

## World News Roundup

## Immigration

## Refusals trap people

## Denials of US immigrant visas spike after change

WASHINGTON, April 15, (RTRS): When Arturo Balbino, a Texas construction worker, walked into his visa interview at the American consulate in the northern Mexican border town of Ciudad Juarez in March, he wasn't nervous. He felt good.

Balbino, a 33-year-old Mexican national who had entered the United States illegally 14 years ago, thought he had a strong case for a spousal visa: a wife and children who are US citizens, a father-in-law who had pledged in an affidavit to financially support him if necessary, and a letter from his employer guaranteeing him an \$18-per-hour job upon his return.

When he went for the interview, he was at the final step of legalizing his status, which would, he hoped, pave the way for a more stable life for himself and his family.



Wheeler

Instead, the consular officer denied his application on the grounds that he could become a drain on US taxpayers by requiring government financial assistance, according to documents reviewed by Reuters.

That decision stranded Balbino in Mexico indefinitely and upended his family's life.

More and more aspiring immigrants — especially Mexicans — are being denied visas based on determinations by the US State Department that they might become "public charges," dependent on the government for support, according to official data and interviews with attorneys, immigrants and their family members.

Lawyers for some immigrants say consular officers are denying visas even when applicants fulfill legal requirements to prove they will be financially independent.

The refusals, capping an often complex and lengthy application process, can trap people for months or longer outside the United States, separated from American spouses and children, as they renew their efforts to legally return. Some may never be able to go back.

One reason for the rise in refusals are little-known changes last year in the State Department's foreign affairs manual that gave diplomats wider discretion in deciding visa denials on public-charge grounds.

## Controversial

The changes occurred in January 2018 as the Department of Homeland Security was preparing a separate, highly controversial proposal to restrict immigration on public-charge grounds. The regulation, officially proposed in October, received more than 200,000 public comments, which will likely take months longer to fully evaluate.

Some critics say the State Department is using a back door, tightening immigration policy without going through a similarly high-profile rulemaking process.

"The State Department is trying to bypass public comment and implement changes to public-charge (policy) all on its own," said Charles Wheeler, an attorney with the Catholic Legal Immigration Network. "These changes are already having a terrible effect on people."

The State Department declined to comment, citing pending litigation over the manual changes.

In the lawsuit in a Maryland federal court, the government rejected accusations that the manual changes are motivated by any antipathy toward immigrants and argued that such "guidance" is not subject to court review or laws requiring public comment.

The guidance, government lawyers wrote in a February court filing, is neutral and implements a long-standing U.S. law meant to exclude immigrants who are likely to become burdens on the United States.

The government acknowledged in the filing that the guidance "could potentially lead" to more frequent public-charge denials.

The changes to the manual are not the only reason for the increase in refusals of immigrant visa applications on public-charge grounds. Those have risen since 2015, when fewer than 900 were issued, according to government data.

But after the manual changes in January 2018, the refusals shot up. In the 2018 fiscal year, which ended in September, nearly 13,500 immigrant visa applications were refused on public-charge grounds — quadruple the number in the previous fiscal year and the highest total since 2004.

Although the State Department does not release visa refusal data by nationality or consulate, immigration lawyers said public-charge enforcement is particularly rigorous at the US consulate in Ciudad Juarez, where all Mexican immigrant visa applications are processed.

## Visas

Mexicans received 11 percent fewer immigrant visas in fiscal year 2018 compared to 2017. That compares to a 4.6 percent overall decline in such visas to people of all nationalities during that period.

Previously, the State Department typically considered an "affidavit of support," signed by an American citizen or permanent resident offering to act as a sponsor of the immigrant, sufficient evidence that the person would not become a government burden, immigration lawyers said.

To qualify as a sponsor, a person must make at least 125 percent of the US poverty level for that person's household size. According to the affidavit from Balbino's father-in-law, seen by Reuters, he made almost \$90,000 a year — tens of thousands of dollars more than the government requires for a household of his size.

Now, according to the manual, the affidavit is just one factor among many. Consular officers are also now allowed to consider past or current use of public benefits — including health and nutrition services. And that includes use by an immigrant's family, even if they are citizens.

Under the previous version of the manual, consular officials were not permitted to consider the use of non-cash benefits.

Balbino's children's use of the Medicaid program for low-income households and food stamps was an issue that came up in his visa interview, along with questions about his father-in-law's commitment to supporting him, Balbino said.

Public-charge denials can be particularly devastating for people like Balbino, who entered the United States illegally, built lives and have an opportunity to legalize their status through marriage.

It's a complex process, but one many immigrants like Balbino are willing to complete. US law requires people who have been present in the United States illegally for longer than six months to leave and remain abroad for several years before attempting to re-enter.



Leslie Harrington kneels down to help a former neighbor and family friend look for jewelry in her destroyed home along Seely Drive outside of Hamilton, Miss., after a deadly storm moved through the area on April 14. (AP)

## Weather

## Thousands without electricity

## Strong storms kill at least 8

TRENTON, NJ, April 15, (AP): Powerful storms swept across the South on Sunday after unleashing suspected tornadoes and flooding that killed at least eight people, injured dozens and flattened much of a Texas town. Three children were among the dead.

Nearly 90,000 customers were without electricity in Texas, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Georgia as of midday Sunday, according to www.poweroutage.us as the severe weather left a trail of destruction.

Two children were killed on a back road in East Texas when a pine tree fell onto the car in which they were riding in a severe thunderstorm Saturday near Pollock, about 150 miles (241 km) southeast of Dallas.

The tree "flattened the car like a pancake," said Capt Alton Lenderman of the Angelina County Sheriff's Office. The children, ages 8 and 3, were dead at the scene, while both parents, who were in the front seat, escaped injury, he said.

At least one person was killed and about two dozen others were injured after a suspected tornado struck the Caddo Mounds State Historic Site in East Texas during a Native American cultural event in Alto, about 130 miles (209 km) southeast of Dallas. Cherokee County Judge Chris Davis said the fatality that was reported was of a woman who died of her critical injuries.

In neighboring Houston County, the sheriff's office said one person was killed in Weches, 6 miles southwest of Caddo Mound.

There was widespread damage in Alto, a town of about 1,200, and the school district canceled classes until its buildings can be deemed safe.

A tornado flattened much of the south side of Franklin, Texas, overturning mobile homes and damaging other residences, said Robertson County Sheriff Gerald Yezak. Franklin is about 125 miles (200 km) south of Dallas.

The weather service said preliminary information showed an EF-3 tornado touched down with winds of 140 mph (225.3 kph).

It destroyed 55 homes, a church,

four businesses, a duplex, and part of the local housing authority building, authorities said. Two people were hospitalized for injuries that were not thought to be life-threatening, while others were treated at the scene, Yezak said. Some people had to be extricated from damaged dwellings.

Heavy rains and storms raked Mississippi into the night Saturday as the storms moved east.

Roy Ratliff, 95, died after a tree crashed onto his trailer in northeastern Mississippi. Monroe County Road Manager Sonny Clay said at a news conference, adding that a tornado had struck. Nineteen residents were taken to hospitals, including two in critical condition. A tornado was reported in the area 140 miles (225 km) southeast of Memphis, Tennessee, at the time.

In Hamilton, Mississippi, 72-year-old Robert Scott said he had been sleeping in his recliner late Saturday when he was awakened and found himself in his yard after a tornado ripped most of his home off its foundation.

## Crawling

His 71-year-old wife, Linda, was in a different part of the house and also survived, he said. They found each other while crawling through the remnants of the house they have lived in since 1972.

"We're living, and God has blessed us," Scott, a retired manager for a grocery store meat department, said Sunday as neighbors helped him salvage his belongings.

National Weather Service meteorologist John Moore said a possible twister touched down in the Vicksburg, Mississippi, area. No injuries were reported, but officials reported damage to several businesses and vehicles.

The storm is expected to continue moving toward the Northeast where its impact has already been devastating.

The Times Gazette reported several homes and businesses were damaged after an apparent tornado struck Shelby, Ohio, Sunday about 4 p.m.

Shelby is about 90 miles (144.83 km) northeast of Cleveland.

The Richland County Emergency

Management Agency reported about a half-dozen homes were damaged and at least six people were taken to a hospital to be treated for storm-related injuries.

The National Weather Service has issued tornado watch warnings for parts of Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania and West Virginia.

But the majority of damaged remained in the Southern part of the US.

The storm damaged a roof of a hotel in New Albany, Mississippi, and Mississippi State University's 21,000 students huddled in basements and hallways as a tornado neared the campus in Starkville.

University spokesman Sid Salter said some debris, possibly carried by the tornado, was found on campus, but no injuries were reported and no buildings were damaged. Trees were toppled and minor damage was reported in residential areas east of the campus.

The large storm system also caused flash floods in Louisiana, where two deaths were reported.

Authorities said 13-year-old Sebastian Omar Martinez drowned in a drainage canal after flash flooding struck Bawcomville, near Monroe, said Deputy Glenn Springfield of the Ouachita Parish Sheriff's Department. Separately, one person died when a car was submerged in floodwaters in Calhoun, also near Monroe.

As the storm moved into Alabama, a possible tornado knocked out power and damaged mobile homes in Troy, about 50 miles (80 kilometers) south of Montgomery.

Near the Birmingham suburb of Hueytown, a county employee died after being struck by a vehicle while he was helping clear away trees about 2:15 am Sunday, said Capt David Agee of the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office. The man, whose name was not immediately released, died after being taken to a hospital.

The forecast of severe weather forced officials at the Masters in Augusta, Georgia, to start the final round of the tournament early on Sunday in order to finish in midafternoon before it began raining.



Sen Bernie Sanders, I-Vt, exits the stage after speaking at an Ohio workers town hall meeting on April 14 in Warren, Ohio. (AP)



Omar



Buttigieg

## America

**Omar slams Trump retweet:** Rep. Ihan Omar says she's faced increased death threats since President Donald Trump spread around a video that purports to show her being dismissive of the 2001 terrorist attacks. "This is endangering lives," she said, accusing Trump of fomenting right-wing extremism. "It has to stop."

Her statement late Sunday followed an announcement by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi that she has taken steps to ensure the safety of the Minnesota Democrat and the speaker's call for Trump to take down the video.

Soon after Pelosi's statement, the video disappeared as a pinned tweet at the top of Trump's Twitter feed, but it was not deleted.

Pelosi was among Democrats who had criticized Trump over the tweet, with some accusing him of trying to incite violence against the Muslim lawmaker. An upstate New York man recently was charged with making death threats against her.

White House press secretary Sarah Sanders defended Trump earlier Sunday, saying the president has a duty to highlight Omar's history of making comments that others deem anti-Semitic or otherwise offensive and that he wished no "ill will" upon the first-term lawmaker.

But Omar said that since Trump retweeted the video Friday night, she's received many threats on her life that referred or replied to the posted video.

"Violent crimes and other acts of hate by right-wing extremists and white nationalists are on the rise in this country and around the world," she said. "We can no longer ignore that they are being encouraged by the occupant of the highest office in the land." She said: "We are all Americans."

Earlier, Pelosi issued a statement while traveling in London saying she had spoken with congressional authorities "to ensure that Capitol Police are conducting a security assessment to safeguard Congresswoman Omar, her family and her staff."

Pelosi said officials will continue to monitor and assess threats against Omar and called on Trump to discourage such behavior.

"The President's words weigh a ton, and his hateful and inflammatory rhetoric creates real danger," Pelosi said. "President Trump must take down his disrespectful and dangerous video." (AP)

**'Mayor Pete' joins race:** Pete Buttigieg, the little-known Indiana mayor who has risen to prominence in the early stages of the 2020 Democratic presidential race, made his official campaign entrance Sun-

day by claiming the mantle of a youthful generation ready to reshape the country.

"I recognize the audacity of doing this as a Midwestern millennial mayor," he said to cheers of "Pete, Pete, Pete" from an audience assembled in a former Studebaker auto plant. "More than a little bold, at age

37, to seek the highest office in the land."

In the hours after his announcement, more than \$1 million in donations poured in, said Lis Smith, speaking for the campaign.

The South Bend mayor, a Rhodes scholar and Afghanistan War veteran who has been essentially campaigning since



Attorney General William Barr leaves his home in McLean, Va., on April 15. Barr told Congress last week he expects to release his redacted version of special counsel Robert Mueller's Trump-Russia investigation report 'within a week.' (AP)

January, has joined a dozen-plus rivals vying to take on President Donald Trump.

"The forces of change in our country today are tectonic," he said. "Forces that help to explain what made this current presidency even possible. That's why, this time, it's not just about winning an election - it's about winning an era."

Buttigieg will return this week to Iowa and New Hampshire, which hold the nation's first nominating contests, to campaign as a full-fledged candidate now being taken more seriously.

Over the past few months, Buttigieg has appeared frequently on national TV news and talk shows and developed a strong social media following with his message that the country needs "a new generation of leadership."

Buttigieg's poll numbers have climbed. Some polls put him behind only Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, who sought the party's nomination in 2016, and former Vice President Joe Biden, who has not yet said he's running.

Buttigieg's campaign has raised more than \$7 million in the first three months of this year, a total eclipsed by Sanders' leading \$18 million but more than Sens. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota and Cory Booker of New Jersey.

"Right now, it's pretty fun," Buttigieg told The Associated Press last month while visiting South Carolina, where he was met by larger-than-expected crowds. (AP)