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Migrants, mostly from Venezuela, are seen near the U.S. border wall in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, as they gather near the U.S. border wall Sept. 24, 2023, after crossing the Rio Grande with the intention of turning themselves in to the U.S. Border Patrol agents to request asylum. (OSV News photo/Jose Luis Gonzalez, Reuters)



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Mexico City — September 26, 2023

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A surge in migration through Mexico during the month of September has provoked a "migratory crisis," according to Catholics who are working with migrants, as shelters strain to handle increasing flows of people heading for the U.S. border -- with even more continuing to pour into the country from points south.

"We're experiencing a new migration crisis, a new humanitarian crisis," Scalabrinian Fr. Julio López, executive secretary of the Mexican bishops' human mobility ministry, told OSV News.

"The southern border is saturated. The north is saturated. Mexico City is saturated. The spaces that most welcome migrants are the Catholic Church's spaces and we're overwhelmed," he said.

Scenes of migrants crossing from Mexico into the United States in large numbers have played out along the length of the U.S.-Mexico border. An estimated 10,000 migrants crossed the Rio Grande daily into the Texas town of Eagle Pass within a week, prompting the mayor to declare a state of emergency, The Wall Street Journal reported Sept. 21.

The U.S. Border Patrol recorded more than 177,000 arrests in August, according to The Washington Post. It marked a sharp increase from the nearly 100,000 detentions in June – the month following the end of Title 42, the pandemic-era health policy providing for the immediate expulsion of migrants to Mexico.

Some 1,400 appointments daily for entering the United States are available for migrants through a mobile app known as CBP One.

Scalabrinian Fr. Pat Murphy has guests at his migrant shelter in Tijuana waiting for appointments made through the app -- mostly families fleeing drug cartel violence in southern Mexico. But most people arriving in Tijuana, he said, "they're going right to the border," rather than shelters.

"The coyotes (smugglers) are arranging (travel) packages: Sign up with us and we'll bring you right to the border and you can cross," Murphy told OSV News. "People are paying tremendous amounts of money for that."

Many of the migrant smugglers operate in conjunction with drug cartels, which often charge migrants a fee for passing through territories under their control. Mexican authorities also extort migrants and often act in cahoots with groups smuggling or committing crimes against migrants such as kidnapping.

"Mexico has turned into an ordeal for the transit of migrants and refugees. Robberies, extortion, kidnappings, forced disappearances and grave human rights violations continue," the bishops' human mobility ministry said in a statement issued Sept. 22 to mark World Day of Migrants and Refugees Sept. 24.

"Our priority, as the church, is preserving and defending human rights, and always being willing to welcome, protect, promote and integrate all persons, migrants and refugees, without distinction and without leaving anyone on the outside," Bishop Guadalupe Torres Campos of Ciudad Juárez, head of the human mobility ministry, said in a Sept. 24 letter.

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Mexico regularly strikes deals with the United States on enforcement issues and has allowed for the return of migrants to dangerous border cities. Immigration officials convinced bus companies not to sell tickets to migrants, which prompted them to steal rides atop freight trains instead.

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador insisted at a Sept. 20 press conference that "migrants must be protected," and said the country protects the rights of migrants.

"It's a double discourse," López said of the government's statements on migration.

Mexican rail operator Ferromex temporarily suspended service due to safety risks to migrants -- six of whom suffered severe injuries, according to the company. The move -- which was done in conjunction with Mexican immigration officials, according to López -- drew questions from López Obrador, who has ongoing disputes with the railway's owner.

"This really wasn't about avoiding accidents rather avoiding that people transit" the country, López said of suspending rail service.

Reports from Central America point to a continued flow of migrants heading toward that region's border with Mexico.

Panama has registered more than 390,000 migrants crossing through the treacherous Darién Gap -- the thick jungle separating the country from Colombia -- so far in 2023. That represents some 57% more than the total for all of 2022.

More than 57,000 migrants have passed through the Darién Gap so far in September, the country's Public Security Ministry reported Sept. 23.

At least 7 million Venezuelans have fled poverty and political oppression since 2015. Many Venezuelans continue to leave and others who had settled in other South American countries are now heading north, analysts say. Joining them are large numbers of Colombians, Ecuadorians and Haitians, along with migrants arriving from other continents.

"The lack of employment, generalized violence, climate change and political persecution are only some of the causes for which people are forced to leave their places of origin, for starting on journeys for which they do not know the ending," the human mobility ministry's statement said.