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DEMOCRATIC WOMEN'S CAUCUS
CONGRESSIONAL PROGRESSIVE CAUCUS
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NEW DEMOCRAT COALITION

The Honorable Robert Salesses
Acting Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon, Washington, DC 20301

The Honorable Caleb Vitello
Acting Director Immigration and Customs Enforcement
500 12th St. SW Washington, DC 20536

The Honorable Benjamine Huffman
Acting Secretary of Homeland Security
3801 Nebraska Ave., NW Washington, DC 20528

January 24, 2025

As the Member of Congress representing El Paso and Fort Bliss, I write to you with urgent concerns regarding the recently announced mobilization of 1,500 active-duty military personnel to the U.S.-Mexico border for the purposes of border enforcement and the use of our military aircraft to conduct removal flights out of our military installations. I am deeply concerned about the impact these immigration priorities, which do not fall under the primary purview of DoD, U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM), or U.S. Transportation Command (USTRANSCOM), will have on Fort Bliss, the installation's resources, and the readiness of our active-duty troops.

Leveraging our military's airlift capabilities for the purposes of removal flights, traditionally coordinated and executed by U.S. Immigration Customs and Enforcement (ICE)¹, appears to be in violation of DoD's constitutional authorities and the Posse Comitatus Act, and a serious misuse of DoD's appropriated funds. Further, this action is wildly mismatched with President Trump and Secretary of Defense nominee Hegseth's stated goals of refocusing the Department on its warfighting mission. Moreover, while El Paso is a proud and storied military community, I believe this administration has a responsibility to clearly convey as much information as possible

¹ <https://www.ice.gov/about-ice/ero>

about the impacts this increased militarization of the southern border will have on communities like my own.

I urge DoD to provide answers to the following questions:

1. The Department of Defense has announced it will send “1,500 active-duty service members and additional air and intelligence assets” to the southern border.² That number comes in addition to the 2,500 active-duty personnel already working the border support mission. It has also been reported that up to 10,000 troops could be deployed for this purpose in the future.³
 - a. Approximately how many service members will be stationed at Fort Bliss and the El Paso area?
 - b. What considerations, if any, will be given to the costs accrued by Fort Bliss and Joint Task Force-North (JTF-N) as this mission set develops in the coming weeks and months?
2. How does the diversion of up to 10,000 troops for this purpose impact the readiness of the supporting divisions and their ability to complete their respective missions?
3. What measures are being taken to ensure the additional troops deployed to support JTF-N's mission will comply with regulations in accordance with the Posse Comitatus Act?
4. What legal justification is USTRANSCOM using to ensure compliance with the restrictions imposed by the Posse Comitatus Act?
5. Public reporting indicates that to date, USTRANSCOM has supplied a total of four military aircraft for the purposes of this mission⁴.
 - a. Is USTRANSCOM anticipating orders to provide additional aircraft for this mission?
 - b. Will USTRANSCOM or U.S. Northern Command be covering the costs accrued to support this mission, and if so, from which funding accounts?
 - c. Will DoD seek reimbursement to cover these operating costs?
6. What measures are being implemented to ensure the continued security of the airfields at which these TRANSCOM flights will be landing?
 - a. What guidance has been given to installations supporting these missions out of their airfields regarding base access for DHS detainees?
 - b. How long are DHS detainees expected to remain on military installations prior to departure of their removal flights?

I am similarly concerned about the circumstances that necessitated the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) using military aircraft to carry out removal flights. Migrant crossings at the U.S.-

² [DOD Orders 1,500 Troops, Additional Assets to Southern Border > U.S. Department of Defense > Defense Department News](#)

³ <https://thehill.com/homenews/5101271-us-military-border-deployment/>

⁴ [US military aircraft to be used for deportation flights](#)

Mexico border are currently at their lowest levels in four years⁵ as a result of former President Biden's executive action on asylum in June 2024 and increased enforcement measures undertaken by Mexico.

El Paso, in collaboration with federal partners within DHS, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), and local branches of U.S. Custom and Border Protection (CBP) and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), has managed changing immigration flows in the community for decades, including during historic highs over the past eight years. While there have been collaborations with Fort Bliss in extreme situations in the past – to house desperate migrant children separated from their parents during the first Trump administration, and again to house Afghan evacuees in 2021 – the current state of play⁶ in El Paso does not merit actions as drastic as utilizing DoD aircraft for removal flights, especially when ICE already carries out deportation flights through ICE Air aircraft. However, on January 23, 2025, a U.S. Air Force C-17 aircraft departed Fort Bliss for Guatemala⁷, with 80 passengers onboard who had been identified for removal. Given that, in 2024, ICE carried out 508 deportation flights to Guatemala through ICE Air and averaged 125 passengers per flight⁸, engaging a C-17 for 80 passengers seems like a gross and indefensible misuse of our military assets.

I urge DHS to provide answers to the following questions:

1. Given that migrant crossings at the U.S.-Mexico border have reached their lowest levels in over four years, what circumstances have necessitated the deployment of additional military personnel and the engagement of military assets to assist with immigration enforcement and removal actions out of military airfields, as opposed to the standard practice for coordinating and executing removal flights through ICE Air?
2. How are individuals being identified for removal?
 - a. Are these individuals in the custody of ICE, or are they being detained at El Paso's Central Processing Center (CPC) or the El Paso Sector Hardened Facility (EHF)?
 - b. How is DHS prioritizing individuals for removal?
 - c. What are the nationalities of the individuals being removed?
 - d. Are all passengers aboard removal flights nationals of the country to which they are being removed?
3. How many removal flights is DHS planning to have USTRANSCOM complete a day?
 - a. How is DHS determining the destination of removal flights?
 - b. How far in advanced is DHS determining the destinations of arrival flights?

⁵ <https://apnews.com/article/immigration-biden-trump-cbp-mayorkas-59f19e61a710f8c09e20cb265f042383>

⁶ [Migrant encounters in El Paso sector lowest in years, continuing trend](https://www.airandspaceforces.com/air-force-c-17s-first-deportation-flights-guatemala/)

⁷ <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/air-force-c-17s-first-deportation-flights-guatemala/>

⁸ <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5e221cacff87ba2d2833cf54/t/6777fd94b68ef61ee9346e6d/1735916959567/ICE+Air+DecTHCPDF.pdf>

- c. What diplomatic arrangements have been established to ensure safe landing of U.S. military aircraft and intake and processing of DHS detainees into the countries to which they are being transferred?
4. Is DHS clearly and reliably communicating information to the DoD and Department of State on the individuals designated for removal and destinations of removal flights?
5. How will these removal operations impact the daily critical functions of ICE and U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents?

I look forward to hearing from both Departments on this serious issue as soon as possible.

Sincerely,



Veronica Escobar
Member of Congress

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