

1-8-2009

Deportations Wreaking Economic Havoc In Guatemala And In The Us

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Deportations Wreaking Economic Havoc In Guatemala And In The Us." (2009). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/9668>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiCen by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

Deportations Wreaking Economic Havoc In Guatemala And In The Us

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Guatemala

Published: Thursday, January 8, 2009

US deportations of Guatemalans reached record levels in 2008, adding to the growing economic problems in both countries. The US ejected 27,929 last year, compared with a still-remarkable 23,062 in 2007. The most recent number is a fourfold increase in the last four years. The number of Guatemalans thrown out of Mexico during the year, however, had declined somewhat, said Guatemala's Direccion General de Migracion (DGM). But even with the decline, the numbers far surpassed those for the US. Mexico booted 49,450 back across its southern frontier in 2007, but this past year the number declined to 36,364. Analysts cite a number of reasons for the decline of returnees from Mexico. The government of President Alvaro Colom is committed to better relations with its neighbor, and that has resulted in nearly a dozen meetings between Colom and Mexico's President Felipe Calderon. Together, they have implemented coordinated joint action against organized crime, particularly in the border regions. With the bilateral focus on border security, it may be that fewer Guatemalans are making the crossing as easily as in previous years. Guatemala's Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Ibarra stressed that relations with Mexico have never been better because of Colom's focus on them since taking office last January. "As a consequence of the latest accomplishments in the area, border security is being reinforced after coordinating with Mexican authorities with whom permanent communication has been established," said Ibarra. But no such gains have been racked up with the US and the now-outgoing administration of President George W. Bush. Widely reputed to have neglected the region and contributed to hemispheric political shifts against it, this administration returned these Guatemalans as part of a policy that sent more than 80,000 home to Central America last year, also a record. The figures include 29,307 Hondurans, 20,516 Salvadorans, and 2,281 Nicaraguans. Saddled with additional debt Many, if not most, of the returnees in recent months have been treated to methods and procedures of questionable legality, both constitutionally and internationally. Central Americans and others seem to be aware of the harsh handling they will get if caught, but the same severe economic conditions that impel the US to sweep out foreign workers also motivate these citizens of the region to keep trying, usually at great expense. Hilda Ramirez, captured in the Arizona desert in December, explained to an Agence France-Presse reporter, "I'm a mother of two children and worked in a maquila, but it closed leaving me without work. I decided to leave and paid a coyote [people smuggler] nearly US\$2,000 and ended up with a debt of almost US\$3,300." That debt will continue to rain hardship on the heads of Ramirez and her family. She gave the coyote the deed to her house as collateral. Now back in Guatemala as a member of the final group of deportees for 2008, she has no way to support herself, and the coyote is certain to exercise his property rights. Ramirez said she will not venture forth again, not so much because of debt or the prospect of being sent back again, but because of the physical and psychological mistreatment she said she suffered at the hands of immigration authorities. Recent reports indicate that, with the economic downturn in the US, many more are giving up the practice of heading back north at first opportunity. This loss of migrant-labor opportunity is disrupting lives, businesses, and communities on both sides of the border. A case in point is Xicalcal in the northern highlands. The little village gave up nearly all its able workers

to migration, leaving behind only those unable to work to live well on remittances and oversee the building of new houses that the money permitted. But after a 2007 raid on a New Bedford, Massachusetts, clothing factory and subsequent ones at the same company, much of the population is back. With their earnings dissipated, they are going broke and becoming desperate, with little work available other than finishing the elaborate houses begun in better times. Victor Garcia, for instance, a father of four who is now lucky to make US\$6 a day doing field labor, used to send home US\$500 a month. Guadalupe Toj's husband fared better than Garcia; he is still in the US, still working, and still sending money home. But for Toj a countdown has begun. Her husband could turn out to be the next figure ambling down the dusty road to Xicalcal. "There are so many people coming back," she worries. "Who is going to employ so many people? What will they eat?" Raids wreck local economies. If times are tough in Xicalcal, they are moving that way in New Bedford too. When the ICE raid sent the Guatemalans home, it also decimated the company that employed them. The Michael Bianco Inc. textile factory relied on the 361 people who were arrested, the substandard wages they paid them, and the wages they illegally withheld from them, for its survival. Now the company's founder faces prison and the company has been sold. The 2007 raid was by government intention a high-profile one, well-publicized, that has frightened employers across the US. In New Bedford, Anthony Sapienza, owner of another clothing factory, anguishes, "It isn't easy for an employer, despite all the rules and regulations. The fact is, you can buy pretty sophisticated documents on the streets, and you can get hoodwinked." His concern is that the US government is making him responsible for its own failure to stop illegal immigration and that he, too, could find himself facing charges despite efforts to comply with verification regulations for his workers. Across the US in Postville, Iowa, another plant was raided, and a corresponding town in Guatemala, San Jose Calderas, began to suffer decline and despair. A May 2008 raid on a kosher slaughterhouse, Agriprocessors, deprived both the Iowa town and San Andres Itzapa municipality, where San Jose is one of several villages, of its major source of livelihood. The raid netted nearly 300 arrests, almost all undocumented Guatemalans, and most from the region around San Jose Calderas. A villager identified only as Marco Tulio, who was returned in shackles along with 100 fellow workers and neighbors, took reporters on a tour of the construction projects halted midway to becoming houses for the families of those who had been sending remittances from Iowa. "This is what deportation has done; it's a disaster for the village. It's gone down since the raid," he said. "All the houses people were building have stopped, so there are these unfinished houses everywhere. How can you live like that?" The tour included shops full of goods but empty of customers, and children in the streets who could no longer afford to go to school. San Andres Itzapa Mayor Marvin Avila concurred. "There already is so much unemployment, and now the deportations generate more poverty," he said. Now residents worry that those kids in the street, denied educational opportunity, will add to a growing Guatemalan lumpen proletariat and contribute to the country's staggering crime rate. Said Margarita Cate of the Federacion Nacional de Mujeres Rurales de Guatemala (FEDENMURG), "What we need is employment here, and not just for the 200 who were deported from Postville. We need support from our government, and from organizations in the United States, so we can do something to help these people and stabilize their lives here." As in Xicalcal, a large proportion of the working-age population had migrated north in the last decade. The remittances allowed for a standard of living unavailable by any other means. "Before the raid, the village was progressing, developing economically," said Mayor Avila. "Now that has stopped. Before the raid, the dollars were coming in, so if someone got sick, they could open their door, get in their own vehicle, drive to a clinic, and pay for it. Now they've sold their car, or, if they haven't, they can't afford to buy gas. They're worse off now because they have debt." Like the Xicalcal people, and

migrants throughout the country, they financed their passage to the US with loans secured by deeds and whatever property they had. The coyotes holding the paper are unlikely to forego collection. After three years sending money home from working in the Iowa plant, Mardoqueo Valle still owes the coyote US\$8,163 and has no prospect of earning the money. He expects to lose the new house where he lives with his growing family. "I don't know what will happen to us now," he says. Maria Elena Siquinjay also owes the coyotes. Her husband had only been working at Agriprocessors about six months when he was arrested, and he is still in custody in the US. She was able to open a little store with the money he'd been sending, but it is one of those little businesses that stand idle these days because people cannot afford to shop. "We had big dreams of building a house or sending the children to school. Now I don't know what's going to happen to us," she said. Postville is not doing well either. The raid shut the town's main employer down. The company is bankrupt and its CEO is reportedly held without bail on charges of child labor and fraud. The boost to local Guatemalan economies came at the additional cost of deceptive practices that included withholding earnings and other exploitative practices. The Guatemalans were just one of several groups of workers, Somalis, people from Palau, even homeless Texans had been duped and dumped before them. Said Maryn Olson of the Postville Central Coordinating Committee, "Postville is definitely still in the midst of a humanitarian and economic crisis." Not all the Guatemalans have been deported. Some remain awaiting the disposition of diverse charges including identity theft and illegal entry. Some wander Postville wearing monitoring bracelets awaiting hearings. They cannot work and must appeal to the same charity agencies that are attempting to aid the local citizens who are facing evictions, as they are unable to pay their rent or other expenses. Elsewhere in Iowa there is evidence of a lack of sympathy for the locals or for the foreign workers. Wrote one Iowan to the Minneapolis St. Paul Star Tribune, "The truth of the matter is that the company abused the workers, the town turned a blind eye, and the state let it happen. While this was happening the undocumented had many 'anchor babies' allowing the burden to fall on the taxpayers, especially now that the plant is down. This was more like a concentration camp and everyone involved should be ashamed, totally ashamed." Postville lies just beyond the Minnesota state line. The recriminations notwithstanding, if there are lessons to be drawn from this experience, they have gone unlearned. Well-aware of what has happened to their neighbors, some of the poor are still venturing north to try their luck. Figures vary, but many experts put the number of Guatemalans living illegally in the US at 500,000, and they say that figure represents an increase of 74% since the turn of this century and that the rate of increase continues to grow much more quickly than that of Mexico, which still contributes larger numbers of undocumented workers because of its superior size. But Mexicans, in terms of national averages, earn more than twice as much as do Guatemalans. Migrating Guatemalans are spurred as well by a soaring birthrate, food prices as high or higher than in the US, failing institutions, including the education, health, and justice systems, a state that has not met its obligations to victims of the civil war that ended in December 1996, one of the widest disparities of income in the world, and little trust that the present government will improve any of this.

-- End --