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Migrant girls play at the Casa del Migrante shelter in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, Feb. 22, 2025. (OSV News/Reuters/Jose Luis Gonzalez)



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U.S. President Donald Trump's new policies concerning unauthorized immigrants and mass deportation operations have caught some Latin American countries off guard, prompting them to improvise ways to deal with the unexpected arrival of high numbers of those being deported.

The Mexican bishops have called for national unity in face of the new administration's policies.

Speaking about the policy of the new U.S. administration, the bishops affirmed: "We can't help but consider it worrying."

In a Feb. 24 statement, they said that given the series of measures Trump "has been taking since the first day of his (administration), it is clear that he aims to pressure our country to achieve very concrete goals in his government plans: combat the activity of organized crime dedicated to drug trafficking, tackle the issue of migration and overcome the disadvantages in economic relations between the two countries that, according to their criteria, are unfavorable for North America."

The bishops praised the first female president of Mexico, Claudia Sheinbaum, for "her major openness to dialogue," and said she "has the opportunity to make a difference from her feminine gaze and sensitivity."

The bishops said that in face of challenges in international politics, "Mexicans must unite to defend the interior of our country, our identity, our freedom, our values, our human and constitutional rights, our institutions and our security, through inclusive governmental strategies that take into account different political forces, organized civil society, religious associations and civic participation at large."

Meanwhile in the region, churches struggled to support migrants in face of what Catholic experts called continued disrespect of basic human rights. Over the course of February, meetings of Catholic groups that work with immigrants and refugees were organized in order to allow its members to reflect on new strategies

as planes with deported immigrants from several countries began arriving at Panama and Costa Rica.

According to Roy Arias, coordinator of borders at the Jesuit Migrants Service, who works on the border between Costa Rica and Panama, just during the week of Feb. 16-23, two such planes brought dozens of deported immigrants who will be sent back to their nations: China, Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan.

Arias described those flights as bringing dozens of kids, corresponding up to half of the total number of passengers, and even pregnant women. Passengers had their hands tied and were escorted by U.S. agents.

He said these groups are put in buses and travel 250 miles to the southern border, where they remain under custody at a center described as a governmental unit that is said to have substandard conditions.

"We're worried about their right to international protection. There's no way to know if it's being guaranteed or not at this point," Arias told OSV News.

He added that "probably many of such people have had their rights violated." For Christians, it's a duty to fight for those people and their rights, he said.

On Feb. 19, Iranian immigrant Artemis Ghasemzadeh, who was deported from the U.S. to Panama, gave an interview to a French news outlet France 24, in which she described a number of human rights violations.

Ghasemzadeh said that the U.S. agents confiscated the phones of most deportees, so she was the only one able to tell their stories. Her group was being kept at a hotel in Panama City. All of them were forbidden to leave the building and could only talk one to one another during meals in the hotel's restaurant. Agents kept monitoring them all the time.

Ghasemzadeh was anxious because she and other 11 Iranians are Christian converts and feared being deported to Iran. In their native country, abandoning Islam is a crime.

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"Before I crossed the border from Mexico about a month ago, I had heard President-elect Trump say he would tighten deportation measures. But we thought he meant criminals, not people who are genuinely in danger and have done nothing wrong," she told France 24.

"Everyone, really everyone, has asked me to say please do not deport us to our country of origin, we are in danger there," she said, saying she can live in any other country "that truly upholds human rights."

"Some churches in the U.S. have reached out to support us, but so far, nothing has changed. We are stuck in a deep state of uncertainty," she said.

"Those situations are worrisome. The government generalizes the cases of the deportees, saying those people are all criminals," Rafael Lara, a member of Red Clamor in Panama, told OSV News. The organization is a Latin American and Caribbean network working with migrants and refugees and working to prevent human trafficking.

In January, the coordinators of Red Clamor throughout Latin America promoted an online meeting with at least 100 members and discussed ways to deal with the new reality. One of the decisions was to increase the dialogues and pressure on institutions and governments in the region.

"That's what we've been doing. We've been calling our government to respect the basic rights of the deportees," he said.

Lara recalled that Panama was formed by enslaved people from Africa and by workers who came from several parts of the globe to build the canal. No immigrants should be disrespected in such a country, he said.

"We're very worried about the fact that the Panamanian government has put its migratory policies in the hands of the United States. That's a flagrant attack to our sovereignty," Lara added.

With the flights coming in regularly, he said, the government doesn't really have a strategy.

"There's no information on the deportation of such groups to their native countries and where they will stay till then. The government is improvising," he said.

Auxiliary Bishop Daniel Blanco of San José, Costa Rica, heads the Social Pastoral Observatory of Human Mobility of Mesoamerica and the Caribbean, known as OSMECA, which met Feb. 11-13 to debate ways to deal with the new scenario. He said that the organization's main concern is to continue to accompany immigrants and deportees.

"At times," Blanco told OSV News, "we have been facing difficulties to visit some facilities where immigrants and deportees are maintained."

He emphasized that law must be respected and that immigrants and deportees cannot be treated as criminals.

"They must not be handcuffed and chained. They must have the right to demand refuge at any time. It looks like that right is not being respected," Blanco said.

Organizations such as Red Clamor and OSMECA have also been discussing ways to deal with the financial crisis provoked by the Trump administration, who cut the U.S. help to agencies that work with immigrants, including the American bishops' refugee settlement program.

"As always, we count on divine providence to help us," Blanco said.

Central American nations have already been noticing a large movement of immigrants who recently left the United States and are now heading to their original countries, something that also requires support from humanitarian organizations. Costa Rica and Panama expect up to 10,000 immigrants crossing their borders in the near future.

This story appears in the **Trump's Second Term** feature series. View the full series.