

Mexico blocks migrant caravan headed north



Tapachula, January 24 (RHC)-- The Mexican National Guard and immigration officials stopped a caravan of hundreds of migrants and asylum seekers on Thursday as they walked towards the southern city of Tapachula.

Troops used shields and pepper spray to corral the caravan, which had crossed the Guatemala-Mexico border early on Thursday in an effort to reach the United States. "There are no human rights," yelled one migrant as he stood over an unconscious pregnant woman who was being attended to by medics. The woman eventually regained consciousness.

Many cried as immigration officials and National Guard troops dragged them towards buses, which officials said were used to take the migrants and asylum seekers to a immigration detention centre in Tapachula, known as Siglo 21. Mexico's National Immigration Institute (INM) said some 800 people were bussed to the detention centre.

Regional migrant rights defenders have denounced the use of force against migrants leaving the border between Guatemala and Mexico over the last week. "This is a repressive act by the Mexican government," said Father Mauro Verzeletti, the director of the Guatemala City Migrant Shelter.

The caravan left the Guatemalan border early Thursday, choosing to cross the Suchiate River between the Tecun Uman and Talisman border crossings between Guatemala and Mexico. This was the caravan's second attempt to enter Mexico.

On Monday, the caravan was stopped by National Guard troops after they attempted to cross the river into Mexico. National Guard troops used tear gas to push the caravan back to the banks of the river. Some migrants slept on the beach in makeshift shelters while others returned to the Catholic Church sponsored migrant shelter.

"I am still scared that they will capture us and deport us to Honduras," Pastora Hernandez, a migrant from San Pedro Sula, told Al Jazeera just before National Guard troops moved in on Thursday. Hernandez migrated with her husband, Pablo Aquino, and two of her young four boys for economic reasons. "It was difficult," Aquino told Al Jazeera. "We were seeing that we were not able to make the same purchases that we use to."

Mexico has been under pressure for more than a year by the Trump administration to do more to stop migrants and asylum seekers from reaching the US border.

Acting U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf on Wednesday praised Mexico's efforts to block the caravan. "The efforts by the Mexican National Guard and other officials have thus far been effective at maintaining the integrity of their border, despite outbreaks of violence and lawlessness by people who are attempting to illegally enter Mexico on their way to the United States," he said in a statement.

This month's caravan left Honduras on January 15, and quickly grew to thousands. It split into three groups, with migrants arriving to the Tecun Uman border in San Marcos and the Ceibo border in Peten. On Tuesday, Mexico began to deport members who officials said entered the country between official ports of entry.

According to the Institute of Migration, 110 Hondurans were returned to their country on a National Guard flight. Other flights were carried out in the following days, including 188 on Thursday.

In an interview on local television in Honduras on Wednesday, Alden Rivera, the Honduran ambassador to Mexico, stated that as many as 1,900 Hondurans could be deported.

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