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ICE and Customs and Border Protection agents take part in a safety drill in the Anapra area in Sunland Park, New Mexico on Jan. 31. | Herika Martines/AFP/Getty Images

IMMIGRATION

Border agents arrested 66,000 border crossers in February

By **IAN KULLGREN** | 03/05/2019 02:48 PM EST

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The February surge follows four months of notably high arrest levels, lending ammunition to President Donald Trump's argument that illegal immigration constitutes a national emergency. Border arrests are a standard metric for the volume of illegal immigration.

Border agents have arrested 268,00 people since the start of the fiscal year in October — an average of 53,600 people per month, the highest rate since 2008. Administration officials laid blame on Congress and the courts for encouraging people to migrate illegally, even as Republican resistance grows against Trump's national emergency declaration.

"The system is well beyond capacity, and remains at the breaking point," U.S. Customs and Border Protection Director Kevin McAleenan told reporters.

But border arrests still remained well below their levels in the 1990s and the 2000s, when monthly arrest levels were routinely twice as high or greater.

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In addition to arrests, authorities in February turned away 9,700 people at border points of entry seeking to migrate lawfully, nearly half of them families and unaccompanied children. The numbers are in line with February 2018, when 10,000 were turned away at border checkpoints.

The Trump administration announced the numbers today amid growing congressional opposition to Trump's national emergency declaration to secure funding to build a wall along the southern border. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell on Monday agreed to take up legislation blocking the declaration of national emergency after it passed the House last week with support from 13 Republicans.

"Regardless of anyone's preferred policy outcome, the status quo is unacceptable," McAleenan said, calling for Congressional action.

CBP officials highlighted an increasing number of large groups and families crossing the border, many of them brought by smugglers to remote locations in Arizona and New Mexico.

Since October, authorities have arrested three times as many families crossing the border as during the same time period in fiscal year 2018, burdening detention facilities built for single men. The agency announced a directive Tuesday to provide enhanced medical screenings, prompted by the deaths of an 8-year-old Guatemalan boy and 7-year-old Guatemalan girl in December.

The agency said it will build a temporary facility in El Paso, Tex. to provide medical screening for children and families. McAleenan described the changes as a stopgap measure that is "not sustainable."

"Remote locations of the United States border are not safe places to cross, and they are not places to seek medical care," he said.

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