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Deportations From U.S. Straining Isthmus Societies and Economies

by Mike Leffert

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The US deported about 70,000 Central Americans back to Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala during 2006. Against the backdrop of legislative failure in the US to pass immigration reform, immigration authorities responded to public clamor for coherent policy with massive raids on workplaces that employ foreign workers, netting as many as 1,300 in a single day. Roundups of purported members of youth gangs of Central American origin and raids on the homes of suspected undocumented immigrants have contributed to the unprecedented flood of migrants back to their homelands. The countries of the isthmus are coping poorly, unable to absorb the return of their citizens in such numbers.

The countries are straining to deal with these numbers, but experts in the field doubt they will accomplish much. Job-creation programs have cropped up, but, said Alvaro Caballeros of the Asociacion para el Avance de las Ciencias Sociales (AVANCSO), "they will never find a job that will pay them what they make in the US." For this social scientist, jobs alone do not get at the totality of the problem. A job does not mitigate the trauma many or most of the returnees have suffered in the deportation process. Advocates say the states must take a more integrated approach.

The deportees are further burdened by the debts they accumulated in paying the high price of being transported to the US, and, for them, the only solution is to try again to emigrate. The debts are not canceled upon deportation. They also feel the pressure from the families to whom they return, who come to depend on the average US\$240 that a migrant worker sends home each month. Some come home leaving children born in the US behind, resulting in more grief. Some organizations concerned with aspects of the problems, either in dealing with returnees or seeing to the welfare of Central Americans in the US, are seeking help ahead of a planned March 11-12 visit to Guatemala by US President George W. Bush.

Representatives of the Alianza por Guatemala de Migrantes, the Red Regional de Organizaciones Civiles para las Migraciones, and others traveled to Guatemala to confer with congressional president Ruben Dario Morales, Foreign Minister Gert Rosenthal, and Procurador de los Derechos Humanos Sergio Morales. Rosenthal told them the situation would be the highest priority item for discussion with Bush. He said, "It is a problem whose detonator is the country's economic system, which fails by obligating people to migrate."

Karla Giron of the Red Regional told Rosenthal that the problem is complex and that the state has to take it on in an integrated manner, a sentiment with which Mauro Verzeletti of the Pastoral de Movilidad Humana agreed. "It doesn't suffice for the Foreign Ministry, with its scarce resources, to take care of our co-nationals," he said. "Instead, the whole state must get involved in it." Rosenthal responded, "The government feels powerless, because they are people who, in one way or another,

violated foreign laws, and we can do little to defend them. It is a growing demand, and we are given fewer and fewer resources to deal with it."

Rosenthal's point, that the economic system is at the root of the migration problem, was taken up elsewhere by Juan Dardon of the Movimiento Tzuk Kim Pop. He noted, "The macroeconomy in general is sustained by commerce and construction. If the flow of remittances is reduced, we could enter into a recession." Dardon said the private sector also has an obligation to get involved in the migration issue, "because it gives the poor masses the purchasing power to consume goods and services."

Get the government to push

Bush The visitors are pressing the government to persuade Bush to stop the deportations. Juan Garcia of the Comision de Migrantes in Rhode Island said the government "must demand of him changes that favor the Guatemalans who work here [in the US]. Lester Rodas of the Alianza para los Guatemaltecos wanted it made clear to Bush that "many families have disintegrated, and many children have been left without protection." Verzeletti's message to the government was, "We know that Bush's visit is for economic purposes, but the Guatemalan authorities must not forget the citizens who have had to migrate to the US."

Guatemala has seen some 18,305 people repatriated under these circumstances during the last year, El Salvador, about 14,328, and Honduras, 23,754. Left out of these numbers are those sent back for gang membership, real or suspected, or criminal offenses and an estimated 180,000 returned from Mexico during a five-year period. The gang members are a special case because, with them, the countries to which they return have taken a punitive stance, preferring to go after and jail them rather than integrate them economically or consider their social needs (see NotiCen, 2005-03-03 and 2005-08-18).

Regarding the gang members, the countries continue to embrace counterproductive measures, contributing to the strain on their societies and economies, while Central American police officials complain that US deportation practices have overwhelmed their capabilities. "I cannot blame the United States for deporting them," said El Salvador's police chief Rodrigo Avila-Aviles. "However, we need to look for new mechanisms so we have more control over these guys."

The costs of incarcerating them, 60,000 of them in El Salvador alone, sucks resources from measures that would treat the problem as a whole. But, just this month, President Antonio Saca met with US Attorney General Alberto Gonzales, and between them they agreed on a plan that emphasizes continued aggression rather than rehabilitation. Gonzalez said the US would finance a new program to train regional police forces and encourage anti-gang legislation. Halting deportations, however, was not part of the package.

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