Migration Grows, Heads South as Well as North

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Body

Hope and despair are tangible here on the busiest bridge spanning the Guatemalan-Mexican border, where the American Dream and the Pan American Highway meld with the underside of Latin America.

Commerce from the ***north*** meets a flood of migrants from as far away as Peru whose destination may be the United States or Canada but also could be Mexico. Corruption and greed join forces with economic destitution to foment a never-ending human stream. With the wink of an eye and a not-so-discreet passing of cash, border agents can be persuaded to look the other way as a cargo truck supposedly filled with bananas also carries 20 frightened Central Americans.

Here the stories unfold of the new American odyssey, where migrants in search of employment and better living standards come ***head***-to-***head*** with a ***growing*** anti-immigrant sentiment in ***South*** America as ***well*** as ***North*** America. With the explosion of trade and dismantling of both transportation and economic barriers among booming urban centers from Buenos Aires and Santiago to Los Angeles and Mexico City, people are on the move as never before.

"***Migration*** is the great phenomenon of the end of the 20th century and is going to be the great problem of the 21st century," said Mexican Foreign Minister Jose Angel Gurria. "Obviously, the patterns of ***migration*** in parts of Latin America tend to be northward into Mexico as ***well*** as into the United States. . . . This is not a new phenomenon, but the proportions are bigger than before."

Few migrants speak of the inter-American odyssey today in the same fearful terms they might have used two decades ago. Except for parts of the heavily traveled U.S.-Mexican frontier, the image that borders once conjured -- of formidable, heavily patrolled barriers designed to protect national sovereignty and keep out intruders -- has been virtually erased for migrants in this new age of hemispheric integration.

Although the flow of migrant labor back and forth across the U.S.-Mexican border has a long history, things are changing along borders ***well*** ***south*** of the Rio Grande as ***well***.

According to David Escobar, the Guatemalan consul in the Mexican riverside town of Ciudad Hidalgo, the Suchiate River is the busiest border crossing point for migrant traffic anywhere ***south*** of San Diego, mainly because of its proximity to the Pan American Highway. He estimated the number of migrants crossing over or near the Suchiate Bridge -- legally and illegally -- in the hundreds of thousands annually.

"I'm constantly urging the Honduran, Nicaraguan, Salvadoran and Costa Rican governments to open consulates here," Escobar said. "This is where most of their commerce ultimately passes, but it is also the place where their citizens are likely to have the biggest problems with [Mexican] ***migration*** authorities."

In the same sense that regional free trade accords have removed barriers to the flow of commercial goods between nations, the constant demand for cheap labor across the Americas has created a new psychology regarding the movement of people.

"I don't think there's any question about it. Borders just don't mean a great deal to migrants anymore," said San Diego resident Barbara Coe, an originator of Proposition 187, passed by voters in California last year to limit payments to illegal immigrants. "Just look at the numbers: from fiscal year 1991 to 1994 in California, 281,000 illegal immigrants were captured at internal U.S. checkpoints. These are places 20 to 40 miles from the border. Nobody knows where the line is anymore."

Familial Networking

Well-entrenched networks among families and, in many cases, entire communities have formed to assist migrants at every point in the process of crossing over and assimilating, explained Lupe Moreno, an Orange County, Calif., resident whose father worked nearly three decades as a smuggler of Mexican migrants. While a large majority of illegal immigrants crossing into the southwestern United States by land are Mexican, towns, villages and even whole regions of Central America have come to depend on ***migration*** -- and earnings sent home by migrant workers -- for economic sustenance.

Visas are less of a barrier. Central American residents en route to the ***north*** pass freely from one country to another using special 72-hour regional visas, according to a Guatemalan diplomat. In August at an inter-American conference in Ecuador, Central and ***South*** American leaders began reviewing proposals to scrap the idea of individual country passports altogether, in favor of the type of regional passports in use within the European Union. The United States has eased visa requirements for some Latin American nations.

For many migrants, the most important borders are the more intangible ones -- such as the ***growing*** political backlash against immigration in the United States and Canada. "For the average immigrant, the border has shifted to an entirely different place," said Juan Jose Gutierrez, executive director of One Stop Immigration, a Los Angeles nonprofit organization that provides legal and educational assistance to immigrants. "The real border is in their everyday reality once they get to where they're going."

Latin American media and governments have closely tracked the swelling political reaction against immigration in the United States, from the passage of California's Proposition 187 to measures pending in Congress that would restrict legal immigration.

Still, ***growing*** numbers of Mexican migrants are ***heading*** northward, largely because of the deteriorating conditions prompted by their country's economic crisis.

Depending on whose statistics are to be believed, the peso crisis has prompted a 10 to 30 percent increase in illegal border crossings to the United States. The U.S. Border Patrol reports a roughly 10 percent increase in apprehensions, which normally signifies an increase in illegal crossing attempts.

"Definitely, more and more people are coming. And it's not just poor people anymore. We're seeing more people from the Mexican middle class, for example," ***migration*** specialist Carol Zabin said. "It's not how we normally think of brain drain, but you now see skilled people from Mexico coming to take unskilled jobs here [in the United States]. It's a waste for everyone."

According to the 1990 U.S. Census, more than 23 million people in the United States claim Hispanic ancestry, a 50 percent increase over 1980 figure. Another 7 million -- mostly illegal migrants -- should be added, according to calculations by various ***migration*** experts. A 1992 study found that incomes of Latinos residing in the United States total $ 143 billion annually.

However, it is not only the United States that is facing an immigrant tide. Argentina and Chile, traditionally hospitable countries to immigrants that welcomed hundreds of thousands in the 19th century, are taking measures to close their doors amid steadily rising unemployment. As many as 1 million Paraguayans and Peruvians are reported to live illegally in Argentina.

For the last year, police in Buenos Aires have been raiding buildings inhabited by illegal residents, and Peruvians in particular have been blamed for a rise in petty crime. The Argentine government has increased surveillance at border crossings with Bolivia and Brazil, recently initiating a campaign against "false tourists" that requires all visitors to prove they have return tickets as ***well*** as $ 50 a day in spending money, or an international credit card.

Mexico is also facing a ***growing*** influx. Central Americans hoping to take advantage of the relative prosperity in Mexico since the 1994 inauguration of the ***North*** American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) are opting to look for jobs there rather than in the United States, despite the peso crisis. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) estimates that 70,000 Central Americans reside illegally in Mexico, mainly in the ***south***.

"A lot of people don't like them because they steal our jobs," said Jesus Guzman, a store owner near the Guatemalan border in Ciudad Hidalgo. "The ranchers and farmers love them because they work for half the salary of a Mexican. But they bring everyone's pay down, and when the Central Americans can't find work, they start stealing cars and robbing houses."

Guzman added, "We have a lot of the same problems that they're talking about in California, but we don't need a Proposition 187. We have something better. It's called the Federal Judicial Police."

Like the three-way flow of U.S.-Mexican-Canadian trade stemming from NAFTA, the flow of migrants has created its own type of hemispheric interdependency. Countries as small as El Salvador and as big as Mexico rely heavily on remittances from their migrant nationals as a steady source of dollar revenue.

Capital Flows

According to a July OECD report, remittances from Mexican migrants to their families back home total $ 3 billion annually, constituting the third-largest source of dollar income for Mexico, behind petroleum exports and tourism.

"It's one of the few capital flows that doesn't disappear based on the whims of investors," said University of California ***migration*** specialist Raul Hinojosa.

"In El Salvador, there were $ 2 billion in remittances in 1993, which on a per-capita basis is even more than Mexico. It's fascinating because it actually allowed the Salvadoran government to revise the national budget and reduce import tariffs to zero. Remittances are now higher than El Salvador's total exports to all countries."

The impact of these remittances in rural Mexico is often far more profound than anything felt from NAFTA-related investment. For example, San Pablo Huixtepec, in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca, has funded paving of the town's streets, repaired a bell tower in the town square and bought a new roof for a 360-year-old church, all through remittances from migrants in the United States.

In El Salvador, because of its recent civil war and ongoing economic problems, one-fifth of the 5 million population have left the country, mostly ***migrating*** to the United States. Since the war ended in 1992, the flux of migrants has not slowed -- contrary to predictions of many experts.

The hamlet of San Jose de la Paz Arriba, 20 miles ***south*** of San Salvador, lives almost entirely off money sent from relatives in the United States. In comparison to surrounding communities, San Jose residents are able to live far better as a result.

Besides individual remittances, expatriates from San Jose have set up a committee in Los Angeles to help pay for community projects. The streets have been paved and a new clinic constructed using the donations. Houses are being repaired and new dwellings built. Unusual furnishings are starting to appear, such as refrigerators, microwave ovens, washing machines and large-screen televisions.

In many cases, there is no electricity to run the appliances, no running water for the washing machines. But the appliances are carefully cared for and viewed as highly prized status symbols.

"***Migration*** has had more impact on El Salvador in the past decade than the civil war," said Juan Jose Garcia, who recently completed a study on the impact of ***migration*** on village life. "It has changed our culture deeply. It has put different world maps in people's ***heads***."

Garcia cited ***migration***'s influences from sexual mores to family structures and consumption habits.

"The main social gathering place is no longer the church or the town plaza," he explained. "The most important people are no longer the priest or the mayor. The center of social activity now is Antel [the local telephone office], and the telephone operators have gained greatly in importance. They are the ones who are the gatekeepers to contact with the United States."

Benito Martinez, the Antel operator in San Jose de la Paz Arriba, a town of 3,000, said he places 350 to 400 calls to the United States each month, all of them collect. Calls often last 20 to 90 minutes.

Telephone calls to Mexico from the United States in 1993 were 3 percent of all international calls made in the world that year.

The American home is feeling the effects of the ***migration*** boom in ways that seemed unimaginable a decade ago.

Scientists at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta have been studying a steep increase in a parasitic disease known as cysticercosis, which can include tapeworms, brain lesions and symptoms of epilepsy. The disease, which affects up to 3 percent of all Latin Americans, has been known to cause 50,000 deaths every year, mainly ***south*** of the U.S. border. It is contracted by handling and eating undercooked pig meat and can be passed by touching other foods.

In Brooklyn, members of the Orthodox Sephardic Jewish community -- forbidden to eat pork -- contracted the disease because it was common practice there to hire housekeepers from Mexico, Guatemala and other Central American countries.

"You can imagine what a terrible shock it was to the community when they found out the disease had something to do with pig meat. It was so bad, so shameful," said Peter Schantz, a deputy chief of epidemilogy at the Atlanta centers.

Cross-Border Politics

The political mobilization that finally occurred among Latin American immigrants in California last year against Proposition 187 has translated into a nascent Latino political movement across the American Southwest -- supported, in part, by the Mexican government.

Foreign Minister Gurria suggested in an interview that his government will take an increasing interest in the political mobilization of Mexicans in the United States to help ensure that similar measures do not take hold.

"Many in the U.S. Congress are not familiar with things Mexican. That is our problem, ultimately, not theirs. . . . There are other countries which have organized themselves very ***well*** in order to make matters of importance about those countries very much felt by the U.S. administration and the U.S. Congress," Gurria explained.

A goal of the Mexican government is to make Congress realize that there is "a political price to pay" for voting against issues deemed vital to Mexico, Gurria added, referring to congressional opposition to the Clinton administration's $ 40 billion bailout package for Mexico. Israel "is a very, very good example of how this is done, but not the only one."

Mexicans "were very politically intrusive during the Proposition 187 campaign, which shows that the Mexican government thinks it has a stake in [the ***growing*** anti-immigrant mood] in the United States," said John Martin, research director of the Washington-based Center for Immigration Studies.

Correspondents Douglas Farah in El Salvador and Gabriel Escobar in Argentina contributed to this report.

LATIN-BORN IN THE UNITED STATES

BY STATE, 1990 CENSUS

California -- 37%

New York -- 14%

Texas -- 13%

Florida -- 13%

Illinois -- 4%

New Jersey -- 4%

Remaining states -- 15%

SOURCE: U.S. Census

KEEPING IN TOUCH

Here is a sampling of figures from the FCC on phone calls made from the United States to various Latin American countries in 1993 (1994 figures were not available).

COUNTRY CALLS MINUTES REVENUES

(dollars)

MEXICO 217,369,776 1,398,864,544 $ 1,400,090,950

CANADA 570,433,917 2,493,774,583 1,427,215,902

EL SALVADOR 5,883,759 106,983,123 137,423,264

GUATEMALA 9,996,828 93,037,372 101,730,245

HONDURAS 4,301,417 61,045,116 69,017,923

COSTA RICA 7,715,053 46,723,633 53,319,293

ARGENTINA 14,083,856 84,910,649 95,132,097

BRAZIL 29,464,119 171,444,482 181,461,086

COLOMBIA 25,966,345 200,210,783 215,086,342

Note: These are business as ***well*** as personal calls.

SOURCE: FCC

Graphic

Illustration; Photo, herberto rodriguez for The Washington Post; Map, brad wye, Central American family ***heads north*** across Suchiate River from Guatemala to Mexico. Guatemala's consul on Mexican side says other countries of the isthmus also should have consulates there. MAIN ROUTES OF ***MIGRATION*** (map)

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