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Central Americans Flee Home Countries: Recent Notes On Migration To Mexico, U.S., Canada

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[Summarized below are extracts from selected media accounts of Central American migration. These reports touch on numbers of migrants and would-be migrants; Mexican, US and Canadian migration policies; and, debate surrounding the "effectiveness" of Washington's Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, known as Simpson-Rodino. The bill granted legal status to foreigners who could prove they had arrived in the US before 1982 and have lived in the country continuously since that time. Subsequent to the bill's approval, Border Patrol, Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and other agency personnel have been increased in an effort to stem the flow of illegal immigrants.]

May 6: INS spokesperson Duke Austin reported that about 100 Nicaraguans who had requested political asylum in the US would be deported in the following week. He said that the policy of giving Nicaraguans preferential treatment among all Central Americans seeking asylum had effectively been terminated by the Bush administration. Beginning three months ago, he added, undocumented Nicaraguans attempting to enter the US have regularly been detained by Border Patrol agents, the same treatment accorded to counterparts from other Central American nations. Mark Shneider, an attorney working with Proyecto Libertad, a human rights advocacy organization in Harlingen, Texas, told reporters that the Border Patrol regularly detains Nicaraguans whose requests for political asylum are still pending. He demanded an "explanation" from the Justice Department for the cause of these detentions. INS spokesperson Virginia Kise said that as of May 6, there were 2,988 undocumented foreigners in the Harlingen district. Of the total, she said, 1,055 were Nicaraguans.

May 26: Mexican immigration service official for the southern region, Alberto Cornelio Maldonado, told Notimex that thus far in 1989, more than 450 Central and South Americans had been deported from Tabasco state. In the first half of May, he said, 52 illegal immigrants were detained and deported. The majority of undocumented persons detained by Mexican authorities in the southern region, said Maldonado, are of Honduran, Salvadoran and Colombian origin. Maldonado asserted that networks specializing in smuggling Central Americans into third countries do not exist in Mexico. Such networks in Guatemala, he said, charge up to $1,000 per person for entry to the US.

June 1: Mexican immigration service official for the southern region, Alejandro Gongora Vera, told reporters that at least 235 undocumented Central Americans were deported from Quintana Roo state in the past six months. Of the total deportees, he said, 150 were captured in Cancun, 30 in Cozumel and 55 in Chetumal. According to daily newspaper Uno Mas Uno (Mexico), Central Americans fleeing their homes are charged between $2,500 and $5,000 by "polleros" for passage through Mexico to the US border. The newspaper said refugees are often brought into Mexico, and then robbed and abandoned in Quintana Roo state. June 5: Raul Gutierrez Certa, Mexican immigration service official in Tampico, Tamaulipas state, told reporters that 30 undocumented persons from Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Cuba were taken to Mexico City on June 3 for deportation. On June 5, he said, the Tampico office sent two Salvadorans to the capital for deportation. Gutierrez reported that a special operations unit had been set up in Tampico to impede the transit of undocumented persons from traveling to the US.

June 6: Elva Martinez of the US Border Patrol intelligence department reported that
in May a total of 1,530 undocumented non-Mexicans were detained in McAllen, Texas. Mexicans detained and "voluntarily" deported during the month of May totaled 5,668. The Border Patrol office reported that in May, 1989, 377 Salvadorans, 129 Hondurans, 631 Nicaraguans, and 147 Guatemalans were detained. In May 1988, Central American detainees were comprised of 317 Salvadorans, 131 Hondurans, 173 Nicaraguans, and 96 Guatemalans. Arturo Solis, director of the Center of Migration Studies and Information (CIEM) in Reynosa (located across the border from McAllen, Tamaulipas state, Mexico), said the Border Patrol's numbers for May are indicative of US attempts to obfuscate the immigration problem. According to Solis, "In late May, the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) reported that the attempt to halt undocumented migration had been successful. A special operation initiated on Feb. 23 aimed at reducing illegal entries into the US was canceled because of its supposed success...This 'success' is quite simply false." "For example," said Solis, "in May 1988, the Border Patrol [in the McAllen district] detained 717 Central Americans, compared to 1,284 in 1989." June 15: INS spokesperson Virginia Kice told reporters that from January through May 1989, 40,022 undocumented persons had been detained in the McAllen and Brownsville districts, a 37% increase over the 29,305 detentions recorded for the same period in 1988. Nonetheless, she said, an overall decline in the trafficking of such persons along the border had been observed, result of Simpson-Rodino. June 16: Copley News Service cited residents on the Mexican side of the river Suchiate (bordering Guatemala) saying that smuggling of Central Americans has become the region's biggest business. The greatest profits reportedly derive from permitting the illegal immigrants into Mexico, robbing them, and then having them deported, knowing that their desperation guarantees their return. Central Americans generally pay up to $200 to get to the Guatemala-Mexico border, about $300 more to cross the river and past the three state roadblocks, and $200 or $300 more if a coyote can get them to Mexico City. They might pay up to $1,500 total for a successful "door-to-door" transport from their home country into US territory. Copley cites Mexican immigration officials as saying they are catching and deporting at least four times as many Central Americans this year as they did last year. Mexico deported more than 12,000 "indocumentados" in the first three months of 1989, compared with 13,000 for all of 1988, officials said. Mexican officials estimate that for every undocumented person apprehended, four or five may be slipping through. Of the latter, an unknown number successfully cross the US border, while the rest remain underground in Mexico, working illegally to earn money before undertaking the final trek into the US. Unidentified INS officials told Copley that the number of Central American detainees has dropped since regulations governing political asylum were tightened up in February. Border Patrol officials in San Diego were cited as saying that this year's figures for detentions of Central Americans are about the same, perhaps even down slightly, from the 1988 total. More than 11,000 non-Mexican undocumented persons were apprehended in the San Diego region in fiscal 1988, but May's figure was just under 700, mostly Salvadorans and Guatemalans. Copley points out that based on the discrepancy between the number of US apprehensions and Mexican estimates of those making it into Mexico, thousands of Central Americans either may have slipped through the INS net into the US this year or remain in Mexico awaiting their chance to go north. June 20: The New York Times described the smuggling of people across US borders as a booming business, and one likely to expand. Potential migrants originate from all world regions, including East Asia, West Africa, India, South America and Central America. Mexican "coyotes" have become the focal point of a global trafficking enterprise. Robert Penland, INS Asst. Commissioner for Anti-Smuggling Operations, told the Times: "International alien smuggling has become a big business, a series of highly organized and sophisticated networks. It's not a single little operation anymore, with one guy going from one country to another evading customs, it's something serious, and it is here to
stay. Dale W. Cozart, Border Patrol chief in San Diego, told the Times that beginning in December or January, the proportion of non-Mexicans among apprehended migrants increased from less than 2% to 5%. A similar increase has been observed in the Brownsville sector of Texas, most being Central Americans. The Times cited the INS as saying that in 1988, 1,008,145 foreigners were apprehended trying to enter the US illegally. Immigrants from more than 60 countries were arrested attempting to cross the Mexican border in 1988. Of the total, 58,423 were non-Mexicans. Figures of illegal immigrants successfully entering the US are not available. Unidentified immigration officials cited by the Times estimate that for every illegal immigrant detained, at least two successfully enter the country. Simpson-Rodino has made entry into the US more difficult, and therefore more expensive. Smuggling networks are also said to have increased involvement in ancillary activities such as job placement for illegal immigrants. In some instances, the networks appear willing to finance clients' trips on credit. Central American peasants are approached in their home villages and offered package deals with no money down. The Times pointed out that in some cases, immigrants, especially those from Central America and China, find themselves in conditions of virtual involuntary servitude. In southern Mexico, such immigrants have been hired out to plantation owners at long hours and low wages, to work on the coffee, cotton and cacao harvests until they earn the money to continue their trip. Women are obligated to work as prostitutes and bargaining girls to pay coyotes, in southern Mexico and in the US. June 21: Canadian immigration official Hector Cowan told Notimex that his government intends to open its borders to a limited number of persons currently residing in refugee camps in Central America and Mexico. This program, said Cowan, will be implemented by Canada's embassies and consulates. He added that the program does not apply to persons requesting asylum. Total beneficiaries under the program, said Cowan, number 3,300. The government, he added, will absorb travel costs for some refugees as well as economic assistance once they have arrived in Canada. In 1989, said the official, about 400 refugees from refugee camps in southern Mexico and larger numbers from camps in Honduras and El Salvador will be accepted for entry into Canada. According to unidentified immigration experts cited by Notimex, the new Canadian policy is intended to impose limits on Latin American immigration. These experts point out that under a policy known as "family reunification," the number of persons entering Canada from Latin America and the Caribbean will likely remain at the same level for many years. Changes in Canada's immigration legislation implemented in January this year were reportedly intended to reduce asylum requests for political or humanitarian reasons by citizens of certain countries. June 26: John Bennet, US consul in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon state (Mexico), told reporters that Washington plans to implement a program modifying Simpson-Rodino with the aim of further stemming the flow of undocumented Central Americans and Mexicans into the US. He said that new offices will be set up on the US-Mexican border for purposes of bilateral coordination. Bennet said that because desired results of Simpson-Rodino have not yet developed, the US Congress will be obligation to review the legislation. He added that the State Department has requested the INS to prepare a detailed analysis of flaws contained in the existing legislation and to offer suggestions for resolving identified problems. In a brief communique, the US Department of Justice announced the resignation of INS Commissioner Alan Nelson. Attorney General Richard Thornburg has nominated James Buck, current deputy commissioner, as Nelson's replacement. Nelson, appointed commissioner during the Reagan administration, was an outspoken opponent of Simpson-Rodino when Congress began debates on immigration legislation reform in the early 1980s. In one of his last speeches at the University of California-San Diego campus, Nelson proposed a national-level computerized system to prevent undocumented immigrants from obtaining jobs. He said the system would serve to verify the identity of all job
applicants, and thereby reduce or prevent the propagation and use of fake documents by illegal immigrants. Critics said Nelson's proposal was nothing new, since the same idea had been rejected during congressional hearings prior to passage of the immigration law. In January this year, during congressional hearings on INS procedures and performance, the Justice Department discovered that thousands of permanent residents' identification documents ("green cards") in some regional offices of the INS had disappeared. [Basic data from Notimex, 05/06/89, 05/26/89, 06/01/89, 06/05/89, 06/06/89, 06/15/89, 06/21/89, 06/26/89; Uno Mas Uno (Mexico), 06/01/89; Copley News Service, 06/16/89; New York Times, 06/20/89]

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