As an Immigration Tide Swells, Europe Treads Water

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Byline: By LAWRENCE DOWNES

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Body

The African and South Asian peddlers who sell counterfeit handbags and DVD's and other sidewalk junk in the Barceloneta, a tourist-clotted neighborhood on this city's Mediterranean beachfront, have to be nimble to stay in business. They tie strings to the corners of the sheets on which they fussily display their goods, so they can instantly shoulder their inventory when the police arrive. At the first glimpse of a striding uniform they scramble, only to roost again for a few more minutes a few yards farther down the street.

It's an indolent game of toreador and bull, but without a coup de grace. Shumil Chowdhury, a Bangladeshi who arrived illegally a year ago, told me he had been arrested 10 times, with the usual consequence being three days in jail, though judges sometimes gave him a break because they realized he had no other way to make a living, and little hope of legalizing his status.

In Barcelona, it is easy to find evidence of this halfhearted mix of tolerance and enforcement, where compassion and toughness cohabit in a way that seems designed to thwart an actual solution. But this attitude seems larger than this city, or Spain.

In Spain, long a gateway to immigrants from ***Europe***'s former colonies, people have grown accustomed to bad news on ***immigration***. More than 11,000 Africans have crossed to the Canary Islands this year, more than double the total for 2005, and hundreds more have died trying.

The travails continue on land; last year in Barcelona, hundreds of immigrants barricaded themselves in Catholic churches, threatening to starve themselves unless they got work visas. The Catalan government, a redoubt of tolerance in a country whose ***immigration*** policies are already among the gentlest in ***Europe***, relented, choosing the path of least resistance, as it has many times. A succession of amnesties has given hundreds of thousands of immigrants at least a theoretical path to legal status, though with bureaucratic hurdles that leave many unable to escape the status quo.

Spain has sought a more nuanced approach on immigrants and refugees than other countries in ***Europe***, where underground populations are straining safety nets and heightening the continent's age-old prickliness about strangers. Spain's strategy -- undermining the shadow economy by smoothing legal pathways for migration and work -- has pointed a direction for the rest of ***Europe***. But the immigrant ***tide*** is ***swelling***. A desperate surge of boat people, not only in Spain but in Italy, Greece and tiny Malta, has made it increasingly obvious that the problem must be confronted on a broader scale.

At a conference in Morocco in early July, delegates of 58 European and African countries pledged to attack the problem. Their agenda could have been photocopied from a Congressional staffer's binder in Washington: border

controls, workplace enforcement, economic development south of the border, questions of assimilation and national identity.

The participation of north and south was hailed as a breakthrough, though the chance of success seemed dubious. The focus on immediate fixes -- more razor wire and sea patrols -- seems as quixotic in the Mediterranean as along the Rio Grande. The amount of development aid dangled to spur a crackdown by African governments against would-be migrants is far less than the remittances that African immigrants send home from ***Europe***. And little was done about trade policies that cripple development in the third world and thus make ***Europe*** complicit in its own immigrant problems.

It's easy to understand the pessimism of people like Father Miguel Rodriguez, a priest in El Raval, Barcelona's immigrant ghetto. In El Raval, where dogs wander the narrow medieval streets below webs of fluttering laundry, Father Miguel feeds and clothes immigrants by the thousands, asking no questions about papers or religion. His organization is tolerated by the Catalan government and by the society figures he shrewdly courts with ceremonial medals and other flattery. They respond with smiles and kind words, though not much money.

Father Miguel, who will celebrate 50 years as a priest this fall, confesses to weary skepticism about ***immigration***. Immigrants absorb the decadent materialist values of the affluent north, he said, without participating in its prosperity. And the cohort of newcomers has brought its own streak of nastiness and criminality. Father Miguel has put a steel barricade on his shabby storefront, where thieves recently stole a printer.

But none of this has stopped the pragmatic Father Miguel from toiling as a fixer, matching immigrants with employers who vouch, not always honestly, for their charges.

A former colleague of Father Miguel's, the Rev. Joan Manuel Serra, who is 42 and has been a priest for only five years, retains a younger man's belief in goodness and progress. When I met him he was toting a backpack and shopping bag filled with a dozen bottles of cava, the local sparkling wine, to deliver to Father Miguel for a confirmation celebration. He, too, lamented the hole in ***Europe***'s soul, its hostility to people from other lands, but he also marveled at what he said was the growing willingness of Spain -- of Catalonia, anyway -- to accept the strangers in its midst. As evidence, he noted that Catalonia was close to electing an immigrant for president, the Socialist candidate Jose Montilla.

Such tolerance would have been unheard of in earlier generations, Father Joan said.

His enthusiasm was sincere, though -- as with any discussion of ***immigration*** in ***Europe*** -- it looks a little different through an American prism. Mr. Montilla was born in Cordoba, in the south of Spain.

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