4-12-2000

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by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2000-04-12

In a report published in early April, the Banco de Mexico (central bank) said remittances sent by Mexicans residing overseas, primarily in the US, to their home country surpassed US$5.9 billion in 1999. This is the equivalent of almost 50% of Mexico's total direct foreign investment of US$11.56 billion last year. Furthermore, the remittances sent by expatriates to Mexico were equivalent to 60% of the income the country obtained from exports of crude oil last year and greatly surpassed the US$2.8 billion in revenues obtained from tourism in 1999, the central bank said. The Banco de Mexico said remittances are becoming a growing source of income for the Mexican economy, increasing from US$3.7 billion in 1995 to almost US$6 billion last year. But the central bank's estimates may be somewhat conservative. In a separate report published in late March, the Consejo Nacional de Poblacion (CONAPO) said only about three-fourths of the remittances are sent via wire transfer. This means that only US$6 billion of the remittances can be tracked directly. Expatriates returning to Mexico bring an estimated US$2 billion annually, which would increase the total brought from abroad last year to about US$8 billion. CONAPO, which also used data provided by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, said Mexico ranks third in the world among the countries that received remittances from overseas, surpassed only by India and the Philippines. "In the past decade, Mexico received more than US$39 billion in funds sent by Mexican emigrants," CONAPO secretary-general Rodolfo Tuiran told the daily newspaper Reforma. "Migration is an important source of income and is essential support for 1.1 million households in Mexico."

The most recent statistics available to CONAPO show that between 7 million and 7.3 million Mexicans were residing in the US as of March 1996. Unofficial estimates indicate this number had increased to about 8 million or more by 2000. The number of Mexicans living in the US as of 1996 is 8% of the total population of Mexico and 3% of the population of the US, said CONAPO. Of the number reported in March 1996, some 500,000 had obtained US citizenship, another 4.2 million to 4.4 million were legal US residents, and 2.3 million to 2.4 million were undocumented immigrants. Rough estimates suggest that the number of undocumented Mexicans residing in the US had increased to about 3 million by 2000.

US continues to crack down on undocumented immigrants

In recent years, the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) and other law-enforcement authorities at the border have increased their crackdown on undocumented workers. In February of this year, the INS announced a new initiative to bolster vigilance along the US-Mexico border. This initiative, contained in the INS budget proposal for the next fiscal year, includes the use of nocturnal video cameras and a proposal to hire an additional 115 Border Patrol officers along the US-Mexico border. Previous attempts to discourage the influx of undocumented workers included California's Proposition 187 in 1994, which cut off government services to undocumented immigrants in the
state (see SourceMex, November 2, 1994). The proposition was a cornerstone of former Gov. Pete Wilson's immigration policies. His successor, Gov. Gray Davis, pledged to reverse Wilson's punitive policies toward undocumented immigrants (see SourceMex, February 3, 1999). At the federal level, the INS launched Operation Guardian in 1998, which beefed up Border Patrol personnel at traditional crossing points along the US-Mexican border. The crackdown at these points in recent years led many Mexicans to attempt to cross into the US at remote and dangerous areas, resulting in increased deaths (see SourceMex, 1998-08-12, 1999-02-03, 1999-09-01).

There have been some proposals this year for the US government to ease its tight immigration policies. In late February, the influential US labor organization AFL-CIO called for the government to decree a general amnesty for undocumented workers already residing in the US. The plan was well-received by the congressional Hispanic Caucus. "[W]e look forward to working with the AFL-CIO and the business community to reform our immigration policy," said Rep. Lucille Roybal-Allard (D-CA). But Rep. Lamar Smith (R-TX), chair of the House Judiciary subcommittee on immigration, criticized the AFL-CIO plan. "The union bosses have betrayed American workers," Smith said in a statement issued. "Legalizing millions of illegal aliens to compete with American workers will cost them jobs and reduce their wages." The immigration issue has come up occasionally in the presidential campaigns of the three major candidates: Francisco Labastida of the governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), Vicente Fox of the conservative Partido Accion Nacional (PAN), and Cuauhtemoc Cardenas of the center- left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD). All three candidates have pledged to press the US for changes in its immigration policies toward Mexico. The three candidates have proposed increased dialogue between the US and Mexican governments, which could yield solutions such as creating a program to allow Mexicans to enter the US temporarily for employment and revising the immigration sections of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). "We are in a situation where two-thirds of the Mexican population lives in poverty," Labastida campaign representative Javier Trevino said at a debate held in California. "We all know this means that the problems of illegal emigration to the US are not going to be solved overnight." (Sources: The New York Times, 01/18/00; La Jornada, Los Angeles Times, 02/18/00; Novedades, 02/18/00, 02/23/00; Spanish news service EFE, 03/15/00; Bridge News, 03/20/00; The News, 03/08/00, 03/21/00; Reforma, 02/08/00, 02/18/00, 03/20/00, 03/22/00; El Universal, 02/23/00, 03/17/00, 03/31/00; Excelsior, 02/14/00, 03/20/00, 04/07/00; El Economista, 04/07/00)