

International Migration to Continue for Generations

By Gustavo Capdevila

The latest global statistics indicate that 47.5 percent of immigrants are female.

GENEVA—The world phenomenon of migration, which currently involves 150 million people, will continue to increase at least in the middle term, and some specialists forecast that the process will only begin to slow after several more generations.

A study prepared by the Geneva-based International Organisation for Migration (IOM) reflects the magnitude of this trans-border movement of people, which has risen continuously over recent years.

For some regions, the proportion of immigrants has increased significantly. In Saudi Arabia and Australia, immigrants currently represent approximately 20 percent of the population in the two countries.

The highest percentages of immigrants have been recorded in smaller countries and territories, especially in the Persian Gulf region. In two nations, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, international immi-

grants make up more than 70 percent of the population.

However, the editor of the IOM study, US expert Susan Martin, of Georgetown University, played down the apparently dramatic findings. The phenomenon, she pointed out, has been occurring throughout human history.

In addition, the numbers show that migration involves just 2.5 percent of the world population. The interesting question to be asked, said Martin, is what are the reasons behind 97.5 percent of the population remaining in their home communities?

There are two distinct types of migrants, according to the US researcher. "There are voluntary migrants, those who move on their own volition, generally for work purposes, to join family members, or other personal motives."

The second group are "forced migrants, people who have to leave their own communities as a result of

repression, conflict, environmental degradation, natural disasters," or other situations that threaten their life, liberty or property.

The equation is completed by another necessary factor: a country willing to accept the migrants, whether due to the needs of its labour market or out of humanitarian concerns. The United States is the largest receptor of immigrants, with some 25 million foreign-born residents living there at the end of the 1990s. Other countries with high numbers of immigrants are India, Pakistan, France, Germany, Canada, Saudi Arabia, Australia, Great Britain and Iran.

One of the newer traits of the phenomenon is the "feminisation" of migration. Many among the new waves of migrants are women heads of household. In the past, women figured principally accompanied by men.

The latest global statistics indicate that 47.5 percent of immigrants are fe-

male. The proportion of women immigrants in industrialised countries is nearly 50 percent, compared to an average of 46 percent in developing countries.

Martin called attention to the existence of networks that link the supply of migrants with the demands of the employers in destination countries. Such networks are increasingly professionalised, she said.

Highly organised criminal activity surrounding migration and migrant smuggling is also on the rise.

Migrants, both voluntary and forced, often must rely on intermediaries to gain entry into the target country. In providing this usually illegal service, smugglers charge as much as 50,000 dollars per immigrant.

The world's migrant population grew from 84 million in 1970 to 105 million in 1995. By 1990 it topped 120 million, and continued to grow, reaching 150 million today.

The rise in the last decade can be explained by factors such as the expansion of economic integration and globalisation, and the

changing geopolitical interests following the Cold War.

Greater transnationalisation also has its impacts, encouraging the flow of people and of international remittances, as emigrants send money home to family.

It has also altered demographic and gender trends in some societies, which cannot provide enough employment opportunities, leading people to emigrate, and in others that have become receptors of immigrants due to the decline of their own economically active populations.

Given this outlook, "one could conclude that it is likely migration will not only continue at current rates, but will increase—at least for the short and medium terms," Martin said.

With expanding economic integration and globalisation, "one can assume that there will be new pressures, new incentives for migrations," stated the expert.

She clarified, however, that "most scholars, regarding the connection between trade and migration, concluded that—in the long term—trade and economic

integration is likely to lessen emigration pressures in countries of origin and generally reduce interest in migration."

But that will take a long time. It will likely be generations before such changes take place, Martin predicted.

On another front, Italy and Ireland, which were once leading emigration countries whose populations left in search of better economic opportunities, have become countries of immigration, she said.

In 1998, nearly 7.5 million people who were born in Mexico lived in the United States, including approximately two million who were naturalised citizens, three million as illegal immigrants and 2.5 million as unauthorised immigrants.

If Mexico maintains its current pace of job creation—one million new positions each year—within the period of one generation, the country may be able to support its own population, which will then be less likely to emigrate, according to Martin's calculations.

Source: Inter Press Service, 3 November 2000

Highly organised criminal activity surrounding migration and migrant smuggling is also on the rise.