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LADB Staff

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Flow of Undocumented Mexicans to U.S. Expected to Remain Steady in 2005

by LADB Staff

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The flow of Mexican undocumented immigrants to the US is expected to continue at a steady pace in 2005 despite the tight security measures imposed by US authorities at the US-Mexico border. The Consejo Nacional de Poblacion (CONAPO), in a preliminary report, estimates that at least 400,000 undocumented Mexicans will cross into the US in 2005 in search of work or to reunite with family members.

This is the same annual average as recent years, said CONAPO. Mexican expatriates remain one of the largest sources of foreign exchange for Mexico. In a preliminary estimate, CONAPO said expatriates sent US\$17 billion back to Mexico in 2004, a sharp increase from the US\$13.4 billion recorded in 2003. The latest official count, released by the Banco de Mexico (central bank) in early January, put remittances at US\$15.2 billion for January-November, already surpassing the 2003 total by almost US\$2 billion.

The steady influx of undocumented immigrants to the US is likely to keep the immigration issue a focal point of US-Mexico relations. President Vicente Fox is continuing to push for an immigration-reform agreement that will give legal status to millions of undocumented workers. The Fox government has found a sympathetic ear in US President George W. Bush, who promised after his re-election last year that he would make an immigration agreement a priority during his second term in office (see SourceMex, 2004-11-17).

Bush is expected to resurrect a proposal he drafted in early 2004 to create a guest-worker program (see SourceMex, 2004-01-24). That initiative was put on the back burner because of the US congressional and presidential elections in 2004.

The Mexican government said it would keep pressure on Bush to push for an immigration accord this year. "We want to urge President George Bush to honor his promise to advocate for an immigration accord," Interior Secretary Santiago Creel Miranda said a meeting with immigrant-rights organizations in Zacatecas state in early January.

Immigration booklet creates controversy

While Bush has expressed willingness to seek an immigration accord, the US president will have to overcome strong opposition from members of his own Republican Party and from groups that oppose easing immigration restrictions. The anti-immigrant sentiment was evident in the strong outcry to an illustrated booklet published by the Mexican government for undocumented migrants seeking to cross into the US. The booklet includes statements discouraging people from crossing the border illegally, but much of the publication is focused on aiding those who ignore that advice and try to enter the US.

The Instituto Nacional de Migracion (INM) produced 1.5 million copies of the booklet, which was distributed by agents of its humanitarian-assistance unit Grupo Beta to would-be migrants along the US-Mexico border. The booklet is also distributed inside magazines and in government offices in Mexico as well as in Mexican consulates in the US. A version is available on the INM site. The booklet was designed for easy reference with illustrations similar to comic books and with simple language. The manual offers safety guidelines and helpful tips for emigrants, such as recommendations that they carry enough water, follow railroad tracks and utility lines if they get lost, and wear clothing that will protect them from the elements.

In the booklet, the INM also recommends to migrants that they keep a low profile once in the US and avoid loud parties or discotheques that might be raided by police. One chapter also lists the rights of migrants if they are arrested, including access to medical care, food and water, and safe transportation to Mexico.

The Mexican government has produced similar booklets in the past, but authorities said the most recent edition is particularly important because of the high rate of deaths among migrants. The INM estimates that at least 1,000 Mexicans lost their lives attempting to cross into the US in the three-year period between 2002 and 2004.

The booklet attracted strong criticism from organizations that favor stricter immigration controls. "[The guide] is an encouragement that will lead to more illegal aliens coming," said Rick Oltman, a spokesperson for the Washington-based Federation for American Immigration Reform. "It is going to result in more tragic deaths as people risk their lives in swollen rivers and burning deserts."

Another group suggested that the Fox administration could better use its time and energy preventing migrants from crossing in the first place. "If the Mexican government were really very concerned about their citizens dying in the desert, why doesn't it use its army and police to prevent people from crossing in those areas?" said Steven Camarota, director of research at the Center for Immigration Studies, which favors tighter borders.

Similar sentiments came from Republicans in Congress. "This is not the action of a friendly neighbor," said Rep. Tom Tancredo (R-CO), who chairs the Congressional Immigration Reform Caucus. "What would the Mexican government say if we encouraged our citizens to violate Mexican law?" Rep. J.D. Hayworth (R-AZ), whose state is the destination of many migrants, suggested the Fox government might be contributing to lawlessness with the booklet. "The Mexican government is aiding and abetting the illegal invasion" of Mexicans into the US, said Hayworth.

The Mexican government defended the publication of the booklet. "We are a country that respects the law and we advise our people to respect the law," said Carlos de Icaza, Mexico's ambassador to the US. Geronimo Gutierrez, deputy interior secretary for North American affairs, emphasized that a principal function of the guide was to dissuade people from making a clandestine journey. But since many were going to make the journey anyway, the guide offered life-saving tips. "The Mexican government obviously has an obligation to take all actions possible to avoid the loss of life," said Gutierrez.

The Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) has suspended distribution of the booklet for several months while authorities determine whether the guide has reduced deaths. The government, however, may resume distribution later this year if its study determines that the booklet was effective in curbing deaths. Mexico angered about Arizona's Proposition 200 For now, the Fox administration and immigrant and human rights organizations have turned their attention to fighting Arizona's Proposition 200, which state voters approved in November (see SourceMex, 2004-11-17).

Under the law, Arizona state employees risk a fine of US\$750 or a four-month prison term if they offer any assistance or services to undocumented residents. Organizations like the Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH) have urged the Fox government to lodge a formal protest with the US federal government about the Arizona law. CNDH president Jose Luis Soberanes recommended that the administration "organize an intense diplomatic and political effort to defend the international rights of immigrants who fall under Proposition 200."

Opposition legislators in the Mexican Congress have also criticized the Arizona initiative, urging a more "energetic" response from the Fox administration. Members of the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) and the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) criticized the SRE for failing to lodge a more forceful protest with the US government. They said the situation is serious enough to warrant the recall of Ambassador de Icaza from Washington.

"As a country we have to express our absolute repudiation of and indignation with this measure," said PRD Deputy Jorge Martinez Ramos, secretary of the foreign relations committee (Comision de Relaciones Exteriores) in the lower house. While the SRE did not immediately issue a statement on the Arizona law, Interior Secretary Creel offered strong criticisms during his tour of Zacatecas. "The Mexican government has been very clear in rejecting Proposition 200 because it is discriminatory," said Creel. "We reject this law and will use all means necessary to overturn it." (Sources: Los Angeles Times, 01/04/05; The Dallas Morning News, 01/05/05; The Washington Post, 01/06/05; El Financiero, 01/07/05; The New York Times, 01/06/05, 01/09/05; United Press International, 01/10/05; El Universal, 01/07/05, 01/08/05, 01/11/08; Notimex, 01/09-11/05; Spanish news service EFE, 01/10/05, 01/11/05; La Cronica de Hoy, 01/03/05, 01/07/05, 01/11/05, 01/12/05; La Jornada, 01/05/05, 01/10-12/05; Reuters, 01/06/05, 01/12/05; La Crisis, 01/10/05, 01/12/05)

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