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U.S. Plans to Pay Mexico to Deport Unauthorized Immigrants There

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WASHINGTON — President Trump has promised for years that Mexico would pay for a vast border wall, a demand that country has steadfastly refused. Now, in the Trump administration's campaign to stop illegal immigration, the United States plans instead to pay Mexico.

In a recent notice sent to Congress, the administration said it intended to take \$20 million in foreign assistance funds and use it to help Mexico pay plane and bus fare to deport as many as 17,000 people who are in that country illegally.

The money will help increase deportations of Central Americans, many of whom pass through Mexico to get to the American border. Any unauthorized immigrant in Mexico who is a known or suspected terrorist will also be deported under the program, according to the notification, although such people are few in number.

Katie Waldman, a spokeswoman for the Department of Homeland Security, said the program was intended to help relieve immigration flows at the United States border with Mexico.

“We are working closely with our Mexican counterparts to confront rising border apprehension numbers — specifically, a 38 percent increase in families this month alone — directly and to ensure that those with legitimate claims have access to appropriate protections,” Ms. Waldman said.

A spokesman for the Mexican Embassy did not immediately respond Wednesday to a request for comment.

The plan, which has been debated internally for months, is part of a broader push by the Trump administration to redirect billions in foreign assistance to other priorities. The administration has yet to spend nearly \$3 billion in foreign aid, money allocated last year by Congress with broad bipartisan support. Hundreds of millions of dollars meant to help stabilize Syria and support Palestinian schools and hospitals has already been redirected.

While the administration has made several announcements about not spending on priorities Congress intended, it has mostly kept quiet about what it will do with the money. But it has long been frustrated that Congress provides billions for foreign aid while refusing to fund its

immigration priorities. The money will be transferred from the State Department to the Department of Homeland Security, and then sent to Mexico.

“Congress intended for this money to lift up communities dealing with crime, corruption and so many other challenges, not to expand this administration’s deportation crusade,” said Representative Eliot L. Engel of New York, the top Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee. “I want answers about why the State Department thinks it can ignore Congress and dump more cash into deportation efforts. Until then, I’ll do whatever I can to stop this.”

The maneuver is the latest by the administration to reduce the number of immigrants crossing the southwestern border. The most prominent piece of the effort has been the “zero tolerance” policy to criminally prosecute any immigrant who enters the country without authorization. That led to the widely criticized practice of separating children from their parents at the border, which spurred a humanitarian and political crisis for Mr. Trump.

But the president’s advisers have also employed other strategies to deter immigrants, including revamping the rules surrounding who can qualify for asylum and trying to strike an agreement with Mexico that would disqualify any migrant who had not sought asylum there from claiming it in the United States.

Under the program, Mexico would be responsible for detaining and providing judicial review of immigrants before deporting them. The sometimes cumbersome and lengthy legal process in the United States to deport asylum seekers has long frustrated Mr. Trump, who has often said the laws must be changed to speed deportations. Getting Mexico to do deportations instead would bypass that process.

Immigrant advocacy groups called the deportation aid for Mexico a misguided and wasteful use of money that would fail to address the problems prompting migrants to travel to Mexico and the United States in the first place.

“We shouldn’t be paying another country to do our dirty work; we should actually be fixing our immigration system and helping these countries get back on solid footing,” said Ali Noorani, the executive director of the National Immigration Forum. “It smacks of desperation.”

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