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Daniel Vázquez

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Skepticism About Reforms Increases Flow of Undocumented Cuban Immigrants to U.S.

by Daniel Vázquez

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The flow of undocumented immigrants from Cuba to the US has increased in recent months, most entering through points along the US-Mexico border, within a context of skepticism about reforms promised by the government of President Raúl Castro and unease regarding the economic collapse of other traditional Cuban migratory destinations such as Spain.

From Oct. 1, 2011, to mid-June, some 8,240 Cubans tried to illegally enter the US, 6,434 of whom entered at the Mexican border. Almost all the 931 intercepted at sea were returned to the island, indicated sources from the US Coast Guard (USCG) and the US Border Patrol (USBP).

The US repatriates Cubans detained at sea during their escape from the island, in virtue of migratory accords signed in 1995 by Havana and Washington. However, the biannual review of those accords was interrupted in 2011 after Cuba sentenced US contractor Alan Gross to 15 years in prison on charges that his activities threatened national security.

While bilateral relations are at a halt because of Gross’ imprisonment in a Havana military hospital and protests continue for the return of five Cubans convicted of spying by US courts, the number of undocumented Cuban immigrants has surged, surpassing the 7,051 entries recorded during the 2011 fiscal year.

Promised migration reforms have not gone into effect (NotiCen, May 24, 2012). These would eliminate bureaucratic obstacles and burdensome paperwork for those who want to legally travel outside the country or who want to return to live on the island. In the much anticipated national parliament session on July 24, Castro said that migratory reform had not been set aside but was still under revision.

In dribs and drabs

"I would prefer to leave at once instead of waiting for major internal changes," said Luisa, a resident of Old Havana and an accountant laid off this year from a state-run business. She hopes to sell her shabby apartment to buy a ticket to the US and to survive the first stage of her new life with help from relatives in Florida. Announced in 2011, the sale and purchase of houses has been one of the changes welcomed by the populace since Raúl Castro took the reins of government in 2006.

Many Cubans consulted by this reporter believe that through Castro the state is actually making reforms, especially through better examination of institutional resources, clearing the clogged state payrolls and offering incentives for efficiency, eliminating the historical gratuities associated with the communist project in the Caribbean, and raising taxes on subsidized services such as electricity.

"The state continues to move away from the paternal role that characterized its interpretation of communism but continues to be totalitarian," said Luisa, who was a state employee for 18 years.
Reforms have been unwillingly received even though there has been a positive increase in freelance activities such as home rentals, food sales, and transportation services, among others (NotiCen, June 28, 2012). At the same time, there has been a rise in taxes that hampers people’s confidence that one can be prosperous if self-employed.

In July, the government closed one of the most flourishing private restaurants in Havana, El Cabildo, which provided income for 130 families and artists from the cultural project La Opera de la Calle. This increased fears that the government was still on the lookout for entrepreneurial initiatives and that these might be abruptly closed down, as they have been for the past half century.

As deregulations continue, self-employment grows but has not taken off as expected because of the lack of inputs, raw materials, and the public’s low purchasing power. No wage reforms have been passed to increase the meager salaries of less than US$20 per month. State control seems to strengthen as it continues to resist true liberalization.

Likewise, the new regulations and customs tariffs announced this year are unpopular. These tax high-demand items brought to the island by visiting émigrés and intermediaries. The high tariffs are a mortal blow for the entry of goods for household consumption, privately owned businesses, or resale on the black market, whose prices compete with the state stores, where the same merchandise can be more than 400% of the international price.

**Peering outside**

The drastic economic changes in Spain have dissuaded Cubans from leaving for Europe even though many already have citizenship there, obtained in recent years thanks to naturalization privileges for Spanish descendants.

Some Cubans who had immigrated to Spain have returned to the island temporarily until the storms of unemployment and salary cuts subside. The favorable situation of possessing a Spanish passport, granted by the Spanish consulate in Havana, facilitates the option of visiting the US to settle there permanently or to earn money temporarily.

"The situation here will be very difficult if [Venezuelan President] Hugo Chávez’s government explodes," said Elvira, retired with three adult children, one of whom is in the medical profession and a member of the Cuban mission in Caracas. He sends money, clothing, food, and other goods to her and his other relatives in Havana.

For Elvira, the internal situation is a feeling of impoverishment. There are days when the grocery store refrigerators are disconnected in privileged districts in the capital, such as El Vedado, and there are no products such as chicken or ground meat available. A weekly purchase of fruits and vegetables using local currency at the farmers’ markets can consume all of her monthly retirement stipend in one blow.

Like Elvira, many Cubans believe that there will be political change in Venezuela in the coming months, and, with the eventual passing of President Chávez, who was diagnosed with cancer (NotiSur, Aug. 12, 2011), Cuba will be pushed into a new "special period." The "special period" was Cuba’s extreme economic depression in the 1990s after the fall of the Eastern European socialist bloc, which had propped up the island for decades.

Castro’s recent tour of China, Vietnam, and Russia in July was interpreted internally as a strengthening of relations with those countries while facing the possibility of a sharp economic
downturn for the island in the event of an interruption in the copious flow of petroleum and other resources from Venezuela that Havana has enjoyed since Chávez’ first took office in 1999.

Summer cholera

Summers on the island generate tensions in families and communities with the upsurge of stomach viruses, oppressive heat, rains and hurricanes, as well as tensions within families arising from "vacations" spent in crowded homes with limited food, poor transportation, and few distractions. This year, another source of anxiety has been three deaths from cholera and another 158 persons infected with the disease. Opposition forces believe that those numbers are artificially low.

The cases have been mainly in the eastern province of Granma, and popular festivals have been suspended and train service was cancelled for a month to Havana, 750 km miles to the west, and Santiago de Cuba, second-most-important city in the country. The last cholera epidemic was in 1882, when Cuba was still a Spanish colony.

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