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Trump Says ICE Will Make Arrests at Airports, Even as Officials Insist Deployment Is Only for Crowd Control

Hundreds of ICE agents are being sent to 14 airports to help manage TSA lines during a staffing crunch, even as Trump said the deployment would involve the “immediate arrest” of illegal immigrants while officials insisted it was not for enforcement.

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Lines spilled onto the sidewalk leading to Cyril E. King Airport in St. Thomas over the weekend as TSA problems, heavy airline traffic and an airport built for 300,000 but serving 900,000 fueled major backups. By. FACEBOOK

Hundreds of Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents are being sent to 14 airports, which federal officials have not publicly identified, as the Transportation Security Administration's

staffing problems grow more severe under the Department of Homeland Security funding standoff. ICE deployment is expected to begin Monday and is aimed at helping with crowd control and security line management, not formal passenger screening.

The move comes after TSA absences climbed to their highest point since the partial shutdown began five weeks earlier. More than one-third of TSA staff were absent at airports in Houston, New York and Atlanta over the weekend, while nationwide absences over the previous seven days topped 9%. A Reuters report on March 19 said the national absence rate had already reached 10.2%, with JFK and San Juan at 25% and Atlanta and Houston Bush at 38%.

TSA workers have been left unpaid because the broader DHS funding bill remains stuck in a partisan fight: Democrats blocked it while demanding ICE reforms after fatal shootings, Republicans rejected those conditions, and President Donald Trump later told Republicans to withhold any deal unless Democrats also passed a separate voting bill. DHS said the pay interruption has had real-world consequences, with some officers unable to pay rent, buy food or put gas in their cars, leading them to call out sick or leave the agency entirely.

Under the current plan, ICE personnel will not go behind security checkpoints because they do not have the specific clearances needed. Instead they are expected to assist with line flow and crowd management in domestic terminals. Atlanta Mayor Andre Dickens said his office had been informed ICE agents would be sent to Hartsfield-Jackson, and federal officials told him the assignment was “not intended to conduct immigration enforcement activities.”

That official explanation conflicts with Trump’s own public rhetoric. Reuters reported that Trump said over the weekend that ICE agents’ activities would include the “immediate arrest of all Illegal Immigrants who have come into our Country,” especially Somalis. That prompted added scrutiny, even as DHS and local officials described the airport mission as operational support rather than immigration enforcement.

The TSA workers’ union has objected strongly. The American Federation of Government Employees said TSA officers spend months training to detect explosives and weapons, and argued that replacing unpaid screeners with “untrained, armed agents” misses the underlying problem. The union’s argument is that the staffing crisis will not be solved until TSA workers are paid.

The airport deployment is therefore less a fix than a stopgap. It may help move lines, but it does not change the central reality that the nation’s airport screening system is under stress because the people trained to run it are showing up for work under mounting financial strain, or not showing up at all.