

Obama to Seek Funds to Stem Border Crossings and Speed Deportations

By Julia Preston
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President Obama will ask Congress to provide more than \$2 billion in new funds to control the surge of illegal Central American migrants at the South Texas border, and to grant broader powers for immigration officials to speed deportations of children caught crossing without their parents, White House officials said on Saturday.

Mr. Obama will send a letter on Monday to alert Congress that he will seek an emergency appropriation for rapidly expanding border enforcement actions and humanitarian assistance programs to cope with the influx, which includes record numbers of unaccompanied minors and adults bringing children. The officials gave only a general estimate of the amount, saying the White House would send a detailed request for the funds when Congress returned after the Fourth of July recess that began Friday and ends July 7.

The president will also ask Congress to revise existing statutes to give the Homeland Security secretary, Jeh Johnson, new authorities to accelerate the screening and deportation of young unaccompanied migrants who are not from Mexico. Fast-track procedures are already in place to deport young migrants from Mexico because it shares a border with the United States.

Mr. Obama will also ask for tougher penalties for smugglers who bring children and other vulnerable migrants across the border illegally, the officials said.

“This is an urgent humanitarian situation,” Cecilia Muñoz, the director of the White House Domestic Policy Council, said in a telephone interview on Saturday. “We are being as aggressive as we can be, on both sides of the border,” she said. “We are dealing with smuggling networks that are exploiting people, and with the humanitarian treatment of migrants while also applying the law as appropriate.”

After the president declared a humanitarian crisis in early June, federal emergency management officials have been coordinating with the many federal agencies involved in finding detention shelters for the unaccompanied youths and in stepping up enforcement measures to deter more migrants from coming.

“The uptick in activity at the border and the steps the administration has put in place are extraordinary,” a White House official said. “We are maxing out our capacities within the existing appropriated monies.” Federal officials have opened shelters to detain unaccompanied children at three military bases and are seeking facilities for other shelters.

Border authorities are required to turn over unaccompanied minors within 72 hours to the Department of Health and Human Services, which oversees the shelters and seeks to locate family members in this country who can receive the youths.

While many unaccompanied children may qualify for some legal status here, many others would not. Authorities want to eliminate delays in deporting children determined to have no legal option to stay, the White House officials said.

On Thursday, Mr. Obama directed tough comments to Central American parents in an interview on ABC News. "Do not send your children to the borders," the president said. "If they do make it, they'll get sent back. More importantly, they may not make it."

White House officials said they were not asking Congress to change other existing legal protections for children apprehended without their parents. The administration is working with the governments of the three countries that are home to most of the migrants — El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras — to ensure the children are safe once they are returned, the officials said.

Representative Henry Cuellar, a Democrat whose district includes a long stretch of the South Texas border, on Saturday visited about 1,000 migrants detained at the Border Patrol station in McAllen. He urged Congress to approve quick changes to laws on the handling of unaccompanied minors.

"When it's Central American countries, there is a different process," Mr. Cuellar said. "One of the things we need to do is tweak the law, to give Border Patrol the power to treat anybody the same as we treat Mexicans."

The influx in the Rio Grande Valley has also included many families, especially women with children. To discourage more families from embarking on the dangerous journey across Mexico, the administration is detaining more of them after they are caught.

House Republican leaders chastised the president last week, saying his lax enforcement of immigration laws had unleashed the flow. "Word has spread to the Americas and beyond that the Obama administration has taken unprecedented and most likely unconstitutional steps to shut down the enforcement of our immigration laws," Representative Robert W. Goodlatte, chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, said at a hearing. "It seems that Obama fiddles while our borders implode."

Mr. Goodlatte said he would work with the White House to strengthen the administration's enforcement powers.

The new proposals to deal with the border came as immigrant rights groups signaled in more than 40 coordinated protests in 23 states during the weekend that they were still hoping for action by the president to slow the pace of deportations.

The demonstrations were small, but fervent. In Chicago, a rally by activists on Friday in front of the offices of the federal immigration enforcement agency included a mock trial of Mr. Obama, who was accused of engaging in harsh deportations. On Saturday, protesters marched through the Boston Common, and in Detroit, they rallied in front of the federal building.

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