

URBAN TACTICS; Look Homeward, Anxiously

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Body

PAINTED on a mirror below a strand of tiny white lights at Toucan Tommy's bar, a blue-eyed Santa raised a mug of Guinness. On a small television screen, brightly colored rally cars raced down impossibly narrow Irish country roads as the bar's patrons nursed drinks and played darts.

It was Christmas night, but the seasonal touches there and at Sean Og's, the Cuckoo's Nest and other bars like them in Woodside, Queens, felt like a mockery to some of the young Irish patrons. Immigration restrictions have become so stringent in recent years that the illegal immigrants among these customers were too afraid to travel home to Ireland for the holidays.

"The spuds don't taste the same here," said a 23-year-old carpenter with a thick brogue.

"Happy Christmas," he said, lurching off his stool as he held out his hand to greet a stranger. "I'd rather be at home."

One might think that these taverns would be full of smiles now, given the proposal announced on Jan. 7 by President Bush to give work visas to illegal immigrants. Although limited to three years, such visas would offer job protections and the right to travel back and forth between the United States and home countries.

But reaction to the Bush proposal has been mixed. Some people hope it would broaden their options, but others say that the plan is too incomplete to assess, or that it would put workers on the government's radar screen and make it easier to deport them down the line.

And so Irish illegal immigrants continue in the same grim limbo they have inhabited since Sept. 11, 2001, a world marked by separation from family, even on holidays like Christmas, and a terror of deportation that led many of those interviewed to insist on anonymity. For many illegal immigrants, that grimness has long been par for the course, but as educated, English-speaking Europeans, the Irish had had relative advantages. For them, living in the United States became harder when enforcement of immigration laws tightened after 9/11.

In heavily Irish neighborhoods like Woodside and Woodlawn, in the Bronx, the bars began to buzz with horror stories. An elderly woman from County Cork trying to visit her daughter here for Christmas was deported after it was discovered that she had once overstayed a visa by a few days. A bartender in Yonkers who used to travel home regularly was stopped upon his return; immigration officials stamped a 10-year-ban onto his passport and sent him back to Ireland. Undeterred, he flew to Canada, hoping to drive over the border, but he was caught, fined \$1,200 and sent back again.

While such stories are nothing new for immigrants from many other parts of the world, they are shocking among the Irish. Cut-rate tickets from New York to Dublin run as low as \$250 round-trip and, for years, even Irish illegal workers flew home for weddings and funerals with little fear of trouble upon their return.

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"I don't want to say it was 100 percent comfortable, but people could travel back and forth freely," said Siobhan Dennehy, executive director of the Emerald Isle Immigration Center, which has offices in Woodside and Woodlawn. "Now we're saying to people, 'Are you ready to give up everything you've worked for here for that chance football game or social event?' We're getting people, especially at Christmastime, saying, 'Well, what should I do?' Your heart wants to tell them one thing, but your brain tells them another."

Irish men and women flocked to Ms. Dennehy's center last month for one bright spot amid the bleakness: an annual lottery in which the State Department randomly selects to receive green cards 110,000 people from nations that have sent relatively few people to the United States. One applicant, a 34-year-old Dubliner, said that her waitress earnings in New York were several times what they would be in Ireland, and that she and her Irish boyfriend were desperate to get green cards.

"We would pay anything to get one," she said. "It's like being in jail. My mother's sick, and I can't go home."

Although this woman has no desire to move back to Ireland, staying here illegally has not been easy. She was deported once, when traveling, and she would not say how she got back, noting that many people still use that route. However unwillingly, she said, among illegal immigrants, "there is a secret criminal world you get to know."

SHE played down some of the criticisms of the Bush proposal. If she signed on as an "official" illegal immigrant, she said, but still had no green card after three years, she did not think it would be difficult to avoid deportation. "Ah, you just move," she said, explaining that she would simply switch apartments and go back under the radar.

Others are more wary. In Woodlawn, a 27-year-old bartender with a strong brow and a confident, affable grin said he would love to travel home without fear. But even presenting his passport as identification for a recent flight to Florida made him nervous.

"Now it's bar codes," he said as he pulled drafts of Guinness for customers. "They have your retina scanned; they can swipe your passport and see your entire history -- when you came, when you left."

Under the Bush proposal, he could get a driver's license and travel home openly for the first time in two years. But for those who want to stay in America long term, he thinks the plan could create problems. "The most dangerous thing is leaving a paper trail," he explained. "You're telling them everything, which is a very scary thought. You have to think about how far can you trust these people."

Whatever the fate of the proposal, the difficulties with being an illegal resident have convinced him that America is not a place to stay, much as he'd like to. "If I could fly home," he said, "I'd stay here for the next 50 years, no question about it."

If the proposal does go through, he said, he might participate and then resign himself to returning to Ireland after three years. Going home is something that many people in his position have been doing since 9/11, shaving their romantic American dreams down to something closer to a shotgun marriage and quickie divorce.

But if Irish illegal immigrants in New York are thinking about going home, people in Ireland are eager to replace them and have been deluging the Emerald Isle center with calls about the new proposal.

Ms. Dennehy is urging caution. "We're telling them, 'No, stay put,'" she said. "We're telling them to be wary until we figure out how it might translate to helping the Irish."

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Graphic

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Photos: The Irish want to visit home but fear they will be unable to re-enter this country. "What should I do?" they ask Siobhan Dennehy, below, who counsels immigrants. (Photos by above, Richard L. Harbus for The New York Times; below, Mia Aigotti)

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