

## Illegal immigrants "self deport" as woes mount

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Tim Gaynor  
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PHOENIX (Reuters) - Mexican illegal immigrant Lindi sat down with her husband Marco Antonio in the weeks before Christmas to decide when to go back to Mexico.

She has spent three years working as a hairdresser in and around Phoenix, but now she figures it is time to go back to her hometown of Aguascalientes in central Mexico.

"The situation has got so tough that there don't seem to be many options left for us," Lindi, who asked for her last name not to be used, told Reuters.

The couple are among a growing number of illegal immigrants across the United States who are starting to pack their bags and move on as a crackdown on undocumented immigrants widens and the U.S. economy slows, turning a traditional Christmas trek home into a one-way trip.

In the past year, U.S. immigration police have stepped up workplace sweeps across the country and teamed up with a growing number of local forces to train officers to enforce immigration laws.

Meanwhile, a bill seeking to offer many of the 12 million illegal immigrants a path to legal status was tossed by the U.S. Congress, spurring many state and local authorities to pass their own measures targeting illegal immigrants.

The toughening environment has been coupled with a turndown in the U.S. economy, which has tipped the balance toward self deportation for many illegal immigrants left struggling to find work.

"It is still just a thought, although we are preparing to leave," said Ernesto Garcia, a carpenter from Caborca in northwest Mexico, who stood in line at the Mexican consulate in Phoenix this week for paperwork that will allow him and his family to resume their lives south of the border.

### PACKING THEIR BAGS

There is no tally of the number of illegal immigrants who have already left the United States, many of whom simply head south over the border with their belongings packed into a car during the annual Christmas exodus, or board scheduled flights for other destinations.

Mexican consular sources in Phoenix say they are seeing a spike in the number of immigrants applying for Mexican citizenship for their U.S.-born children, which will allow them to enroll in schools in Mexico.

They are also seeing a rise in requests for papers enabling families to carry household belongings back to Mexico, free of import duties.

Members of the Brazilian community in the U.S. northeast, meanwhile, say they are starting to see an increase in the number of illegal immigrants heading back to their homes in Brazil in recent months.

"They are beginning to put in the balance the constant fear of being detained and deported, and many are deciding to leave," said Fausto Mendes da Rocha, executive director of the Brazilian Immigrant Center in Boston.

Other returning immigrants cite a slowdown in the U.S. economy as a factor, and the falling value of the U.S. dollar against other currencies, which has eaten into the value of remittances sent to support families at home.

Aluisio Carvalho, 66, left a wife and four children behind in Brazil in 2001 when he set off to find work in Boston. Since then, he has managed to pay for the education of his children by working in a restaurant, but is now planning to leave himself in February.

"Salaries are really low, and living costs are high. We also face too much exploitation at work here, too many demands," he said.

#### MOVING WITHIN THE UNITED STATES

While some illegal immigrants are simply self-deporting, others are moving within the United States to avoid federal immigration raids and pro-enforcement measures passed by a patchwork of state and local authorities.

Among them are undocumented immigrants in Marshalltown, Iowa, where Mexicans and Central Americans workers at a Swift & Co meatpacking plant were arrested during coordinated immigration raids across six states a year ago that netted hundreds of employees.

Moses Garcia, a U.S. citizen who came from Mexico 18 years ago and knew many of the families affected by the 2006 raid through his church and real estate work, said most of the workers have left to other states, not back to Mexico.

"They feel like they are not welcome here," Garcia said. "They go to Minnesota, Atlanta, Nebraska, California."

In Arizona, where some specially trained sheriff's deputies already enforce immigration laws and a new state law sanctioning businesses hiring undocumented workers is due to come in to effect January 1, many illegal immigrants are eyeing a move to states they see as less hostile.

Among them is day laborer Fernando Gutierrez who trekked illegally into the desert state 18 months ago from Mexico, and is now thinking of joining a cousin working in Oregon in the Pacific northwest.

"Everyone lives in fear of the police stopping you for some minor infraction and then asking for your papers," Gutierrez said as he touted for work in the chill morning air at a Phoenix day labor site.

"I want to get as far away from here as possible."

# Experts: New Law Driving Out Illegals

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PHOENIX (AP) -- Illegal immigrants in Arizona, frustrated with a flagging economy and tough new legislation cracking down on their employers, are returning to their home countries or trying their luck in other states.

For months, immigrants have taken a wait-and-see attitude toward the state's new employer-sanctions law, which takes effect Jan. 1. The voter-approved legislation is an attempt to lessen the economic incentive for illegal immigrants in Arizona, the busiest crossing point along the U.S.-Mexico border.

And by all appearances, it's starting to work.

"People are calling me telling me about their friend, their cousin, their neighbors - they're moving back to Mexico," said Magdalena Schwartz, an immigrant-rights activist and pastor at a Mesa church. "They don't want to live in fear, in terror."

Martin Herrera, a 40-year-old illegal immigrant and masonry worker who lives in Camp Verde, 70 miles north of Phoenix, said he is planning to return to Mexico as soon as he ties up loose ends after living here for four years.

"I don't want to live here because of the new law and the oppressive environment," he said. "I'll be better in my country."

He called the employer-sanctions law "absurd."

"Everybody here, legally or illegally, we are part of a motor that makes this country run," Herrera said. "Once we leave, the motor is going to start to slow down."

There's no way to know how many illegal immigrants are leaving Arizona, especially now with many returning home for normal holidays visits. But economists, immigration lawyers and people who work in the immigrant community agree it's happening.

State Rep. Russell Pearce of Mesa, the author of the employer sanctions law, said his intent was to drive illegal immigrants out of Arizona.

"I'm hoping they will self-deport," Pearce said. "They broke the law. They're criminals."

Under the employer sanctions law, businesses found to have knowingly hired illegal workers will be subject to sanctions from probation to a 10-day suspension of their business licenses. A second violation would bring permanent revocation of the license.

Nancy-Jo Merritt, an immigration lawyer who primarily represents employers, said her clients already have started to fire workers who can't prove they are in the country legally.

"Workers are being fired, of course," she said. "Nobody wants to find out later on that they've got somebody working for them who's not here legally."

When immigrants don't have jobs, they don't stick around, said Dawn McLaren, a research economist at Arizona State University who specializes in illegal immigration.

She said the flagging economy, particularly in the construction industry, also is contributing to an immigrant exodus.

"As the jobs dwindle and the environment becomes more unpleasant in more ways than one, you then decide what to do, and perhaps leaving looks like a good idea," she said. "And certainly that creates a problem, because as people leave, they take the jobs they created with them."

Pearce disagreed that the Arizona economy will suffer after illegal immigrants leave, saying there will be less crime, lower taxes, less congestion, smaller classroom sizes and shorter lines in emergency rooms.

"We have a free market. It'll adjust," he said. "Americans will be much better off."

He said he's not surprised illegal immigrants are leaving the state and predicts that more will go once the employer-sanctions law takes effect next month.

"It's attrition by enforcement," he said. "As you make this an unfriendly state for lawbreakers, I'm hoping they will pick up and leave."