

U.S. admits 8-year-old girl died in Border Patrol custody

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Armed members of the Texas National Guard watch asylum seekers and migrants from behind a fence near El Paso, Texas [Andres Leighton/AP]?

Dallas, May 19 (RHC)-- A little girl from Panama born with heart problems has died in Border Patrol custody, according to a U.S. government statement on Thursday, marking the second death in two weeks of a child in custody from Latin America. The 8-year-old girl and her family were being held in Harlingen,

Texas, in the Rio Grande Valley, one of the busiest corridors for border crossings.

The Border Patrol's parent agency, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, has struggled with overcrowding at its facilities, spurred by a large increase in migrants and asylum seekers ahead of the expiration last week of a key regulation on immigration linked to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The girl experienced "a medical emergency," and emergency medical services were called. They took her to the hospital where she was pronounced dead on Wednesday, the agency said. An autopsy has been ordered.

The girl's name was Anadith Tanay Reyes Alvarez, said Honduran Consul Jose Leonardo Navas, who is based in McAllen, Texas. He said she is from Panama, although her parents are from Honduras. The consul said she was traveling with her father, mother and two older siblings.

She was born with heart problems and was operated on three years ago in Panama, according to her father who spoke with the consul.

Customs and Border Protection's internal affairs office will investigate the girl's death, and the Homeland Security Department's inspector general and Harlingen police have been notified, Customs and Border Protection said.

Her death comes a week after a 17-year-old Honduran boy, Angel Eduardo Maradiaga Espinoza, who was travelling alone, died in US Health and Human Services Department custody.

Also, earlier this year, a 4-year-old "medically fragile unaccompanied child from Honduras" died at a hospital in Michigan, Health and Human Services said in its statement on Thursday. The agency said the child, who was in the care of the agency's Office of Refugee Resettlement, was taken to the hospital on March 14 following a "cardiac arrest event". She died three days later.

In recent weeks, the U.S. has struggled with large numbers of migrants and asylum seekers coming to the border in expectation of the end of Title 42, a regulation that had curbed migration during the pandemic.

Last week, hundreds of arrivals were held in open air on US soil between two border walls in San Diego. Many subsisted for days on a limited Border Patrol diet of water and chips or granola bars and whatever volunteers or vendors passed through openings in the wall.

Pedro Rios, director of the American Friends Service Committee's US-Mexico border program, said on Thursday that portable bathrooms were too full to use, forcing arrivals at the border to relieve themselves outdoors. He also explained that Border Patrol told him to call 911 when volunteers encountered an 8-month-old child between the walls who was "listless and vomiting." The camp in the area has since been disbanded.

On Thursday, advocates also warned of dangerous conditions for migrants and asylum seekers who are still in Mexico trying to gain entry to the United States. Advocates said during a news conference with journalists that they had visited a number of encampments in Mexico to assess conditions there and found little in the way of medical care.

Amy Fischer, director of refugee and migrant rights at Amnesty International USA, said "almost everyone" they saw on the Mexico side of the border "had some type of health condition that they were dealing with." She said it was "almost universal" that migrants and asylum seekers were "lifting up their shirt and showing a rash or saying that my kid had X kind of sickness".

Last week, the Border Patrol began releasing asylum seekers in the US without notices to appear in immigration court, instead directing them to report to an immigration office within 60 days. The move spares Border Patrol agents time-consuming processing duties, allowing them to open space in holding

facilities. A federal judge in Florida ordered an end to the quick releases.

The Border Patrol had 28,717 people in custody on May 10, the day before pandemic-related asylum restrictions expired, which was double from two weeks earlier, according to a court filing. By Sunday, the number had dropped 23 percent to 22,259, still unusually high.

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