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At Border, Mexican Migrants Wait and Worry

By TIM GOLDEN

SANTO DOMINGO, Mexico — The years of hard labor that people from this desert town have done in the restaurant kitchens and the lettuce fields of California have crowded Santo Domingo's streets with pickup trucks and put satellite dishes on some of the adobe homes.

About one-quarter of the 13,000 residents of this town in north-central Mexico live mostly "on the other side," as they call the United States.

And with a small empire of Mexican migrants scattered among the migrants in the United States, there are always jobs there to beckon, to young men and women who come of age in Santo Domingo without much hope of finding work at home.

People here say they have been thinking harder about heading north in the three months since the devaluation of the peso sent inflation soaring, the economy into recession and thousands of workers to the unemployment lines. But many here also say the decision is not as easy as it once seemed.

"The dollar is the only thing that is going up now," said Agustin Chávez, a 22-year-old elementary school teacher. "But everyone says it is harder to get to the other side. It costs you much more. It is not like before."

Despite a sharp increase recently in the number of migrants caught sneaking into the United States, it is still far from clear that Mexico's economic turmoil will flood the United States with illegal job-seekers.

For poor Mexicans wanting to emigrate, the cost of getting to job markets in California, Chicago or New York has risen considerably, according to dozens of would-be immigrants interviewed along the border in Tijuana and in two central Mexican states, San Luis Potosí and Zacatecas.

Even in communities like Santo Domingo, where travel back and forth to the United States remains a way of life, there is anecdotal evidence that the United States Border Patrol's increased enforcement efforts around San Ysidro, Calif., and El Paso are beginning to discourage some Mexicans from even trying to cross the border.

The permanent settlement in the United States of many Mexicans who used to come and go seasonally has also reduced the pool of potential migrants.

And for those Mexicans with relatives sending money back from the United States, the value of those dollars has risen sharply with the peso's devaluation.

"People are still alive here thanks to the money that comes from the United States," said the Mayor of Santo Domingo, Álvaro Rodríguez Luna. "Things balance out. The prices go up, but the money that comes from the other side has also gone up."

Clinton Administration officials cited the threat of illegal immigration as a critical reason for the $20 billion United States contribution to a $50 billion international loan package for Mexico.

In mid-January, the Treasury Department estimated that "a protracted economic crisis" in Mexico could mean an increase of more than 30 percent in illegal immigration, or about half a million new economic refugees a year.

That Mexico faces a serious economic crisis is unquestioned; how long it will last remains to be seen.

The Government of President Ernesto Zedillo has forecast a 2 percent shrinkage of the economy this year, and the loss of about a million of the country's 26 million jobs.

According to the Immigration and Naturalization Service, arrests by Border Patrol officers along the United States-Mexican border were 9.6 percent higher in January than during January 1994. In February, the increase was 37.6 percent; in March, 40 percent.

But such figures may be deceptive. Most obviously, the numbers do not necessarily reflect the real flow of undocumented migrants because the Border Patrol has traditionally counted arrests rather than individuals, who are often apprehended more than once.

The jump in arrests is probably in part a consequence of a bigger and more effective Border Patrol: more agents, the redeployment of others and the addition of equipment like night-vision scopes, electronic sensors and better radios.

The migrant traffic is also shifting: more Mexicans are sneaking into the United States in less-patrolled areas like Nogales, Ariz., and Del Rio, Texas, and more are using forged identity documents to pass through checkpoints.

The young urban Mexicans who are increasingly supplementing the seasonal farm workers of past migrations may be more able to pay for such documents.

But looking ahead, a more effective Border Patrol and a growing hostility toward undocumented immigrants in California and other border states will likely discourage at least some Mexicans from leaving home.

Draped over a tree limb near the Tijuana airport as he peered over a metal fence at San Ysidro, Calif., Adrián López Arana seemed a case in point.

"I'm going home," he moaned. "My brother said all I had to do was find a coyote at the bus station and I would be there the next day. He didn't tell me about this."

The economy in Mexico is tattered, but moving north is not the answer.

The weight of President Clinton Administration officials cited the threat of illegal immigration as a critical reason for the $20 billion United States contribution to a $50 billion international loan package for Mexico.

In the farming village of San José de Calixtey, near Santo Domingo, in earlier days those who had been back and forth to the United States before said that not only was the crossing more difficult, but the cost was becoming almost prohibitive.

"I would go tomorrow but I don't have the money," said Mario Loera, 22. "It used to cost you 300 pesos to get to Ciudad Juárez and $150 for the coyote. Now it is double. That is two or three cows, and I do not have any."

Whatever the Border Patrol's success, most experts believe that Mexico's economic troubles will inevitably bring some increase in the flow of migrants, and history suggests as much. In 1983, the year after the collapse of the Mexican economy led Latin America into its debt crisis, the arrests of undocumented immigrants in the United States rose about 35 percent.

Yet a study that compared the probability of immigration in the relatively prosperous period between 1973 and 1980 to the five years thereafter found a rise of only about 15 percent, according to the author, Manuel García y Griego, a demographer at the University of California at Irvine.

"I think it would be foolish to assign all of the increase, or even most of it, to economic considerations," Dr. García y Griego said of the rise in Border Patrol arrests. "I don't think we can ignore the impact of the devaluation, but that impact has not played out yet."

Part of what has changed since Mexico's economic troubles in the 1980's, noted another American immigration expert, Wayne A. Cornelius of the University of California at San Diego, is that many Mexicans who sought jobs in the United States in earlier times have stayed in the north under the amnesty of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act.

Many of those Mexicans are no longer sending dollars back to their relatives, but a boom in the transfer of such remittances by others suggests that the stronger dollar may keep other potential migrants at home in Mexico.
Another Shelling of Sarajevo Underlines Political Stalemate

By ROGER COHEN

ZAGREB, Croatia, April 12 - A mortar shell slammed into a central street in Sarajevo today, wounding seven people, and international peace mediators called off a visit to the city because of a lack of security at the airport.

The shelling, and the cancellation of the visit by American, French, British, German and Russian officials, underscore the fact that more than three years after the Bosnian war began, nothing fundamental has changed in the capital.

Random shells can still kill or maim people in central Sarajevo, and the Serbian forces ring the city can still dictate who enters the capital. Since the Bosnian Government opened an offensive last month in central and northern Bosnia, the Serbs have become more aggressive, shelling Sarajevo and closing the airport.

In eastern Bosnia, Gorazde, which like Sarajevo was long ago declared a "safe area" by the United Nations, was also shelled this week. NATO planes passed over the two cities, but the aircraft took no retaliatory action against the attackers.

Officials from the five-nation "contact group" of mediators were supposed to go to Sarajevo to try to persuade President Alija Izetbegovic to extend a frayed four-month cease-fire that formally expires at the end of this month.

But Mr. Izetbegovic made his position clear before of the aborted visit, saying, "We cannot accept a formal extension of the cease-fire because there is a danger of the gradual legalization of the status quo, which would be damaging to us." Serbs hold 70 percent of Bosnia.

The only circumstances, Mr. Izetbegovic added, in which an extension might be possible would be if Serbia's President, Slobodan Milosevic, recognized Bosnia.

But the mediators learned in Belgrade on Monday that Mr. Milosevic is not ready to renounce Serbian ambitions in Bosnia, which such recognition would imply. His position has been clear for at least a month, but Western governments have continued their diplomatic efforts.

It now appears almost inevitable that the Bosnian situation will deteriorate, with a tightening Serbian squeeze on Sarajevo, more Bosnian Government offensives and possibly a major Serbian counterattack to cut off the Government's northern stronghold of Tuzla or sweep through the eastern Muslim enclaves.

**Moscow Defends General**

BY STEVEN ERLANGER

MOSCOW, April 12 - The Defense Ministry asserted today that charges against a Russian general who was dismissed by the United Nations peacekeeping force in Croatia were exaggerated, but it refused to comment on the substance.

The charges against General Perelyakin "do not exactly correspond to the reality," Andrei A. Beketov, a Russian Defense Ministry spokesman, said today in a brief interview.

But he refused to comment on the charges of connivance. The Russians traditionally have been allies of their fellow Orthodox Serbs, and the Bosnian Muslims and Croats have often accused Russian peacekeepers of taking the Serbs' side.

In an article in its Thursday issue, the newspaper Izvestia quoted an unnamed Russian defense official who called the dismissal political.

The general "is a good specialist and always worked fine," said the official, who works in the ministry's international cooperation section.

"I'm convinced his dismissal is a political act aimed at pushing out the Russian battalion, not Perelyakin, from former Yugoslavia.

He said General Perelyakin would stay in his job until his tour expires on April 30, but NTV television reported tonight that his assignment would end on Friday.

One Russian officer serving under General Perelyakin told the news agency Tass-Tass that the dismissal was part of a Western effort West to exclude non-NATO countries from the peacekeeping force and to "homogenize" the mission.

Tensions between Russian and Belgian peacekeepers have been high in Sector East, the area under General Perelyakin's command.

The dismissal of the general is awkward for the Russian military, which has tried to portray itself as an equally responsible partner in peacemaking with the NATO countries. The Russian military has been hit by allegations of corruption in eastern Germany and faulted for heavy use of force in trying to suppress secessionists in Chechnya.