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U.S. Crackdown on Illegal Immigration Creates Alarm in Central America

by LADB Staff

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Since mid-February, near-panic has gripped the Nicaraguan exile community in Miami, Florida, because of a court decision to immediately deport thousands of undocumented Nicaraguans. That, combined with US efforts to increase significantly its efforts this year to crack down on illegal immigration, has alarmed the Central American countries. The isthmian governments are planning a joint appeal to the US government to declare a moratorium on deportations, allowing them time to prepare economic programs to assist the thousands of citizens who could be forced to return.

In early February, the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) released a new report, which estimates that the number of undocumented foreigners now residing in the US climbed by about 1.1 million between 1992 and 1996, bringing the total number of foreigners in the country illegally to about 5 million. Of the total, about 2.7 million, or 54%, are Mexicans.

Isthmian nations account for 13% of illegal residents in US

The Central American countries, however, provide the second-largest group of undocumented foreigners in the US after Mexico. Taken together, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua account for about 660,000 of the illegal residents in the US, or 13.2% of the total. Top countries of origin and estimated number of undocumented residents in the US (October 1996)

Country Number of people Percent

Mexico 2,700,000 54.1

El Salvador 335,000 6.7

Guatemala 165,000 3.3

Canada 120,000 2.4

Haiti 105,000 2.1

Philippines 95,000 1.9

Honduras 90,000 1.7

Bahamas 70,000 1.4

Nicaragua 70,000 1.4

Poland 70,000 1.4

Source: INS statistics, published by The New York Times, 02/08/97.

The US job market has provided an escape valve for the Central American economies, particularly for Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, where unemployment remains high. Regular remittances by Central Americans working in the US to their relatives back home have become an economic mainstay for the countries. In El Salvador, it is now the number-one source of foreign exchange, and in Guatemala, it is the second-largest source of dollars after coffee (see NotiCen, 12/05/97).

As a result, the Central American nations are particularly sensitive to US efforts to crack down on illegal immigration. Indeed, the growing anti-immigrant sentiment in the US, plus the US government's increasingly belligerent stance vis-a-vis undocumented foreigners, has generated widespread concern in the region, especially because the US says it will increase its efforts this year to deport illegal residents. Between 1995 and 1996, total deportations increased by 36%, from 50,272 to 68,294. Of that total, Central Americans accounted for nearly 15%. For 1997, the INS has set a goal of 93,000 deportations.

Thousands of Nicaraguans under threat of immediate deportation

Not surprisingly, then, Central American governments fear that a recent decision to immediately deport thousands of Nicaraguans in Miami is the start of a massive crackdown on undocumented Central Americans in the US. In early February, an appeals court in Florida upheld a new state law that cuts off all legal recourse for stopping deportation proceedings against Nicaraguans who have resided in the US for less than seven years.

Until now, thousands of Nicaraguans have relied on temporary work permits and other legal mechanisms to avoid deportation since the civil war in Nicaragua ended in 1990. If the new law is upheld, the Nicaraguan government estimates that a minimum of 20,000, and as many as 40,000, Nicaraguans face imminent deportation. "The situation is extremely grave because it affects almost everybody," said Roberto Arguello, a well-known Nicaraguan banker in Miami. "People are crying, others are moving from house to house and changing their telephone numbers to escape deportation. It's chaos."

The deportation threat has generated alarm in Managua, where the government is preparing a special appeal to President Bill Clinton's administration to intercede on behalf of the Nicaraguans in Florida. "I sincerely hope that a massive deportation does not occur, because it would have a grave impact on the economy of our country," said President Arnaldo Aleman. "Our government will do everything in its power to convince the US government to intercede on behalf of our citizens."

Regional presidents plan joint appeal to postpone deportations Given the fear that the situation now faced by Nicaraguans foreshadows similar actions against other Central American residents, the governments are planning a collective appeal to the US for a moratorium on deportations to give them time to prepare for the return of their citizens. The request will be discussed with President Clinton when he meets with the Central American heads of state in Costa Rica next May (see NotiCen, 02/13/97).

"We are preparing an appeal to Clinton to grant us a waiting period before initiating massive deportations," said Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Emilio Alvarez, following a conference with

his counterparts in Guatemala to prepare for the presidential summit in May. "Central America still needs time to recover from the trauma of war and economic crisis. We need to put programs in place that will allow us to reincorporate our citizens into the work force." The initiative will be discussed again by the foreign ministers at their next meeting in Panama in late March, and then by the Central American presidents at a regional summit in early April. [Sources: El Tiempo (Honduras), 01/28/97; New York Times, 02/08/97; Reuter, 01/24/97, 02/07/97, 02/14/97, 02/23/97; La Prensa (Nicaragua), 02/10/97, 02/20/97, 02/24/97, 02/25/97; Spanish news service EFE, 02/10/97, 02/11/97, 03/03/97; Prensa Libre (Guatemala), 02/11/97, 02/12/97, 02/14/97, 02/15/97, 02/18/97, 03/03/97, 03/05/97]

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