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## **Mexican Crisis Resulting in Increase of Undocumented Immigrants to U.S**

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A severe recession in Mexico, resulting from the devaluation of the peso, is expected to sharply increase the rate of illegal immigration of Mexicans to the US in the next several months. As a result, the US is making plans to greatly increase its patrols along the border, leading to conflicts with the Mexican government over the effort to crack down on illegal immigration, as well as disputes with the US Congress over how to pay for more US security in the border areas. According to statistics compiled by the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and other agencies, roughly 100,000 undocumented immigrants were deported back to Mexico during January of this year, double the number reported in the same month in 1994. The statistics for January appear to be the "tip of the iceberg," since the tough economic reforms required by international creditors in exchange for an economic rescue package of US\$50 billion are expected to throw Mexico into a severe recession.

By some estimates, the number of deportations is expected to total 1.5 million for all of 1995. Key among the economic adjustments demanded by the creditors is the requirement that Mexico bring inflation under control by charging interest rates above the rate of inflation in order to sop up excess liquidity from the economy. This, in turn, is expected to raise interest rates to unattainable levels and force many businesses to implement cutbacks or fold altogether, thus greatly worsening employment problems in Mexico (see SourceMex, 02/22/95). The devaluation in late December was already beginning to affect the unemployment picture for January.

According to El Financiero daily business newspaper, the jobless rate among the economically active population (EAP) in Mexico was a record-high 3.7%. The report which is based on statistics issued by the official statistics agency (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática) noted that the statistics do not reflect the rapidly growing numbers of Mexicans who are underemployed. According to the report, if the unemployed and underemployed were counted together, the unemployment picture in January affected roughly 6.5 million Mexicans. The lack of job creation and massive layoffs in Mexico both resulting from the devaluation have left many Mexicans with no other choice than to seek employment in the US.

The increase in illegal immigration to the US, however, is coming during a period when anti-immigrant sentiment is growing stronger in the US, as evidenced by the passage of "Proposition 187" in California in November of 1994, and some proposals in the US Congress to deny benefits even to immigrants who are legal residents. Indeed, in early February US President Bill Clinton ordered tougher enforcement measures at the border to prepare for the expected increase in undocumented migrants. The directive included the assignment of 62 new Border Patrol agents to the Nogales-Tucson district in southern Arizona, where much of the increase in recent months has been reported.

Statistics released by the Center for Immigration Studies in Washington in early February show that more than 19,000 undocumented immigrants were arrested in Tucson, Arizona, in January, twice as many as during the first month of 1994. The statistics also showed that the number of arrests had increased by 25% in El Paso, Texas. On the other hand, the number of arrests declined slightly in the San Diego-San Ysidro district of southern California. The drop in immigration there is attributed in part to the passage of Proposition 187 in California, which seeks to deny most educational, medical, and social service benefits to undocumented workers (see SourceMex, 11/02/94).

The assignment of new border patrol agents to Arizona was only a small part of President Clinton's overall proposal to increase immigration enforcement along the US-Mexico border. In the budget proposal for 1996, the US administration is seeking a major increase in the number of Border Patrol agents, inspectors, and other immigration personnel along the US-Mexico border. To pay for the increased enforcement, Clinton had proposed the collection of a special fee of US\$3.00 per vehicle and US\$1.50 per pedestrian crossing into the US from Mexico and Canada. The fee was expected to generate US\$400 million annually. That proposal, however, came under immediate criticism from Mexican and Canadian government officials, who warned that the fee would cause a deterioration in relations between their countries and the US. In addition, others in the US joined in strongly criticizing the proposal, among them various chambers of commerce and members of Congress that represent districts near the US-Mexican and US-Canadian borders.

In a letter to Clinton during February, Richard Perez of the Laredo Chamber of Commerce noted that the devaluation alone had already caused retail sales in that community to plummet by about 20% during January. Perez estimated that US merchants along the US-Mexico border could experience a decline of 60% to 70% in sales this year because of the effects of the devaluation. Thus, a border fee would represent an unfair burden, causing commercial activity to drop even more, according to Perez. Members of Congress, meantime, suggested that the fee would amount to the creation of a new levy on a region already hit disproportionately by the costs of illegal immigration. To present a united front against the fee, Democratic and Republican legislators from the US-Mexico border area formed a special task force to decide on actions to block the fee's approval. Among other things, the legislators expressed their concerns through letters to Clinton and through meetings with Vice President Al Gore and White House Chief of Staff Leon Panetta.

The most vocal opponents of the fee were Republican Jim Kolbe of Arizona and Democrats Solomon Ortiz and Ron Coleman of Texas. In response to the protests from congressional representatives, plus the opposition voiced by the governments of Mexico and Canada, on Feb. 22 Clinton withdrew the original proposal and offered a so-called "local option alternative." Under this alternate plan, states choosing to implement the crossing fee would receive additional federal funds to combat illegal immigration and to construct and expand border infrastructure. "We are in fact providing states the option of having the fee imposed in their jurisdictions in order to receive the benefits of the higher revenues, or on the contrary, they can opt for no fee and no additional benefits," explained White House spokesman Mike McCurry. However, the alternate plan also met with strong opposition. Rep. Ortiz, whose district includes Brownsville, Texas, argued that the plan would lead to uneven enforcement along the border, since the states and local communities that refuse to charge a crossing fee could find themselves at a disadvantage in receiving funds from the federal government.

For its part, the Mexican government used a meeting of the immigration committee of the US-Mexico Binational Commission in Zacatecas in mid-February to express its concerns about the US plan. The Mexican delegation at the conference included deputy secretaries from the Foreign Relations Secretariat (SRE), Interior Secretariat (Gobernacion), and the Attorney General's Office (PGE). The US delegation was led by INS Commissioner Doris Meissner and the US Ambassador to Mexico, James Jones. Despite the strong reservations from Mexico about the plan, the official communique from the consultations took the form of a broad statement in which the two countries pledged to "increase cooperation on common matters related to immigration, taking into account the different levels of development of each of the two economies, and the variances in their labor markets."

Some analysts viewed the weak communique as an informal concession by President Ernesto Zedillo's administration to the US for the US\$20 billion in loan guarantees that the US has provided to help rescue the Mexican economy from the impact of the peso devaluation. While some political analysts criticized Zedillo for not pressing the US to ease its new restrictions on immigration, others said this was probably the best compromise, given the strong sentiment in the US Congress to enact even more restrictive measures. In fact, after the rescue package for Mexico was announced on Feb. 21, influential legislators such as Rep. Dan Burton, R-Ind., chairman of the Western Hemisphere Subcommittee, criticized the Clinton administration for not extracting a formal pledge from Mexico to crack down on illegal immigration.

Some political observers said the Canadian government probably had a greater influence than Mexico on Clinton's decision to back down on the initial proposal to impose the mandatory fees. According to the Associated Press, Clinton dropped the original proposal and offered the alternate plan one day before his scheduled meeting with Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien in Ottawa on Feb. 23. (Sources: Inter Press Service, 02/06/95, 02/09/95; New York Times, 02/04/95, 02/08/95; Deutsche Press Agentur, 02/08/95; La Jornada, 02/01/95, 02/02/95, 02/08/95, 02/09/95, 02/12/95, 02/15/95; Agence France-Presse, 02/01/95, 02/21/95; Notimex, 02/04/95, 02/05/95, 02/06/95, 02/07/95, 02/16/95, 02/22/95; Associated Press, 02/09/95, 02/21/95, 02/22/95)

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