

Jeh Johnson: No legal status for new migrant children

President Obama said the children will be cared for, but also said to those considering crossing the border: Don't cross thinking you can stay.

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There is no guarantee of citizenship or legal status for the thousands of unaccompanied migrant children who have attempted to enter the country in recent months, U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson insisted Thursday.

"Those who cross borders today illegally, including children, are not eligible for an earned path to citizenship," Johnson said during a morning press conference.

Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals is a program for children brought to the U.S. illegally by their parents before age 16. They are commonly referred to as "dreamers." Deferred-action status is available only to immigrants who have lived continuously in the U.S. since 2007 and meet other requirements. Deportation proceedings against dreamers are deferred, and they are eligible to work in the United States.

A comprehensive immigration-reform bill approved by the Senate last year but which stalled in the House could include a path to citizenship, but only for those who entered the country before December 2011.

The Southwest border has been overwhelmed by a surge of unaccompanied minors crossing into the U.S. in recent months. Many of those have been shipped to Arizona because of overcrowding at facilities in Texas, where most were apprehended. As of Wednesday, more than 1,000 migrant children were being housed in a federal detention facility in Nogales, Ariz., officials said, waiting to be processed.

The media has been barred from entering the facility, but Arizona Republican Sens. John McCain and Jeff Flake urged Customs and Border Protection to allow press access.

"In the face of this humanitarian crisis, barring the news media from gathering information that is certainly in the public's interest undermines principles fundamental to transparency and democracy," McCain and Flake wrote in a letter sent Thursday.

The Department of Health and Human Services is responsible for care of unaccompanied immigrant youths after they leave CBP custody. Mark Greenberg, an official with said the agency, said it was steadily increasing the capacity to handle migrants but has been overwhelmed in recent months.

"What has happened in this most recent period is the numbers, particularly since the beginning of May, have grown at a pace beyond what we predicted and beyond what the Department of Homeland Security had predicted," Greenberg said at the press conference. "That's what has caused this most recent set of challenges."

More than 47,000 unaccompanied migrant youths have been apprehended this fiscal year, a 92 percent increase from the previous year. The majority of the children are from the Central American countries of Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, according to the CBP.

Greenberg said projections indicate that more than 60,000 unaccompanied children will have crossed the border by the end of this year.

Johnson listed several organizations that have stepped in to accommodate the influx, including the American Red Cross, which has provided blankets. The Department of Defense has volunteered military bases in San Antonio, Ventura County, Calif., and Fort Sill, Okla., as temporary facilities for hundreds of child migrants.

Critics have expressed concern that housing young immigrants provides an incentive for more to cross the border, but children processed through the system are required to appear for removal proceedings, whether they are released to parents in the U.S. or to foster care, Johnson said.

"Those apprehended at our border are priorities for removal," Johnson said. "They are priorities for enforcement of our immigration law regardless of age."

Johnson said the federal government has revived a media campaign warning foreign parents and children about the dangers of crossing the border.

Officials also are working with government representatives in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Mexico to address border security and faster repatriation, he said.

"Family unification for a child is something that is critical," Johnson said, "so I want to see every child with a parent who is able to take care of them, and the law requires that we do what is in the best interest of the child, and that is what we're doing."

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