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Statement By Secretary Jeh C. Johnson On Southwest Border Security

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DHS Press Office
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In connection with the latest monthly release of the numbers of apprehensions on our southwest border, Secretary Johnson made the following statement:

"In February 2016, apprehensions by the Border Patrol on our southwest border – an indicator of total attempts to cross the border illegally – increased slightly from January, but remained substantially below the month-to-month numbers of apprehensions we saw in the latter part of 2015. The numbers of unaccompanied children and family members remained at the same levels as January, which is greatly reduced from the apprehension numbers at the end of 2015. The overall 10 percent increase from January is due to an increase in apprehensions of single adults, from 17,505 in January to 19,917 in February, 71.5 percent of whom are from Mexico. Notably, one year ago, in February 2015, the number of apprehensions of single adults was 19,950, and in February 2014 the number was 28,277.

	UACs	Family Members	All
July 2015	4,182	4,503	28,388
August 2015	4,638	5,159	30,239
September 2015	4,485	5,273	30,286
October 2015	4,944	6,026	32,726
November 2015	5,610	6,471	32,845
December 2015	6,775	8,974	37,014
January 2016	3,111	3,145	23,761
February 2016	3,113	3,048	26,078

Recent enforcement actions, which focus on those apprehended at the border on or after January 1, 2014, continue. On January 4, I announced enforcement actions that took place on January 2-3. Further, at my direction, beginning January 23 ICE has been conducting "Operation Border Guardian," by which ICE has taken into custody 336 individuals. The focus of this operation are those who came here illegally as unaccompanied children after January 1, 2014, and are now over 18, have been ordered removed by an immigration court, and have no pending appeal or claim of asylum or other relief. Others who are priorities for removal have been apprehended as part of this operation. When enforcing the immigration laws, our personnel will not, except in emergency circumstances, apprehend an individual at a place of worship, a school, a hospital or doctor's office or other sensitive location.

These actions are part of our broader and ongoing efforts to enforce our immigration laws, in line with our stated priorities. Since October 1, ICE has repatriated a total of 28,808 individuals to Central America, and ICE and the Border Patrol have either repatriated or returned approximately 128,000 to Mexico. Since October 1, there have been a total of 290 removal flights to Central America. We are working with the Mexican government to increase the number of removal flights there from two to three flights per week. On February 23, we entered into new agreements with the Mexican government for the more efficient repatriation of adults, and safe and timely repatriation of families and unaccompanied children.

As I have said repeatedly, our borders are not open to illegal migration. If someone was apprehended at the border, has been ordered removed by an immigration court, has no pending appeal, and does not qualify for asylum or other relief from removal under our laws, he or she must be sent home. We must and we will enforce the law in accordance with our enforcement priorities.

I have also been working closely with the Department of Justice to ensure that as many unaccompanied children as possible have appropriate representation during immigration proceedings. We support improving the process for all those in immigration proceedings and have requested over \$17 million as part of the President's FY17 budget request to support critical initiatives that provide legal assistance services to vulnerable immigrants, including \$2 million for Justice AmeriCorps - a program that specifically provides legal representation to unaccompanied minors. We need every element of the court process to work effectively to accomplish the goal of both honoring humanitarian claims and processing those who do not qualify for relief.

With the Department of Justice, we are also doubling down on our efforts to apprehend and prosecute smugglers. Through initiatives like Operation Coyote, we are targeting the transnational criminal organizations that profit from human smuggling. Since its launch in summer 2014, Operation Coyote has to date resulted in the criminal arrest of 1,124 individuals, 877 indictments, and 829 convictions.

Finally, as I have said in the past, we recognize that many who seek to flee Central America may be regarded as refugees. We are expanding our Refugee Admissions Program to help vulnerable men, women and children in Central America. In partnership with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and non-governmental organizations in the region, we have taken preliminary steps to ensure we are able to implement this new program as soon as possible. This approach builds on our recently established Central American Minors program, which is now providing an in-country refugee processing option for certain children with parents in the United States, as well as the existing asylum process; to date, the State Department has received 7,606 applications for this Program.

Again, our policy is clear: We will continue to enforce the immigration laws and secure our borders consistent with our priorities and values. At the same time, we will offer vulnerable populations in Central America an alternate, safe and legal path to a better life.”

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