

Legal, political and humanitarian concerns raised over child migrant crisis

DB dailybulletin.com/article/20140706/NEWS/140709667

By Charles Babington, The Associated Press

By Charles Babington, The Associated Press

WASHINGTON >> The legal, humanitarian and political constraints facing the Obama administration as it copes with thousands of Central American children entering the country illegally came into sharp focus in a series of interviews Sunday.

A George W. Bush-era law to address human trafficking prevents the government from returning the children to their home countries without taking them into custody and eventually through a deportation hearing. Minors from Mexico and Canada, by contrast, can be sent back across the border more easily. The administration says it wants more flexibility under the law.

Even if Congress agrees, however, the change might do little to ease the partisan quarreling and complex logistical and humanitarian challenges surrounding the issue.

Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson said Sunday the administration has dramatically sped up the processing of adults who enter the country illegally, and it is opening more detention facilities. He acknowledged that the unaccompanied children from Central America, some 9,700 taken into custody in May alone, pose the most vexing problem.

All persons, regardless of age, face “a deportation proceeding” if they are caught entering the country illegally, Johnson said. The administration, he said, is “looking at ways to create additional options for dealing with the children in particular, consistent with our laws and our values.”

Repeatedly pressed to say whether thousands of Central American children will be deported promptly, Johnson said, “we need to find more efficient, effective ways to turn this tide around generally, and we’ve already begun to do that.”

Several Republicans, and even a Democrat, said the administration has reacted too slowly and cautiously to the crisis. More than 50,000 unaccompanied minors have been caught on the U.S.-Mexico border this year. Most are from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, where a spike in violence and poverty are prompting parents to send their children on difficult and dangerous journeys north.

Their numbers have overwhelmed federal agencies. When 140 would-be immigrants — mostly mothers with children — were flown to southern California to ease an overcrowded Texas facility, angry residents of Murrieta greeted the bus as it pulled into town, complaining that they were being asked to do more than their share.

“This is a failure of diplomacy, it is a failure of leadership from the administration,” said Texas Gov. Rick Perry, who sought the 2012 GOP presidential nomination.

Rep. Henry Cuellar, D-Texas, said the administration “is one step behind” a major dilemma that was foreseeable. The number of children coming from Central America without adults has been rising dramatically for several years.

President Barack Obama is asking Congress for more money and authority to send the children home, even as he also seeks ways to allow millions of other people already living in the U.S. illegally to stay.

The Bush-era law requires unaccompanied children to be handed over to the Department of Health and Human Services for care and housing. Unlike Mexican or Canadian children, the Central Americans must be taken into custody and given a deportation hearing before they can be returned to their home countries.

A possible change to the Bush-era law could give Border Patrol agents more leeway in handling these children.

Unaccompanied Central American children generally are being released to relatives already in the United States. Mothers with their children often are released with a notice to appear later in immigration court.

Meanwhile, word of seemingly successful border crossings reaches their home countries, encouraging others to try.

Johnson said the U.S. government is trying to send the message that all persons who enter the country illegally will face deportation proceedings eventually. In Central America, he said, “the criminal smuggling organizations are putting out a lot of disinformation about supposed free passes into this country” that will expire soon. “We’re cracking down on the smuggling organizations by surging law enforcement resources,” Johnson said.

Johnson and others are warning of the dangers that immigrants, and especially children, face when they try to reach the United States on their own.

Alan Long, mayor of Murrieta, denounced the nation’s current immigration laws and practices. Central Americans think “they’re coming to a better place,” Long said Sunday, “but on that journey one-third of the females — some younger, in their teens — are raped.”

Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said that children entering the country illegally must be sent home.

If not, Graham said, “you’re going to incentivize people throughout that part of the world to keep sending their children here.”

Graham said foreign aid should be cut off to countries that don’t do more to discourage illegal immigration to the United States.

Johnson spoke on NBC’s “Meet the Press;” Perry appeared on ABC’s “This Week;” Cuellar and Long made their comments on CNN’s “State of the Union;” Graham was on CBS’ “Face the Nation.”