

Mexico Takes Flack Over Its Version of Proposition 187

By Leon Lazaroff

When José Ramón Aviles left his native Honduras to look for a job in the United States, he never expected to be nabbed by migration police in Mexico.

Standing in a park near the Mexican border, Mr. Aviles says he was roughed up by the police, stripped of his money (\$65), and left in a jail for three days without food. "The police are criminals," he said.

At a time when Mexico's new president, Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León, is vigorously protesting California's Proposition 187 and calling for improved treatment of undocumented immigrants in the U.S., Central and South Americans hoping to reach the U.S. through Mexico are complaining just as angrily about mistreatment and discrimination in Mexico.

Bishop Jorge Arizmendi of Tapachula, Mexico, a city of about 300,000 just 15 miles north of the seedy crossroads of Tecún Umán, says that human rights violations against undocumented Central and South Americans have long been the status quo along the country's often-forgotten southern border.

Zedillo Pledge

A month ago, Bishop Arizmendi and other southern Mexico clergymen had a chance to privately press their concerns with Zedillo, who was then president-elect. A few days later, during a stopover in Guatemala City, Zedillo pledged to upgrade the treatment of undocumented Central American immigrants.

So far, though, Arizmendi reports only a stepped-up presence of immigration police and roadblocks. Many presume the increase is a result of U.S. government pressure stemming from [California's] Proposition 187 to stem the flow of illegals. A U.S. government official denied any connection. "Just as our government is demanding the protection of human rights for the Mexicans and Central Americans in the United States, we must do the same here," says Arizmendi. "It simply must be said: the undocumented have no rights under Mexican law."

Arizmendi hopes Zedillo's outspoken criticism of the controversial California proposition, which limits availability of social services going to undocumented workers, will pressure Mexico's government to examine its own rough treatment of undocumented immigrants.

Government officials though, have preferred to keep public focus on their northern border. In recent years, Mexico has pointed to the 40,000 Guatemalans

living in camps for political refugees in the state of Campeche as proof of its respect for immigrants.

"[For admission] ...schools require a birth certificate or a passport and visa. But few immigrants [to Mexico] hold such documents and are commonly turned away."

But with wars in Central America officially over, fewer refugees are able to get an immigration hearing. Deportations have risen from 90,000 in 1990 to more than 143,000 in 1993, according to the National Migration Institute in Mexico City.

Thumbing a Ride

In hot and humid Tecún Umán, the hundreds of Central Americans and even occasional Chinese and Egyptians hanging around for a shot at a northbound ride are mostly migrants seeking a better wage.

Although few aim to work in Mexico, many find themselves in jails or held over in cities such as Tapachula contemplating their next move. And while Mexican law champions human rights and guarantees education and medical services, human rights advocates say police and government authorities are uncooperative.

"There is often a gap between what is written in the law and what the reality is on the ground — particularly in far-flung places like Chiapas," says Bill Frelick, director of the Washington D.C.-based U.S. Committee for Refugees.

While a public education is guaranteed for every child regardless of citizenship, schools require a birth certificate or a passport and visa. But few immigrants hold such documents and are commonly turned away. Medical care, too, requires similar documentation. Like undocumented Mexicans working on California farms, Guatemalan and Honduran farm hands can similarly triple their wages by landing work in northern Mexican states of Sonora and Sinaloa. But once there, workers complain of having to accept sub-minimum pay, excessive hours, and poor housing. "This is a terrible injustice that must change," says Oswaldo Valdemar Cuevas, Guatemalan consul in Tapachula.

But change is not on the horizon. Since Zedillo has made opposition to Prop. 187 a high priority, raising the issue at the recent Americas Summit in Miami, drawing attention to Mexico's own deficiencies is unlikely.

"People say that with [Prop.] 187, Mexicans in California will be denied basic services and discrimination will be rampant," says Celso López, editor of Tapachula's newspaper, *Diario del Sur*. "But that's what's been happening here for years." ■