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GOP LAWMAKERS FAULT RISE IN ASYLUM SEEKERS ALONG SOUTHWEST BORDER

By Joel Millman
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House Republican lawmakers on Thursday questioned top Obama immigration officials about a sharp rise in asylum seekers allowed to stay in the U.S. after crossing the Southwest border illegally.

U.S. immigration officials in fiscal 2013 recorded a total of 36,026 "credible-fear" declarations, where migrants state their fear of being harmed on return to their homelands, and are allowed to remain in the U.S. while pursuing asylum. That total was nearly triple the number recorded during fiscal 2012 and about six times annual totals during the Bush administration.

"The world is not twice as dangerous as it was in 2012, so what explains the spike?" said Rep. Trey Gowdy (R., S.C.).

The House Judiciary Committee hearings were the latest by Republicans challenging the Obama administration's performance on border security, which many in Congress have said is crucial to their support for a comprehensive immigration law overhaul.

Some Republicans on the panel questioned whether credible-fear screenings have become too lax. Democrats warned tougher screening could keep legitimate asylum seekers from pursuing claims.

"In a reflection of the Obama administration's undermining of the enforcement of our immigration laws, these credible-fear claimants almost always get approved and are released into our communities," said Rep. Jason Chaffetz (R., Utah). "When their asylum claims are ultimately denied, they simply add to the fugitive population in the U.S."

Administration witnesses disputed that allegation and said that credible-fear cases represent no more than 10% of all Border Patrol apprehensions, with migrants usually going into detention facilities managed by the Department of Homeland Security.

Immigration officials added that credible-fear detainees regularly are released, either on bond or under their own recognizance. Daniel H. Ragsdale, deputy director of DHS's Immigration and Customs Enforcement unit, testified that of 30,000 credible-fear claimants who were permitted to proceed with their asylum claims, more than 24,000 were released this year from detention.

Witnesses before the panel argued that a rise in credible-fear declarations by itself doesn't prove abuse is rampant.

So far this century, "the number of asylum cases approved has remained rather steady," testified Ruth Wasem, an asylum specialist with the Congressional Research Service. Ms. Wasem noted the bulk of the increase in credible-fear claims derives from a surge in illegal migration from Central America, and to a lesser extent from Mexico, Ecuador and India.

Ms. Wasem said El Salvador's credible-fear claimants, who received a "pass" designation from U.S. asylum officers screening their claims just 40% of the time in 2008, now earn passes in most cases.

Data released this year to The Wall Street Journal under the Freedom of Information Act indicate a majority of all Central Americans with credible-fear claims have received passes since 2011.

"The increase in credible-fear claims is being driven by people from Central America – 65% of the claims came from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador," said Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D., Calif.). She said that whether this run-up is the result of fraud or a "brewing refugee crisis in the Western Hemisphere" is something Congress still needs to explore.