

Flow of child immigrants slows along Texas border

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McALLEN, Texas (AP) — Far fewer unaccompanied immigrant children are crossing the Texas-Mexico border, allowing the federal government to close the temporary shelters that it hurriedly opened to handle the surge, authorities say.

The Department of Homeland Security released data Thursday showing that about 5,500 unaccompanied children were arrested in July, barely half the number in May and June and the fewest children arrested in a month since February. Similarly, arrests of parents with children dropped by more than half last month, to just over 7,400.

DHS Secretary Jeh Johnson welcomed the decline but said the current numbers are still much higher than in previous years.

"We continue to have much work to do to address this issue, and our message continues to be clear — 'Our border is not open to illegal migration,'" Johnson said in a statement.

Arrests in South Texas have fallen in recent weeks to about 100 per day, down from 300 or more in June, according to the Border Patrol.

The decline could be the result of searing summer temperatures or a messaging campaign in both the U.S. and the migrants' home countries that stresses the dangers of the journey and warns them they will not be allowed to stay. The government has reduced the removal time for many adults traveling alone from 33 days to about four days, Johnson said.

Officials on the border are careful not to suggest that the crisis has passed. When temperatures subside, they say, children from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador could be back in greater numbers.

The White House has shied away from taking credit for the decrease, which gives the administration more time to deal with the crush of immigrants who have already arrived, many drawn here by persistent rumors that once across the border, they will be allowed to stay.

The slowdown also seems likely to reduce the urgency for Congress to act after adjourning last week without a deal to give President Barack Obama any of the money he's asked for to handle the influx. If the slower pace holds, Congress may have little impetus to return to the issue when lawmakers reconvene after Labor Day.

The falling numbers could cause the border crisis to recede somewhat from public view, offering Obama extra space to curb deportations for other segments of the immigrant population, a step he's indicated he plans to take around the end of summer.

This week, the federal agency charged with housing the children announced it would soon suspend operations at three temporary shelters with a total of about 3,000 beds. Government officials said the existing network of federally contracted shelters would suffice, at least for now. The shelters could reopen later, if needed.

From October to July, 63,000 unaccompanied children entered the U.S. illegally, double the number from the same period a year earlier. Another 63,000 families — mothers or fathers with young children — were arrested during that period, and they remain a presence in shelters across the Rio Grande in Mexico.

Total apprehensions — adults and juveniles — in the Rio Grande Valley were 24,500 in July. That was down from about 38,000 in June but still well above the 15,000 in July 2013, according to the Border Patrol.

The state-run children's shelter in Reynosa, Mexico, just across the border from McAllen, has not received a Central American child yet in August, said coordinator Jose Guadalupe Villegas Garcia. The shelter had been receiving 10 to 12 kids from those countries per week in early July, but that rate began slowing around the middle of the month, he said.

At the nearby religiously affiliated Senda de Vida shelter, Eneyda Alvarez, a 28-year-old mother of three watched her 8-year-old son, Antony, kick a soccer ball around the courtyard. Scars from where her husband viciously beat her with a cable showed like tan stripes on Alvarez's dark skin.

When she heard her husband had told his brother to douse the family's house in gasoline and set it ablaze, she sold all their possessions, left two kids with an aunt and headed north with Antony and her mom.

The family made it to the northern Mexican border state of Tamaulipas, but armed men took Alvarez and Antony off a bus in Tampico about six hours south of the border. They held the pair for three days, first in a warehouse with about 200 immigrants, where Alvarez said she saw people with appendages cut off, and later in a two-story house with 18 others.

The men extorted \$1,000 from her aunt in Virginia, then threatened to cut off one of Alvarez's fingers if she didn't come up with another \$5,000.

Mexican Marines raided the house, finally ending their nightmare. A couple days later, she reunited with her mother at the shelter in Reynosa. She says she cannot return to Honduras because her husband could kill her.

When she left Honduras in late July, she was under the impression the Border Patrol was still releasing mothers traveling with young children because a neighbor had just made it. "Then, I said, I'm going to go."

Hector Joaquin Silva de Luna, a pastor who runs the shelter, said it's been two weeks since any unaccompanied children arrived, but the number of families at the shelter has held steady at 16 to 23 per week. He said many have heard the message from U.S. authorities that they will be deported. A delegation of U.S. officials visited the shelter Sunday.

Ingrid Bran had not heard about the U.S. beginning to detain mothers and children until she arrived at the border. She left the Paraiso department on Honduras' border with Nicaragua a month ago because she couldn't find work cultivating chiles or coffee to support her two children.

"A friend told me to turn myself over to immigration" authorities, Bran said, as her 7-year-old son played with Alvarez's boy. But after arriving at the border, she was told that the previous practices had ended.

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