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Debate Raging, Mexico Adds to Consulates in U.S.

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On the surface, there was nothing extraordinary about a certain government office in Little Rock, Ark., the other day as paperwork was signed, names were called, fees were paid, waits were endured and computer keyboards went tap, tap, tap.

Just the workaday humdrum of official government business — the government of Mexico, that is, in yet another new consulate, the country's 47th in the United States.

Mexico's consulates function as a safety net of sorts, issuing passports and identification cards that facilitate banking and offering assistance when Mexican immigrants, an estimated 11 million, run into trouble.

Increasingly, they are also acting as influential free agents in a broken immigration system that Congress is trying to overhaul. As the consulate that opened last month in Little Rock illustrates, the Mexican government is following its citizens far from the border into the growing quarters of Latino migration, much of it illegal.

Since 2000, consulates have opened in places where immigration from Mexico has soared, including St. Paul; Indianapolis; Kansas City, Mo.; Omaha and Raleigh, N.C.

"They have every right to open one up," said State Representative Jon Woods, a Republican from northwest Arkansas who won office last year on a platform that included combating illegal immigration. "But the problem I have with it opening up is it blatantly screams that illegal immigration is a problem in Arkansas. That's the main reason it opened up."

Under the bill being debated in Washington, legal status would be offered to most of the 12 million illegal immigrants in the United States, while border security would be strengthened and penalties for employers of illegal immigrants would be increased. Yesterday, the Senate voted to keep a provision in the bill that would allow hundreds of thousands of temporary foreign workers to enter the country each year.

Rafael Laveaga, a spokesman for the Mexican Embassy, declined to comment on what effect the legislation might have on consulates, though his government has said it supports efforts to increase legal immigration and has called the current bill "an important step toward the approval of comprehensive immigration reform this year."

A recent analysis of census data suggested that Arkansas had the country's fastest-growing Hispanic population this decade, set at 70,000 in 2005, a 48 percent increase over five years. At least half of the newcomers were illegal immigrants, according to the analysis commissioned by the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation from the Urban Institute and released last month.

Consulate officials in Little Rock acknowledge that the 6,000-square-foot piece of Mexican territory occupying a former medical clinic serves all Mexican citizens, regardless of immigration status.

"We can't interfere with the laws of the United States, but the consulates are certainly involved when individuals' rights are not exercised or are violated or when there are cases of families that have been separated, with the parents deported and the children remaining here," Arturo Sarukhan, the Mexican ambassador to the United States, said in a speech on April 25 at the opening of the consulate in Little Rock.

Roberto González, 20, a construction worker living here illegally, waited recently in the lobby for the identification card the Mexican government issues known as the "matrícula consular." The card is honored in the United States by many police agencies, employers and — most important — by banks, which are used by countless immigrants to send billions of dollars home every year. But it is a lightning rod for critics of illegal immigration, who see it as a demonstration of the Mexican government's helping its citizens live in the United States illegally.

"I will be able to open bank accounts, pay water and light bills, have an easier life here with the consulate and the documents they give," said Mr. González, one of more than 200 people who have received a card since the consulate opened.

Andrés Chao, the Mexican consul in Little Rock, looks past the criticism. Mr. Chao, a career diplomat who has worked in New York City and in The Hague, said he was glad to be in Arkansas at a time when the Mexican immigrant population, while small, was growing rapidly.

"This is like the birth of a community," Mr. Chao said, driving around town and pointing at the number of businesses catering to immigrants.

For Mr. Chao, the going has been smooth. The consulate has served about 50 people a day, and he says he expects the number to grow as word spreads that it is open.

The opening of the Little Rock consulate follows the one in St. Paul, which opened in June 2005. In New Orleans, where growing numbers of Mexican immigrants are working on post-Hurricane Katrina construction, plans are in the works to reopen a consulate, which closed for budget reasons nearly five years ago. There are 539 foreign consulates in the United States, and Mexico has more than any other country. (After Mexico, Canada has 19, Japan 17 and Britain 12).

In addition to issuing identification cards and passports, the consulates perform the usual consular functions: assisting citizens who are arrested, helping arrange the return to Mexico of the dead and fostering trade and cultural ties.

But Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, a public policy institute in Washington that is opposed to illegal immigration, said the spread of Mexican consulates and their advocacy of the identification card amounted to an end run around American immigration laws.

Mr. Krikorian said Mexico went further than other countries that issue such cards, including the United States, by lobbying banks and law enforcement agencies to recognize the cards as valid identification, knowing full well that most legal residents would not need such a card.

The Mexican government in the past few years has issued nearly three million of what it calls a high-security version of the card, which is accepted by more than 160 banks and recognized by 1,100 police departments.

“These consulates are not like most other countries’ consulates,” Mr. Krikorian said. “They are not there simply to help their countrymen if there is a problem with law enforcement or to promote Mexican business in the United States.”

The card was “one of the major areas of activity” at consulates, he said, adding, “The point being to ‘document’ the undocumented and make an end run around Congress.”

The Bush administration has not blocked use of the cards, saying in a policy statement in 2004 that banks must have “flexible standards” in deciding what identification to accept.

Mexican government officials said they were only serving the needs of a growing population. The 11 million Mexican-born immigrants living in the United States, as estimated by the Pew Hispanic Center, account for about 10 percent of all Mexicans.

Jorge G. Castañeda, a former foreign minister of Mexico and a professor at New York University, said Mexico had long had an abundance of consulates in the United States, including more than 10 on or near the border, where cultural bonds and conflict run deep.

“Why don’t other countries have more? Because they don’t have a border like we do,” Mr. Castañeda said. “It’s pretty straightforward. And other consulates are in large metro areas where there are very important Mexican communities.”

Before the consulate in Little Rock opened, people in Arkansas who sought Mexican consular services had to go to Dallas, a five-hour drive, not an easy trip for the many immigrants who lack cars or have limited time off from work.

The study by the Urban Institute found that the vast majority of illegal immigrants in Arkansas were from Mexico, with a smattering of Central Americans. Most poured in to

work at chicken processing plants and fill construction and service industry jobs. A small percentage moved into professional jobs, the analysis found.

It estimated that a little more than half of all new immigrants in Arkansas were there illegally, but Randy Kapps, the lead demographer on the study, said it was impossible to be precise.

It was no coincidence, Mr. Chao said, that Mexico chose to open a consulate in the state that is home to Wal-Mart and other businesses with which it would like to strengthen ties. Former Gov. Mike Huckabee and former President Vicente Fox of Mexico promoted trade, in addition to the immigrant population, as important selling points when they broached the idea of a consulate here four years ago.

“There is a lot of investment in Mexico from Arkansas businesses and a lot of opportunity,” Mr. Chao said, sipping water bottled by a company that wants to expand into the Mexican market.

But the heart of the mission here, he said, is serving people like Ramiro Givara, a 31-year-old construction worker who dropped by the consulate the other day and walked out with a freshly minted identification card.

“This is so much easier for us,” Mr. Givara said. “It is like having part of Mexico here.”