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Migration: Major social, economic force in Americas for years to come

By Ezra Fieser Catholic News Service

ANTIGUA, Guatemala (CNS) -- To escape war and poverty, Latin Americans will continue to flock to neighboring countries and to the United States for work and security, making migration a dominant economic and social force in the Americas for years to come, migration experts said.

Although reforms to the U.S. immigration system are unlikely this year, church officials said Latin American leaders should continue to push for human rights protections and policy changes that are more tolerant of migration.

"Today, the rights of migrants are being punished by anti-immigration policies," said Bishop Pablo Vizcaino Prado, president of the Guatemalan bishops' conference. "We'd like the Guatemalan migrant to be seen as a richness, the greatest richness that Guatemala exports."

Bishop Vizcaino, who heads the Diocese of Suchitepequez-Retalhuleu, spoke in late January during an international conference on migration and peace. The two-day conference brought together politicians, migration experts, church leaders and Nobel Peace Prize winners from across the Americas to discuss migration.

"We should unite the heads of government and treat (migration) as a united front," said Gloria Oqueli, president of the Central American Parliament and a former Honduran congresswoman. "We need to call on the European Union and the United States to stop deportation and change return laws and to return migrants humanely."

The conference was set against a backdrop of increasing deportations and stalled efforts to reform immigration laws in the United States, the preferred destination in the Western Hemisphere. The U.S. deported 345,000 undocumented immigrants in the 2008 fiscal year, up from 288,000 the previous year, according to federal statistics.

The Washington-based Center for Immigration Studies said any reform in the United States is unlikely in 2009 or during President Barack Obama's first term.

"It's a quagmire that neither political party wants to get into at this point," a center representative told Catholic News Service. "The Obama administration has plenty on its plate, and it's not likely to waste political capital trying to push for something that collapsed last time."

The Washington-based Migration Policy Institute said the Obama administration is committed to comprehensive reform, including a decision about how to treat the estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants living in the U.S., but the economy is a far larger issue.

"People are so worried about their economic well-being that it accentuates the concerns about competition for jobs," said Donald Kerwin, the institute's vice president of programs and former executive director of the Catholic Legal Immigration Network. "I think there will be a continuation of work-site enforcements and (authorities) will continue to target employers ... who violate laws."

Like several other Central American countries, Guatemala saw a record number of deportations from the United States in 2008, with nearly 28,000 residents returned. Maria Rosanna Mejia was one of them.

She left Guatemala, where she was earning about \$105 a month working six days per week as a housekeeper, in 2005. She entered the U.S. illegally and made her way to Postville, Iowa, and found work in the Agriprocessors meatpacking plant, where hundreds of other undocumented Guatemalans also worked.

Her \$6.50 per hour wage was enough for her and her daughter to live on, and she could send money back to her family in Guatemala. On May 12, 2008, U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement raided the plant and arrested 389 people, including Mejia. It was the largest workplace raid in U.S. history.

"Everyone started crying and yelling and started running away," Mejia said during the conference. "I tried to hide, but it was impossible. ... They found me, pointed a gun at me and told me not to move. I felt like an animal in the hands of a hunter."

While hundreds of others caught in the raid were convicted of a felony -- identification fraud -- and sentenced to jail time, Mejia was sent home to care for her 2-year-old daughter, Stephanie Mariana. She wore an electronic monitoring bracelet on her ankle for three months while awaiting deportation. She was unable to work or leave her home.

"I asked them how we were supposed to live. They said it was not their problem," Mejia said.

The Postville raid drew criticism from pro-immigration groups across the country. Speakers at the conference said it was an example of how thousands of migrants are treated during the deportation process.

"In the United States, people had to live with devices on their legs. They were controlled by (authorities). This type of treatment should be condemned," said Rigoberta Menchu Tum, who won the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize for her work in calling attention to the Guatemalan army's massacres of indigenous people during the 36-year civil war. "On the subject of migration ... we're talking about whole communities that are forced to leave. We're talking about the human species."

While many took aim at the United States, church leaders stressed the importance of working in Latin American countries, where civil unrest and poverty are intricately linked to migration.

"The church has a very important pastoral and social role to play in migration," said Johan Ketelers, secretary-general of the Geneva-based International Catholic Migration

Commission. The reasons for migration are "about life, about a fair wage, decent housing, access to health and access to employment."

About 2 million people in Latin America and the Caribbean were lifted out of poverty in 2008, according to the U.N. Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. But 182 million people are still living in poverty and the number of people living in extreme poverty rose from 68 million to 71 million in 2008, the commission said. The situation is likely to worsen moderately in 2009 as the world financial crisis causes cuts in wages and the remittances sent home from migrants living in the U.S.

In many places, desperate economic conditions and high levels of crime force people to flee their home countries. A 2008 U.N. study said Central America had the highest regional homicide rate in the world, and many other Latin American countries were nearly as dangerous.

In Colombia, speakers said, the world's attention has been focused on the battles between government and paramilitary forces and guerrilla groups, but the human toll has been largely overlooked. With an estimated 3 million residents displaced due to the ongoing war, Colombia has the world's second-highest rate of internally displaced people, behind Sudan.

"There are so many zones of conflict that are causing displacement. We now have flows of people moving to Costa Rica, Panama, Brazil and Ecuador," said Josef Merkx, a representative of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. "Latin America has a long tradition of humanitarianism. ... Refugees clearly have to make an effort to integrate into (new societies). But the countries should make an effort to welcome them."

Tensions between migrants and local communities have been well-documented. In November, for example, Marcelo Lucero, a 37-year-old Ecuadorean immigrant who had lived in the U.S. for 16 years, was stabbed to death by a group of seven teenagers from a neighboring town on New York's Long Island in what authorities called a hate crime. The teens, each of whom pleaded not guilty, are awaiting trial. The killing was referenced during the conference as an example of how xenophobia and racism can escalate into violence.

The church can play an essential role in building peace between communities and migrants, whether they are war refugees or undocumented workers, church leaders said.

"The church should stand for families and family values, to assist in bettering relations between migrants and communities," Ketelers said. "It comes down to building bridges."

Scalabrinian Father Rui Manuel da Silva Pedro, general director of the Scalabrini International Migration Network, which sponsored the conference, said migrants should be seen as goodwill ambassadors who introduce new cultures and traditions.

"Migrants are resources for peace," he said. "They are agents of encounters between different groups of people. They are agents of change."

END

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