

As U.S. Speeds the Path to Deportation, Distress Fills New Family Detention Centers

By JULIA PRESTON

AUG. 5, 2014

After declaring the surge of Central American migrants crossing the border a humanitarian crisis, the Obama administration has shifted sharply to a strategy of deterrence, moving families to isolated facilities and placing them on a fast track for deportation to send a blunt message back home that those caught entering illegally will not be permitted to stay.

In a far corner of the New Mexico desert, in the town of Artesia, more than 600 women and children are being held in an emergency detention center that [opened in late June](#). On Friday, officials began filling up [a new center in Karnes City, Tex.](#), for up to 532 adults and children, and they are adding beds to a center for families in Pennsylvania that now holds about 95 people.

Most of the debate over the illegal influx has centered on about 57,000 unaccompanied minors apprehended since October. But the number of minors with parents has increased even faster, nearly tripling to more than 22,000 so far this year from about 8,500 in all of 2013, according to the Pew Research Center. More than 40,000 adults and their children — an unprecedented number — were caught along the southwest border, according to the Department of Homeland Security.

Until recently, most families were released to remain in the United States while their deportation cases moved slowly through the courts. But [that policy fueled rumors](#) reaching Central America that if parents arrived with young children, they would be given permits to stay. To stop such talk, officials said, they are moving swiftly to expand family detention.

“Our borders are not open to illegal immigration,” said the Homeland Security secretary, Jeh Johnson, emphasizing his point when the Karnes City center started up last week.

The migrants in Artesia were apprehended in South Texas, then moved more than 700 miles to the hastily arranged barracks behind the walls of a law enforcement training campus. Homeland Security officials said the plan is for them to be held for no more than 10 days before being sent on flights back home.

But the administration’s plan has been complicated by the assertions of many migrants who say they are frightened of being sent back into deadly gang violence, setting off required reviews to determine if they have valid asylum claims. Some migrants have refused to sign travel documents required for deportations. At least two women and their children in Artesia were taken off deportation flights on the tarmac after they insisted they would face harm at home, according to legal advocates who visited the center.

“They told me I was certain to be deported, but I don’t want to go back there,” Katy Serrano, 22, a Salvadoran mother with a 15-month-old, said in a hurried cellphone interview from the detention center, where telephone communications are limited. “All my family is here, and back there is only a gang that said they would hurt my son.”

At the end of July, 283 women and 344 minors were in Artesia, including dozens of infants and toddlers, almost all from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. The administration is making it difficult for migrants to press asylum claims and is denying bond to anyone, including children, who has qualified legally for release, according to lawyers and social workers.

Five immigration officers based in the center are interviewing migrants to assess their fears of persecution, and in a makeshift courtroom immigration judges far away are hearing asylum cases via video conferencing. But lawyers who have made the long drive to Artesia, which is 240 miles from Albuquerque and 200 miles from El Paso, have discovered that there was no protocol to let them in and no means to file even basic court documents.

“They just set up this big deportation mill in the middle of nowhere,” said Olsi Vrapic, an immigration lawyer based in Albuquerque. One woman he was assisting had her asylum claim swiftly denied by a judge while an associate from his office was standing outside the center, waiting to be let in.

In the Artesia center’s first month, 209 migrants were deported, officials said. The pace of deportations would have been faster, but nearly two-thirds of the mothers expressed fears that they would face violence back home and have been held for asylum reviews, officials and legal advocates said. Lawyers who have interviewed migrants in Artesia say many more have viable claims than Central Americans who came in the past.

With only weeks to organize the detention center, immigration enforcement officials scrambled to create a family-oriented space, with small bunk rooms for mothers and their children, high chairs in the cafeteria and a playroom with toys. Detainees receive medical screenings and vaccinations when they arrive, officials said. One child who came down with chickenpox last week was quickly quarantined while other detainees were vaccinated and deportations were temporarily halted.

But the center is not set up to hold young children for a long time. Ms. Serrano said her son, Mateo, had fallen ill repeatedly during four weeks in Artesia, including a cough and vomiting that had required an emergency trip to a nearby hospital. On Saturday, his fever spiked again. Officials have reiterated that she is scheduled for deportation and declined to release her and her child.

“They don’t have the ability to care for these small children,” said Bryan Johnson, a lawyer for Ms. Serrano, who added that he was struggling to communicate with her from his offices in Bay Shore, N.Y., because there are no landline phones in the center. “They are putting these babies at risk to deter future people from coming.”

After years of litigation over poor conditions, the Obama administration [closed its last big family detention center](#) in 2009, the T. Don Hutto center in Texas.

Peter Boogaard, a Homeland Security spokesman, said Artesia and the other new family centers would “ensure more timely and effective removals” of adults with children “that comply with our legal and international obligations.”

Families in Artesia face an uphill fight to avoid deportation. Lisa Brodyaga, a lawyer based in the Rio Grande Valley, is representing a Salvadoran woman, detained with her 11-year-old daughter, whose police officer husband has refused to join forces with criminal gangs. The woman, whom Ms. Brodyaga identified only as O. to protect her privacy, had given a detailed account of her flight from gang members who camped out on the roof of her house and harassed her family in the food store, threatening to assault “that which you hold most dear” — her daughter.

With space tight at the center, asylum officers interviewed the woman and her daughter together, Ms. Brodyaga said, and then ruled that their fears were not credible.

“It’s rough having your 11-year-old daughter present when you are explaining that she is the one who could be raped and killed if you were sent back,” Ms. Brodyaga said, adding that the woman is still fighting her deportation.

The few migrants who have qualified for release have been told that they would not be allowed to post bond. According to court documents, government prosecutors argued that releasing any detainees from Artesia “further encourages mass migration” and would create “significant adverse national security consequences.”

Laura Lichter, a former president of the American Immigration Lawyers Association who helped mobilize a corps of lawyers to head to Artesia, said immigration officials appeared to be going through the motions of legal review. “The perception,” she said, “is that people come there to get deported.”

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/06/us/seeking-to-stop-migrants-from-risking-trip-us-speeds-the-path-to-deportation-for-families.html>