

Border Crossings

Spain, Like U.S., Grapples With Immigration

By JASON DePARLE

June 10, 2008

MADRID — With the United States riven by calls to legalize millions of illegal immigrants, Americans might consider the possible effects by looking at southern Europe, where illegal immigration has abounded and so have forgiveness plans.

In the last two decades, Spain, Italy, Portugal and Greece have run at least 15 legalization programs, including a Spanish effort three years ago that was among the Continent's largest. With little domestic opposition, Spain legalized nearly 600,000 of the African, Latin American and eastern European workers who helped power its economy and brought this once insular land the strengths and strains of diversity.

Immigrants say their prized work cards have brought higher wages, peace of mind and reunions of separated families. But critics say legalizations have attracted more illegal migrants — with spillover risks to nearby countries — and warn that an economic slowdown now puts Spain and its foreigners at odds.

Among the beneficiaries of the legalization policy are Ignacio Cantos and Sandra Delgado, a husband and wife from Ecuador who left four children and an economic crisis in search of Spanish jobs. Legalization has raised their pay and ended their fear of the police, who once jailed Mr. Cantos for lacking work papers.

It has also ended their separation from their youngest child, Allan, a gap-toothed 8-year-old sent with his siblings to live with their grandparents when he was 3. Since arriving in Madrid in March, he has been twirling his mother's earrings and stroking her hair as if worried that she is a mirage.

"I would never leave my children a second time," said Ms. Delgado, 38, a nanny who has been raising others' children while aching for her own. "I'm sorry I did it."

Though both husband and wife favor legalization, they differ on the critics' main complaint — that "regularizations" attract more illegal migrants.

"I don't think so," said Mr. Cantos, 43, a truck driver who argued that migrants moved out of desperation, not legal expectations. "I didn't even know what a regularization was."

But Ms. Delgado said repeated amnesties could act as a magnet. "People are thinking they'll be able to get their papers almost immediately," she said.

The United States has an estimated 12 million illegal immigrants, a record number. Its last mass amnesty program, which began in 1987, legalized 2.7 million. President Bush proposed an immigration plan that would give some workers a path to legalization. But it died last year under assault from people who said it would lead to more illegal immigration.

Europe has held at least 20 legalizations in the past 25 years, giving residency papers to about four million people. Italy and Spain account for about two-thirds of the total, to the consternation of northern Europeans who see the south as the Continent's weak back door. With free movement across much of Europe, legalized immigrants can easily head north, alarming those worried about job competition, welfare costs, cultural clashes or terrorist threats.

Southern Europe's tolerance for illegal immigration has several explanations. Its aging populations and booming economies created a need for foreign workers. Its proximity to northern Africa and eastern Europe places it close to countries that supply them. And its economies have traditionally depended more on off-the-books workers.

No country has run more legalization programs than Spain, which has carried out six since 1985. As recently as a decade ago, immigrants made up less than 2 percent of the population. Now they are more than 10 percent. About 40 percent come from eastern and northern Europe; 38 percent come from Latin America; and 20 percent from Africa.

Despite the rapid change, until recently there was little political conflict, with legalizations occurring under both conservative and socialist governments. Spain even offers immigrants free health insurance, whether they are legal or not.

"The attitude toward unauthorized migrants is much more relaxed than in the United States," said Joaquín Arango, a sociologist at Complutense University in Madrid.

The acceptance has been attributed to newfound prosperity, the need for workers, the progressive culture of post-Franco Spain and the shared language with Latin Americans, which spares Spain a major source of tension in the United States.

But with the economy slowing, attitudes appear to be changing. The unemployment rate among foreigners is now 14.7 percent, compared with 8.7 percent among Spaniards. Nearly 40 percent of the recent jump in unemployment has occurred among the foreign-born.

"People are starting to say: 'We don't need immigrants. They should return to their country,'" said Sebastián Salinas, a lawyer with the immigrant rights group Acobe.

Immigration emerged as an election issue in Spain this year for the first time. Mariano Rajoy, a conservative challenger to Prime Minister José Luiz Rodríguez Zapatero, said the 2005 legalization had attracted more illegal immigrants and increased social tensions.

“We are heading toward a situation of enormous problems,” said Mr. Rajoy, who narrowly lost.

Likewise, with Italy’s economy faltering, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi recently promised a new crackdown on illegal immigrants.

Mr. Cantos, in moving to Spain, traded one set of problems for another. One of 11 children born to poor farmers, he finished most of high school and landed a job collecting insurance premiums. But he lost it in 1999 when bank runs, a currency plunge and soaring unemployment sent hundreds of thousands of Ecuadorians to Spain, which they could enter without visas at the time.

Mr. Cantos joined them in 2001 after borrowing the air fare from a sister in Los Angeles. (She had moved there illegally and become legalized, but warned him that the border was now too dangerous to cross.) He found piecemeal work in Madrid passing out leaflets, and Ms. Delgado, needing money, reluctantly followed.

Life was miserable. They lived in a two-bedroom apartment with seven other migrants. They went to work fearing arrest. Ms. Delgado had lived in Madrid for two years when Spain put into effect the legalization, which covered only migrants with jobs. Of the 570,000 successful applicants, two-thirds came from five countries: Ecuador (21 percent), Romania (17 percent), Morocco (13 percent), Colombia (8 percent) and Bolivia (7 percent).

The government argued that underground work reduced tax revenue and gave lawbreaking employers a competitive edge, through lower labor costs. But officials say their main goal was social, not economic.

“If you practice exclusion, you risk the future of your country,” said Jesús Caldera, who ran the program when he was labor minister. “You risk terrorism, violence.”

Still, there have been costs. The slowdown in construction has idled Mauricio Velasco, a housepainter from Ecuador, who now draws unemployment benefits. Jorge Salinas brought his mother from Bolivia, but she soon needed a kidney transplant, which the Spanish government provided without charge. His mother, Miriam Vaca, 70, now gets free dialysis treatments three times a week. “The ambulance comes to get me,” she said. “They are very, very kind.”

French, German and Dutch officials criticized the Spanish move, fearing an increase in illegal immigration that would cross their borders. Some domestic critics said the program also attracted illegal workers dwelling elsewhere in Europe.

“They came by land, air and water,” said Ana Pastor, a legislator from the conservative Popular Party. “There was a massive influx.”

Lorenzo Cachón, a sociologist at Complutense University, analyzed the program’s “call effect” by studying municipal records. Most immigrants in Spain, legal or not, register

with local governments to obtain benefits like health insurance. Their numbers grew 20 percent the year after the program was announced, compared with 3 percent the year before.

“That means the maximum call effect is 17 percent,” he said. In practice, he said, much of that growth came from migrants already living in Spain, who registered as part of legalization. “I consider that a small call effect.”

He, like most scholars, said migrants were mainly lured by jobs. But the region’s history of repeated legalizations, he added, may add to the pull. “It produces in the imagination of the immigrant the possibility that there might be a regularization,” he said.

A 2007 report by the Council of Europe, an organization of European states, concluded that the Spanish program may have had a small “pull effect” but called it a “positive experience from which many European states can learn.”

For the Cantos family, the program brought an uphill fight. Mr. Cantos paid \$1,200 to a lawyer who never filed his application, which he discovered only when stopped by the police. Finding him absent from the list of pending cases, they jailed him overnight and started deportation proceedings.

Ms. Delgado did get her papers filed, only to discover that her employer failed to sign them. She says her boss “forgot” — drawing quotation marks with her fingers and rolling her eyes — “because she knew I wanted to travel back to Ecuador, and she didn’t want me to go.” She won a long appeal, and Mr. Cantos was legalized as her spouse.

Their combined income quickly rose about 30 percent, as employers had to pay more to keep them. With annual earnings of about \$44,000, they make about 20 times what Mr. Cantos made in Ecuador as the family’s sole provider.

Mr. Cantos said legalization had brought him “a sense of peace,” as he no longer feared arrest. But Ms. Delgado wears the willed smile of a woman trying to hide her sorrow. Her visit to Ecuador reminded her of how much she had missed of her children’s lives. “You go back and you don’t find them the way you left them,” she said.

Their income allowed the couple to bring just one child to Spain, and they brought their youngest, Allan. Arriving in March, he found the weather cold, the food strange. Puzzled by his parents’ fourth-floor walk-up, he said, “The houses are high.”

Fearful of losing his mother again, he grows jealous when his father hugs her. He exploded one night when he heard his parents laughing in the next room.

“He ran out of the bathroom and said, ‘You two are happier without me!’ ” Ms. Delgado said. “He still asks us to this day, ‘Why did you leave us behind?’ ”

With another willed smile, she added, “We’re so happy to have at least one of them back.”