

International

New massive migrant caravan enters Mexico, legally or not

Migrants took to make-shift rafts to cross the Suchiate River

CIUDAD HIDALGO: Hundreds of Central Americans entered Mexico illegally as the latest migrant caravan trying to reach the United States began crossing the Mexican-Guatemalan border en masse Friday. Not content to wait five days for the humanitarian visas Mexico is offering them, several hundred migrants took to make-shift rafts to cross the Suchiate River, which forms the frontier, or snuck across the loosely guarded border bridge overnight, AFP correspondents said.

Their advance could trigger a new Twitter firestorm from US President Donald Trump, who has urged Mexico to halt such caravans, and who tweeted early Friday: "Another big Caravan heading our way. Very hard to stop without a Wall!" Hundreds more of the 2,000 migrants in the caravan gathered patiently on the border bridge, trickling into Mexico as the authorities processed them. The authorities will set up checkpoints in southern Mexico to make migrants who snuck into the country register for visas, said Alejandro Encinas, under-secretary for migration. "We are informing all of them that they must comply with our country's laws," he said.

Fuel for wall debate

Caravans of migrants seeking safety in numbers have taken center stage in the raging debate in the United States over Trump's proposed border wall, which has led to a government shutdown that is now the longest in history. The latest caravan is smaller than the one that swelled to 7,000 migrants late last year, leading Trump to warn of an "invasion" by "hardened criminals" and send thousands of troops to the US-Mexican border.

Mexican authorities are urging the migrants to arrive legally and offering expedited "visitor cards" that let them work and access basic health care in Mexico. So far, 969 migrants from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua have registered

under the program, receiving bracelets that they can exchange for visitor cards in five days. But hundreds more ignored the offer. "A lot of us aren't interested in waiting five days. Our goal is to reach the United States," said Alma Mendoza, a nurse and single mother making the trip with her three children. "We don't have food, much less money. We want to reach our destination," she told AFP. Other migrants said they would consider staying in Mexico. "My goal is to reach the United States, but if I can't I'll stay in Mexico and work. They're giving us an opportunity," said Christian Medrano, 33, an industrial technician.

Mexico meanwhile announced a fresh policy under which Central Americans fleeing poverty and violence with the intention of reaching the United States may remain in Mexico for a year. The decision "recognizes the importance of our relationship with Central America," especially El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, said Tonatiuh Guillen, commissioner of the Mexican National Institute of Migration.

'AMLO' walking fine line

The caravan set out Tuesday from San Pedro Sula, in northwestern Honduras, and has grown along the way. The migrants are mostly fleeing poverty and crime in Central America's "Northern Triangle" of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Brutal street gangs have made the three countries among the most violent in the world.

Another caravan of about 200 migrants set out Wednesday from El Salvador and is now in southern Mexico, possibly poised to join up with the first. Many of the migrants are traveling in families, often with small children. They have covered about 700 kilometers (435 miles) so far, and have roughly 4,000 kms to go if they take the same route as the last caravan, to Tijuana, across from San Diego, California. When that caravan reached Mexico in October, the authorities tried to stop it with riot police. But the migrants



CIUDAD TECUN UMAN: Honduran migrants heading to the United States with a second caravan reach the town of Ciudad Tecun Uman, Guatemala along the border with Mexico. —AFP

stormed in anyway, tearing down border fences and crossing the river illegally when police refused to let them through.

Since then, Mexico has gotten a new government, led by President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, an anti-establishment leftist. "AMLO," as the new president is widely known, has promised to treat migrants more humanely than previous administrations. But he has also sought to stay on Trump's good side with talk

of reducing migrant flows. The October caravan largely dispersed after reaching Tijuana.

US Border Patrol agents fought back two attempts by the migrants to rush the border, firing tear gas to disperse them. Some have since found work in Mexico, some crossed the border and filed asylum claims, and many returned home. About 400 remain in a shelter set up for them in Tijuana that is slated to be closed on Wednesday. —AFP

Trump-Pelosi rancor over Democrat's scrapped trip

WASHINGTON: US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi on Friday excoriated her political nemesis, President Donald Trump, for "outing" her commercial trip to Afghanistan after he barred her from using a military aircraft, forcing her to scrap it entirely over security concerns. The brawl between the no-nonsense Republican leader and the take-no-prisoners Democrat is the latest round in their showdown, which could take a new turn with Trump announcing he will be making a "major announcement" Saturday regarding the partial government shutdown and the situation on the US-Mexico border.

The federal government has been shuttered for four weeks over Trump's insistence that a wider federal budget measure include billions of dollars for a border wall — and Pelosi's refusal to go along. Their spat spilled into the diplomatic arena Thursday when, after Pelosi suggested Trump postpone his State of the Union address until government reopens, the president grounded the military plane set to transport her delegation. Pelosi accused Trump of being "very irresponsible" in breaching security protocol.

"We had a report from Afghanistan that the president outing our trip had

made the scene on the ground much more dangerous because it's just a signal to the bad actors that we're coming," she told reporters. The administration strongly denies that it "leaked" any plans about the trip to a war zone. "The idea we would leak anything that would put the safety and security of any American at risk is a flat-out lie," a senior White House official said.

Tit-for-tat

The US government shutdown, which has left about 800,000 federal workers without a paycheck, is now the longest in the country's history — and there is no sign of a compromise. The Office of Management and Budget reportedly issued a memorandum saying that "under no circumstance during a government shutdown" can a congressional delegation use government aircraft for travel.

However, Republican Representative Lee Zeldin led a delegation to Iraq and other countries since the shutdown began. With the two sides showing no sign of a breakthrough, some cash-strapped federal workers — many working without pay, others forced to stay home — are tapping life savings, selling possessions or taking advantage of food pantries to help make ends meet. Amid the bickering, a former president called for a truce.

"It's time for leaders on both sides to put politics aside, come together, and end this shutdown," George W Bush said on Instagram, where a photograph shows him handing pizzas to members of his Secret Service detail who are protecting him without pay. Pelosi's office sounded off on the administration's han-



WASHINGTONDC: US Speaker of the House Rep. Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) speaks during a weekly news conference. —AFP

dling of her trip, which had not been announced for security reasons. The State Department released an updated assessment stressing that Trump's announcement of the Pelosi travel "had significantly increased the danger to the delegation and to the troops," her spokesman Drew Hammill said.

"This morning, we learned that the administration had leaked the commercial travel plans as well." Democratic lawmakers have expressed outrage. "Disclosing ANY Members' travel into a war zone is disgraceful and dangerous," tweeted congresswoman Jan Schakowsky, who has traveled to Afghanistan and Iraq as a lawmaker. Republicans have spoken out too,

including Senator Rob Portman who criticized the Pelosi-Trump back and forth. "They're both making it more difficult, not easier, for us to find a resolution to this impasse," he said. Trump harangued Pelosi on Twitter, asking why she and other Democrats would leave the country "on a seven day excursion when 800,000 great people are not getting paid." His re-election campaign team then released a tongue-in-cheek shutdown-related campaign fundraising request. For a contribution of \$20.20, a reference to the next election year, the campaign told supporters it would send a fake red brick to Pelosi and Democratic Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer — to build a wall. —AFP

Indigenous people protest for their rights in Washington

WASHINGTON: Hundreds of members of indigenous communities protested in Washington on Friday, denouncing injustices they are facing and demanding that their rights be respected. They gathered on Washington's snowy National Mall, some wearing traditional dress, carrying signs with messages including: "Justice For Missing Murdered Indigenous Women" and "We Will Not Be Silenced."

"Currently, many indigenous people are victims of voter suppression, divided families by walls and borders, an environmental holocaust, sex and human trafficking, and police/military brutality with little or no resources and awareness of this injustice," a post on the Indigenous People's March Facebook page said.

"I came here for the future generations of my people. I came here for environmental injustices that are happening on our reservations. Our waters are being polluted. Nothing is being done," said Malia Simon, a

20-year-old member of the Navajo tribe, which is located in four southwestern US states. Indigenous communities have also denounced restrictions on their freedom of movement and boundaries they did not draw. "The border was created by settlers, it's not something that we recognize. Indigenous people migrate North to South, since we've been here, since the beginning of time," said Joey Morales, a member of the Pijao people of Colombia.

In the United States, Native Americans are among the poorest communities and have particularly suffered during the partial closure of the federal government, which has now stretched on for nearly a month. Often they are torn between living on reservations — which try to preserve group culture and languages — and life in cities elsewhere. "A lot of people aren't getting their (US) benefits, aren't getting their money, aren't getting a lot of money for grants," said Cante Heart, a Winnebago tribe member.

Several tribes are also locked in a struggle with Canadian and US authorities over the route of an oil pipeline crossing their reservations. Jack Gifted by Eagles noted that the Dakota Access pipeline "has already leaked," and could do so again. US President Donald Trump suffered a setback in December when a judge suspended construction of the giant Keystone XL pipeline to connect Canadian oilfields to



WASHINGTON DC: An activist demonstrates in the Lincoln Memorial during the Indigenous People's March on the National Mall. —AFP

Gulf of Mexico refineries. Vanessa Pastrana, a native of Puerto Rico and the Taino people, who lived in the Caribbean before being virtually wiped out, said that

there is a need to "fight back and be strong." "These marches are good but you got to put work behind these marches," Pastrana said. —AFP

Zimbabwe police erect road blocks to hunt protesters

HARARE: Zimbabwe police manned checkpoints on many main roads yesterday, searching vehicles for protesters allegedly involved in recent anti-government demonstrations. A crackdown by security forces has been fiercely criticised by the UN human rights office, with allegations of shootings, beatings and abductions of opposition figures, activists and ordinary residents.

Police roadblocks were a notorious feature of daily life under former president Robert Mugabe. But they largely disappeared after he was ousted by the military in November 2017 and succeeded by his former deputy Emmerson Mnangagwa. "We want to tell members of the public that... we have already set up security checkpoints where police officers and other security institutions will be checking," police spokeswoman Charity Charamba told Saturday's state-owned Herald newspaper.

She said the checkpoints were to catch suspected looters and recover property stolen during protests that erupted after Mnangagwa last weekend announced a 150-percent increase in petrol prices. The Herald said 700 people had been arrested after the violent protests, which it blamed on the opposition MDC party and trade unions.

Police armed with assault rifles

Police checkpoints were in action yesterday in the capital Harare and the second city Bulawayo, AFP reporters witnessed. In Bulawayo, police officers armed with assault rifles manned roadblocks on every major route, conducting "stop and search" operations. In both cities, customers seeking to stock up on basic goods tentatively returned to shops that opened for the first time since the protests started on Monday.

Long queues formed to buy bread and petrol, which are both in short supply due to Zimbabwe's long-burning economic crisis. "Nothing has changed after the fuel price increase," said one motorist in a queue who identified himself only as Sonny. Social media has been blocked by the government in an apparent attempt to suppress information about the security operation and alleged abuses.

The Zimbabwe Human Rights NGO Forum said it had recorded at least 12 deaths, 78 gunshot injuries and more than 240 incidents of assault and torture. The United Nations human rights office on Friday urged Harare to "stop the crackdown", voicing alarm over the security forces' "excessive use of force" which included reports of them using live ammunition. And it called on Zimbabwe's government "to find ways of engaging with the population about their legitimate grievances". —AFP