## Transcription

**Event**: CBP Releases Fiscal Year 2019 Migration Stats

**Date:** Tuesday, March 5, 2019

**Time:** 1 pm ET

**Location:** Media Briefing Room at the Ronald Reagan Building. 1300 Pennsylvania Ave

**AC Meehan:** Thank you everyone. We'll get started. Thank you for joining today. My name is Andrew me and I'm the Assistant Commissioner for Public Affairs at U.S. Customs and Border Protection. The purpose of today's briefing is to announce the CBP enforcement actions for the month of February in Fiscal Year 19. I'm joined by Chief Brian Hastings of the Law Enforcement Operations Directorate of the United States Border Patrol who will provide the perspective from USBP and the impact of this surge in migration over the last several months.

Commissioner McAleenan will share his perspective after Chief Hastings and following the Commissioner's remarks, we’ll open it up for a few questions. The numbers and the migration statistics will be provided on CBP.gov at 2:00 p.m. Eastern time. Additionally, we will address the Fiscal Year 2018 Border Security Report. When compared to fiscal 2019, it will illustrate this growing trend. I'm going to provide a brief overview of the numbers and then turn over to Chief Hastings. Total enforcement actions for February in Fiscal Year 19 were 76,103. That includes those deemed inadmissible at the ports of entry and those apprehended in between the ports of entry.

This represented a 31 percent increase over January. Of that 76,103, 7,249 were unaccompanied children and 40,385 were family unit aliens, representing 62 percent of all enforcement actions. With that I'm going to turn it over to Chief Hastings for the Border Patrol's perspective.

**Chief Hastings:** Good afternoon. My name's Brian Hastings. I'm the Chief of Operations here at Border Patrol headquarters. Shortly, you're gonna see some videos here that kind of outlines a few of the things that we have going on currently with the border. Specifically, these were taken of some large groups in the El Paso area as well as Lordsberg, New Mexico. Talked about some of the challenges that that presents here shortly. Just kind of want to hit on a few of the things that AC Meehan already mentioned. Primarily, 28 days in February we had over 66,000 apprehensions. During this Fiscal Year so far to date, since October, we've had over 268,000 apprehensions so far as compared to the same time frame last Fiscal Year. That's a 97 percent increase. So a lot of folks look at that and they say - frankly based upon those numbers we have seen numbers like that in the past. In fact, if you look back to 2005, we've seen numbers like 1.5 million and so a lot of folks don't understand this significant change in the demographics of what we're seeing today. It’s what presents us and our partners with a lot of challenges.

Historically, U.S. Border Patrol has arrested 70 to 90 percent Mexican nationals. We can apply a consequence to that demographic. We could return them quickly to Mexico. Today, 70 percent of all those we're arresting are from the Northern Triangle – Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. October 2018 marked the first time in our history that family units exceeded single adult apprehensions. And in February of 2019, family units and unaccompanied children accounted for 65 percent of all Border Patrol apprehensions. For the Fiscal Year, it's 60 percent family unit apprehensions - family unit and unaccompanied juveniles.

So, without a consequence, without being able to deliver a consequence to these individuals for illegally crossing our borders, the Border Patrol has no reason to expect that this trend will decrease. In fact, we believe it will increase. It's well known at this time that adults with children will not be detained during the immigration proceedings for illegal entry. The word of mouth and social media quickly gets back to those in the Northern Triangle countries that if you bring a child, you'll be successful. From April 2018 through February of 2019, we've had almost 2,400 fraudulent claims of families. Of those fraudulent claims, some are folks who have claimed that they're under 18 and are not. Others have actually been fraudulent familial claims.

Another trend that we're seeing - and I mentioned earlier - are the large groups. This is a dangerous trend for us. We define large group as a group of over 100. So far this Fiscal Year, we've seen 70 of those groups of over 100. They've totaled over 12,000 apprehensions. And the important thing to note is if you look back historically, last Fiscal Year we had 13 of those groups over 100. The year before that, two groups over 100 for that Fiscal Year of 17. So that's 99 percent of all of those individuals are family units again and they are from again the northern triangle.

If the current trend continues, Border Patrol can expect to apprehend approximately 174 large groups totaling over 29,000 deportable aliens. Now the issue with this and the concern with this that we have are the majority these groups are entering in places that are very rugged, very remote, specifically talking to areas – Ajo, Arizona, Lordsburg, New Mexico. Very remote, very rugged. The issue that that causes us, the challenge that causes us, is are the furthest areas from our central processing centers, the furthest areas from medical services, furthest from our transportation services that we have, as well. Even more troubling for us is that the current intelligence is telling us and we're seeing firsthand the drug trafficking organizations are utilizing these groups as cover and diversion to divert our agents away from the security national security border mission and use them as a diversion to cross drug loads. We've had four specific cases here recently that we've seen those family units being used as a diversionary tactic. That's highly concerning for us going forward.

So, lastly I just want to hit on some of the resourcing issues that all of this causes for U.S. Border Patrol CBP. We're devoting a large amount of our daily resources to this. The facilities and the manpower cannot support the continued increase in the apprehensions of family units and unaccompanied children. Our Border Patrol stations were built in the 80s and 90s. They were built for a different demographic, not for the current amount of family units and UACs that we're seeing.

In each day each and every day, Border Patrol is putting approximately 25 to 40 percent of our manpower is being dedicated to the care, transportation, and the humanitarian mission they're pulled from the national security mission to do these things. We're committed to addressing these humanitarian needs. The current situation is unsustainable for Border Patrol operations with this. The increased flow combined with the stress of the journey the crowded conveyances and flu season has resulted in significant increases for the medical referrals for Border Patrol.

Currently, U.S. Border Patrol is sending an average of 55 people per day for medical care. During December, this was as high as 63. We're on track to refer approximately 31,000 individuals for medical treatment this year as compared to 12,000 last Fiscal Year. Since December 22nd, 2018, U.S. Border Patrol agents have spent over 57,000 hours at a hospital or medical facility. This equates to just under 5,700 shifts of hospital watch during the 72 days at a cost of $2.2 million in Border Patrol salary. Between 2014 and 2018, med part data has shown that we have spent 98 million dollars on medical services for individuals in CBP custody.

That's a quick background of what we have going on operationally. I'm proud of the professionalism, compassion our agents have shown confronting this border security and humanitarian crisis. And with that, I'd like to turn it over to the Commissioner McAleenan to speak more about the ongoing actions.

**Commissioner:** Thank you Chief and thank you Assistant Commissioner Meehan for your briefings. Welcome everyone today.

It should be very clear from these numbers that we are facing alarming trends in the rising volumes of people illegally crossing our Southwest Border or arriving in our ports of entry without documents. This increased flow presents - currently at our highest levels in over a decade - both a border security and humanitarian crisis, challenges our resources and personnel, and is negatively impacting border security. While Chief Hastings focused on the significant numbers of illegal crossings between ports of entry, where 87 percent of the total flow in February came, we're also seeing stark increases in asylum seekers as we work to provide lawful and safe access at our Southwest Border ports of entry.

In Fiscal Year 2018, we saw a 120 percent increase over Fiscal Year 17, with 38,000 claims at Southwest border ports of entry. So far this Fiscal Year, we've seen a 90 percent increase over those record levels in Fiscal Year 18 and fully 60 percent of an inadmissible persons at our Southwest Border ports of entry are making claims of fear of return to their home country.

Taken together, these numbers are remarkable. 76,000 total apprehensions of inadmissible arrivals in a four week month in February. That's the highest number of encounters in any February in the last 12 years. Within that number, I just want to underscore, in 28 days, we had 40,385 encounters with family units and 7,250 encounters with unaccompanied children.

That means we have apprehended and encountered more families in just five months and five days than last year's record total. Not only are the numbers increasing, the percentage of people from countries in the Northern Triangle of Central America has increased as well. Now 70 percent of all crossings are from these countries and a full 62 percent of all crossings and encounters are vulnerable families and children.

November of this Fiscal Year marked the first time that any other country exceeded the numbers of Mexican nationals apprehended and encountered by CBP. Guatemalans and Hondurans are both crossing now in larger numbers than Mexican nationals. These numbers are significant, as chief Hastings explained, because unlike historical crossings, which are comprised of a large majority of single adult males from Mexico who could be repatriated quickly, families and children from Central America require increased care and processing, and are released into United States pending adjudication of their immigration claims.

Within these numbers, we are confronting challenging new smuggling cycles, patterns, and methods. So-called caravans, where 500 or more migrants form groups in Central America, mostly in Honduras, and traveled together through Mexico to our Southwest Border. Separately, we see a new phenomenon, highlighted on the screen, of large groups of mostly family units from Guatemala who are traveling on buses through Mexico to the U.S. border in much shorter smuggling cycles, making the journey in as little as four to seven days and on a very consistent basis.

So far this year, as Chief Hastings alluded to, we've seen more than 70 instances of groups over 100. In one case, agents encountered a group of 334 migrants. Smugglers are dropping these groups in the most remote areas of our border, including places like Antelope Wells, New Mexico; Ajo, Arizona; and Yuma, Arizona.

The availability of these express bus routes means that more young children are arriving at our border and we are seeing migrants arrive with illnesses and medical conditions in unprecedented numbers. To address these concerns, which were put into stark relief with the tragic deaths of two migrant children in December, CBP has mounted significant new efforts to increase medical checks and care upon arrival at Border Patrol stations or ports of entry.

On December 25th, 2018, I directed CBP to complete secondary medical reviews of all children in Border Patrol custody by either contract medical professionals or a CBP agent and officer trained as an EMT or paramedic. To sustain and formalize this work, on January 28 I issued an interim medical directive developed with advice from medical experts and pediatricians to guide CBP deployment of enhanced medical efforts to mitigate the risk to, and improve our care for, individuals in CBP custody, as a result in these surges of children and families.

Since the directive was signed and with the help of inter-agency partners like the U.S. Coast Guard and Public Health Service, CBP has interviewed 27,000 juveniles and certified medical practitioners have screened over 12,000 more, transporting an average, as you heard, 55 people to the hospital each day. We're going to make that procedure publicly available today, given the intense interest in our medical efforts on the border. The border patrol's El Paso sector, I want to highlight for a second, because they've experienced these trends and these increases more acutely than any other place along the border, new in this Fiscal Year. That includes El Paso and about 40 miles south, as well as all the way through New Mexico in the boot heel extending toward the west. El Paso sector alone has seen a 434 percent increase in apprehensions this Fiscal Year. The vast majority are family units and unaccompanied children arriving in large groups which challenges their capacity in their facilities.

Facilities housing migrants near El Paso have reached capacity, and gone over capacity, numerous times in this fiscal year {in the first quarter}, a situation that impacts both the efficiency of migrant processing and the quality of our care that we're able to provide for detained migrants. To help address this, we are taking steps to establish a centralized processing center (CPC) in the El Paso sector. This will help us protect the health and safety of families and children in custody, while streamlining operations and reducing the time that we're holding families and children. The El Paso Central Processing Center will provide one location for the processing of family units and children in an appropriate environment and will facilitate consistent medical assessments in one location.

I want to underscore a key point here. While our enhanced medical efforts and the creation of new facilities will assist with managing the increased flows, and while we'll continue to do all that we can to address these increases in traffic safely and humanely. The fact is that these solutions are temporary and this situation 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.

The system is well beyond capacity and remains at a breaking point. Based on the experiences of men and women on the front line, this is clearly both a border security and humanitarian crisis, and we know what is driving these trends. These increases in traffic are a direct response from smugglers and migrants to the vulnerabilities in our legal system. These weaknesses in our immigration laws and accumulated court rulings now represent the most significant factors impacting border security and causing this humanitarian crisis.

These include, first and foremost, the inability to keep families together while they complete expeditious and fair immigration proceedings. Instead, crossing with a child is a guarantee of a speedy release and an indefinite stay in the United States. The asylum gap, where approximately 80 percent of individuals meet the initial credible fear bar and the asylum process, while only 10 to 20 percent of Central Americans are found to have valid asylum claims at the end of their immigration court proceedings. And the disparate treatment under the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act, which allows for children arriving from Mexico and Canada - contiguous countries - to be repatriated, but not children from other countries including those in Central America, regardless of the position of those governments.

No one knows these vulnerabilities better than transnational criminal organizations who are continually working to exploit vulnerable people in the Northern Triangle and the weaknesses in our system. The message from the smuggling organizations to parents in Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador is clear: If you bring a child, you will gain entry to the United States and you will be allowed to stay.

There are solutions to this crisis. We need to continue to support the governments in Central America to improve economic opportunities to address poverty and hunger and to improve governance and security. The administration announced $5.8 billion in aid and investment commitments in December. We must work with the new administration in Mexico on addressing the transnational criminal organizations that prey on migrants and incentivize this traffic. We must invest in border security, including a modern border barrier system, additional agents and officers, technology to screen vehicles, and air and marine support. And we will put the investments in the Fiscal Year 19 appropriations bill to good use.

But we also face an acute need for legislative action to address the gaps in the legal framework, given the challenges I outlined here today. Every single day, smugglers and traffickers profit from human misery by exploiting people who are seeking a better life. Through human smuggling, transnational criminal organizations have established a new multi-billion dollar line of business. The situation is not safe for migrants. It challenges our ability to provide humanitarian care. It contributes to dangerous conditions on our border and enables smuggling, while enriching criminals. Regardless of anyone's preferred policy outcome, the status quo is unacceptable. It presents an urgent and increasing crisis that needs to be addressed.

Thank you. We'll be happy to take some of your questions.

**Reporter:** You mentioned the need for legal framework / legislation by congress. Would you say that that is a higher priority than extending physical barriers at the southern border beyond what was already what was already appropriated in FY 2019?

**Commissioner:** Well, I think we need to do both. We're facing both a border security and a humanitarian crisis. The vulnerabilities in the legal framework are creating the incentives for families and children to come to the border while we still face significant numbers of single adults trying to evade capture and increased narcotics smuggling between ports of entry. That's what the border barrier system and the technology between ports of entry helps us address. So we absolutely need help on both sides.

**Reporter:** If I could just get one follow up: Which one do you think should be done faster?

**Commissioner:** Well if we could get bipartisan action to address the crisis that we're outlining, legislation could be completed faster. But we're also moving out very quickly on the border wall system.

**Reporter (Quinn):** These numbers are used as a proxy for the flows across the border. But how much of that can just be attributed to your agents having more resources and doing a better job of apprehending people as we build up certain border areas.

**Commissioner:** That's an important point. So are our surveillance capability, our ability to interdict those who do cross, is at its highest level ever in terms of a border security capability to identify and interdict crossings. And as you note, families and children are not trying to evade capture. They're presenting. So we're capturing just about all folks who cross between ports of entry in terms of families and children. That said, we know that single adults continue to try to evade capture. We know that that smugglers try to use the current flow on the humanitarian side to bring in drugs and contraband, and we want to make sure we don't miss anybody. So we need that dual investment on the border security side and changes to help us on the humanitarian side.

**Unknown Reporter:** As far as the migrant protection protocols, which in a call last week they mentioned is going to extend to other locations along the border, how does the medical aspect of this factor into that. For example if you have someone that comes in they have a medical issue will you treat them the same and then will they be returned Mexico? How will that play out?

**Commissioner:** So on the medical side, having the ability to provide certified medical practitioner for care at our major ports of entry is absolutely part of our medical expansions, and not just for Border Patrol stations. We have that ability at San Ysidro. We want expanded to places like El Paso, where we see a lot of migrants arriving undocumented, as well as Nogales and other places along the border. So, if somebody comes in who's very ill, we will try to address that and treat them on arrival. What the Migrant Protection Protocols will allow us to do is to create additional access for people that are seeking to present asylum claims or are undocumented and then a dedicated court docket to hear those claims more expeditiously.

**AC Meehan:** Last question.

**Reporter:** So with the numbers that you've seen in January and February, what is the expected forecast for the rest of the year?

**Commissioner**: So typically we see seasonal increases in March, April, and May. The patterns that we're seeing right now are very similar to what we saw in Fiscal Year 14, which led to the first significant surge of families and children. So we're very concerned that we're going to see numbers continue to rise into March, April, and May - especially with these new diversified offerings that smugglers are presenting to bring families to the border more quickly.

**AC Meehan:** Thank you, sir. Happy to follow up with anybody with any additional questions. Again, the stats are going to be posted on the 2 o'clock. And please don't hesitate to contact CBP OPA with any additional follow ups.

Thank you.