

## THE JOURNEY TO THE PROMISED LAND. MEXICAN MIGRATION MOVEMENTS

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The Mexicans' relationship with their American neighbours is ambivalent, for they feel overshadowed as well as attracted by them. There is no other place in the world where the stream of migrants of one nation towards the other is bigger. Every year, more than 400,000 Mexicans seek to reach the Promised Land in the north. The figures speak for themselves: 98.7 percent of Mexican expatriates live in the US. One in three foreigners in the US is a Mexican. The *remesas*, the money migrants transfer back to their relatives in their home country, are Mexico's second most important source of income, right after oil revenues.

These migration movements are rooted in history. After its defeat in the war against the US in the middle of the 19th century, Mexico lost more than half of its territory to its northern neighbour which, however, paid its opponent 15 million US Dollars in compensation for war damage. Many of the Mexicans who had become US citizens back then stayed in their hometowns but cultivated relationships with the now-smaller Mexico, from which even new migration movements emerged.

The first major migration wave occurred after 1942 when, suffering from a shortage of labour during the Second World War, the US industry specifically recruited Mexicans to work on its farms. The second, but this time illegal, immigration wave set in 1965. Ever since 1986, Washington has been trying to stop the massive, undesirable flow of immigrants by imposing tougher border controls and penalties for US citizens who employ immigrants illegally. At the same time, two million Mexicans living in the US were legalized. The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 was supposed to bring the problem under control. However, it remained unsuccessful. Similarly, an agreement on migration negotiated by Mexico's President Fox and US President Bush in 2001 also had little effect as, due to the terrorist attacks of September 11 and the US citizens' resultant fear of terrorists invading the country across the Mexican border, the border defences were strengthened even more.

Among sociologists, the factors that cause people to migrate are called *push* and *pull* factors. The former relate to the situation prevailing in the migrants' country of origin, the latter to that in the destination country. Mexican migrants are influenced by both: The labour market for people with lower qualifications and the wages in their own country are unattractive, whereas the labour market north of the border lures them with interesting income opportunities.

There are three kinds of Mexican migrants: *Temporary* migrants who work in the US for one season, *definitive* migrants who permanently live in the US, and *commuter* migrants who cross the border every day to work in the US. They all have one thing in common: most of them work in the low-wage sector – in agriculture and catering, as sales assistants, and as service, cleaning, and nursing personnel.

In the beginning, temporary migration from Mexico to the US was the most common pattern. However, the young, mostly unmarried and male seasonal workers employed in agriculture have turned into Mexicans who live in the US on a permanent basis, working in various areas. By now, migration affects almost every Mexican; one in ten households has a member living in the US.

Mexico is a country of origin, transit and destination for migrants. The largest minority living in Mexico is American. In 2000, 343,591 Americans were living in Mexico, accounting for 69.7 percent of the foreign population. Only 9.5 percent of immigrants are from Latin America, primarily Guatemala, Cuba, Colombia, Argentina, and El Salvador. Most Central American emigrants cross the border with Guatemala and Belize, which is eleven hundred kilometres long. In the eighties, many Guatemalans sought to escape the civil war in their own country. In recent years, the number of Cuban immigrants has increased. And finally, the number of Central and South Americans as well as Asians and Africans who use Mexico as a gateway to their dream destination, the US, is on the rise as well.

With its length of 3,200 kilometres, the border between Mexico and the United States is unique in the world. Its fortifications have been systematically strengthened for many years. In 2006, the US passed a law that provided for the construction of a 1,125-kilometre fence at a cost of 1.2 billion US Dollars that was to be patrolled by 18,000 border guards. However, none of the measures implemented by the US so far have been able to stop illegal immigration from the south. It has even become more dangerous: Each year, 400 people die in the attempt to reach the US. And the number of those who offer traffickers immense sums for their services is increasing.

The migration of Mexicans to the US severely affects the economies of both countries. In 2007, the *remesas* of the Mexicans living in the US added up to 2.7 percent of Mexico's GDP. According to the Mexican authorities, seven percent of the country's households receive *remesas*, and almost half of the recipients are out of work.

While the massive emigration of people of employable age depopulates entire districts and must, therefore, be regarded as negative, the *remesas*

themselves are a positive factor: They give a boost to the service sector in the emigrants' home country, as those who come home temporarily spend money in hotels and restaurants. Moreover, numerous banks have been established in the rural areas concerned.

The Mexican state endeavours to use the *remesas* productively, even though they constitute a problem: Their compensatory effect prevents reforms of the economic and social structure. Furthermore, it is to be feared that the migrants' trend towards establishing themselves permanently in the US will reduce the *remesas* in the long run.

The USA certainly benefits from migration. According to a study conducted by the University of Berkeley, many immigrants pay taxes but hardly use public services such as health care. Moreover, Mexicans often do jobs that are unattractive to US citizens or other immigrants because they are poorly paid.

Bilateral relations between the two countries are marked by the US' active and Mexico's reactive role: Ever since the eighties, Washington has been trying in vain to slow down immigration. The free trade area of 1994, NAFTA, was supposed to be a structural-policy remedy against migration. However, even 14 years later, there is nothing to indicate economic harmonization. Mexico responded to the US' restrictive measures in 1996 by demanding that the USA safeguard the human rights of Mexican immigrants and officially sanctioning dual citizenship. When the border defences were strengthened once again in response to September 11, 2001, migration was not halted but merely redirected.

According to experts, the problem can only be defused by an integral migration reform which, among other things, would have to focus on the economic development of the regions affected by emigration in Mexico. Yet this is hampered by the divergent interests of the two sides: While politicians in the USA feel constrained to stop immigration, such a sudden stop would be very inconvenient for Mexico.

It is beyond doubt that immigrants have become a political factor in the USA: In 2006, the issue of migration triggered a heated discussion in the US congress which, in turn, led to massive demonstrations by immigrants. On May 1, 'Immigrants' Day', many Latin Americans went on strike to demonstrate to the USA its economic dependence on the Latin American workforce. The positions on this problem recently voiced by Barack Obama and John McCain hardly differ. They both want a reform which aims at legalizing the status of immigrants.

What impact economic developments in the USA will have on migration from Mexico and the role of the *remesas* in Mexico's economy remains to be seen. There is much to indicate that foreign money transfers will slump. To be sure, it would be desirable if the Mexican state used the *remesas* to promote development, but this would be no replacement for an economic policy which focuses on the causes of migration. What would be needed is a migration reform that involves players on both sides; this would be a suitable path towards finding an integral solution to the problem of Mexican emigration.

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