

Asylum Processing at the U.S.-Mexico Border

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BY STEPHANIE LEUTERT AND CAITLYN YATES

The University of Texas at Austin



INTRODUCTION

In recent years, hundreds of thousands of migrants have sought asylum annually along the U.S.-Mexico border—either by arriving at ports of entry or by turning themselves in to Border Patrol agents. In response, U.S. authorities have enacted a range of policies, which have oscillated between channeling asylum seekers into specific legal pathways and either partially or fully blocking their access to the U.S. immigration system. During each shift, migrants have reacted in varying ways, such as by creating asylum waitlists or encampments along the border.

In November 2018, the Robert Strauss Center for International Security and Law at the University of Texas at Austin began publishing quarterly reports on asylum processing at ports of entry. As of January 20, 2025, there is no longer any asylum processing at the border. On this day, President Donald Trump assumed office for a second term and immediately halted all asylum processing—including both at and between ports of entry. This shift left hundreds of thousands of asylum seekers in limbo across Mexico, without any path to make an asylum claim in the United States.

Simultaneously, the Mexican federal government has also increased its immigration enforcement at its borders and across the country’s interior. Specifically, it has expanded the number of migration-focused checkpoints on highways heading north, deployed more soldiers to the U.S.-Mexico border, and bussed apprehended migrants to cities in southern Mexico. The Trump Administration’s elimination of foreign assistance has also hurt Mexican civil society organizations, with some migrant shelters struggling to provide food and other basic resources.

This February 2025 asylum processing update focuses on current U.S. asylum policies at ports of entry and migrants’ experiences in Mexican border cities. It draws on phone and WhatsApp interviews with Mexican government officials and members of civil society organizations on both sides of the border from February 17, 2025 through February 24, 2025. It also relies on local news articles to fill in any gaps.

Asylum Processing Phases

Over the past six and a half years, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has passed through seven different asylum processing phases at ports of entry. These phases have alternated between allowing asylum seekers to make protection claims at ports of entry and either partially or fully blocking asylum processing. See Figure 1 for a breakdown of each phase.

Figure 1: Asylum Processing Phases at Ports of Entry Along the U.S.-Mexico Border

Phase	Time Period	Phase Name	CBP Processed Asylum Seekers at Port of Entry	Method to Access Port of Entry	Asylum Seekers Processed by Date of Arrival at Border
1	June 2018 - March 2020	Metering	Yes	Waitlist and lines at port of entry	Yes ¹
2	March 2020 - April 2022	Title 42	No	N/A	N/A
3	Summer 2021 & April 2022 - January 2023	Title 42 Exemptions	Only vulnerable individuals	Waitlist	Varied by organizing entity
4	January 2023 - May 2023	CBP One and Title 42	Yes ²	CBP One appointment	No
5	May 2023 - June 2024	CBP One and Walk Ups	Yes	CBP One appointment Waitlist and lines at port of entry	No Varied by organizing entity
6	June 2024 - January 2025	CBP One and June 2024 Emergency Declaration	Yes	N/A	N/A
7	January 2025 - Present	Executive Order Against Invasion	No	N/A	N/A

Author's elaboration.

In June 2018, CBP launched its first attempt to restrict asylum seekers' access to ports of entry. During this first phase, CBP officers initiated a process that came to be known as "metering." As part of this metering process, port officials informed arriving asylum seekers that U.S. ports of entry were full and only accepted a specified number of individuals per port of entry each day. In response, migrants waited in physical lines in front of the ports of entry and later relied on self- or externally-run waitlists in Mexican border cities, which acted as proxy lines for asylum seekers.

In March 2020, as Covid-19 began to spread across the United States, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) issued a public health regulation for Covid-19—referred to as Title 42 authority—that eliminated all asylum processing at ports of entry. This second processing phase resulted in the suspension of asylum waitlists in Mexican border cities and migrants were stuck in limbo at the U.S.-Mexico border. The following year, in 2021, CBP created various temporary Title 42 exemption programs, which then became permanent in April 2022. These exemption programs constituted the third processing phase, whereby CBP officers allowed certain migrants—who were deemed to be vulnerable—to cross at ports of entry and seek asylum.

In January 2023, CBP launched a new model of asylum processing: the “CBP One” mobile application. At this time, Title 42 remained active but CBP required that asylum seekers use the mobile application to request an appointment at a U.S. port of entry—leading to the fourth processing phase. Individuals located in Mexico could submit certain information on the CBP One application—including biographical and demographic details, travel history, and their sponsor information—and request a processing appointment at one of the participating ports of entry along the U.S.-Mexico border.

In May 2023, the Covid-19 era Title 42 public health order expired, and CBP began its fifth processing phase. During this phase, CBP continued to primarily process asylum seekers through the CBP One application, but also accepted small numbers of individuals without CBP One appointments at ports of entry, who were referred to as “walk ups.” At the same time, the Biden administration put forward a final rule titled “Circumvention of Lawful Pathways,” which banned access to asylum for non-Mexicans who crossed the border in between ports of entry or as walk ups.³ This meant that CBP officials continued to process walk ups for entry into the United States, but any non-Mexican individuals were then ineligible to apply for asylum once in U.S. territory.

In June 2024, CBP entered its sixth asylum processing phase. At this time, the Biden administration issued a presidential proclamation and an interim final rule titled “Securing the Border.”⁴ This policy change allowed officials to restrict access to asylum during “emergency” conditions, which it defined as periods when the Border Patrol’s daily apprehensions surpassed an average of 2,500 encounters over seven days.⁵ Beginning in June 2024, the U.S. administration began applying the emergency restrictions at the border, and suspended walk up processing. Notably, during this phase, CBP officers continued to process 1,450 CBP One appointments each day.

Finally, on January 20, 2025, President Trump assumed office for his second term and immediately took steps to halt asylum processing along the border. In a series of changes, the new administration launched the seventh asylum processing phase by shutting down the CBP One application and notifying asylum seekers that all scheduled appointments were now cancelled. Later that day, the Trump Administration issued the “Guaranteeing the States Protection Against Invasion,” executive order.⁶ This executive order declared an invasion at the U.S.-Mexico border and barred asylum seekers from both entering the United States and accessing the U.S. immigration system.

Civil society organizations have immediately challenged this executive order in court. On February 3, 2025, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed a lawsuit on behalf of three civil society organizations along the U.S.-Mexico border, alleging that the executive order violates federal laws.⁷ However, even if a court blocks this specific executive order, migrants would still not necessarily be able to seek asylum at ports of entry. If there is not a court-ordered path for seeking asylum, the combination of the previous Biden Administration

restrictions and the shuttered CBP One application would continue to block all asylum processing at ports of entry.

Conditions Across Mexico and Along the U.S.-Mexico Border

Since the Trump Administration assumed office and halted asylum processing at the border, the conditions along the border have changed dramatically. The administration cancelled approximately 30,000 scheduled CBP One appointments and closed the pathway for an estimated 200,000 to 270,000 asylum seekers in Mexico who were actively seeking these appointments.⁸ Many of these individuals have left Mexican border cities, with some traveling to larger interior cities—such as Monterrey and Mexico City—and others returning to their cities of origin. A small number of asylum seekers have also crossed into the United States as clandestine migrants between ports of entry.

This report estimates that approximately 13,000 individuals remain in Mexican border cities. These individuals are concentrated in Reynosa, Ciudad Juárez, and Tijuana, with these three cities hosting approximately 80 percent of the border's estimated migrant population. This is likely the lowest number of migrants in Mexican border cities since 2019 or 2020. These migrants are also less visible than in the past. Many people have moved out of the cities' shelters and into rented rooms and apartments, and there are no longer any tent encampments along the border.

In recent months, Mexico has also stepped up its immigration enforcement efforts. During the end of the Biden Administration, Mexico's National Migration Institute (*Instituto Nacional de Migración*, INM) began apprehending more migrants and bussing those apprehended asylum seekers to cities in southern Mexico.⁹ This has continued into the Trump Administration, with INM and the country's National Guard (*Guardia Nacional*) erecting more checkpoints on north-bound highways. Further, in early February 2025, under threat of U.S. tariffs, Mexico agreed to deploy 10,000 additional National Guard members to the country's northern border.¹⁰

Another significant shift in border cities is the federal government's new reception centers for receiving Mexican deportees from the United States. In response to the Trump Administration's promise to increase deportations, Mexico launched the program "Mexico Hugs You" ("*Méjico Te Abraza*") to receive deported Mexicans. The program's primary component involves reception centers in cities, including Matamoros, Reynosa, Nuevo Laredo, Ciudad Juárez, Nogales, San Luis Río Colorado, Mexicali, and Tijuana. The Mexican Army (*Secretaría de la Defensa Nacional*, SEDENA), the Marines (*Marina*), and the National Guard run these centers, which aim to assist recently deported individuals with legal documents, information about social programs, clothes, and other basic supplies. Buses then transport these individuals into Mexico's interior.

In addition to Mexican deportees, Mexico is also receiving some non-Mexican citizens from the United States. During the Biden Administration, Mexico agreed to accept up to 30,000 people per month from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuela.¹¹ This practice has continued into the Trump Administration, with Mexico also now reportedly accepting individuals from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. However, unlike Mexican deportees, these individuals are not routed through the new border reception centers. Instead, they are generally bussed immediately to Mexico's interior cities and southern border. During the first four weeks of the Trump Administration, Mexico received 3,091 individuals who were not Mexican citizens.¹²

Historically, civil society organizations have supported Mexico's migrant population, including waiting asylum seekers, migrants in transit, and deportees. However, the Trump Administration's efforts to dismantle the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and halt foreign aid have slashed funds for many of these organizations. For example, Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) announced that it was closing all of its operations in northern Mexico, and Asylum Access has noted that it will have limited hiring across Mexico.¹³ Additionally, the foreign aid freeze also affects local organizations, including migrant shelters across the country that provide people with food, housing, and basic services.¹⁴

Overall, migrants continue to face unstable living conditions and security risks throughout Mexico. Civil society organizations have detailed widespread violence against asylum seekers both in southern Mexico and in cities along the U.S.-Mexico border.¹⁵ Certain groups of asylum seekers also continue to experience additional challenges, with Black, LGBTQ+, Indigenous, and non-Spanish speaking asylum seekers often facing targeted discrimination. The following sections of this report detail the conditions for waiting asylum seekers in ten Mexican border cities.

Asylum Processing: February 2025

Mexican City	# of People Estimated in City	City Conditions
Matamoros, Tamaulipas	~800 people <i>February 17, 2025</i>	<p>In mid-January 2025—when the Trump Administration shut down the CBP One application—there were approximately 800 migrants waiting in shelters across Matamoros. Out of this population, civil society organizations estimated that 75 percent of the people already had a CBP One appointment.¹⁶</p> <p>Currently, there are an estimated 800 migrants in Matamoros (including people living in the shelters and in rented rooms and apartments). The majority of these migrants are from Mexico, followed by Cuba, Venezuela, and Honduras. Many of the migrants living in Matamoros now view their time in the city as more long-term, and are looking to find employment, enroll their children in local schools, and regularize their immigration status if they are not Mexican citizens.</p> <p>There is no longer a migrant encampment near the Rio Grande, and all of these individuals are staying in shelters and in rented rooms and apartments. Other asylum-seeking migrants have left the city and traveled to locations in Mexico's interior. A minority of people have also crossed the border between ports of entry.</p> <p>U.S. authorities are deporting Mexican and small numbers of non-Mexican citizens to Matamoros. Mexican authorities transfer Mexican deportees to the city's new reception center, where they spend a short period of time before being bussed to locations in the country's interior.¹⁷</p> <p>There is no longer a process in the city for crossing migrants undergoing medical emergencies into the United States.</p>
Reynosa, Tamaulipas	~4,500 people <i>February 16, 2025</i>	<p>Currently, there are an estimated 700 migrants staying in Reynosa's shelters. Many other migrants are staying in rented rooms around the city.¹⁸ The vast majority of these migrants are from other parts of Mexico or Honduras, with fewer numbers of people from Venezuela and other Latin American and Caribbean countries.</p>

Asylum Processing: February 2025 (continued)

Mexican City	# of People Estimated in City	City Conditions
Reynosa, Tamaulipas (continued)		<p>Some migrants have left Reynosa and traveled to other Mexican cities, such as Monterrey and Mexico City. While more than 300 migrants have also boarded buses to Mexico's southern border—specifically Villahermosa, Tabasco and Tapachula, Chiapas—that were organized by Mexico's National Migration Institute and the International Organization for Migration (IOM).¹⁹</p> <p>The security situation in Reynosa continues to be challenging. Shelter directors note that many migrants arriving in the city were previously kidnapped. These individuals were often released after family members paid between US\$1,000 and \$3,000 per person. One civil society organization representative noted that kidnappers were even counting pregnant women as two people and requiring ransom payments for both the woman and her unborn child.²⁰</p> <p>U.S. authorities are deporting Mexican and small numbers of non-Mexican citizens to Reynosa. Mexican authorities transfer Mexican deportees to the city's new reception center, where they spend a short period of time before being bussed to locations in the country's interior.</p>
Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas	<p>~50 people</p> <p><i>February 18, 2025</i></p>	<p>When the Trump Administration cancelled CBP One appointments, there were around 400 migrants in the city.²¹ These individuals were mostly arriving for their CBP One appointments. Civil society groups report that there are now very few migrants in the city or residing in the shelters.</p> <p>In recent months, both the Casa del Migrante Nazareth and Amar migrant shelters reopened after being closed for more than a year. In February 2025, the Archdiocese of Nuevo Laredo, who had run the Casa del Migrante Nazareth for more than 20 years, announced that they were leaving the city. In their place, a local presbyterian minister will now run the shelter.²²</p> <p>The city's security situation continues to be challenging. On February 3, 2025, there were multiple clashes between members of the Cartel del Noreste and Mexican authorities. In response, the Nuevo Laredo International Airport temporarily shut down and U.S. officials issued a shelter in place order for the city.²³</p>

Asylum Processing: February 2025 (continued)

Mexican City	# of People Estimated in City	City Conditions
Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas (continued)		U.S. authorities deport Mexican and small numbers of non-Mexican citizens to Nuevo Laredo. Mexican authorities transfer Mexican deportees to the city's new reception center, where they spend a short period of time before being bussed to locations in the country's interior.
Piedras Negras, Coahuila	<p>~100 people <i>February 17, 2025</i></p>	<p>In early January 2025—when the Trump Administration shut down the CBP One application—there were approximately 350 migrants in and around Piedras Negras, and around 20 migrants waiting in the city's shelters with CBP One appointments.²⁴</p> <p>Since late January 2025, the number of migrants in Piedras Negras has dropped markedly. Migrants have left the city and traveled to larger metropolitan zones—such as Monterrey—in search of jobs. Other individuals are trying to figure out how to return to their countries of origin.</p> <p>As of February 17, 2025, civil society organizations in Piedras Negras reported that there are fewer than 100 migrants in the city. The majority of these migrants are from Honduras, El Salvador, and Venezuela. Most are currently attempting to regularize their immigration status in Mexico or are figuring out how to leave the city. A few new migrants arrive to Piedras Negras each day and attempt to irregularly cross the Rio Grande.</p> <p>U.S. authorities are deporting Mexican and small numbers of non-Mexican citizens to Piedras Negras. Mexican authorities bus the Mexican citizens to the new reception center in Nueva Rosita, which is about an hour and a half away from Piedras Negras.²⁵</p>
Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua	<p>~2,500-3,000 migrants <i>February 19, 2025</i></p>	In mid-January 2025—when the Trump Administration shut down the CBP One application—there were approximately 3,000 migrants in Ciudad Juárez's shelters. Since CBP One's dissolution, the number of migrants in the city's shelters has declined, with shelters going from 70 percent occupancy in mid-January to about 40 percent occupancy (~1,700 migrants) in mid-February. ²⁶ However, many migrants are staying in rented spaces and hotels.

Asylum Processing: February 2025 (continued)

Mexican City	# of People Estimated in City	City Conditions
Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua <i>(continued)</i>		<p>U.S. authorities are deporting Mexican and non-Mexican citizens to Ciudad Juárez. Mexican migrants returning to the city pass through the new reception center. While non-Mexicans are bussed to Mexico's southern border. Many of these non-Mexican individuals are Venezuelan citizens, who are expelled through the Santa Teresa / San Jerónimo International Bridge.</p>
Agua Prieta, Sonora	<p>~10 people <i>February 19, 2025</i></p>	<p>When the Trump Administration shut down the CBP One application, there were only four Mexican families waiting for appointments in Agua Prieta.²⁷ As of mid-February, those four families were still in Agua Prieta.</p> <p>Local civil society organizations report that there are barely any migrants arriving to the city. Similarly, the city is not receiving many deported migrants from the United States. Between mid-January and mid-February 2025, local authorities registered only 60 deportations, which is lower than the numbers in the nearby cities of Nogales and San Luis Río Colorado.²⁸</p> <p>However, Mexican authorities created a potential reception center in the city, in case the number of deported individuals begins to increase.</p>
Nogales, Sonora	<p>~150 people <i>February 20, 2025</i></p>	<p>When the Trump Administration cancelled CBP One appointments, there were a large number of people who were stranded in Nogales. While the city normally hosts mostly Mexican migrants and asylum seekers, the stranded individuals included people from a range of countries, including Haiti and Afghanistan. However, these asylum seekers soon left Nogales. Many traveled to bigger Mexican cities, such as Mexico City or Tijuana.</p> <p>Over the past few weeks, the Kino Border Initiative reports that it has been relatively empty. However, at least 150 asylum seekers continue to wait in Nogales. These individuals are living in rented rooms around the city. Most of the non-Mexican migrants in Nogales are looking to apply for asylum in Mexico. While the Mexican migrants in the city are split regarding their future plans, with one group planning to return to their locations of origin and the other group planning on staying in Nogales.</p>

Asylum Processing: February 2025 (continued)

Mexican City	# of People Estimated in City	City Conditions
Nogales, Sonora <i>(continued)</i>		U.S. authorities deport Mexican and non-Mexican citizens to Nogales. The National Guard brings deported Mexican nationals to specific shelters in the city. Conversely, INM moves non-Mexicans directly to Hermosillo and then to the country's southern border.
San Luis Río Colorado, Sonora	<p>~15 people</p> <p><i>February 18, 2025</i></p>	<p>In mid-January 2025—when the Trump administration ended the CBP One application—there was only one family in San Luis Río Colorado that was actively seeking a CBP One appointment. After this pathway closed, the family continued to stay in the city. A local civil society organization reports that there are between 10 and 15 migrants in the city, most of whom are from Mexico.</p> <p>U.S. authorities deport mostly Mexican citizens to San Luis Río Colorado. Mexican authorities transfer these deportees to the city's new reception center, where they spend a short period of time before being bussed to locations in the country's interior.</p>
Mexicali, Baja California	<p>~1,000 people</p> <p><i>February 24, 2025</i></p>	<p>When the Trump Administration cancelled CBP One appointments, there were approximately 1,400 migrants in the city's shelters.²⁹ This included more than 170 migrants who had CBP One appointments.³⁰</p> <p>In recent weeks, the number of migrants in the city has declined slightly as some migrants have returned to their locations of origin or moved to other cities, such as Tijuana. Currently, the majority of the migrants in the city are from Honduras and Mexico, with fewer people from Guatemala and El Salvador. Shelters report being at anywhere from 35 percent to 70 percent capacity. Recently, Mexicali authorities noted that migrants arriving in the city would now be transferred to Tijuana.³¹</p> <p>U.S. authorities deport Mexican and non-Mexican citizens to Mexicali. On February 10, 2025, the first five deported Mexican men arrived at the city's new reception center.³²</p>

Asylum Processing: February 2025 (continued)

Mexican City	# of People Estimated in City	City Conditions
Tijuana, Baja California	~ 3,500 people <i>February 19, 2025</i>	<p>At the end of December 2024 and beginning of January 2025—just before the Trump administration ended the CBP One application—there were an estimated 3,800 migrants living in shelters in Tijuana.³³</p> <p>In recent weeks, the number of migrants living in Tijuana's shelters has declined.³⁴ Most migrants have stayed in the city, but have begun renting rooms. Many non-Mexican citizens are looking to regularize their immigration status in Mexico. Smaller numbers of migrants have also left Tijuana to return to their homes or have attempted to cross irregularly into the United States.³⁵</p> <p>On January 20, 2025, a small group of approximately 200 migrants formed a temporary encampment outside the El Chaparral port of entry. The group was protesting the CBP One application's dissolution and the cancellation of their scheduled appointments. However, the following day, Mexican authorities dismantled the camp and moved the migrants to nearby shelters.³⁶</p> <p>In recent months, civil society groups in Tijuana report a large influx of National Guard members. This includes a new revision point outside the San Ysidro Port of Entry, where members of the National Guard now check all U.S.-bound vehicles. Additionally, Mexican authorities have also put more migration-focused checkpoints on north-bound highways heading to Tijuana.</p> <p>U.S. authorities deport Mexican and non-Mexican citizens to Tijuana. Mexican migrants returning to the city pass through the new reception center. While non-Mexicans are bussed to Mexico's southern border.</p>

*The numbers should be interpreted as a general range rather than an exact figure.

ENDNOTES

1. During the metering phase, some waitlist managers engaged in corrupt activities that led to non-sequential processing of waiting asylum seekers.
2. During the “CBP One and Title 42” phase, individuals using the CBP One application had to attest that they met certain vulnerability requirements, which exempted them from the Title 42 health order. However, in practice, all asylum seekers could request a processing appointment through the application.
3. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services and Executive Office for Immigration Review, “Circumvention of Lawful Pathways,” Federal Register, May 16, 2023.
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5. “Securing the Border: Presidential Proclamation and Rule,” U.S. Department of Homeland Security, accessed on November 7, 2024, <https://www.dhs.gov/immigrationlaws>.
6. The White House, “Guaranteeing the States Protection Against Invasion,” January 20, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/guaranteeing-the-states-protection-against-invasion/>.
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12. Claudia Flores, “Claudia Sheinbaum niega que migrantes lleguen esposados; México ha recibido a más de 6 mil personas, incluyendo otras naciones,” *Infobae*, January 30, 2025, <https://www.infobae.com/mexico/2025/01/30/claudia-sheinbaum-niega-que-migrantes-lleguen-esposados-mexico-ha-recibido-a-mas-de-6-mil-personas-incluyendo-otras-naciones/>.
13. Maya Averbuch, “Miles de migrantes quedan a la deriva en la frontera y sin sustento en EE.UU.,” *Infobae*, February 10, 2025, <https://www.infobae.com/america/agencias/2025/02/10/miles-de-migrantes-quedan-a-la-deriva-en-la-frontera-y-sin-sustento-en-eeuu/>.
14. Salvador Rivera, “Migrant shelters in Tijuana feel pinch with no USAID money,” *KGET*, February 10, 2025, <https://www.kget.com/border-report-tour/migrant-shelters-in-tijuana-feel-pinch-with-no-usaid-money/>; Claudia Landerso, “Migrantes se quedan sin apoyo alimentario por recortes a la USAID,” *El Sol de la Laguna*, February 11, 2025, <https://oem.com.mx/elsoldelalaguna/local/migrantes-en-torreon-se-quedan-sin-apoyo-alimentario-por-recortes-a-la-usaid-21630419>.
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16. When CBP terminated the CBP One appointments, a group of around 50 migrants stormed onto the Gateway International Bridge in Matamoros. The migrants in the group were upset about the cancelled appointments and tried to run into the United States. However, U.S. authorities blocked the group’s access into the country. “Vamos a cruzar como sea: Migrantes intentan dar portazo en frontera con Estados Unidos,” *Debate*, January 22, 2025, <https://www.debate.com.mx/migracion/Vamos-a-cruzar-como-sea-Migrantes-intentan-dar-portazo-en-frontera-con-Estados Unidos-20250122-0071.html>; Ángel Arias, “El 75% de los migrantes varados en Matamoros ya contaban con una cita programada,” *Hoy Tamaulipas*, January 24, 2025, https://www.hoytamaulipas.net/notas/582027/El-75-de-los-migrantes-varados-en-Matamoros a-contaban con-una-cita-programada.html#google_vignette.
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