

Deportees' Bittersweet Homecoming

Migration Is Boon, Bane for Honduras

The Washington Post

June 27, 2007

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras -- Almost every day, another unmarked jet from [Houston](#) lands at the international airport in this Central American capital and disgorges a new batch of deportees from U.S. immigration custody. More than 1,800 this month. More than 13,700 since January.

The passengers file out uncertainly, pausing to grab the paper or plastic bags holding their few belongings, and enter a low building with a sign that says: "Welcome Home, Brothers." There are weary-looking older workers, scowling young men with tattoos, a handful of women. They wear clean prison uniforms or the grimy clothes in which they were caught.

Those who found menial jobs in the United States say they sent far more money home than they could ever earn in [Honduras](#), but most say they were caught within days of sneaking across the border and have returned with empty pockets. Two out of three say they intend to try again.

"The immigration van caught us after we walked for three days across the desert in Arizona," says Matias Miranda, 42, an illiterate farmer who just made his second attempt to enter the United States in search of work. "I was getting older and I wanted to try once more, to help my children. But already I am back without a single peso. All I got was this Bible, and I still have the one they gave me last time."

Illegal migration is a crucial safety valve for Honduras, a chronically poor country of 7.5 million where 40 percent of the populace earns less than \$3 a day and just over half the workforce has a sixth-grade education. Money sent directly to Honduran families from relatives working in the United States, both legally and illegally, provides nearly one-third of the national income -- \$1.8 billion in 2005, \$2.3 billion last year.

Over the past several years, however, the pace of deportations from the United States has skyrocketed as the [U.S. Border Patrol](#) has beefed up operations. In 2005, 18,941 Hondurans were deported; in 2006, 24,643 were deported; and by mid-June 2007, the figure had exceeded 13,700. There have been similar increases in deportations from [Mexico](#) and [Guatemala](#), which Hondurans must cross before they reach the United States.

The current debate over immigration reform in the United States, where an estimated 12 million illegal immigrants live, has caused hope and anxiety here, because it holds out both the promise of legalizing tens of thousands of Hondurans now in the United States and the threat of a harsher crackdown near the border, which about 90,000 Hondurans attempt to cross illegally each year.

Meanwhile, the steady rise in deportations is met here with a mixture of alarm and relief. Officials worry that the current flow of cash remittances to families -- expected to reach a record \$2.8 billion this year -- will start to lessen and that the economy will not be able to absorb a sustained influx of jobless returnees.

On the other hand, Honduran society has paid a high price for this economic antidote. Experts here say illegal immigration destroys families during long separations and lures fatherless youths to crime and gangs. It also fosters dependency on handouts from abroad and a tendency to fritter cash windfalls on luxury goods.

"Honduras today survives on remittances, but mass migration also causes enormous damage," said Julio Velásquez, an official of the Honduran National Human Rights Commission. "Those who manage to reach the U.S. can lift their families a little out of poverty, but often the families fall apart and the kids end up in gangs or on drugs. We need to create the conditions so people don't need to leave, instead of thinking of migration as something to admire."

Darío Cardona, the deputy minister of labor, said a variety of factors have contributed to the exodus. The minimum wage here is only \$3.50 a day, and many Hondurans earn far less as seasonal field hands or street vendors. Although the economy is growing and inflation is down, Cardona said, progress has been hampered by corruption, poor public education and lack of investment.

"The poor who leave subsidize the poor who stay," he said. "Depending on other countries is a short-term help for us, but it is not a long-term solution. Our country is exporting its youth and its labor force, and after a few years many of them come back with nothing."

Sympathy and Respect

At the Center for Attention to Migrants next to Toncontin International Airport, deportees who have just been uncuffed from airplane seats are greeted with the sympathy and respect due homecoming survivors of a long ordeal. Immigration officials offer good-luck handshakes while volunteers pass around coffee, tortillas and brochures for free training in fish farming, pastry cooking, auto mechanics or computer programming.

Valdete Wilemon, a Brazilian nun who runs the center, says she has heard a thousand horror stories from returning migrants -- of people crazed from thirst in the U.S. deserts, falling to their deaths from trains in Mexico, being beaten and robbed by cross-border guides.

"I see migration as a big business for those who exploit it, and a cause of great suffering for the migrants," she said. "We treat them with dignity, and we welcome them home. But this country is very poor, and the people will keep trying to get to the north, no matter how big a wall they build," she added. "The deportations are more now, but so is the flight."

Despite her ministrations, new deportees are often angry and bleak. They mill uneasily or slump in chairs, ripping open sacks containing shoelaces, belts and wallets confiscated by U.S. immigration officials -- and copies of the Bible donated by prison visitors -- while they wait impatiently to be processed for reentry into Honduras.

Some look sullen with failure or haggard with exhaustion; others grin and whoop with defiant relief. A few young men with tattoos, possible signs of gang membership, curse at visitors. One man pulls out a snapshot of his wife and daughter, left behind when his factory was raided in [New Jersey](#). Another complains angrily that his landscaping boss in [Texas](#) betrayed him to avoid paying his salary.

"I not criminal guy," says Santos Canales, 30, struggling to explain himself in English. "I work hard. I have wife and five kids. The boss know I am illegal. I ask for my money. He call police, not pay me."

In the next room, immigration officials call the deportees one by one for brief interviews. They answer two pages of questions that provide a basic but revealing profile of the motives and fortunes of many illegal migrants from [Central America](#). Education level? Most say they reached only sixth grade. Occupation? Most say farmer, driver, factory worker or bricklayer.

How long did you spend in the United States? A few say several years, but most answer less than two months. How much did you earn? Most say zero; a few say between \$1,000 and \$2,000 a month. How much did you send home? Again, most say zero; some say several hundred dollars a month.

How many times have you been deported? Many say twice, some say more. Are you planning to go back? Many in their 20s and 30s answer yes; most in their 40s and 50s shake their heads and say no.

"For me, it was definitely worth it," says Hidalgo Fuentes, 30, who quit his local factory job and was caught in May trying to reach [Missouri](#) on a cargo train. "Here, the best I can earn is about \$30 a week. The last time I went north, I earned \$500 a week washing dishes, and my family was able to build a house." Asked if he expects to try again, he just smiles.

Reuniting the Family

Outside the center, a throng of families waits anxiously. Most have received calls from relatives in U.S. detention, saying they will be home this week. Gladys Morales and her two children are there, taut with excitement and dressed in new clothes for what Belkis, 13, calls "the Big Day."

They are waiting for Gladys's husband, Ramón, 34, who has been in [New Orleans](#) for three years. He worked as a house painter, sending home a steady stream of cash that helped them improve their three-room shack on a hillside outside the capital. But they missed him terribly, especially José Ramón, 9. For this family, the joy of reuniting is far more important than the loss of income.

Suddenly, there he is in the door, still wearing the paint-splattered pants he had on when U.S. immigration agents raided an apartment complex he was painting in April. The children rush forward, and he crushes them to his chest.

"So you still remember me?" he murmurs affectionately. "How are you doing in school? Are you behaving yourselves?"

José Ramón clutches his father's hand all the way home, a huge grin on his face. He brags about his grades and jokingly offers to teach his father English.

When they reach their house, Ramón Morales looks around appreciatively. The back room is still a dirt-floor shed with a latrine, but the front room has new tiles, a fresh coat of paint, and a TV set and three CD players covered with doilies. Over a welcome-home meal of rice, beans and pork chops, Morales says he has no idea how he will earn a living now, but he is sure of one thing.

"My children need me. So many homes fall apart, but we stayed united," he says. "I worked hard, I suffered a lot, I sent money home. But after going through all that, you come back with a new mentality. I want to build a life here now. I can't leave them again. It's time for me to come home."