

Caravan migrants break Guatemala border fence

By **SONIA PEREZ D.**
and **MARK STEVENSON**
Associated Press

TECUN UMAN, Guatemala — Migrants traveling in a mass caravan burst through a Guatemalan border fence and streamed by the thousands toward Mexican territory on Friday, defying Mexican authorities' entreaties for an orderly crossing and U.S. President Donald Trump's threats of retaliation.

On the Mexican side of a border bridge, they were met by a phalanx of police with riot shields. About 50 managed to push their way through before officers unleashed pepper spray and the rest retreated.

The gates were closed again, and police used a loudspeaker to address the masses, saying, "We need you to stop the aggression."

Mexican federal police chief Manelich Castilla, speaking from the border town of Ciudad Hidalgo, told Foro TV that his forces achieved their main objective of preventing a violent breach by the 3,000-plus migrants. In a separate interview with Milenio television, he accused people not part of the caravan of attacking police with firecrackers and rocks.

"It will be under the conditions that have been said since the start," Castilla said. "Orderly, with established procedures, never through violence or force as a group of people attempted."

The chaos calmed somewhat as migrants formed lines in a mass of humanity stretching across the bridge. Some returned to the Guatemalan side to buy water and food.

But others, tired of waiting, jumped off the bridge into the Suchiate River. Migrants organized a rope brigade to ford its muddy waters, and some floated across on rafts operated by



A boy cries as he is brought back down after an unsuccessful attempt to lift him over a border fence, in Tecun Uman, Guatemala on Friday. Earlier in the day, waving Honduran flags and carrying umbrellas to protect against the sun, thousands of migrants arrived at the Guatemalan side of the border with Mexico, demanding they be allowed passage.

AP Photo/Oliver de Ros

local residents who usually charge a dollar or two to make the crossing.

Cristian, a 34-year-old cellphone repairman from San Pedro Sula, said he left Honduras because gang members had demanded protection payments of \$83 a month, a fifth of his income. It was already hard enough to support his four daughters on the \$450 he makes, so he closed his small business instead.

Cristian, who declined to give his last name because the gangsters had threatened him, estimated that about 30 percent of the migrants want to apply for refugee status in Mexico, while the rest want to reach the United States.

"I want to get to the States to contribute to that country," Cristian said, "to do any kind of work, picking up garbage."

Police and immigration agents let small groups of



A youth calls for calm as he stands in front of a phalanx of Mexican Federal Police in riot gear, after Central American migrants rushed the gate at the border crossing in Ciudad Hidalgo, Mexico on Friday.

AP Photo/Moises Castillo

10, 20, 30 people through the gates if they wanted to apply for refugee status. Once they file a claim, they can go to a shelter to spend the night.

Eric Lagos Rodriguez from Tegucigalpa, the Honduran capital, and his fam-

ily turned themselves over to authorities to apply.

"We couldn't go on like this," Lagos said, "we're traveling with six children."

As dusk neared, police were relieved by fresh officers and reformed ranks.

Migrants continued to hang on the gates, yelling "there are children here" and "we are hungry." Back on the Guatemalan side, some people set up tarp shelters.

Earlier in the day, thousands of migrants, some waving Honduran flags and carrying umbrellas to protect against the sun, arrived at the Guatemalan side of the river, noisily demanding they be allowed to cross.

"One way or another, we will pass," they chanted, climbing atop U.S.-donated military jeeps parked at the scene. Young men tugged on the fence, finally tearing it down, prompting the huge crowd of men, women and children to rush past and over the bridge.

Edwin Santos of San Pedro Sula was one of the first to race by, clutching the hands of his father and wife.

"We are going to the

United States!" he shouted. "Nobody is going to stop us!"

Acner Adolfo Rodriguez, 30, one of the last through, said he hoped to find work and a better life far from the widespread poverty and gang violence in Honduras, one of the world's deadliest countries.

"May Trump's heart be touched so he lets us through," Rodriguez said.

The U.S. president has made it clear to Mexico that he is monitoring its response. On Thursday, he threatened to close the U.S. border if Mexico didn't stop the caravan. Later that day, he tweeted a video of Mexican federal police deploying at the Guatemalan border and wrote: "Thank you Mexico, we look forward to working with you!"

Mexican officials said those with passports and valid visas — only a tiny minority of those trying to cross — would be let in immediately.

Migrants who want to apply for refuge in Mexico were welcome to do so, they said, but any who decide to cross illegally and are caught will be detained and deported.

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo met Friday with President Enrique Pena Nieto and Foreign Relations Secretary Luis Videgaray in Mexico City, with the caravan high on the agenda.

At a news conference with Videgaray, Pompeo called illegal migration a "crisis" and emphasized "the importance of stopping this flow before it reaches the U.S. border," while also acknowledging Mexico's right to handle the crisis in a sovereign fashion.

"Mexico will make its decision," Pompeo said. "Its leaders and its people will decide the best way to achieve what I believe are our shared objectives."

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