

Military operation sends 5,200 U.S. troops to stop migrants at border

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This October 29, 2018, photo provided by the U.S. Air Force shows troops headed toward the U.S.-Mexico border. The Trump administration announced plans to deploy 5,200 troops, double the 2,000 who are in Syria fighting the Islamic State group, to the border. Trump calls the migrant caravans an "invasion." Photo by: Airman 1st Class Zoe M. Wockenfuss/U.S. Air Force via AP

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Shortly before nationwide elections, the government is sending 5,200 troops to the Southwest border in an unusual military operation.

President Donald Trump wants voters to focus on what he calls an "invasion" at the border. It is a slow-moving caravan of Central American migrants.

The number of troops being sent is more than double the 2,000 in Syria fighting the violent group Islamic State. It is also known as ISIL and ISIS.

Two caravans of migrants, traveling mostly on foot, are hundreds of miles from the U.S. border with Mexico. Most are poor, carrying the belongings that fit into a bag and fleeing gang violence or poverty. Any who complete the long trek to the border face hurdles to being allowed to remain in the United States.

Trump, eager to keep voters thinking about immigration before the elections, stepped up his warnings about the caravans. He tweeted, "This is an invasion of our Country and our Military is waiting for you!"

In an interview, he said that he wanted to order an end to the constitutional right to citizenship for babies born in the United States to non-citizens. The statement faced a great deal of backlash from experts. They said such an order would be unconstitutional. The right to citizenship for those born in the U.S. was added to the Constitution in 1868. It is part of the 14th Amendment and is also called birthright citizenship.

Trump Wants To End Birthright Citizenship

Asked if such an order would be legal, Trump said, "they're saying I can do it just with an executive order." He added that "we're the only country in the world where a person comes in and has a baby, and the baby is essentially a citizen of the United States." However, a 2010 study showed that 30 countries have birthright citizenship.

In another interview, Trump said the U.S. would build tent cities for asylum seekers. Asylum is the legal protection that can be granted to people who are afraid to return to their home country. Migrants would apply for it after they are in the United States, or once they reach the border.

"We're going to put tents up all over the place," Trump said. "They're going to be very nice, and they're going to wait, and if they don't get asylum they get out."

Under current procedures, migrants who pass a screening are often released until their cases are decided in immigration court. That can take several years.

Trump denied his focus on the caravan is to help Republicans in the elections. He said, "This has nothing to do with elections."

The elections will determine whether Republicans, Trump's party, maintain control of Congress.

An Overabundance Of Troops At The Border

The military operation is to help Customs and Border Protection (CBP). Troops will help to "harden the southern border" around legal entry points, said Air Force General Terrence O'Shaughnessy. Helicopters will allow border agents to spot migrants trying to cross illegally, said O'Shaughnessy.

Troops planned to take heavy barbed wire to spread across open spaces between entry points.

"We will not allow a large group to enter the U.S. in an unlawful and unsafe manner," said Kevin McAleenan. He is one of the leaders of CBP.

Some of the troops will be armed. Troops would focus first on Texas, followed by Arizona and then California.

The troops will join more than 2,000 National Guardsmen Trump has already sent to the border. It was unclear why Trump's administration was sending the new troops since they will be limited to performing the support work the National Guard already is doing. The military cannot legally

work directly with migrants. McAleenan said the military presence could help deter migrants from crossing illegally.

The number of people in the first migrant caravan headed toward the U.S. has dropped to about 4,000 from about 7,000. However, a second one was gaining steam and was dealing with violence. About 600 migrants in the second group tried to cross a bridge from Guatemala to Mexico on Monday, October 29. The riverbank standoff with Mexico police followed a more violent confrontation Sunday, when the migrants used sticks and rocks against officers. One migrant was killed Sunday night by a head wound, but what caused it was unclear.

Migrants Have The Right To Seek Asylum

The first group went through the river, wading or on rafts, and was advancing through southern Mexico. That group appeared to begin as a collection of about 160 who decided to band together in Honduras for protection against the gangs that prey on migrants traveling alone and grew as the group moved north. The migrants are mostly from Honduras, where the caravan started, as well as El Salvador and Guatemala.

A smaller caravan earlier this year decreased in number as it passed through Mexico. Only about 200 made it to the California border.

Migrants have rights under both U.S. and international law to apply for asylum. However, there already is a crowd of asylum seekers waiting at some U.S. border crossings to make their claims, some waiting as long as five weeks.

McAleenan said his officers were overwhelmed by the many asylum seekers. He also said Mexico was prepared to offer asylum to members of the caravan.

The White House also is considering blocking those traveling in the caravan from seeking legal asylum. They might be kept from entering the U.S.

The military operation drew criticism.

"Sending active military forces to our southern border is not only a huge waste of taxpayer money but an unnecessary course of action," said Shaw Drake. He is a lawyer for the American Civil Liberties Union's border rights center in El Paso, Texas.