

International

Would-be immigrants see a ray of hope in re-opened US border

'I would even cross by river if needs be'

SAN YSIDRO, US: Maria fled the violent drug gangs of Michoacan with just three changes of clothes, and traveled 1,500 miles (2,500 kilometers) to the edge of Mexico where she now waits to claim political asylum in the United States. The 38-year-old is part of a record wave of Central and Southern Americans trying to escape violence and poverty at home and make a new life in the world's richest country over the last year, even as its borders have been shut because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Now they have opened again, Maria sees a chink of light. "Now I have hope," she told AFP in a makeshift camp in Tijuana, where hundreds have gathered waiting to travel a few miles north across the frontier.

"We came to get away from organized crime. Not because we are criminals," says Maria, whose real name is being withheld at her request. Her eldest son was recruited by a brutal gang last year. That was when the threats began.

This year she, her husband, two young children and other family members gathered their meager possessions and headed north, in the hope of getting over the border somehow. Migration advocates say if they can just make it onto US soil, they can tell a border guard they want asylum and will be dealt with in-country.

But with the border closed to all but US nationals, legal residents and certain exempt individuals, getting across was not possible and she had to stake her asylum claim from Mexico. That was six months ago. While she waits, she lives in the grubby and crowded El Chaparral camp, where dozens of families seek out an existence in flimsy tents.

'I would cross by river'

When the border swung open again this week, fellow resident Perez was also flooded with hope. "I was very happy," she said. Life in a camp with no electricity is not easy, she adds, though she is hopeful her request for asylum will be granted.

"But if they deny me political asylum, my thought is to cross illegally. I would even cross by river if needs be." In the 12 months

Forced displacement swelled in first half of 2021: UN

GENEVA: The number of people fleeing war, conflict and persecution rose significantly during the first half of 2021, driven especially by the millions more displaced inside their own countries, the UN said yesterday. In a fresh report, the United Nations refugee agency estimated that by the end of June, more than 84 million people worldwide were living as refugees, asylum seekers, or in so-called internal displacement within their own countries.

That marks a hike of about two million people from an already record high at the end of 2020. "The international community is failing to prevent violence, persecution and human rights violations, which continue to drive people from their homes," UN refugee chief Filippo Grandi said in a statement.

In its mid-year trends report, the agency warned that many of those fleeing their homes were facing additional challenges due to COVID-19, extreme weather and other effects of climate change. Some 26.5 million people were living as refugees by the end of June, including some 6.6 million Syrians, 5.7 million Palestinians, and 2.7 million Afghans.

Some 3.9 million Venezuelans were also displaced beyond their

to September, the United States recorded 1.7 million people entering illegally at the southwest border, the highest figure since records began in 1960.

Those illegal crossings are high, says University of San Diego School of Political Science Director David Shirk, because there is no legitimate route. "By restricting... crossing for asylum purposes, what US border policies have done is to create a very, very large and desperate population of people waiting on the Mexican side," he said. Many are "trying to wait their turn, but finding that the length of time is too long."

'If we wait... we get killed'

For Margarita, waiting was never an option. She and her husband Luis and their two children fled their native Bogota after being threatened by members of the FARC, Colombia's main armed rebel group.

Like other people AFP spoke to for this piece, the couple declined to give their real names. Margarita says she ruled out legal routes for migration because they would just take too long. "I said 'if I wait to do it in 2022 or 2023, they kill us.'" They packed four suitcases and left for Mexico. In Tijuana, they followed directions until they reached a river that marks the border, which they waded into. As the water rose to their chests, they lost almost everything.

"All we had left were our papers, our bible and two changes of clothes," says Margarita, showing their belongings in two nylon sacks.

US authorities took them to a detention center and separated them for three days. The couple and their five-year-old son were transferred to a migrant shelter operated by Catholic charities in San Diego to await a court hearing, while their 19-year-old daughter remained in the detention center. As Margarita was speaking to an AFP team, her daughter phoned and the two spoke for the first time in ten days. "Forgive me, forgive me," she sobbed as she gazed at the video of her daughter on the screen.

For David Shirk, the post-COVID economic boom in the

borders without being considered refugees, while 4.4 million people were registered worldwide as asylum seekers. While those numbers marked small hikes, most of the increase in global displacement seen during the first half of the year was due to people fleeing inside their countries, especially in Africa, UNHCR said.

More than 4.3 million people were estimated to have become newly internally displaced across dozens of countries between January and June — 50 percent more than during the first half of 2020, the report showed. Intensifying violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Ethiopia, with its escalating conflict in Tigray, forced more than one million people to flee internally in each of those countries.

Active conflicts and violence also pushed up internal displacement in places like Myanmar, Afghanistan, Mozambique and South Sudan, UNHCR said. Meanwhile, fewer than one million internally displaced people were able to return home during the first half of 2021, leaving a full 51 million worldwide living in internal displacement at the end of June, up from 48 million six months earlier.

The vast majority of refugees are hosted in countries neighbouring crisis areas, mainly in poorer parts of the world, while IDPs often find accommodation in already struggling communities. "It is the communities and countries with the fewest resources that continue to shoulder the greatest burden in protecting and caring for the forcibly displaced," Grandi said. "They must be better supported by the rest of the international community." — AFP



SAN DIEGO: Colombian Margarita Padilla reacts on a phone call with her son nearby in their room at a migrant shelter run by Catholic charities in San Diego, California on Tuesday. — AFP

United States is likely to attract more immigrants in search of work, making fixing the migration system a priority. He sees little material difference between policies pursued under President Joe Biden and those of his predecessor Donald Trump. — AFP

US prosecutors seek four years' jail for Capitol riot 'shaman'

WASHINGTON: US prosecutors are demanding 51 months behind bars for the self-proclaimed "shaman" who joined the January 6 assault on the Capitol building wearing a horned buffalo headdress, court documents revealed. Jacob Chansley, whose painted face, bare chest and horned headgear made him an icon of the attack on the Capitol in a bid to stop the election results being validated, was arrested days after the storming of the seat of the US government.

Facing as much as 20 years behind bars, Chansley, who became known as the "QAnon shaman" after a conspiracy-theory website popular on the far-right, pleaded guilty to unlawful trespassing and violent conduct in early September in federal court in Washington.

His lawyer, citing his client's "sincere remorse," his psychological problems and the 317 days already spent in custody, appealed to the "court's compassion" to impose a sentence "significantly below the range" set out in federal guidelines.

Carrying a US flag fastened to a six-foot spear and sporting numerous tattoos on his bare torso, Chansley, from Phoenix, Arizona, participated in the invasion of Congress with thousands of supporters of then-president Donald Trump to prevent elected officials from validating the victory of Democrat Joe Biden in the presidential election. — AFP