

Report says U.S. border agents used unnecessary force on Haitians



??Video footage and photos of the September 19 incident at Rio Grande River made it clear that US agents were whipping Haitian migrants [File: Felix Marquez/AP Photo]

United Nations, July 9 (RHC)-- U.S. border agents used “unnecessary force” against Haitian migrants along the country’s border with Mexico last year, a new federal report has found, after dramatic scenes at the Rio Grande River drew widespread condemnation and calls for accountability.

In a 511-page report released on Friday, U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) blamed a “lack of command control and communication” for agents using their horses to forcibly block and move migrants back across the river last September near Del Rio, Texas.

Video footage and photos of the September 19th incident show that U.S. agents were whipping Haitian migrants, which caused outrage among advocacy groups and civil rights leaders. “On multiple occasions, several mounted agents used force or the threat of force to drive migrants back into the Rio Grande river despite the fact that the migrants were already within the United States,” CBP Commissioner Chris Magnus said during a news conference.

The administration of U.S. President Joe Biden had promised a full investigation after many in the president’s own Democratic Party objected that such tactics with racial overtones were being used, despite a pledge to move away from ex-President Donald Trump’s hardline immigration policies.

Footage captured by Al Jazeera at the time showed mounted officers wearing cowboy hats blocking the paths of migrants, and one officer unfurling horse reins resembling a lariat, which he swung near a man’s face as he carried a bag of food across the river to a makeshift camp in south Texas. The images triggered a strong nationwide backlash and calls for an investigation.

“The investigation concluded that there were failures at multiple levels of the agency, a lack of appropriate policies and training, and unprofessional and dangerous behavior by several individual Agents,” CBP said in a separate statement on Friday.

Magnus said the report found no migrants were struck with the reins that agents were photographed swinging in their direction, however. Still, the report outlined the agents’ inappropriate behavior towards Haitians, including yelling profanities and insults related to a migrant’s national origin, and using unnecessary force against migrants attempting to re-enter the U.S. with food for their families, who were already on the U.S. side of the border.

“A determination was made that one agent acted in an unprofessional manner by yelling denigrating and offensive comments regarding a migrant’s national origin and gender,” Magnus said during the news conference.

The investigation also found that one agent on horseback grabbed a man and spun him around and “acted in an unsafe manner by pursuing the individual he had yelled at along the river’s edge forcing his horse to narrowly maneuver around a small child.”

Of the roughly 15,000 Haitians who arrived at the U.S.-Mexico border in September of last year, about 8,000 were rapidly expelled in the weeks that followed under a Trump administration-era order known as Title 42.

The Biden administration has grappled with a record number of attempted crossings at the US’s southwest border with Mexico. Republicans have criticised Biden for trying to reverse some of his predecessor’s policies, while some Democrats have said he is not doing enough to protect vulnerable migrants.

Magnus said investigators did not speak to Haitian migrants while preparing the investigation but used statements and court documents that some provided as part of lawsuits they filed against US authorities.

As part of the investigation, four Border Patrol employees — all of whom have been placed on administrative duty since the investigation began months ago — have been recommended for disciplinary action, which will come separately.

“We are already taking steps to ensure a situation like what occurred in Del Rio doesn’t happen again,” Magnus said.

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