

[Transcript] The Daily / A Texas Town Wanted Tougher Border Security. Now They Regret It

From New York Times, I'm Michael Balbaro.

This is The Daily.

When the governor of Texas announced an unprecedented plan to use local law enforcement to stop the flow of migrants across the U.S.-Mexico border, few communities were more receptive than the city of Eagle Pass, where residents had become fed up with the federal government's approach.

Today, two years later, my colleagues, National Correspondent Edgar Sandoval and Daily Producer Nina Feldman, traveled to Eagle Pass to find out why the people who once welcomed the plan are now turning against it.

This Thursday, October 19th.

Edgar, tell us about this trip that you just took to the U.S.-Mexico border.

So a few weeks ago, I traveled to the town of Eagle Pass, Texas, where I produced it from the Daily, Nina Feldman.

And we're going to ride towards the International Bridge.

The thing to know about Eagle Pass is it's right on the Rio Grande, directly across from the town of Las Negras, Mexico, not unlike the town where I went to high school in college in McAllen, Texas.

So you can just cross on that bridge and you're in Mexico in a few minutes.

And it's really one town divided by the river, the Rio Grande, right?

So there are about 30,000 residents, and a lot of them live on one side and work on the other side.

And as a border town in Eagle Pass, they have always been used to illegal crossings.

But it's also become one of the front lines of something else, you know, this grand experiment by the Texas government to tackle the issue of illegal crossings.

And to understand that experiment, I needed to talk to people who had personal experiences with it.

Hi.

Hi.

People like Magali Urbina.

Hi.

Magali.

Nice to meet you.

Magali's family has been in Eagle Pass for three generations.

She and her husband are middle-aged and on this big beautiful pecan farm right by the Rio Grande.

My husband was looking for a place to build our retirement home, and we had lots of free time to drive around town, and we found this orchard and fell in love with it.

And mind you, the Urbinas are not farmers by training.

She was a teacher and a Hebrew in the oil industry.

How do you guys do that to the farm?

The land, the greenery, the trees, the river.

The river.

Yeah.

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And once they bought it, they really fell in love with the place.
And on this farm, Edgar, what is this couple's relationship to the U.S.-Mexico border and to migrants?
You know, like a lot of people who live on the border, they're used to it.
I've seen it my entire life.
You would see maybe five, six single men, young men coming across.
We used to see in clusters of migrants being apprehended by the border patrol every time they'd drive to the grocery store or to the pharmacy.
So periodic crossings are a fact of life.
In fact, Magali was so used to it that she used to put water in her property for migrants that were crossing because she saw them just like thirsty and looking for help.
It just made more sense.
You're going to let them in, give them water.
But the Urbinas were totally unprepared for what happened in 2021.
Turning back to the border crisis, now the number of unaccompanied migrant children at the southern border is also on the rise.
Over 15,000 unaccompanied minors now in U.S. custody, 5,000 of them with border patrol.
Shortly after Biden took office, migrants started to rush the border.
The U.S. is on track to see the highest number of illegal border crossers in 20 years.
And it didn't take long for people living in towns like Eagle Pass to feel the effects of this.
It was late in the summer of 2021 where I started noticing women, a lot more women.
And I saw children, a lot of unaccompanied children.
Magali and her husband started seeing this huge number of migrants.
It was just shocking to see so many people and then you would see them completely naked getting out of the river.
There was three of them across the Rio Grande.
They were stepping in her backyard and they would cut across her pecan farm.
Hundreds of people that we would see in town that were not from here.
We all, everybody sees it.
Eagle Pass was being overwhelmed.
Police were getting a lot more service calls from residents competing at more people crossing in their backyard.
There were just a lot more migrants than the city could handle.
It was like normal.
That's when I told myself and my husband, this is not right.
There's something wrong with this picture and we should not become immune to it.
In the first Democratic primary debate, Biden says when he's president, illegal immigrants should immediately, this is quote, immediately surge to the border.
And it's always displaying on the southern border.
This entire crisis is created simply by Joe Biden's actions and words.
Republicans were pointing the blame squarely at the White House.
Well, look, I guess I should be flattered.

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People are coming because I'm the nice guy.

That's the reason why it's happening.

Truth of the matter is nothing has changed.

Biden defending himself, you know, saying that this problem started before he even became president.

It had nothing to do with him.

There was a 31% increase under Trump because he was a nice guy and he was doing good things at the border.

That's not the reason they're coming.

And the truth is that between the pandemic, you know, the situation on the ground in Central and South America and the change of administrations, it's hard to point out just one reason that crossings were going up, but the crossings were up.

My phone has been ringing off the hook from ranchers in this region and the region's west of here.

Meanwhile, about the dramatic increase in the number of people who are crossing their ranches and causing mayhem on their ranches.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott said he was going to go around the federal government.

Texas is not going to shy away from stepping up and filling the gap that the federal government has left open.

And just deal with the border himself.

We've launched Operation Lone Star.

He came up with this plan called Operation Lone Star.

Right.

When we covered Operation Lone Star on the show in the past, it was unusual because here was a governor of a state saying that state government was going to do this role that has traditionally been carried out by the federal government, which is secure the border.

Right.

It was sort of like, you know, move over, I'm taking charge.

We're ready.

We're waiting for you.

If you dare step into the state of Texas, Texas will use every tool and strategy we can to arrest anybody who's violating the law, to put behind the bars anybody's violating the law, to make sure that the laws in the state of Texas are going to be enforced.

If you are a caravan or...

You know, Abbott's plan is to send a huge number of Texas National Guard troops and state troopers to fortify the border and more aggressively seek out migrants who are crossing illegally.

And one of the places where Abbott implemented Operation Lone Star was Eagle Pass.

And Edgar, how welcome or unwelcome is Abbott's plan to have the state fill in for the federal government in Eagle Pass with people like Magali?

Very welcome.

People like Magali were really grateful that the governor had this plan, you know, and Magali to be clear border for Abbott.

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So it makes sense that she would trust the promise that he's making, you know, to deal with this problem.

But even people who didn't board for Abbott realized there was a problem.

We're going to go to the left there.

And one of those people is Jesse Fuentes.

I just turned on the air.

We can sit out here if you want or we can sit in the little library in there if I ever you're comfortable.

Jesse grew up in Eagle Pass.

He's a Democrat.

We grew up a couple of blocks from the river.

So we were at the river every day.

We were in the water.

We were fishing.

We were playing mudball fights.

He actually runs a business giving kayak tours on the river.

And that's giving him an up close view to see in the search.

I mean, you could see that that federal forces were a little overwhelmed.

And even he was seeing that there was a need for some sort of intervention.

Because people were everywhere.

And I understood that we needed help.

And so when he hears about this idea of Operation Lone Star, he thinks it could really help.

Were people initially like you also hopeful and welcoming up that help?

Was that a disappointment?

I think there was optimism that they were going to come in.

They were going to help us control it.

Within the norms that they were going to work with a custom border protection.

And there was going to be an amazing control or security without cruelty.

Like a lot of people in Eagle Pass, I think he was really hopeful.

He wanted to believe that Operation Lone Star was going to fix everything.

You know, I think of the traveling angel genre of film were, you know, the good guy comes to town, he rescues the town and he rides off on the horse and he leaves.

I said, that's what's going to happen.

They're going to come in.

They're going to help us get it under control, establish operating procedures and move on.

And I was tolerant of it, like everybody else.

What elements attracted to you that you heard from the governor?

That, you know, we're going to help you.

We're here to help you.

Did he say how?

No, he didn't.

We'll be right back.

So, amid all this optimism from the residents of Eagle Pass, what does Operation Lone Star

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actually look like there in practice?

So Operation Lone Star really hinges on this idea.

The National Guard members and state troopers will come to towns like Eagle Pass and help Border Patrol deal with the search.

But the problem is, you know, these troops don't actually have jurisdiction to operate on the border.

That's really a function of the federal government.

So the governor came out with a workaround.

The officers have to work with private landowners and make arrangements to station themselves on the property.

And oftentimes they arrest migrants who have just crossed over.

They charge them with trespassing.

And other times they just bring them over to the Border Patrol.

So because state police can't arrest people for immigration offenses, you're saying they have to arrest them specifically for trespassing.

And they have to do that on the property of willing private landowners who give them permission to do that.

Exactly, you know.

And my colleague or husband were among the first landowners to cooperate in Eagle Pass.

When he was talking about Lone Star, they came to us and they invited us to meetings and they said that they wanted to put up a fence because there were so many people crossing and we were okay with it.

You know, first they signed a contract where they basically gave up control to some other property, especially the areas facing the river.

And the agreement wasn't initially just to allow the state police to build a fence.

That way they would deter migrants from crossing to the property or funnel the migrants into a smaller area.

And how did that work out at the beginning?

What was that like?

It was fine.

Everybody was in that corner, which is why we said keep it to the corner, stay away from the orchard because it's a business.

Just makes sense.

And at the beginning it's going well, you know, there's more control of migrants in the property than the state police and the National Guardsmen give them a sense of safety.

But then one day she goes down to the river in her property.

That day they just showed up and they just started putting seawater and I told them we didn't want it.

We had already talked to the state.

And she says the state trooper is a National Guardsman installing a long rope or serenity of wire along the river with her property and she's going to take enough back by this.

I didn't like it one bit.

I just knew that I was there's nothing I could do and I'm not the type that's going

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to just throw myself and just stop, stop.

I just said, okay, I'm not, it has to happen.

There's nothing I could do.

I'm by myself.

They're not listening to me.

She lifts her feeling a sense of uneasiness because when she looks at her property now it's just this wall of Constantino wire, two or three tiers on top of each other with these sharp racers, you know.

Right.

Which is the kind of site you normally see outside a prison, these loops of Constantino wire not normally associated with someone's yard.

Exactly.

And that wasn't the only barrier they installed.

Yeah.

Can you just describe what we're looking at here?

We are at the northern part of our property on the river side and you can see that the river is about 25, 30 yards from us and the buoys are about 50 yards from us.

They also installed buoys.

They're just this long string of orange balls outside her property by the river and the purpose is to prevent migrants from crossing.

But of course, when Magali goes to the property by the river, she just sees this like giant orange ball, the size of dumpsters.

Wow.

The next thing she knows, you know, they're building roads on her property just for the vehicles from the state police, humbies, military vehicles, they can now crisscross the property looking for migrants.

Just to be clear, they're building actual roads on her orchard.

That's exactly right, you know, and what this results in is that all this dust from the trucks are hitting her trees, which really affects the growth of the pecans that she was trying to, to grow during her harvest season.

These are the trees that have just, just so much dust, just constantly.

She points at us that the leaves of the trees just look brown, you know.

There are no, no, one.

And they're not growing any pecans.

They should have at least, you would be able to see one because it's about to be the harvest, right?

And she's really frustrated because she could compare that to areas where there are no state officials, and that part of her property is actually growing pecans.

Hmm.

So it's starting to very much feel like Magali is losing control of her land, which is no doubt very frustrating to her, but it's got to be complicated by the reality that she signed a contract letting the state come into her property and do all of this, right?

Exactly.

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So people like Magali, her husband, were the ones who kind of agreed to this arrangement. Okay.

Well, what about Jesse, this canoe and kayak operator you mentioned earlier? What was his experience like with Operation Lone Star?

Yeah.

So he used to run his business and Shelby Park, which is a park and downtown Eagle Pass next to the Rio Grande.

But once Operation Lone Star came, almost overnight, the park became a staging ground. What we're looking at here is, is the staging area for Operation Lone Star.

For military trucks, checkpoints for migrants crossing in.

The biggest concentration of airboats, because remember, the park is right next to the river.

There's a stack of shipping containers, there's officers everywhere.

Eliminated all the flora and the fauna on the edges of the riverbank.

More wires like the ones Magali is looking at everything in her property.

They've bulldozed the highway along the edge of it.

They've erased about five different islands that were in the middle of the river.

They've killed our river.

They've killed it.

So Jesse decides that he can really run tours on the river anymore.

The place overrun by military vehicles and police officers.

It's just no place for him to operate a business.

Right.

And I'm presuming that there isn't a whole lot of interest in taking a kayak or canoe tour of the Rio Grande at a place where it's been that militarized.

I mean, how can I promote this?

You know?

How can you promote this?

Right.

So he feels like he has no place to go now.

You know, he took his kayaks and his canoes back to his property away from the river.

And he's hoping for the day when the Operation Lone Star will cease to be an Eagle Pass.

But he's wondering if that's going to take months, years, or perhaps never.

So at this point, Operation Lone Star, which originally had been welcomed with pretty much open arms by people like Magali and Jesse, is now turning into quite a major headache for them both.

Correct.

You know, it's not just Magali and Jesse who are mad.

It seems like everyone you talk to in Eagle Pass is going increasingly upset.

And a series of events that happened over the summer really brings that anger to a head.

And happening now on the border, four migrants drowned in the Rio Grande in a 48-hour time span.

In July, several migrants drowned in the river.

A woman and an infant were found unresponsive in Eagle Pass.

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There is backlash following claims DPS troopers were ordered to mistreat illegal immigrants crossing the border.

And then later that month, a state trooper came out and said that he and his colleagues had been directed to turn migrants back in the middle of the river, you know, instead of bringing them ashore for processing.

And they had also been directed to deny people water.

The trooper wrote, I believe we've stepped over the line into inhumane.

And meanwhile, you know, the staff at the shelter in town were reporting that migrants were showing up with gaping wounds from crossing through the Argentina wire.

What I saw on the river today, that's not what I want to be known for.

Opsied scorns on human beings that should not, should not be exposed to this kind of treatment.

And you say this real big of pouring of objection from locals, you know, about what they see as more than just an issue with their property, the eyesores, but increasingly, you know, they see as a moral failure.

So Edgar, it feels like the costs of Operation Lone Star have turned out to be very high for the residents.

It's meant giving up land, views, river access, even in the case of Magali business.

And the humanitarian cost is also very high.

But the deal was you pay these costs and you get border security.

So the question is, is border security what Eagle Pass ultimately got?

Quite simply, no.

Over the first two years of Operation Lone Star, crossings have gotten up and down in places like Eagle Pass.

But most recently, the town has seen a huge surge in illegal crossings.

And for people like Magali, I don't think this is surprising.

I was going to ask, so has it worked?

Has it helped any of it?

They're still coming through.

Here it's just slowed it down, like two neighbors down to the north of us.

They're pulling them out through there.

And Magali say a few people are coming directly to her property, but instead they're going around to her neighbor's property.

How many people would you say a month these days or a week?

I drove by.

Maybe it was last week and I saw maybe 70, 80 people in the evening.

What was your reaction to that when you were like concerned?

Well, we all know that it's still happening.

It's just they're saying that they're stopping it, but all they're doing is just pushing it to the sides.

So given how all of this has turned out, how does Magali feel about the fact that she decided to take on such a big role in this operation?

I think she feels conflicted about it.

On one hand, she really wanted to see a solution, but this is definitely not what she envisioned.

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I think they sold us one idea and then we got another.

Not just me.

Everybody down here.

She told me that if she had known that all of these things were going to happen in her property, she would have never had agreed to cooperate.

Like I said, if they would have painted this picture and said, this is what we're going to do after you worked on here and done all this to your property, we're going to come in here and do this to it and destroy it, well, why would I send?

No way.

Do you think this, this is waves migrants from coming over when they see the buoys and the of course, you know why you're in the fence is when just visually do you think that they've crossed through the Guderian gap and they've left some loved ones there and they got up and they kept walking.

This is not going to stop them.

At the end of the day, Magali feels like she's back when she started in 2021 and she's grown increasingly frustrated by the lack of solution from any elected official.

So I ask her, does she feel like anyone is actually trying to help her now?

You spoken to Democrats and Republicans about this.

Why are you hearing back from them?

Nothing, we don't hear anything other than it's just the other one's fault.

It's the blame game.

They need to address it.

Everybody that's been using it for their own political gain needs to just stop and think if you all really care, they all say they care about the United States of America and what's in the best interest for us all, then do it.

Stop using it.

Why don't they?

All you hear is blame, blame, blame, blame.

They've been blaming people since what, the 60s, 70s, the 80s, the 90s.

Who are we going to blame next year?

Who are you going to blame in 10 years?

Why don't you all want to fix it?

What do you mean when you say don't use it?

They all use it when they're running for office.

Immigration is one of those things that they talk about when they're all, everybody that, you know, we're going to have a presidential election.

But your take is that it's a lot of talk.

Yes, and we've seen them all.

A lot of people have come down here and what do they all say and what have they done?

Well, Edgar, thank you very much.

We appreciate it.

Thank you for having me.

The Times reports that Texas Governor Greg Abbott is now seeking new legal powers to

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strengthen Operation Lone Star.

Abbott, frustrated that state police can only arrest migrants on charges of trespassing on private land, is trying to change Texas law so that police can arrest migrants on any property along the Texas border by making illegal crossings a state crime.

Such a law, which is likely to be challenged in court, would be a direct challenge to federal authority over immigration.

We'll be right back.

Here's what else you need to know today.

On Wednesday, as President Biden arrived in Israel, both the U.S. and Israel said that early evidence showed that the deadly explosion at a hospital in Gaza was caused by Palestinian fighters, not by Israel.

The evidence gathered by the U.S., including satellite and infrared imagery, suggests that a rocket fired from a position in Gaza, misfired and landed on the hospital, where it killed hundreds of civilians.

I come to Israel with a single message, you're not alone, you are not alone.

In a rare wartime speech to the Israeli people, Biden compared Hamas' attack on Israel last weekend to the trauma of the September 11 terror attacks against the United States in 2001. You can't look at what has happened here, to your mothers, your fathers, your grandparents, sons, daughters, children, even babies, and not scream out for justice.

Justice must be done.

But even as Biden pledged American support to Israel, he took pains to call for restraint during its coming invasion of Gaza, invoking America's own excesses after 9-11.

I'd caution this while you feel that rage.

Don't be consumed by it.

After 9-11, we were in rage in the United States.

While we sought justice and got justice, we also made mistakes.

And for the second time in two days, Republican Representative Jim Jordan of Ohio lost a vote to become Speaker of the House, this time by an even wider margin than he did on Tuesday, as moderate Republicans once again rejected his ultra-conservative record.

One of those moderate Republicans, Mike Lawler of New York, told CNN that Jordan has little chance of ever prevailing.

Well, it's clear he doesn't have the votes.

I don't see the outcome changing here.

And so the question for Jim and for the conference is, how do we get back to work?

With the House unable to elect a speaker, there were growing calls to empower a temporary, unelected speaker to carry out the chamber's work, perhaps through the end of the year.

Today's episode was produced by Nina Feldman, Diana Nguyen, and Luke Vanderpuk.

It was edited by Devin Taylor, fact-checked by Susan Lee, contains original music by Mary and Lozano, Chelsea Daniel, and Roanie Mistow, and was engineered by Chris Wood.

Our theme music is by Jim Brunberg and Ben Lantverk of Wunderley.

Special thanks to David Goodman and Eileen Sullivan.

That's it for the Daily.

I'm Michael Ball Borrow.

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See you tomorrow.