

## **Immigration Crisis: Officials says hundreds of kids reunited with families since May**

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The U.S. government was wrestling with the ramifications of President Donald Trump's move to stop separating families at the border.

### **Immigrants from Guatemala seeking asylum look over travel packets as they wait at the bus station after they were processed and released by U.S. Customs and Border Protection in McAllen, Texas.**

**Texas:** About 500 of the more than 2,300 children separated from their families at the U.S.-Mexico border have been reunited since May, a senior Trump administration official said Thursday, as confusion mounted over the "zero tolerance" policy that called for the prosecution of anyone caught entering the United States illegally.

It was unclear how many of the roughly 500 children were still being detained with their families. Federal agencies were working to set up a centralized reunification process for the remaining separated children and their families at the Port Isabel Detention Center just north of border in Texas, said the official, who was not authorized to speak publicly and spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity.

The U.S. government was wrestling with the ramifications of President Donald Trump's move to stop separating families at the border and Congress again failing to act on immigration amid outcry from all corners of the world, with the images and sounds of crying children dominating the news.

The Trump administration previously had not said whether any hundreds of children who were separated from their families had been reunited. The official said many of reunited families were back together after a few days of separation. But other parents have said they don't know where their children are and were struggling to get answers. Some mothers were deported without their kids.

Meanwhile, there were signs that the administration was dialing back its "zero tolerance" policy, for now.

The federal public defender's office for the region that covers cases from El Paso to San Antonio said Thursday the U.S. Attorney's Office would be dismissing cases in which parents were charged with illegally entering or re-entering the country and were subsequently separated from their children.

### **The parents were told by the Immigration Officers that they would be separated from their children and voluntarily crossed back to Mexico after trying to seek asylum in the United States.**

"Going forward, they will no longer bring criminal charges against a parent or parents entering the United States if they have their child with them," wrote Maureen Scott Franco, the federal public defender for the Western District of Texas, in an email shown to the AP.

In the Texas border city of McAllen, federal prosecutors unexpectedly did not pursue charges against 17 immigrants. A federal prosecutor said "there was no prosecution sought" considering Trump's executive order ending the practice of separating families.

But president showed no sign of softening.

The Trump administration began drawing up plans to house as many as 20,000 migrants on U.S. military bases, though officials gave differing accounts as to whether those beds would be for children or for entire families. The Justice Department also went to court to overturn a decades-old settlement that limits to 20 days the amount of time migrant children can be locked up with their families.

“We have to be very, very strong on the border. If we don’t do it, you will be inundated with people and you really won’t have a country,” Trump said.

Thursday’s uncertainty resulted from the abrupt ending Wednesday of a White House-sanctioned practice of separating more than 2,300 children from their parents over the past several weeks. After Trump’s executive order, a host of unanswered questions remained, including what will happen to the children already separated from their parents and where the government will house all the newly detained migrants, with the system already bursting at the seams.

Officials from the Defense Department and Health and Human Services said the Pentagon has agreed to provide space on military bases to hold up to 20,000 people detained after illegally crossing the Mexican border.

It was unclear which bases would be used. But HHS has assessed four as prospective housing for children: Fort Bliss, Goodfellow Air Force Base and Dyess Air Force Base in Texas, and Little Rock Air Force Base in Arkansas.

The Justice Department asked a federal judge to change the rules regarding the detention of immigrant children, seeking permission to detain them for longer than the permitted 20 days to keep them together with their parents.

Meanwhile, the mayors of about 20 U.S. cities gathered at a holding facility for immigrant children in the border city of El Paso. They accused Trump of failing to address a crisis of his own making and called for the immediate reunification of immigrant children with their families.

“This is a humanitarian crisis,” Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan said.

In Washington, the House killed a hard-right immigration bill Thursday and Republican leaders delayed a planned vote on a compromise GOP package, with party members fiercely divided on the issue. Democrats oppose both measures.

The rejected bill would have curbed legal immigration and bolstered border security but would not have granted a pathway to citizenship to “Dreamers” who arrived in the country illegally as children.

The delayed vote was on a compromise bill between GOP moderates and conservatives that would offer Dreamers a pathway to citizenship and provide \$25 billion for Trump’s border wall, among other things.

**Immigrant children playing inside the Catholic Charities RGV on June 21, 2018, in McAllen, Texas. Families, who have been processed and released by U.S. Customs and Border Protection, wait inside the facility before continuing their journey to cities across the United States.**

Elsewhere, Democratic Gov. Ralph Northam of Virginia ordered an investigation into claims by children at an immigration detention facility that they were beaten while handcuffed and locked up for long periods in solitary

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confinement, left nude and shivering in concrete cells.

First lady Melania Trump made a surprise visit to a McAllen detention center that is housing some of the children. She told the children to "be kind and nice to each other."

She made waves while boarding the flight to McAllen in a green military-style jacket with the message "I really don't care, do u?" on the back.

Asked about it, her spokeswoman Stephanie Grisham said: "It's a jacket. There was no hidden message."

Mrs. Trump was wearing a different jacket when the plane landed.

- AP