

Catholics weigh in on closing southern border

In moves criticized by Catholic immigration advocates as short-sighted and counterproductive, President Donald Trump in recent weeks has threatened to close the United States' border with Mexico and cut direct aid to Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala.

The president continued to ratchet up his administration's hardline approach toward immigration enforcement. After visiting the southern border in California on April 5, the president announced he was deploying 750 border agents to deal with the recent increase in illegal migration.

"It's a colossal surge, and it's overwhelming our immigration system, and we can't let that happen," Trump said. "We can't take you anymore. ... Our country is full."

Immigration experts told Our Sunday Visitor that the president's proposals would wreak economic havoc, disrupt border communities and exacerbate conditions in Central America's Northern Triangle that prompt people to seek asylum in the United States.

Examining root problems

"We cannot continue to look at this issue from an enforcement-only lens that just focuses on the United States," said Ashley Feasley, the director of migration policy and public affairs at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Feasley told OSV that the bishops "have long advocated" for comprehensive immigration reform that examines the root causes of why so many Central Americans are willing to risk a dangerous journey through the region to reach the United States' southern border.

“We know that aid focused on a country’s infrastructure, on educational and employment initiatives is helpful, improves the livelihoods of people there, and is a vital piece of any sort of comprehensive immigration plan,” Feasley said.

Donald Kerwin, the executive director of the Center for Migration Studies, a Scalabrinian think tank, told OSV that the president’s threats to close the border and cut direct aid to the Northern Triangle countries sound more like “temper tantrums” than actual policy ideas.

“Democracy in the region is so fragile, the poverty so intense, the violence so high; those are the conditions you need to address first,” said Kerwin, who also disagreed with the president’s characterization of illegal immigration at the border as a crisis.

“I think it’s a crisis of bad policy,” Kerwin said. “There is a crisis in the Northern Triangle states. There is a crisis in humanitarian protection in our hemisphere and our world. There is a crisis in responsibility-sharing for these types of situations. There is a crisis among people who are driven to seek haven, not just in the United States but elsewhere in the region.”

Larger consequences

A week before visiting the southern border, Trump said his administration was at a “breaking point” as border agents continued to process asylum claims amid a continual influx of migrants.

In February, the U.S. Border Patrol said it apprehended more than 66,000 migrants without legal documents, the highest monthly total since March 2009. Federal immigration officials told media outlets that the numbers rose higher last month.

“We can never allow open borders!” the president tweeted on April 6, a day before Kirstjen Nielsen resigned as homeland

security secretary. The president reportedly had been displeased with Nielsen for not doing enough to stop illegal migration.

While illegal migration is not as high as it was in the early 2000s, when mostly single Mexican men were crossing the border, agents in the last few years have seen increases in unaccompanied minors and entire families fleeing violence in Central America.

“The vast majority of these people coming to the United States are presenting themselves to the Border Patrol and saying, ‘I’m here. I’m scared. Please help me,’” said Melissa Lopez, the executive director of Diocesan Migrant and Refugee Services in El Paso, Texas.

Lopez told OSV that shutting the border would also “affect everybody” who lives and works in the border community that straddles El Paso and Ciudad Juárez in Mexico.

“Not only would asylum seekers not be able to enter and seek asylum, but lawful permanent residents wouldn’t be able to come back and forth either, and neither would United States citizens,” Lopez said. “It would have a real chilling effect on our local economy, and I have no doubt on the national economy as well.”

Humanitarian concerns

On April 1, Nielsen also had ordered an expansion of the administration’s “Migrant Protection Protocols,” a policy that forces non-Mexican asylum seekers to wait in Mexico while their asylum cases are pending in the United States.

The Catholic bishops along the border have criticized that policy. In a joint statement released on March 4, the bishops in Texas and Northern Mexico said the policy makes it difficult for asylum seekers to attain legal representation and deprives them of the support of family members in the

United States.

“It raises large humanitarian and social service concerns given that some of the places where people are waiting are not safe,” said Feasley, of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

In the El Paso immigration corridor, asylum seekers are forced to stay in Ciudad Juárez, a Mexican city of 1.3 million people scarred by cartel violence. During its most dangerous period earlier this decade, more than 3,000 people were killed in a given year.

“Juarez is not quite as dangerous as it used to be, but it’s still not the safest city,” Lopez said. “So having people who are already vulnerable living in what is not a real safe community is extremely concerning.”

While the Mexican government has worked to improve its asylum humanitarian immigration system, Feasley said the country still lacks the capacity to handle the flow of migrants and integrate them into local communities.

“Those who are enrolled in this program don’t have the right to work in Mexico. They don’t have the freedom of mobility,” Feasley said. “So how exactly are they to support themselves when we see them having to wait weeks, in some cases months, for their U.S. immigration court proceedings?”

Tunnel vision

Trump on March 30 also ordered the U.S. State Department to slash more than \$450 million in aid to El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras on grounds that those countries had not done enough to deter illegal immigration.

“If they’re really hoping to stop undocumented immigration to the United States, cutting off aid that works on the very root causes of that migration is just the completely wrong thing to

do,” said Kay Andrade Eekhoff, Catholic Relief Services’ regional adviser for youth employability in El Salvador.

Eekhoff told OSV that aid money from the United States funds employment and violence-prevention initiatives, drought-intervention programs and anti-corruption measures. She said those programs help young people who otherwise might see migration as an option.

“A lot of people feel like their backs are against the wall and they don’t have any alternatives,” said Eekhoff, who added that people in El Salvador are “very attuned” to the president’s immigration rhetoric.

“However, if you’re living in a neighborhood that can be described metaphorically as a dark, dangerous dead-end alley without seeing any way out for yourself, and you know that migration is a dark dangerous tunnel, it’s a tunnel nonetheless with a pin prick of light at the end,” Eekhoff said. “That’s what often makes a big difference for these folks.”

Brian Fraga is a contributing editor for Our Sunday Visitor.