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In Migrant Camps, Anxiety and Relief: ‘It Was Worth It. We Are in America.’

Pandemic-era migration restrictions were lifted without a fresh spike in border crossings. Thousands of migrants now find themselves in a holding pattern.

Migrants wait to be processed in a camp on a patch of U.S. land between Tijuana and San Diego on Friday. Mark Abramson for The New York Times



By Soumya Karlamangla, Edgar Sandoval, Miriam Jordan and Simon Romero

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SAN DIEGO — In the vast migrant camp that sprung up this week on a patch of U.S. soil between Tijuana and San Diego, a striking system of order has emerged, even as anxiety and uncertainty swell.

The Africans in the camp — from Ghana, Somalia, Kenya, Guinea, Nigeria — have one leader, a tall Somali man, who communicates with aid groups about how many blankets, diapers and sanitary pads they need that day. The Colombians have their own leader, as do the Afghans, the Turkish and the Haitians.

Stuck in the same holding pattern as thousands of other migrants in cities along the border after pandemic-era migration restrictions expired on Thursday night, the occupants of the camp here have had to make do with the scarce supply of food and water provided by volunteers and the Border Patrol.

Through metal bars, aid workers on the U.S. side pass through rolls of toilet paper, bags of clementine oranges, water bottles, packages of toothbrushes.

“Can we get the leader from Jamaica, please!” Flower Alvarez-Lopez, an aid worker at the camp, called out on Friday.

A woman wearing a sun hat and a pink tie-dye shirt stuck her hand through the wall. Another woman wearing a beanie squeezed her full cheeks through the beams. “Can we get the leader from Afghanistan! Russia!”



Volunteers, activists and agencies handed out donations to migrants from the United States side of the border. Mark Abramson for The New York Times

As thousands of migrants came to the border this week ahead of the expiration of immigration restrictions known as Title 42, frustration, desperation and resilience played out in one spot after another. And on Friday, hours after the restrictions had ended, the waiting, the uncertainty and the resolve persisted in place after place.

The thousands of migrants who have made it across the Rio Grande in recent days debated what to do next, while thousands of others bided their time in northern Mexico, trying to decipher how they, too, could cross, and when.

Officials in border cities were facing uncertainty as well, as they tried to anticipate how the policy changes would play out.

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Oscar Leeser, the mayor of El Paso, told reporters on Friday that about 1,800 migrants had entered the border city on Thursday. “We saw a lot of people coming into our area in the last week,” he said. But since the lifting of Title 42 overnight, he said, “we have not seen any big numbers.”

Shelter operators reported that it was too soon to tell what could unfold in coming days, since most people who crossed were still being processed by the U.S. government. But they, too, said that the largest spikes in crossings might have passed.

“The number of people that were picked up from the river levee on the other side of the wall yesterday was significant, but not nearly what everyone expected it was going to be,” said Ruben Garcia, director of Annunciation House, which assists migrants in the El Paso area. “We’ll have to see what happens in the next few days. There are many variables,” he said.



Migrants that have been processed through immigration rest in a shelter run by Catholic Charities in McAllen, Texas, on Friday. Verónica G. Cárdenas for The New York Times



"It was a big sacrifice to get here," said Venezuelan migrant Ligia Garcia, who described how she and her husband traveled with their two children across the jungles of Central America, then Mexico, to reach Texas. "But it was worth it. We are in America." Verónica G. Cárdenas for The New York Times

But while the numbers did not spike on Friday, officials said crossings had reached historically high levels in the days before Title 42 ended. Sheriff Leon Wilmot of Yuma County, in Arizona, said Border Patrol agents had arrested about 1,500 people on Thursday, the last day that Title 42 was in effect, and were holding about 4,000 — a population that has strained the only charity in town dedicated to helping migrants.

As hundreds of people were released from Yuma's border holding facility on Friday, a fleet of charter buses sat idling in the parking lot of the nonprofit Regional Center for Border Health, waiting to ferry migrants to the airport or to Phoenix. For weeks, the group has filled about six buses with migrants every day. On Friday, 16 buses carrying about 800 migrants rumbled out of Yuma.

On some days this past week, more than 11,000 people were apprehended after crossing the southern border illegally, according to internal agency data obtained by The New York Times, putting holding facilities run by the Border Patrol over capacity. Over the past two years, about 7,000 people were apprehended on a typical day; officials consider 8,000 apprehensions or more a surge.

A person familiar with the situation said the Border Patrol apprehended fewer than 10,000 who crossed the border illegally on Thursday, indicating that a large increase came before Title 42 lifted.

Outside a shelter in McAllen, Texas, Ligia Garcia pondered her family's next steps. She was elated to have finally made it across the Rio Grande, but with no family in the United States, and no money, they found themselves in the same situation as thousands of other migrants along the border with Mexico: waiting, while relying on the kindness of strangers.

“We will seek assistance for now, because we have no money and no choice,” said Ms. Garcia, 31, a Venezuelan migrant carrying her 6-month-old son, Roime, near the bulging shelter run by Catholic Charities. “It was a big sacrifice to get here,” she said, describing how she and her husband traveled with their two children across the jungles of Central America, then Mexico, to reach Texas. “But it was worth it. We are in America.”

While Mexicans and Central Americans for decades represented the majority of migrants seeking entry into the United States, Venezuelans have been crossing the southern border in ever greater numbers, and they recently dwarfed the numbers of migrants from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador.

But because large-scale immigration from Venezuela is a relatively new phenomenon, the Venezuelans often lack networks of relatives or friends who can assist them in the United States, and often arrive with nothing but the clothes they are wearing, like Ms. Garcia, the migrant in McAllen.

“I have been doing this for over 45 years. I have never seen as challenging a population as the Venezuelans because so many of them do not have people to receive them in the United States,” said Mr. Garcia, who runs Annunciation House in El Paso.



Migrants waited to be processed at a Border Patrol substation in El Paso on Friday. Ivan Pierre Aguirre for The New York Times



A migrant was loaded onto a bus to be processed by Border Patrol in El Paso on Friday. Ivan Pierre Aguirre for The New York Times

In the meantime, migrants were scrambling for information. Olinex Casseus, 58, was sitting on the sidewalk Friday morning in Piedras Negras, across the border from Eagle Pass, Texas, with his wife and daughter as he tried, repeatedly and unsuccessfully, to use the C.B.P.'s app to schedule an asylum appointment with U.S. migration agents.

“We want to do everything completely legally,” said Mr. Casseus, who fled Haiti for Puebla, Mexico, after the 2010 earthquake that devastated Haiti. He said he hoped to piece together a new life in Miami if they are able to cross. “But everything is now delayed, and the rules are constantly changing,” he added. “I guess that means we continue to wait.”

At the encampment between San Diego and Tijuana, needs and tensions began to mount in recent days. Roughly 1,000 people have jumped one barrier separating the cities in the past week, and most remained stuck behind another wall as they awaited processing by U.S. officials. The area between the two border walls is technically on U.S. soil but considered a no man’s land.

Blankets are the most in-demand item, as the nights become uncomfortably cold for the hundreds of people sleeping outdoors. But there are not enough, so volunteers have tried to limit donations to families with young children.

On Thursday night, while blankets were being handed out, migrants began shouting at one another, believing that one group was taking blankets for people who did not have young children. The aid workers stepped in to break up the fighting.

“People are cold, hungry, desperate, destitute, nervous,” said Adriana Jasso, a volunteer with American Friends Service Committee.

A man from Colombia, wearing a tattered blue hoodie, arrived in the camp with his family on Friday morning after smugglers had led them through a hole in the wall on the Mexican side. Viewing the tents made of Mylar blankets spread across the camp and rows of migrants lying on the dirt, he was unsure how to secure food or tarps to get set up.

He approached Ms. Alvarez-Lopez to ask for supplies. “Go look for Jesus,” she told him, apparently referring to a fellow migrant, and he walked away exasperated. “My only Jesus is up there,” he said, pointing to the sky.

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