



Protesters block three buses carrying illegal immigrants arrested in Texas from entering a U.S. Border Patrol Station in Murrieta on Tuesday. RICHARD LUI/THE DESERT SUN



Illegal immigrant protester Sabine Durden collapses after getting into a argument with a counter-protester in Murrieta on Tuesday. RICHARD LUI/THE DESERT SUN



Law enforcement officers try to keep the protest from boiling over Tuesday. RICHARD LUI/THE DESERT SUN

“We are your babysitters! We clean your hotels! We babysit your kids!”

LUPILLO RIVERA, an immigrant who wore a Mexico soccer jersey, who tried to launch a counter-protest at the Border Patrol station in Murrieta on Tuesday.

Protest

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families to a processing center in San Diego County.

No one in Murrieta ever saw the families at the center of Tuesday’s immigration conflict. The tinted windows of the buses hid their faces.

“We can’t start taking care of others if we can’t take care of our own,” said Nancy Greyson, 60, one of the first Murrieta residents to protest the immigration transfer.

Tuesday’s clash was a chaotic start to the federal government’s plan to ease overcrowding in facilities in Texas’ Rio

Grande Valley. The government plans to relocate some of those immigrant families to Southern California. El Centro is expected to receive a similar transfer of families on Wednesday.

Tuesday’s move was supposed to involve 140 people who were flown into San Diego and then bused to Murrieta.

Once they were interviewed and processed by local Border Patrol officials, the immigrant families would have been handed over to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, where officials were to determine which families would be deported and which would receive asylum.

After processing, some of the families would have been driven in vans to bus stops in Perris, San Bernardino and

Menifee, according to three Border Patrol union representatives who spoke to The Desert Sun. The immigrants would have been left in those cities, much like what happened in May when immigrants from the Rio Grande Valley were dropped off in Tucson, Ariz.

Gabe Pacheco, a Border Patrol union representative, characterized the process as “de facto amnesty.”

After the buses retreated, about half of the Murrieta protesters moved on to a meeting at City Hall.

The meeting was led by Mayor Alan Long, who had publicly encouraged the protest the day before. Long opened the meeting with a prayer urging President

Barack Obama to follow the “laws of the nation.”

Murrieta Councilman Rick Gibbs also spoke at the meeting, voicing concerns that the immigrant families would bring disease and crime to the city. Gibbs assured the crowd that, if any of the families were successfully transferred to the Murrieta station, the station’s conditions would not be comfortable.

They would sleep on concrete floors, he said.

“This is a jailhouse, there are no ifs, ands or buts about what this is,” Gibbs said. “There are rooms for 30 to 40, steel

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Protest

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benches ... There is no privacy.”

A lack of resources

For days, officials in Murrieta and El Centro have warned that they didn’t have the resources to handle the influx of families who have illegally crossed into the United States.

Busloads of families are expected to arrive every three days. Murrieta expects another bus transfer on Friday.

Ron Zermeno, a Border Patrol union representative who works as the health director at the Murrieta station, said housing the immigrants at the station, even temporarily, is inhumane.

Zermeno told The Desert Sun that he doubted the Murrieta station could handle even the first wave. Officials suspended just about all normal station operations to prepare for the incoming families.

“It’s chaos. It’s going to be a mess,” he said.

The station normally focuses on prosecuting drug-related crimes, such as smuggling, so it has no dining hall or dorm facilities. The station had planned to feed the immigrant families three meals a day in their cells.

“We’re not equipped to handle people long-term — we never tried to be,” said Christopher Harris, vice president of Local 1613 of the National Border Patrol Council that represents 2,000 Border Patrol agents in the San Diego sector. “Most of our agents are really good people. ... The morale is so low because they’re worried about dropping off people into these communities ...”

Harris noted that agents in his station were emailing him to see if they could bring toys and clothes for the children while they awaited processing.

After the buses were rerouted Tuesday to San Diego, union leaders said the Murrieta station staff would be sent south, as well.

Riverside County Supervisor Jeff Stone on Tuesday said the county offered to provide a mobile health clinic in Murrieta but the federal government declined the offer.

“It seems like we may need to be prepared for what I would call a local state of emergency,” said Stone, a conservative Republican from Temecula, who is campaigning for a state Senate district that includes the Coachella Valley.

“We stand ready, and we are hoping to continue to work with our congressman (U.S. Rep. Ken Calvert), with our U.S. senators, to do what the county is supposed to do, and that is to provide social services for people that are in the county of Riverside irrespective of their nationality. ... It’s almost like a FEMA event.”

Although the busloads of immigrants didn’t arrive in Murrieta until Tuesday afternoon, a small crowd of protesters gathered in the early morning, and a few staked out the Border Patrol station the night before.

Diane Serafin, a Murrieta resident,



The U.S. Border Patrol Station in Murrieta. RICHARD LUI/THE DESERT SUN

arrived at the station about 7:30 a.m., determined to do her duty as “a patriot.” Serafin is a registered Republican, but she said the protesters in Murrieta crossed political lines.

“There’s no difference between an R and a D,” Serafin said. “Nobody in Washington is listening to us.”

As the crowd grew, so did tensions. Later in the day, a shouting match broke out between protesters and a smaller group of immigration reform supporters. At one point, Lupillo Rivera, an immigrant who wore a Mexico soccer jersey, tried to launch a counter-protest.

“We are your babysitters!” he screamed. “We clean your hotels! We babysit your kids!”

No actual fights occurred.

The transfer to Murrieta also attracted Border Angels, a San Diego-based nonprofit that helps find housing for displaced immigrants. Enrique Morones, president of Border Angels, said mass deportation is not a solution to the growing immigration crisis.

“I agree with what President Obama said recently about this being a humanitarian crisis and, if we (think) this is a humanitarian crisis, then we need a humanitarian solution,” Morones said. “If these children were Canadian, we would not be having this interview right now.”

It’s not known how long officials in Texas will continue to transfer immigrant families into Southern California.

Since October, the Rio Grande Valley has seen an unprecedented influx of unaccompanied children from Central America — mostly from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala — who have illegally crossed into the United States.

It’s believed that parents from Central America send their children north hoping they will be granted asylum under the Obama administration’s Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program. This misconception can also be traced to a 2008 law signed by President George W. Bush that gave special consideration to minors fleeing violence in Central America.

An estimated 52,193 unaccompanied children younger than 18 have been caught illegally crossing the Southwest U.S.-Mexico border since October, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection. About 37,600 have crossed into the Rio Grande Valley alone, a 178 percent increase from the previous year.

In the Border Patrol’s El Centro sector an estimated 444 unaccompanied children have crossed since October. That’s up from the 315 children who were detained last year.

On Wednesday, another 144 people are expected to be flown from Texas to Yuma, Ariz., then bused to El Centro sometime in the afternoon.

On Tuesday, Imperial County Supervisor Jack Terrazas said the county was told the relocated immigrants included very few fathers and no unaccompanied children.

Officials hope the immigrants will connect with relatives already in the United States.

“The idea is to get them in contact

with those folks,” Terrazas said.

At a meeting with the Border Patrol on Tuesday, El Centro leaders were assured that no Imperial County resources would be used.

“We were basically and emphatically told that our services will not be needed,” he said. “That’s the expectation. In reality, our thoughts are to gather those resources to be ready just in case.”

U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Rancho Mirage, has asked the Obama administration for an executive order that would ensure people held in immigration detention and processing centers receive humane treatment. She has also introduced a bill to achieve the same goal.

“I share your sense of shock and distress for what these tens of thousands of children have endured in their home countries, the exploitation they have suffered on their way to our country, and the long journey they still face before reuniting with their families,” she said in a June 10 letter to the president.

“While I appreciate the emergency nature of the federal government’s response to this crisis, I am gravely concerned that migrants apprehended at our borders, children and adults alike, are housed in short-term detention facilities that are woefully inadequate.”

Reporters Tatiana Sanchez, Barrett Newkirk, Brett Kelman, Erica Felci and Reza Gostar contributed to this story.

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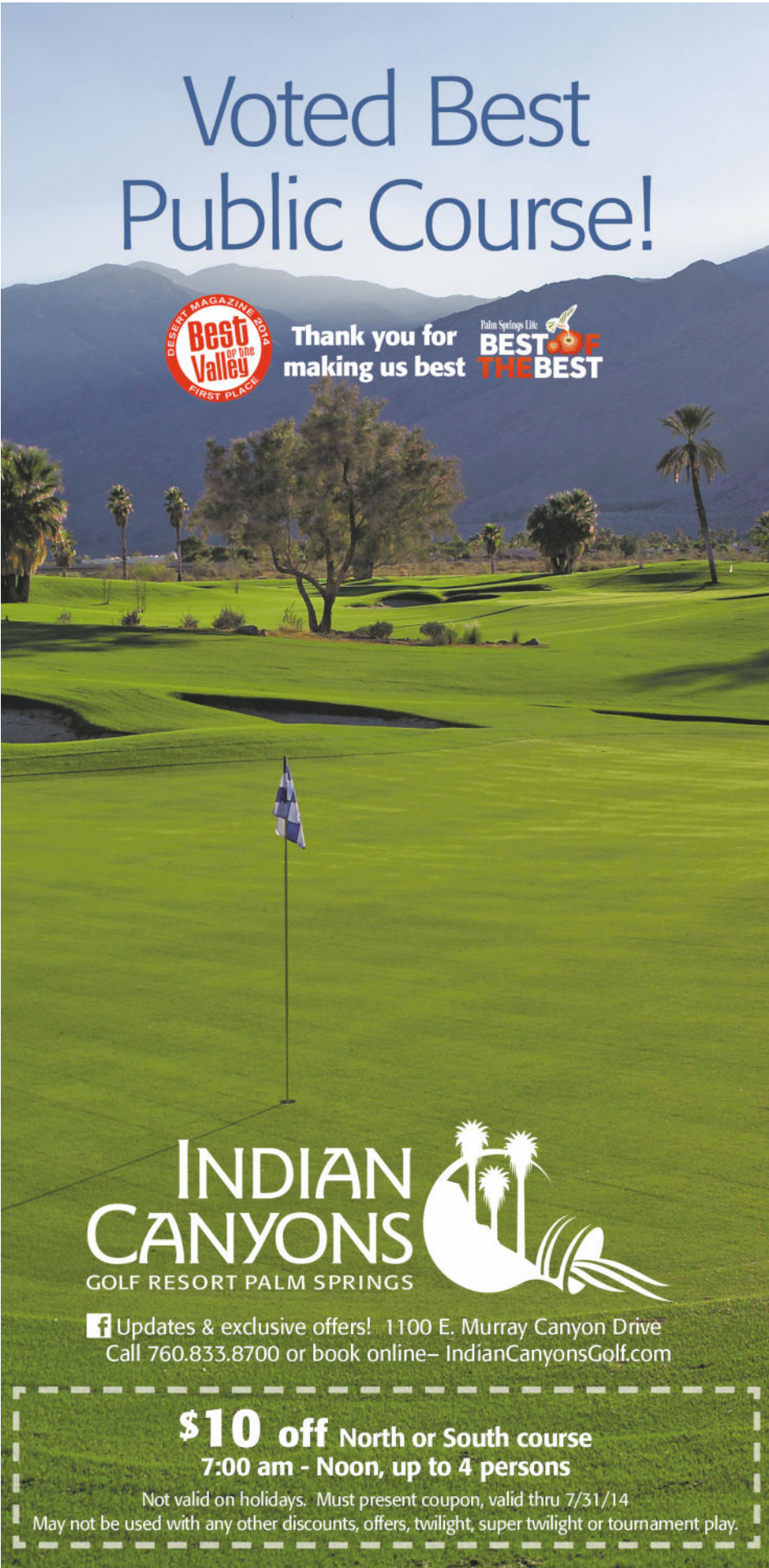
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