

Obama administration says child immigrants are “priorities for removal” from US

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Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Jeh Johnson made clear on Thursday that immigrants—including unaccompanied children—caught illegally crossing the US border are priorities for deportation.

His comments addressed the crisis generated by the tens of thousands of Central American youth attempting to enter the United States through the Rio Grande Valley in Texas. In the last six months, over 47,000 children—mostly from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador—have crossed illegally without an adult.

“Those apprehended at our border are priorities for removal,” Johnson told reporters at a Washington new conference. “They are priorities for enforcement of our immigrant laws, regardless of age.” He added, “I am not encouraging in any way, shape or form illegal migration. That’s the message,” he told reporters. “Those who cross our borders today illegally, including children, are not eligible for an earned path to citizenship.”

The children will be turned over to Department of Health and Human Services, which will decide if a relative in the US gets custody or if the children will be deported, according to Johnson.

The White House has come under increasing fire from Republicans—as well as some Democrats—who accuse the Obama administration of being “soft on illegals.” They cite the president’s 2012 signing of an executive order, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals or DACA, as well as the administration’s overall immigration policy, as the cause in the growth of the numbers of immigrant children crossing the Rio Grande.

Johnson emphasized that the thousands of children crossing the Southwestern border are ineligible for relief. Addressing the parents of the child immigrants, he said, “Illegal migration is not safe,” adding later, “your child will not benefit from DACA now.”

The Republicans claim that DACA, which delays

deportation of some undocumented immigrants who came to the US as children on or before June 15, 2007, attracts undocumented workers and their children, who are led to believe, often by *coyotes*, or human smugglers, that they will get a deferral.

In testimony before a Congressional committee on Wednesday, Johnson stressed that DACA “does not apply to anyone who came into the U.S. today, tomorrow or yesterday.” The HHS secretary avoided mentioning any connection between US imperialist policy in the region and the conditions of poverty and violence leading many to make the dangerous journey to the US.

CBP Protection Commissioner Gil Kerlikowske, who was also at Thursday’s press conference, defended the Customs and Border Patrol (CBP), which is holding and processing the children at a converted warehouse in Nogales, where the population has now exceeded 1,000. Kerlikowske praised the “absolutely heroic efforts” of CBP agents to provide for the children.

HHS’s Johnson said that government is looking for additional space to shelter the children and process them. He said that space for them has already been reserved at three military bases.

CBP has allowed some politicians, activists and religious charities, but no media personnel, into the warehouse where the child immigrants have been transferred by authorities from Texas. While some of the visitors have commented that the youths’ needs appear to be addressed, not all of them took such a rosy view of the facility.

One visitor, the Rev. Sean Carroll of the Kino Border Initiative charity, wrote on the organization’s web site: “Based on the way they looked and on the facilities that had been set up, their physical needs seem to be met. Their psychological and spiritual well-being is less clear to me, due to the inability to speak and interact with the young people.”

Another visitor, Deedee Blase, an immigration activist, told Fox 10 News, “It felt like a dog pound... It had a warehouse like, concrete, feel to it. When we walked in you saw cages with barbed wire fencing. There are two cages with boys and girls next to each other, and then there are 4-5 porta-potties behind it.”

According to Blase, many of the children had not taken a shower in 10 days. “I see the morale is very depressing,” she said.

Photos taken on the cellphone camera of one visitor, Texas Democratic Congressman Henry Cuellar, show children crammed into chain-link fenced areas and sleeping on the floor with no more than aluminum blankets. In such cramped conditions, diseases like chicken pox, MRSA staph infections and rabies have sprung up, with no quarantining other than segregation behind yellow police evidence tape.

On the same day as Johnson’s Congressional committee appearance, the National Immigrant Justice Center, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and other organizations filed a complaint to the DHS alleging systematic abuse of 116 youth by CBP agents. The range of abuses included beatings, sexual assaults, verbal abuse and threats, inadequate food and water, forced stress positions, confiscation of money and belongings and separation from family members.

The various organizations had filed numerous prior complaints to the DHS, all of which were met with silence. The present complaint says, “By failing to meaningfully investigate or otherwise respond to consistent reports of systemic abuse, DHS has demonstrated a continuing disregard for the civil and human rights of unaccompanied immigrant children.”

Joseph Anderson , director of litigation for Americans for Immigrant Justice, told the *Arizona Daily Star*, “We are coming forward now with more than 100 complaints, but we believe thousands of children have been subjected to these conditions.” He added, “Although the surge of unaccompanied exacerbates this problem, it predates this problem.”



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