

Undeterred caravan migrants: 'All of Honduras wants to come here'

Facing tightened security, waves of Hondurans continue to try to make it to the US, saying they have no other choice.



A Honduran migrant, part of a caravan trying to reach the US kneels holding a Honduras flag at a border checkpoint in Tecun Uman, Guatemala [Ueslei Marcelino/Reuters]

Esquipulas, Guatemala - Reina Madrid breaks down in tears when she mentions her children. She left them with her sister on Thursday afternoon to join a caravan of Honduran migrants and refugees in order to seek work.

"They were all crying. It was hard," she tells Al Jazeera following a harrowing journey to Esquipulas, a city in southern Guatemala just over the border from Honduras.

Madrid and her four children, ages eight through 17, are from Villanueva, a city plagued by violence in northwestern Honduras. Her daughter and three sons are all in school, but they collect and sell firewood to help make ends meet.

For years, Madrid had a job as a cook at a restaurant in Villanueva. She smiles as

she explains all the different kinds of typical Honduran dishes she can make.

“I love cooking,” she says. But she has not been able to find steady work all year.

Last year, Madrid’s mother became ill and it was no longer possible to both work full-time in the restaurant and take care of her mother, who died in January.

Facing electrical bills and school expenses, Madrid decided to join a large group of Hondurans leaving from the San Pedro Sula bus terminal.

She is one of thousands of Honduran migrants and refugees fleeing the Central American nation. An initial caravan left the country one week ago, crossed into Guatemala on Monday, and has since dispersed into waves, as thousands more travel north to join them.

Thousands of Hondurans made it to the Mexican border on Friday. Some have been swimming and rafting across into Mexico. Most were stopped before entering and have been taken to shelters while they await processing one group at a time, which may take days.



Honduran migrants hike in the forest after crossing the Lempa river, on the border between Honduras and Guatemala, to join a caravan trying to reach the US [Jorge Cabrera/Reuters]

Tightened security

Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras have been fortifying their borders all week, sending reinforcements to beef up the presence of security forces. Mexico erected fencing at the Tecun Uman border crossing with Guatemala. Honduran police and riot police have been stopping people from leaving. Guatemalan police have set up checkpoints to stop people from advancing.

The additional security measures come as US President Donald Trump continues to ramp up pressure on governments in the region to halt the caravan before it hits the southern US border, which Trump has threatened to shut down. He has also threatened to cut aid to Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador.

Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez and other high-level Honduran officials met on Saturday with their Guatemalan counterparts, including President Jimmy Morales, to address the caravan and coordinate a response. They also reached out to Mexico, they said on Saturday, claiming the caravan was politically motivated. At an air force base in Guatemala, the two presidents presented their "Safe Return" plan to provide transportation home for caravan participants who wish to return.

The Honduran government announced on Saturday that it was shutting down its immigration checkpoint at the Agua Caliente border crossing until further notice, adding that Guatemala's was already closed "due to the crisis unleashed by sectors outside of national interests", according to a National Immigration Institute statement.



‘Hondurans want to leave and not go back’

People want to flee Honduras and not go back, says Madrid. She admits she considered the possibility of going back home when she arrived tired and hungry in Esquipulas, with wet clothes and cheap pink sneakers. A call with her son lifted her spirits, she says.

Madrid is part of one of several waves of hundreds of people following behind the initial caravan. When she left earlier, the bus terminal was packed with hundreds of people from different parts of Honduras setting out to flee the country for a variety of reasons, but mainly unemployment and violence.

Madrid and a crowd set out on foot from the terminal at 11pm. Between walking and a free bus ride offered along the way, Madrid arrived at the Agua Caliente border crossing with Guatemala eight hours later.

Honduran police were blocking the highway, preventing people from leaving the country, she says. Those who had lucked into bus rides right from San Pedro Sula had been there all night, and Madrid and others streamed in throughout the morning.

Madrid had heard that police told the early arrivals they would be allowed to cross at 8am, but the hours passed and national police officers and members of the Cobra police special forces continued to block the route. Most people had not slept all night or eaten, and many became restless and impatient.

“We broke through the border,” Madrid says.

Police used batons and rocks were thrown back and forth, says Madrid. Four police officers and five migrants and refugees were wounded and treated by paramedics, according to Honduran authorities.

Madrid and others say they used tear gas, but according to officials, it was a different aerosol chemical agent. Either way, it stings a lot, Madrid says.

The crowd made it through and lined up to present their documentation to Guatemalan immigration agents for processing at the country’s border checkpoint, a few kilometres past the Honduran one.

It was after dark by the time everyone made it into Guatemala, and people trickled into Esquipulas all evening, making their way to the local Casa del Migrante Jose shelter. The shelter is affiliated with the Catholic Church, but is run by volunteers of various religious denominations.

A caravan in waves

The Honduran migrants and refugees arriving at the shelter Friday night joined others from all around the country who had crossed over the previous two days.

Aside from the large groups of hundreds of Hondurans fleeing together, small groups, families and individuals have been making their way across on their own. Unable to get past the Honduran police blocking the way out of the country, dozens of small groups of people have taken to hiking around checkpoints, police lines, and the border.

Several refugees at the Esquipulas shelter told Al Jazeera they saw adults and children fall and injure themselves while trekking around checkpoints. Groups lost track of each other, and not everyone made it to Esquipulas.



Honduran migrants react after crossing the border between Honduras and Guatemala, in Agua Caliente, Guatemala [Jorge Cabrera/Reuters]

At the shelter, Honduran migrants and refugees who have been there since Thursday told Al Jazeera that small groups have set out towards Guatemala City but many have not made it far. Whether people are travelling on foot or by bus, Guatemalan police have stopped many from proceeding.

They are transported back down to the Honduran border crossing, multiple refugees, as well as local Esquipulas residents and taxi drivers confirmed to Al Jazeera.

“They’re being stopped,” says Selvin Santos, who arrived in Esquipulas earlier this week from Choluteca in southern Honduras.

‘There is nothing’

Santos could have attempted to leave on Friday, but he does not know the way and thinks there is more safety in numbers, he tells Al Jazeera at the Esquipulas shelter, where volunteers were busy all day preparing food and cleaning the space.

Many in the caravan prefer to wait until their numbers grow larger, but approximately 70 Hondurans decided to set out on foot from Esquipulas on

Saturday and attempt to make it further along the road towards Guatemala City.

The group only made it a kilometre or so out of the city before Guatemala police special forces stopped them from proceeding. They were told to stay put on the side of the highway until police obtained further instructions on whether or not to allow them to continue.

More special forces agents gradually began arriving, however, and a police bus showed up. The group of Hondurans waited another 15 minutes or so before deciding they did not want to risk being held and transported back to the Agua Caliente border. They walked back to the shelter in Esquipulas.



Dozens of Hondurans rest at the side of the highway north of Esquipulas while waiting for directions from Guatemalan police special forces halting their advance [Sandra Cuffe/Al Jazeera]

It is not by choice that so many Hondurans are abandoning their country, Santos says.

“It is need. There are no job opportunities,” he tells Al Jazeera, adding that in Honduras, “we face hunger. There is nothing.”

Santos and other Hondurans stuck for now in Esquipulas feel alone, he says. There are few journalists and no human rights personnel visiting or

accompanying them at this point. Santos and others tell Al Jazeera they know the Mexican border is now the focus, but they desperately want a media and human rights presence down by Guatemala's southern border.

Hundreds of Hondurans continue to seek a path forward to make it to Mexico or all the way into the US, but Madrid is planning to stay in Esquipulas to seek work. Several others plan to do the same in Guatemala City instead of forging on.

Two buses were set to leave Madrid's hometown of Villanueva for the border Saturday morning, and police at the border told her they were also expecting two buses from Olancho, in eastern Honduras.

While she was talking to a Honduran police officer at the border, Madrid says, she was next to a truck filled with riot gear.

"All of Honduras wants to come here," Madrid says.

An old meme has been circulating in light of the current situation in Honduras: "May the last one to leave turn off the light."

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