

RUBEN GALLEGO

3RD DISTRICT, ARIZONA

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December 21, 2023

The Honorable Pete Buttigieg
Secretary
U.S. Department of Transportation
Washington, DC 20590

The Honorable Alejandro Mayorkas
Secretary
Department of Homeland Security
Washington, DC 20528

Dear Secretaries:

I write concerned regarding recent reports that travel agencies around the world, in possible coordination with organized smuggling networks in Mexico, are advertising travel packages that include transportation to our southern border. I request a whole-of-government strategy to monitor and curb these smuggling operations, including in coordination with foreign governments, air carriers, and financial institutions.

In my recent trip to the southwest border in Arizona, I spoke to local officials and community leaders who are feeling significant strain from increased border crossings and resource shortages. The Tucson Sector of Customs and Border Protection (CBP) operations is currently the busiest sector along the southwest border. As of this month, the Tucson sector was at 190% capacity as sustained high levels of arrivals have persisted in recent months. There have been 139,000 arrivals since the end of September, which amounts to 31% of all arrivals across the southern border.

Last year saw a significant increase in individuals whose countries of origin are outside of the Western Hemisphere, also known as “extracontinentals”. According to U.S. Customs and Border Protection data (CBP), arrests of these migrants entering via Mexico tripled in the past fiscal year, fy2023, from 70,000 to 214,000. This is posing significant challenges to the already strained immigration enforcement system and border communities, including from language barrier difficulties and the expensive, time-consuming process of repatriation.

According to recent reports, travel agencies in some of these countries of origin are advertising travel packages that include flights, connections to smuggling organizations, and transportation from cities in Mexico to the border. As Troy Miller, CBP’s Senior Official Performing the Duties of the Commissioner says, “These smugglers are recklessly putting migrants in harm’s way, in remote locations across the border, onto the tops of trains, or into the water of the Rio Grande River.”

While there has been increased effort to combat the bus lines and organized smuggling efforts in Mexico, you should also take steps to uncover and, wherever possible, shut down illegitimate travel agencies that are de-facto fronts for organized smuggling operations to the border. This includes, to the extent you are not already doing so, reporting on the processes through which

extracontinentals arrive at the border, identifying the “travel agencies” and individuals behind these operations, and monitoring financial transactions.

I call on you to work with your foreign counterparts, including international partners, and with private industry to monitor and shut down these smuggling networks. This includes working with air carriers to identify and flag suspicious transactions – for example, a single travel agency bulk purchasing tickets to Mexico.

Should foreign air carriers be uncooperative in this effort or be found to be knowingly profiting from organized international smuggling operations, I also request full and fair consideration of re-examinations by the Department of Transportation of standing statements of authorization for international charter flights, acquired through code sharing agreements with domestic carriers, in accordance with 14 CFR Part 212. If a foreign air carrier is knowingly engaging with international human smuggling networks, it would call into question the integrity of their entire operation.

Thank you for your attention to this matter and I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Ruben Gallego
MEMBER OF CONGRESS

CC: The Honorable Antony J. Blinken
Secretary
U.S. Department of State