants to volunteer that they fled their home countries out of fear, rather than in response to a question from an immigration officer. In the jargon of the border, migrants must "manifest" fear to gain a "credible fear" interview to start the asylum process.

Biden’s order also shortens the time asylum-seekers have to find a lawyer to four hours, from 24. "This is really a draconian step" that will affect asylum case outcomes, Corbett said. "It will essentially run roughshod over the due process rights of migrants at the border."

"If you wanted to manage migration at the border, this wouldn’t be the policy," Corbett said, explaining the policy will be bad for migrants, asylum seekers and border communities, as well as, likely, for border-enforcement agencies.

Leaning into enforcement "does nothing to effectively manage migration or mitigate migration," Corbett said. "It’s not a winning strategy."

The Rev. Francisco Bueno, director of Casa del Migrante in Ciudad Juárez, said he has held off communicating about the executive order with migrants at his shelter until he has a better idea of how it will play out, a process that usually takes two weeks, in his experience. In the past, policy changes "have generated some chaos" among migrants, so he and his team have agreed to wait to better understand how the unpredictable variables will shake out in order to manage their stress.

In the meantime, he said, "it’s a tense calm."

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Bueno, who also is responsible for the human mobility ministry in the Diocese of Ciudad Juárez, said, "Everything that happens in the United States impacts the southern border of the U.S. and the northern border of Mexico," Bueno said. “We always have to be at the ready.”

"Sometimes, it’s an exhaustion to be constantly re-adapting," said Bueno, adding that he and his team learn to endure from migrants.

Corbett said that, while he has already heard of migrants being turned back, he has yet to personally see the number of arrivals change near El Paso. The federal government, he said, still has logistical challenges to work through to implement the policy.

"It is very difficult for Border Patrol to summarily remove people," Corbett said. "We still don’t have a complete picture of how it’s going to work."

Corbett also expects that the courts may intervene over the executive order, as they did with former President Donald Trump’s restrictions on the right to seek asylum.



A migrant gestures to Texas National Guard members standing behind razor wire on the bank of the Rio Grande, seen from Matamoros, Mexico, May 11, 2023. (AP/Fernando Llano)

The Rev. Pat Murphy, a member of the Scalabrinian Missionaries, informed the migrants at the Scalabrinian Casa del Migrante in Tijuana, Mexico, near San Diego, about the executive order at the shelter’s weekly Mass Wednesday night. "The people here don’t even have an idea of what’s happening," he said. "They were stunned."

Murphy, the director of the shelter, attended a meeting the same day with shelter leaders and Mexican officials to discuss how they would handle large numbers of migrants stuck on the Mexican side of the border.

The Tijuana shelter provides childcare and helps parents find work in Tijuana as they wait for asylum appointments. Because of that, Murphy said that it can only serve 140 people really well. "We know our limits," he said.

Murphy expressed pessimism that the Mexican government would keep its promises to humanely deal with the situation if large numbers of migrants begin to be turned back from the border, especially as President Andrés Manuel López Obrador nears the end of his term in September.

Corbett said that the situation for migrants is already dire. In Texas, where Gov. Greg Abbott, a Catholic, has deployed the Texas National Guard and the Department of Public Safety as part of a broader anti-migrant campaign, the Hope Border Institute's medical clinic has been treating migrants who have been harmed by concertina wire, rubber bullets and pepper balls.

Corbett said he recently met a migrant mother who got caught in the concertina wire and was pushed back to Mexico by the National Guard, separating her from her husband and child, who reached the U.S.

At San Diego, Murphy said, about 80% of the migrants crossing are Mexican, a group that seems to disproportionately get fewer asylum appointments through the CBP One app. "We have a number of people come every day escaping the violence of Guerrero and Michoacán," where the drug cartels are powerful, he said.

More than one Catholic working on migration identified the motivation for the new policy as political. "It's the administration sending a message ahead of the elections that they want to adopt a hardline policy at the border,"said Corbett.

Murphy said that Biden, a Catholic, is recycling former President Donald Trump's policies. "It's so blatantly political that he's doing this just for votes," Murphy said. "He's again abandoning the people that he promised to help."

Bueno, whose shelter can serve up to 600, said he understands why immigration is a major issue in the United States' November election, but said, "we have to go towards the root. Much of the people's movement is because of the needs that they experience in their countries."

What the border needs, Murphy said, is to "overhaul immigration reform," but he also highlighted a lack of Catholic formation about immigration. "By and large, the priests don't touch this subject," he said, adding that priests are afraid that speaking on immigration will affect the collection plate.

"If you don't know how to talk about it, invite someone to your parish who can talk about it," Murphy advised. "The bottom line is to always treat immigrants as human

beings."