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Mexico "unofficially" Expanding Cooperation With U.S. To Reduce Flow Of Central American Refugees

by Deborah Tyroler

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In its March 17 edition, the New York Times reported that the Mexican government is "unofficially" expanding its cooperation with the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to reduce the flow of illegal immigrants into the US. President Carlos Salinas de Gortari's government has reportedly permitted INS agents to increase investigative activities in Mexican territory, while the Mexican police have recently combined forces with the US Border Patrol to apprehend Central Americans and Mexicans along the US border. For instance, on Feb. 23, the Border Patrol and the Mexican Federal Police carried out a "sandwich" operation at Tijuana-San Ysidro. More than 500 people, mostly Mexicans but including a few Central Americans were caught in the middle and arrested when the two forces moved toward the border from the north and south. The participation of the Mexican Federal Police in this operation sparked enormous controversy in Mexico. Government officials responded by claiming that the operation was not aimed at preventing the entry of Mexican undocumented workers into the US, but rather at protecting them from drug dealers and thieves. Unnamed US officials told the Times that while the information they obtain from Mexican authorities may also be useful in stopping the entry of undocumented Mexican workers into the US, they have emphasized that their primary objective at present is to cooperate with Mexico in controlling Central American immigration. On March 16 in a formal policy statement, the Mexican government asserted that "It does not constitute a crime of any sort" for Mexican citizens "to try to enter another country without immigration documents or to leave national territory without going through inspection and other established formalities." Joint efforts by Mexican and US authorities, said the statement, "do not seek to contravene the foreign policy of Mexico, nor much less violate the individual guarantees of those who find themselves in our national territory." On March 22, Mexican Foreign Minister Fernando Solana told reporters in Mexico City that while the government continues to exchange information on immigration matters with the US and Guatemala, there have been no changes in immigration policy. Next, Solana denied claims that Mexican policy regarding Central American immigrants has changed. A statement released on the same day by the Foreign Ministry said: "No diplomatic agreement has been reached between Mexico and the United States that establishes joint efforts between Mexican police forces and the Immigration and Naturalization Service to stop the flow of undocumented migrants, from Mexico or from any other nation in Latin America." In 1988, the INS recorded 940,601 apprehensions of people trying to enter the US illegally. More than 90% of those detained were Mexican citizens. (Basic data from Xinhua, 03/23/89; New York Times, 03/17/89)

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