

MEXICO: WORLD'S BACK DOOR TO U.S.

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Byline: By LARRY ROHTER, Special to the New York Times

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Body

Citizens of countries as far away as India, China, Yugoslavia and Lebanon are increasingly using **Mexico** as a transit and staging point to enter the **United States** illegally, according to American and Mexican government officials.

The would-be immigrants are being arrested in growing numbers by American immigration authorities along the Mexican-American border. An increasing proportion of the non-Mexican immigrants are from regions other than Central America.

The same networks of smugglers that have long transported Mexicans and other Latin Americans into the Southwestern **United States** have expanded their operations to handle this lucrative new traffic, the officials said.

"The word is out all over the world that if you can make it to **Mexico**, you stand a good chance of getting into the **United States**," said Duane Austin, a spokesman for the Immigration and Naturalization Service in Washington.

Migration From Central America

Since the eruption of political turmoil in Central America at the start of the 1980's, the largest single group of non-Mexicans coming across the border has been from strife-torn countries like El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua. But immigration service records show that the number of Central Americans detained while using the Mexican route has declined slightly while detentions of those from other, more distant countries is on the rise.

One group of about a dozen Chinese apprehended in Southern California a year ago said they had been discharged from a ship off the coast of Lower California and had made their way north on foot. Gene Smithburg, assistant chief of patrol for the San Diego border sector, said an Asian man posted \$10,000 bond for each of them, "and we never saw him or them again."

In another instance, during the World Cup tournament in **Mexico** last year, a tour group of Lebanese and Turks, ostensibly in **Mexico** to see the international soccer championship, dropped from sight, officials said. When the group suddenly surfaced in Ciudad Juarez, where no games were being played and which is across the Rio Grande from El Paso, they were detained by the Mexican authorities.

The phenomenon of non-Mexicans crossing into the **United States** has been accelerated by growing awareness around the world of **Mexico's** visa and entry regulations, according to foreign diplomats here.

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Mexico has liberal or only nominal entry visa requirements for nationals of some European, Asian and Latin American countries, they said, and citizens of those and other countries have been coming here as tourists with the intention of using Mexico as what one Mexican official calls "a trampoline" to enter the United States.

From 1982 to 1985, the number of illegal immigrants from countries "other than Mexico" detained at the U.S.-Mexican border rose 50 percent, from 24,325 to 36,689, according to immigration service statistics.

In the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30, 1986, the total rose another 33 percent, to 48,954.

How Many Are Caught

There are no figures available on the number of non-Mexican illegal immigrants who have successfully crossed the border. But Mr. Austin said the immigration service estimates that it catches "one out of every two illegal aliens in the best of cases and one out of three in the worst."

The non-Mexicans make up only a small part of the 1.6 million apprehensions of illegal immigrants on the border between the United States and Mexico last year. But the rapid growth and increasing diversity of the "other than Mexico" group is an indication that smugglers and illegal immigrants worldwide continue to regard the 1,952-mile border as more easily penetrable than more traditional routes.

The San Diego border patrol office, which controls the most heavily traveled area of the border, reports that illegal immigrants from 67 countries were apprehended along its sector of the border last year.

Networks of Smugglers

Authorities in both countries said smugglers in Europe and Asia, as well as some travel agents in the United States, have established working relationships with Mexican "coyotes," as the smugglers of immigrants are known here. They said one well-established network begins in China and has stops in Hong Kong, the Bahamas and Mexico City before its terminus in California. It charges \$5,000 to \$10,000 per immigrant, they said.

The Mexican authorities, while more reluctant to talk publicly about the problem, appear to share the concern of their American counterparts. Mr. Austin said the Mexican Government "has cooperated" with the Immigration Service and has passed on information about non-Mexican groups or individuals it regards as suspicious.

"The Mexican Government does not like the idea of a large and uncontrolled population here of people who have overstayed their visas or entered the country illegally," a foreign diplomat said. "They are regarded as an unwelcome and potentially dangerous force, especially at a time when Mexico is in the midst of a severe economic crisis."

A Mexican official recently returned from an assignment in a European embassy said that orders had been sent out to be on the lookout for false passports, especially those from countries with which Mexico maintains relaxed visa requirements.

The official said additional steps have also been taken to scrutinize visa requests more closely, with particular attention paid to Iranians, North Africans and Lebanese.

Nevertheless, American officials said they would like to see Mexico make even stronger efforts to halt the influx of third-country illegal immigrants.

A spokesman for the Mexican Foreign Ministry, Manuel Compean, said that Mexico maintains a policy of reciprocity on visas, allowing routine entry to citizens of all countries that do not require visas of Mexicans. He said he did not know if Mexico had made "any document or formal representation" to any of those countries about abuse of the regulations.

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