

Anti-immigrant convoy protests at the border

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Body

AUSTIN. A caravan of vehicles carrying Americans who oppose illegal migration plans to rally today at three points near the U.S.-Mexico border.

Upon its arrival in Texas, a woman participating in the convoy, made up of some 300 vehicles and called "Reclaim Our Border", considered that Americans should be alarmed by the number of "military-age men" who have entered the country. The event hopes to draw attention to border security, as the number of migrants crossing illegally into the United States has reached historic highs under the presidency of Joe Biden, who is seeking re-election in November. The caravan left Virginia on Monday and plans to hold events near Eagle Pass, where state and federal authorities are disputing control of border security, as well as in Yuma (Arizona) and San Ysidro (California). According to its organizers, this is a peaceful protest by citizens seeking to ask the Biden administration for measures to strengthen the borders against illegal migration from Mexico. "There is a lot of humanity that is being taken advantage of and ruined. That's why we want to save humanity. We want to save our nation," commented Republican Senate candidate for New Mexico Ben Luna in an interview with Fox News. Supporters have organized the caravan on social networks and chat groups, including the Telegram channel "Reclaim our Border," which as of Thursday had more than 4,400 members. However, they charge that Facebook has censored several of their events.

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Small Texas border city lands unsolicited spotlight in state-federal showdown over border security

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Body

EAGLE PASS, Texas (AP) — As a ceremony with the blaring horns of mariachi musicians and rhythmic click-clack of horse hooves was about to begin, Mayor Rolando Salinas took a moment to reflect that his Texas border city is “more than just the immigration crisis that you see in the media.”

Cowboys and cowgirls from Eagle Pass and Piedras Negras, Mexico, met Friday on one of their two international bridges to begin a weeklong ride to the San Antonio Stock Show & Rodeo. The annual ritual is a point of local pride even as Eagle Pass draws wide attention for a showdown between Texas Gov. Greg Abbott and the Biden administration over policing the border for illegal crossings.

“It shows you the connectivity between the United States and Mexico,” Salinas said as he observed final preparations for the annual “La Cabalgata Internacional La Grande.”

A few hours later, about 200 advocates were in a festive mood in the nearby town of Quemado ahead of a “Take Back Our Border” rally on Saturday. Connie Hinton, 56, said she showed up with her father from Austin, Texas, because “they need to get the people that are here illegally under control.”

The rally, which began with a trucker convoy in Virginia, was the latest sign of how an unprecedented migrant surge has shaken Eagle Pass, a sprawling town of warehouses and decaying houses that many big retailers have overlooked.

Mission: Border Hope, a group that helps migrants with travel plans after they are released by the Border Patrol with notices to appear in immigration court, has seen daily arrivals plummet to about 20 in recent days from highs of about 1,200, director Valeria Wheeler said.

The group's shelter closed ahead of Saturday's rally out of fears of unrest, even though rally organizers said they planned a peaceful protest.

Since early January, when Texas seized control of city's Shelby Park on the banks of Rio Grande, Eagle Pass has been at the center of an extraordinary turf war between Texas' Republican governor and the Democratic White House.

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The park, made up of playing fields and a boat ramp at the end of the downtown business district and next to a golf course, is closed. U.S. Border Patrol agents are denied entry.

U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said Friday that the governor's actions were "unconscionable."

"It is unconscionable for a public official, to deliberately refuse to communicate, coordinate, collaborate with other public officials in the service of our nation's interests, and to refuse to do so with the hope of creating disorder for others," Mayorkas said in an interview with The Associated Press.

Eagle Pass, with about 30,000 people, has become a major corridor for illegal crossings in recent years, making it a target for Abbott's enforcement. The community lies in the Border Patrol's Del Rio, Texas, sector, which is often the busiest of the agency's nine divisions on the Mexican border. In a record-high month of nearly 250,000 arrests for illegal crossings in December, Del Rio tallied 71,095 arrests, second only to Tucson, Arizona. San Diego in California was a distant third.

Visitors have struggled to find hotel rooms as the state law enforcement presence surges, with budget chains charging more than \$200 per night, said Jorge Barrera, president of the Eagle Pass Chamber of Commerce.

"Obviously everybody likes growth," Barrera said. "But when it's a little too fast, it's little bit hard for the community to be able to keep up."

On Friday, there were no migrants to be found on the grassy fields of Shelby Park as Texas National Guard members unspooled razor wire atop train containers dotting the riverbanks. About 200 migrants arrived Thursday, according to the mayor, a sharp drop from December.

A divided U.S. Supreme Court allowed the Border Patrol to cut razor wire that Texas installed, for now, but the state continues to erect more. The federal government argued the wire impedes its ability to patrol the border, including aiding migrants in need.

The Biden administration told the Supreme Court that "Texas has effectively prevented Border Patrol from monitoring the border" at Shelby Park. The state has defended the seizure, with Attorney General Ken Paxton saying he "will continue to defend Texas's efforts to protect its southern border" against the federal government's attempts to undermine it.

At a ranch outside Eagle Pass where Abbott sympathizers gathered ahead of Saturday's rally, vendors sold Donald Trump-inspired MAGA hats and Trump flags. A homemade sign read, "The federal government has lost its way. Their job is to protect the states."

Julio Vasquez, pastor of Iglesia Luterana San Lucas in Eagle Pass, said Abbott's campaign is a waste of money because migrants "come with empty hands asking for help."

Alicia Garcia, a lifelong Eagle Pass resident who avoids Shelby Park but attended Friday's annual rodeo-themed festival at the nearby international bridge, questioned the value of Abbott's efforts because many asylum-seekers are released by U.S. authorities to argue their cases in immigration court.

"What's with the show?" said Garcia, 38. "Better to just break everything down if they are still crossing."

Associated Press writers Elliot Spagat in San Diego and Paul Weber in Austin, Texas, contributed.

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Body

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Sign up for The Brief , The Texas Tribune's daily newsletter that keeps readers up to speed on the most essential Texas news.

EAGLE PASS — Flanked by visiting Republican governors, Gov. Greg Abbott on Sunday afternoon railed against President Joe Biden's handling of the southern border and recommitted to defending the state from an 'invasion' of migrants.

Abbott has doubled down on enforcement at the border amid an escalating feud with the federal government over who controls part of the Texas-Mexico border in Eagle Pass, a town of about 29,000 residents. Although immigration law enforcement is under the jurisdiction of the federal government, Abbott claims the Biden administration has failed to enforce immigration law, leaving the state to fend for itself.

Texas has continued to erect razor wire as a barrier between the Rio Grande River and Shelby Park, a 47-acre area in Eagle Pass, even after the federal government said the wire impedes federal border agents from apprehending people who cross the river.

'As opposed to detaining illegal immigrants, Biden has let them all loose, with no ability to accurately determine their whereabouts,' Abbott said on Sunday. 'We've seen the catastrophic consequences of Joe Biden's open border policy.'

Abbott said gang members, as well as hundreds of people on the terrorist watch list, have been apprehended at the border. He thanked border patrol agents at checkpoints who have seized millions of lethal doses of fentanyl and thousands of pounds of methamphetamine.

Republican governors have rallied behind Abbott's efforts to deter illegal immigration. Last month, 25 of them released a joint statement, arguing that Texas has legal authority to defend itself because the Biden administration has failed to enforce immigration laws.

About half of those Republican governors traveled to Shelby Park on Sunday, where they praised Abbott for his methods, such as building a border wall, installing wire and placing a string of buoys in the river. Tennessee Gov.

Gov. Greg Abbott defends migrant tactics in Eagle Pass amid escalating legal battle with Biden administration

Bill Lee and Arkansas Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders said they would continue to deploy National Guard troops to the border to support Abbott.

Lt. Col. Freeman Martin, deputy director of DPS's Homeland Security Operations, told the visiting governors Sunday that Abbott's directives are working. During a briefing at the DPS Eagle Pass Area Office, Martin said the razor wire and buoy barriers "save lives."

The standoff between Texas and the federal government began after the Texas National Guard and state troopers took control of Shelby Park in January , blocking Border Patrol agents from entering.

It was the latest move by the state under Abbott's Operation Lone Star initiative, which began in March 2021 and sent Department of Public Safety troopers and Texas National Guard members to the border to stop illegal immigration. Hundreds of thousands of migrants have crossed the Rio Grande into Texas, many of them seeking asylum.

That put Texas on a collision course with the federal government: Under federal law, the federal government has sole jurisdiction over the enforcement of immigration laws, a power upheld by multiple U.S. Supreme Court decisions.

The Texas forces have deployed miles of concertina wire along the border at Eagle Pass, including around Shelby Park. When Border Patrol agents began cutting through the wire to apprehend migrants or reach those who needed medical attention, the state sued the federal government, accusing it of damaging state property.

The 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals issued a ruling in December that prohibited Border Patrol agents from cutting the wire. But on Jan. 22, in a 5-4 decision , the U.S. Supreme Court vacated the lower court's ruling.

The ruling did not explicitly grant Border Patrol agents access to the park or require the state to remove the concertina wire, prompting Abbott to double down. Shortly after, National Guard and state troopers continued to block federal agents' entry to the park and deploy more concertina wire as Abbott maintained his long-standing claim that the Biden administration has refused to enforce immigration laws.

"Instead of prosecuting immigrants for the federal crime of illegal entry, President Biden has sent his lawyers into federal courts to sue Texas for taking action to secure the border," Abbott said in a statement.

Last month, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the federal agency that oversees the Border Patrol, sent a letter to Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton's office demanding that federal officials be allowed into the park.

Paxton has said Texas wouldn't comply with the Biden administration's request.

Another legal confrontation is brewing: Late last year, Abbott signed into law a bill that allows police to arrest people suspected of illegally crossing the Texas-Mexico border on state charges. Scheduled to take effect in March, the legislation prompted the American Civil Liberties Union and other groups to file lawsuits to overturn the law.

In an interview with the New York Times published Friday , U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas called Abbott's actions on the border unconscionable, saying the state refused to communicate or coordinate with the federal government to create disorder.

"I call upon Gov. Abbott to follow the law as the courts direct," he said. "I call upon Gov. Abbott to communicate and coordinate with his fellow governors in other states. I call upon Gov. Abbott to not use human beings as political pawns."

Abbott's visit to Eagle Pass coincided this weekend with the arrival of a convoy of Americans opposed to the Biden administration's handling of border policy.

Gov. Greg Abbott defends migrant tactics in Eagle Pass amid escalating legal battle with Biden administration

The Take Our Border Back convoy departed from outside Washington last week, passing through Dripping Springs along the way. Organizers called it a peaceful protest, though some critics expressed worry about violent or secessionist undertones.

The convoy arrived Saturday in Quemado, a rural community about 20 miles north of Eagle Pass. A rally attracted a modest crowd and remained peaceful, The New York Times reported . Attendees listened to Christian music, waved 'Trump 2024' flags and called on the federal government to secure the U.S.-Mexico border.

However, Border Patrol officials evacuated a migrant processing center in Eagle Pass Thursday after the FBI warned of threats to the facility. The Daily Mail reported that officials said up to 175 migrants were relocated to other holding centers in Texas.

During the Sunday afternoon press conference, some members of the Take Our Border Back convoy faced off against Eagle Pass residents, who condemned Abbott for spending billions of dollars on the border. Just outside of Shelby Park, convoy members held pro-Trump signs and chanted 'USA.' Meanwhile, Eagle Pass residents and activists from other border towns such as Laredo led their own chants of 'Vive la frontera.'

Some of those residents held a press conference before the governor's. Speakers criticized members of the convoy for 'hijacking Christianity.' Others criticized Abbott for taking over a city park.

'Quit wasting our tax dollars on political propaganda,' said Juanita V. Martinez, an Eagle Pass resident and Maverick County Democratic Party Chairperson. 'Abbott doesn't care about anything but boosting his Republican political agenda.'

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