

## **US to fly 'massive' number of Haitians to Haiti**

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Haitians have been migrating to the US in large numbers from South America for several years, many of them having left the Caribbean nation after a devastating earthquake in 2010.

*Migrants seeking asylum in the US bathe in the Rio Grande river near the International Bridge between Mexico and the US, where they are waiting to be processed, in Del Rio, Texas on Sept. 17, 2021. (Reuters)*

**United States:** The Biden administration plans on "massive movements" of Haitian migrants in a small Texas border city on flights to Haiti starting Sunday, an official has said, representing a swift and dramatic response to thousands who suddenly assembled under and around a bridge.

Details are yet to be finalised but will likely involve five to eight flights a day, according to the official with direct knowledge of the plans who was not authorised to discuss the matter publicly and spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity. San Antonio, the nearest major city, may be among the departure cities.

US authorities closed traffic to vehicles and pedestrians in both directions at the only border crossing in Del Rio, Texas, after chaos unfolded Friday and presented the administration with a new and immediate challenge as it tries to manage large numbers of asylum-seekers who have been reaching US soil.

US Customs and Border Protection said it was closing the border crossing with Ciudad Acuna, Mexico, "to respond to urgent safety and security needs". Travellers were being directed to Eagle Pass, Texas, 91 kilometers away.

Haitians crossed the Rio Grande freely and in a steady stream, going back and forth between the US and Mexico through knee-deep water with some parents carrying small children on their shoulders. Unable to buy supplies in the US, they returned briefly to Mexico for food and cardboard to settle, temporarily at least, under or near the bridge in Del Rio, a city of 35,000 that has been severely strained by migrant flows in recent months.

Migrants pitched tents and built makeshift shelters from giant reeds known as carrizo cane. Many bathed and washed clothing in the river.

The vast majority of the migrants at the bridge on Friday were Haitian, said Val Verde County Judge Lewis Owens, who is the county's top elected official and whose jurisdiction includes Del Rio. Some families have been under the bridge for as long as six days.

Trash piles were 3.1 metres wide, and at least two women have given birth, including one who tested positive for COVID-19 after being taken to a hospital, Owens said.

Val Verde County Sheriff Frank Joe Martinez estimated the crowd at 13,700 and said more Haitians were traveling through Mexico by bus.

About 500 Haitians were ordered off buses by Mexican immigration authorities in the state of Tamaulipas, about 200 kilometers south of the Texas border, the state government said in a press release Friday. They continued toward the border on foot.

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left the Caribbean nation after a devastating earthquake in 2010.

After jobs dried up from the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro, many made the dangerous trek by foot, bus and car to the US border, including through the infamous Darien Gap, a Panamanian jungle.

It is unclear how such a large number amassed so quickly, though many Haitians have been assembling in camps on the Mexican side of the border, including in Tijuana, across from San Diego, to wait while deciding whether to attempt to enter the United States.

The US Department of Homeland Security did not respond to a request for comment. "We will address it accordingly," Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said on MSNBC.

The Federal Aviation Administration, acting on a Border Patrol request, restricted drone flights around the bridge until September 30, generally barring operations at or below 305 metres unless for security or law enforcement purposes.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, a Republican and frequent critic of President Joe Biden, said federal officials told him migrants under the bridge would be moved by the Defense Department to Arizona, California and elsewhere on the Texas border.

Some Haitians at the camp have lived in Mexican cities on the US border for some time, moving often between them, while others arrived recently after being stuck near Mexico's southern border with Guatemala, said Nicole Phillips, the legal director for advocacy group Haitian Bridge Alliance.

A sense of desperation spread after the Biden administration ended its practice of admitting asylum-seeking migrants daily who were deemed especially vulnerable.

"People are panicking on how they seek refuge," Phillips said.

Edgar Rodriguez, lawyer for the Casa del Migrante migrant shelter in Piedras Negras, north of Del Rio, noticed an increase of Haitians in the area two or three weeks ago and believes that misinformation may have played a part. Migrants often make decisions on false rumours that policies are about to change and that enforcement policies vary by city.

US authorities are being severely tested after Biden quickly dismantled Trump administration policies that Biden considered cruel or inhumane, most notably one requiring asylum-seekers to remain in Mexico while waiting for US immigration court hearings. Such migrants have been exposed to extreme violence in Mexico and faced extraordinary difficulty in finding attorneys.

The US Supreme Court last month let stand a judge's order to reinstate the policy, though Mexico must agree to its terms. The Justice Department said in a court filing this week that discussions with the Mexican government were ongoing.

- AP