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TRUMP TAKES STEPS TO TIGHTEN RULES ON ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION

President moves to give agencies more power to deport people quickly, as the Pentagon orders up to 4,000 National Guard troops to the Mexican border

By Alicia A. Caldwell
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The Trump administration is seeking to tighten the rules governing immigrants caught crossing the Mexican border illegally and intends to prosecute and promptly deport as many such people as possible.

President Donald Trump signed a memo Friday ordering officials at the departments of Defense, State, Homeland Security and Health and Human Services to provide detailed reports of how each agency is doing its part to end policies that limit how immigration authorities can quickly deport people.

The president said he wants details about the construction of jails, improvements to the system for judging which immigrants should be allowed to get a full hearing on an asylum claim and a full accounting of military facilities that could be used to house immigrants caught crossing the border illegally.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions also said Friday that he is ordering federal prosecutors to charge and try as many first-time border crossers as “is practicable.”

“To those who wish to challenge the Trump administration’s commitment to public safety, national security, and the rule of law, I warn you: illegally entering this country will not be rewarded, but will instead be met with the full prosecutorial powers of the Department of Justice,” Mr. Sessions said in a statement, describing the situation at the border as a “crisis.”

Immigration advocates decried the move to prosecute more people and said it was an effort to block people from their legal right to apply to refuge in the U.S.

“Trump has been using the specter of a migrant invasion to justify his calls to keep vulnerable asylum seekers in prolonged detention,” said Clara Long, a senior researcher at Human Rights Watch, in a statement. “He is betting that his audience won’t bother to check if there’s any factual basis to the panic he is creating. But for the people impacted by his proposed policy changes—including vulnerable children fleeing for their lives—there are very real reasons to be afraid.”

The administration’s directives came as Defense Secretary James Mattis on Friday ordered the deployment of up to 4,000 National Guard troops to the border with Mexico, the Pentagon said.

The Texas National Guard started deploying the first 250 troops, along with vehicles and some aircraft, to the Mexican border in that state Friday evening. Brig. Gen. Tracy Norris

said the Texas troops will be in place within 72 hours. Additional troops will be notified about deploying to the region starting next week. She didn't say how many Texas troops may ultimately be deployed or for how long.

Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey announced in a tweet Friday that his state would send 150 National Guard troops to the border in that state starting next week.

In March about 37,000 people were caught crossing the Mexican border, a substantial increase over the same period in 2017, a jump that the administration has cited as part of the need for more border security.

In the first half of the budget year that started in October, however, more than 20,000 fewer people have been entering the U.S. illegally compared to the same period a year ago, according to the U.S. Border Patrol. Overall, arrests of illegal border crossers are at the lowest level since the early 1970s. Arrests have been dropping for years, due to an improved economy in Mexico and tighter U.S. border control.

White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders said Friday's memo takes "important steps to end 'catch and release,' the dangerous practice whereby aliens who have violated our nation's immigration laws are released into the United States shortly after their apprehension."

Mr. Trump and other members of his administration have been decrying what they call "loopholes" in immigration law that allow some immigrants to be released after being caught crossing the border illegally. "Catch-and-release" generally refers to asylum laws that allow immigrants who convince an asylum officer they have a "credible fear" of being returned to their country to be released into the U.S. until their case is decided by an immigration judge.

It can take years for an asylum case to be decided in immigration court, where there is a backlog of more than 684,000 pending cases.

The call to prosecute illegal border crossers is not new. Under what began as a pilot program more than a decade ago, nearly every adult immigrant caught crossing the border in one section of West Texas near Del Rio has faced prosecution for more than a decade. The exception has generally been parents caught crossing with their children.

Such zero-tolerance zones were expanded under the Bush and Obama administrations to other sections of the border, including in Arizona and California but have since been scaled back, in part because of a drop in arrests and lack of resources.

Crossing the border illegally is a federal misdemeanor that can result in a prison sentence. Adults caught crossing the border illegally after already having been deported can face a felony charge. Mr. Sessions and Mr. Trump had previously pledged to step up prosecutions of repeat border crossers.

The presidential memo and the Justice Department directive cap a week in which Mr. Trump has focused on the border and immigration. Earlier this week Mr. Trump signed an order directing National Guard troops to the Mexican border.