

## International

# Roma, Texas: Border town at center of immigration wave

## Hundreds of undocumented immigrants take first steps into US

**ROMA, US:** Around midnight, Silvia hears the doorbell ring at her home in the small community of Roma, Texas, where she is a teacher. When she answers the door, she finds a young girl, soaked and begging for help. Silvia lives opposite a sandy path that sees hundreds of undocumented immigrants take their first steps into the United States after crossing the Rio Grande from Mexico.

The 11,000 inhabitants of this Rio Grande Valley border town and these undocumented immigrants have lived alongside each other for decades. There are mixed feelings among residents about the new arrivals: compassion and empathy for those looking for a better future—just like many of their own families did years ago—but also worry and even fear about the growing number of people coming to their community in recent months. Lately, there have sometimes been up to 500 people who cross the river in Roma per night, including families and children who have traveled alone.

“What are we going to do with all these children?” Silvia wondered. “Where are we going to put them? We also have people here who need help,” she said, standing in the door of her modest house, where she has installed security cameras. The 58-year-old ultimately gave dry clothes to the girl that night—she had fallen out of a smuggler’s boat and nearly drowned—but Silvia didn’t want to lend the

child her phone to make a call. “There are too many,” she said. “I’m afraid. Something has to be done.”

Roma is a national historical site, founded 250 years ago and known for its bird watching opportunities. The large majority of those who live there speak Spanish as well as English, are of Mexican descent, and work in the public sector or for oil pipelines. And Joe Biden won the 2020 presidential vote in Roma—just.

### Empathy

“We empathize with immigrants because we know their experiences. Their stories are our stories also,” Roma Mayor Jaime Escobar said. “The only concern that I have as mayor is if it becomes an increased problem that we can’t control.” Over the course of three nights, AFP journalists saw hundreds of immigrants cross the river in rowboats, most of them coming from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador—escaping hunger, violence and poverty.

Families and children turn themselves over to US Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) and are detained. About 80 percent of the lone children and teenagers already have at least some family in the United States, and the Biden administration’s policy is to reunite the children with their relatives in the US—unlike under former president Donald Trump whose officials deported them. Some families are able to

claim asylum and are released from detention to await their hearings. Others are turned back.

But there are also adults who come alone and intend to escape detention entirely. It’s no easy feat—there is a strong law enforcement presence in Roma and the surrounding area as Biden seeks to assure critics that the border is not wide open and that single undocumented adults will be deported.

There were nearly 100,000 undocumented immigrants arrested at the border in February, a return to numbers not seen since mid-2019, before the COVID-19 pandemic. For Dina Garcia Pena, founder of local newspaper El Tejano, “there isn’t anybody here who doesn’t understand the fight for a better life.” “A lot of people came from Mexico. My dad was undocumented. We leave water outside in case of emergency, we never deny a phone to anyone,” she said. But “we are seeing really large groups of 400 people.”

### The wall

“The government has to (do) something about these people, they are looking for a place to live here, but there’s too many coming from out there,” local school custodian Tony Sandoval said, dressed in jeans, a cowboy shirt and straw hat. The 67-year-old said he sometimes gives food to the migrants who pass his house, but he is furious that his fence on Roma’s outskirts frequently gets broken down.

Sandoval pointed to an incomplete portion of the reddish-brown border wall that runs between nearby sorghum and cotton farms—a cornerstone Trump project—and said he would like to see it finished. Biden, who promised to reverse many of Trump’s anti-immigration policies, halted work on the wall when he took office two months ago. Luis Silva, a pastor at Bethel Mission Outreach Center who is also in favor of the wall, greets immigrants at the riverbank, brings them water and escorts them to CBP. But in his pocket, he carries a 9 mm Smith and Wesson gun. “It’s never my plan to use it, but...” he trailed off. “There has to be a way to stop this thing,” Silva said. “I almost was attacked in my house” by a migrant, he added. “We are the Wild West pretty much around here. We just have to watch out for our people.”—AFP

technology, these two tender-aged siblings would have been exposed to the harsh elements of desert environment for hours,” Chavez said. The United States is facing an increase of migrant arrivals at the country’s southern border, mostly Central Americans who say they are fleeing poverty and violence in their own countries.

Recently, there has been an average of 500 unaccompanied children crossing each day. President Joe Biden’s administration is facing growing pressure to confront the situation and criticisms about how the unaccompanied minors have been cared for while under US government custody.

According to official statistics, the Department of Health and Human Services had 12,918 migrant children in their care as of Tuesday, while CBP was responsible for the care of another 5,285. —AFP



Rosibel Emerita Arriaza, the mother of Salvadoran woman Victoria Esperanza Salazar Arriaza, who died on March 27, 2021. — AFP

## Mother of Salvadoran killed by Mexican police seeks Biden help

**SAN SALVADOR, El Salvador:** The mother of a Salvadoran woman who died at the hands of Mexican police asked US President Joe Biden Wednesday to grant refuge to the victim’s young daughters. Rosibel Arriaza, mother of Victoria Salazar, spoke to AFP as she was preparing to leave for Mexico from El Salvador to recover her daughter’s body and be reunited with her granddaughters, aged 15 and 16 — one of whom had gone missing but has since been located.

“I’m afraid that something will happen to my girls in Mexico and I don’t want to bring them to El Salvador either. I want to ask the president (Joe) Biden to help me... and give refuge to my grandchildren in the United States,” Arriaza told AFP by telephone. According to Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, Salazar was “subdued by four individuals” on Saturday in the Caribbean beach resort of Tulum. “She was brutally treated and murdered. It fills us with sorrow, pain and shame,” he said on Monday.

“All those responsible are going to be punished. They are already in the process of being prosecuted and there will be no impunity,” the president vowed. The 36-year-old mother of two had lived in Mexico for five years and worked in a hotel, according to her family in El Salvador.

Oscar Montes de Oca, prosecutor for the state of Quintana Roo, home to Tulum, said Salazar was involved in an altercation with the manager of a grocery store, who called the police. He said the police used “disproportionate force” against Salazar, which caused a fatal spine fracture.

Salazar’s mother has likened her killing to the treatment in the United States of George Floyd, who died as a policeman knelt on his neck. Montes de Oca said the four officers suspected in Salazar’s death were in custody and would be brought before a judge to face charges of femicide, punishable by up to 50 years in prison. —AFP



ROMA: The entrance to a border crossing in the southern Texas border city of Roma. The 11,000 inhabitants of the Texas border town Roma have been living with illegal immigrants for decades. — AFP

## Two children dropped over US-Mexico border wall

**WASHINGTON:** Two small Ecuadoran girls, three and five years old, were hoisted over and dropped from the top of a 14-foot wall marking the US-Mexican border in the middle of the night before being picked up by US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officers, the agency said

Wednesday. “On Tuesday evening, a Santa Teresa agent utilizing camera technology observed a smuggler dropping two young children from the top of the approximately 14-foot-high (four-meter-high) border barrier,” CBP said in a statement. The children were taken to a CBP station in Santa Teresa, New Mexico to be evaluated by medical personnel, and then were transported to a local hospital as a precaution. CBP said the girls remain in the agency’s custody.

“I’m appalled by the way these smugglers viciously dropped innocent children from a 14-foot border barrier last night,” chief patrol agent Gloria Chavez said in a statement.

Chavez said US agents are working with Mexican authorities to identify those responsible. “If not for the vigilance of our agents using mobile