

U.S. Senator Susan Collins
Floor Remarks on Border Crisis
December 19, 2023

Mr. President, our colleagues are aware that there are a group of Senators who are meeting with the administration officials to try to carefully craft an urgently needed solution to the border security crisis.

I rise today to discuss the urgent need for bipartisan solutions to address that crisis.

Mr. President, yesterday set a new record that demonstrates the magnitude of our border security crisis. U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers encountered a record 12,381 foreign nationals who were entering the United States along our southwest border without authorization.

So far this fiscal year, we are averaging nearly 8,500 encounters per day, and this month, the average is nearly 10,000 per day. That means for the month of December, we are likely to reach a record of more than 300,000 people crossing the southwest border without legal authorization.

At the current rate, we are paced for more than three million encounters in fiscal year 2024, which would shatter the previous high set last fiscal year.

To put this in perspective, Mr. President, that is more than twice as many encounters at the southwest border as there are people in the entire State of Maine. And these enormous numbers do not include what border patrol agents describe as the “got-aways,” in other words, those who do not turn themselves in and instead elude capture.

These numbers have grown dramatically in the past three years. Since fiscal year 2021, we have seen almost 6.6 million encounters and are on pace to see nearly 9.7 million individuals by the end of fiscal year 2024.

Jeh Johnson, who served as Secretary of Homeland Security under President Obama, once said that when he was Secretary, 1,000 migrant encounters a day overwhelms the system. So just think, Mr. President, what 10,000 individuals crossing does to the system.

And this problem is not limited to the southwest border – even though that is where the problem is most acute. We are increasingly seeing surges of migrant encounters along our northern border, including the State of Maine.

According to Customs and Border Protection, migrant encounters at the northern border increased 73 percent in fiscal year 2023 over the previous year, and a staggering 700 percent over fiscal year 2021 levels.

In the state of Maine, encounters have increased over 450 percent since fiscal year 2021. Increasingly, what we're seeing is that migrants are flying to Canada, knowing that they will have an easier time crossing the enormous 5,525-mile northern border.

Just recently, the U.S. Border Patrol encountered a group of 20 Romanians illegally crossing into the United States near Houlton, Maine – in northern Maine. Two of these individuals were flagged as Transnational Criminal Organized Crime matches and detained for expedited removal proceedings. The remaining 18 were simply released into the local community.

Communities in Maine and throughout our country are struggling to absorb this influx of people who are being released into the interior. The majority of migrants are released pending and adjudication of their asylum claims, but that is a process that can take years.

In Portland, Maine, a city of 68,000 residents, more than 1,600 asylum seekers have arrived since January. Sanford, Maine, which has a population of only 22,000, has had approximately 400 migrants arrive since May. Over the past six months, the City of Sanford has spent 1.3 million to provide food, housing, and other required assistance to asylum seekers and their families.

Now, the irony here, Mr. President, is these asylum seekers are not allowed to go to work immediately upon filing their asylum applications.

I have introduced a bill that could help lessen the impact on local communities by helping asylum seekers support themselves as they want to do and employers in Maine want to hire them while they await their immigration proceedings. Specifically, my bill would shorten the waiting period for asylum seekers who come through legal ports of entry to apply for employment authorization, provided that their applications are not frivolous, that they are not detained, and that their identities have been verified with their names run through the federal government's terrorist watch lists.

Mr. President, an out of control border, which is what we have now, poses a very real threat to our homeland and our people. This is a national security challenge for our country.

Since fiscal year 2021, 294 individuals who were apprehended by border patrol at the southwest border were on the terrorist watch list. That compares to only 11 such individuals in the previous four years combined. And just think how many others are part of the “got-aways,” those who did not turn themselves in and were or were not apprehended by our border patrol.

There are also tens of thousands of migrants arrested at our southern and northern borders who have criminal convictions, or who are wanted by law enforcement, such as the two Romanians recently encountered in Maine.

Mr. President, not only has the failure to control our border led to unchecked migration, but it has also contributed to the very serious illegal drug crisis that is affecting communities throughout our country. Mexican drug cartels are using the chaos at the southern border to facilitate their trafficking operations. They are sending record amounts of fentanyl into this country – enough to kill every American many times over.

Maine, like so many states, have seen record increases in recent years in the number of overdose deaths, nearly 80 percent of which were fentanyl related. We lost 513 Mainers in the first 10 months of 2023 to fatal overdoses – 373 of these deaths were fentanyl-related.

In addition, the Mexican cartels use the chaos and the uncontrolled southern border for human trafficking. This is a crisis. It is a humanitarian crisis, and it is a national security crisis. And we cannot allow it to continue.

Mr. President, I have long supported creating legal immigration pathways with appropriate guardrails. Immigrants contribute to our great country and our communities in so many important ways. However, it is clear that we must act to address the ongoing and ever worsening crisis at our borders, which adversely affects communities throughout our country. We cannot delay any longer.

I am a strong supporter for continuing to provide assistance to Ukraine to repel Russian aggression. Make no mistake about it – Putin will not stop with Ukraine, he will go on to recreate, if he possibly can, his vision of once again having the old Soviet Union. I believe that if he is successful in Ukraine, he will next seize Moldova. He then will begin to menace and threaten our NATO allies – the Baltic States, Poland.

So far, Mr. President, we have been able to assist Ukraine without one American soldier losing his life or her life. We should continue to do so.

We need to help our greatest ally, Israel, in its fight against the terrorist group, Hamas.

These in many ways are border disputes as well, but we cannot ignore the border crisis that we have in our own country. And that's why we need to work on all of these issues and bring them together in a supplemental funding bill.

Mr. President, the time to act is now. It is unfortunate that the Administration has been so late to these negotiations. But I still have hope that we can put together a package that will address all of these crises: the border crisis in our own country, the border crisis in Ukraine, the border crisis in Israel – with the terrorist attacks from Hamas – and the coming border crisis that we're going to see, I fear, with China's increasingly threatening Taiwan.

All of those issues need to be addressed in the supplemental. Let's get the job done.

Thank you, Mr. President.