

Deputy Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas’ Remarks at NDN

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Unofficial Transcript

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Thank you very much Simon, and thanks to all of you for dedicating a few minutes of your time this morning. I should say that is not the way the interview with Secretary Johnson went. Be that as it may. I’m going to be very brief. I want to share with you just a few thoughts about our response to the surge in the migration of unaccompanied children to the southwest border and of course specifically to the Rio Grande Valley Sector of that border. And then leave it to you to leave as much time for question and answer. I see representatives from the embassies. I see journalists I know. And of course I see wonderful advocates very dedicated to the issues. And I want to give everyone as much time to ask whatever questions are on your mind. I know that some will be difficult and some less so. Simon aptly described this as a difficult situation.

Our response to it is characteristic of how we would respond to situations as a Department and that is in a very comprehensive way across the department. It was but five months ago when we first began to experience a really dramatic surge in the number of children arriving at and apprehended in the Rio Grande Valley sector of the border. More than 300 in a day. And very quickly Secretary Johnson raised the level to the highest level of contingency planning in the department which meant that not only the traditional agencies in the department would respond to this situation, but rather the department as a whole would. And shortly thereafter, the President directed the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) under the capable leadership of Craig Fugate would lead an all of government response. It is now five months later and the number of children arriving at and apprehended at our border is dramatically lower than it was five months ago. And that I think that is a result of a number of factors, many within our control and some perhaps outside of the control of the Department and the government generally.

Historically, for example, the month of August has seen a precipitous drop in the number of migrants reaching the southwest border by virtue of the season, the time of year, the heat and the like. So that very well may play a factor in what we observed in the dramatic decline. But clearly the response of the United States Government and the Department of Homeland Security on point, as well as the responses of our partner countries, Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, have all played a part. And let me if I can, just briefly describe our response and what we have done in the surge of resources and bringing together all of the assets of the Department of Homeland Security and the government of the United States to be where we are today.

And I should at the outset say two things. One, it would be premature at best to declare victory. To say the problem is behind us because we don’t know. And so what we have achieved is tremendous progress. And the second point is that if indeed we begin to observe an uptick in the

number of unaccompanied children migrating to the southwest border, specifically the Rio Grande Valley, we are prepared to address that uptick very swiftly.

One of the first things that we did, both to prevent the migration of those youth to the southwest border and to accomplish a very important humanitarian protection mission is surge law enforcement resources to combat the traffickers and smugglers that were bringing the children to the Rio Grande Valley sector. And we did that with Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents, Homeland Security Investigations officers, with our partners in Mexico, with other law enforcement agencies in our administration, and we surged resources, more than 50 investigators and tremendous resources not only to address the trafficking networks and the people that are conducting them but also to address the flow of funds from the illegal enterprise. We had a number of operations working in parallel that have yielded tremendous results to date.

We engaged in a public messaging campaign that had two main components to it. One was to dissuade individuals from taking the perilous journey from their countries of origin across Mexico and to the southern border. And I think we are all acutely aware of the perils of that type of journey, even for an adult, let alone for a child who is unaccompanied. And that was a very significant area of focus for us. The second was to counter what we learned to be a very significant misinformation campaign on the part of smugglers and others. And that was that if you can get to the southwest border, if you can get to the United States and be apprehended you had a permiso, you had the ability to enter the United States and remain in the United States lawfully. You could avail yourself of comprehensive immigration reform when that would pass or alternatively you could avail yourself of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program or DACA, as it is commonly known by its acronym. Both very significant pieces of misinformation, and we engaged with our partners to the south in a very vigorous public messaging campaign to dissuade people from taking the perilous journey and from setting the record straight with respect to the fact that relief would not be provided to them under either of those programs.

We accelerated the cases, the processing of the recent arrivals. I should say at the outset of this tremendous spike our facilities on the border there are not designed for the long term detention of children or families. We have under the law an obligation to turn over a child in our custody to Health and Human Services within 72 hours. When three, four hundred children a day were arriving we were not meeting that 72 hour threshold and now we're well under it and we're managing the process very ably. And we accelerated our processing of children, of family cases while adhering to our legal requirements and values as a nation. We built facilities. We developed facilities for the detention of families and adults traveling with children. And I know very well, and I'm sure I'll be asked about this, I know that the conditions in those facilities have been a concern to advocates in the community and we have responded to those concerns very vigorously.

When the concerns were first surfacing, Secretary Johnson had planned to send two experts in immigration, David Shahoulian and Serena Hoy, relatively new arrivals in our Department of Homeland Security. Many of the advocates in the audience know them both well for the quality of their work and their expertise and lifelong dedication to these issues. He was planning to send them to observe the facilities, but accelerated their visit to the Artesia facility in response to the

concerns articulated by the community, the concerns about the ability to conduct screening of a parent outside the presence of a child; issues of concerns of access to counsel; the scheduling of interviews; the privacy of spaces and the like. And we have responded to those concerns as quickly as possible. And our response is ongoing. We understand those concerns and we want the conditions of our facilities to be at the highest levels that everyone here would embrace.

We are working as I alluded to earlier. We have worked and continue to work with the governments of Mexico, with the governments of El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala to build the repatriation capacity, to work on the public messaging, to interdict individuals seeking to cross borders illegally, to address and attack the smuggling and trafficking organizations. It's been a very holistic approach in that regard while ensuring that the humanitarian protections of individuals seeking refuge under the law, seeking refugee protection here in the United States for example are honored, that our credible fear screening is comprehensive and is as fulsome and sensitive to the needs of the children as all would expect.

And lastly, not most importantly, but at least equally as important perhaps most importantly to the future, is investing in the countries of Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador and providing them with the resources to address the situation of violence in the towns and cities, to address the causes of despair that would lead a parent to send a child unaccompanied from one of those countries on a long and dangerous traverse to the United States. And I do think that the investment of resources is perhaps the most important of all with respect to the future and the future children in those communities. And with that I conclude and I thank you for being here and I really welcome your questions and comments.