

## **COLOMBIA CHANGES BECKON SOME IMMIGRANTS SEE IMPROVEMENTS BACK HOME AND DECIDE TO RETURN.**

**By Kenneth D. MacHarg**

A changing political climate in Colombia and increasing political involvement among Colombians in south Florida are sending a ripple of change through the local Colombian community as it prepares to celebrate Independence Day on July 20.

“Many people are starting to return to Colombia,” said Maria Nury Gomez of Boca Raton who works in Fort Lauderdale. “For many Colombians, it has been a struggle here, and many of them have not made it after two to three years of trying.”

Gomez said that changing conditions in Colombia under President Alvaro Uribe and an increasingly favorable economic situation there have convinced many that now is the time to return home and start again.

The reverse flow of Colombians picked up steam in March and April according to Lesly Jaramillo of Fort Lauderdale who headed an effort to support Uribe in Broward County during last year’s elections. “In May and June, Avianca Airlines said it was moving up to 15 families a week back to Colombia,” she said.

During the past decade, there has been a steady flow of Colombians to south Florida as increasing guerrilla warfare among two rebel groups, a right-wing paramilitary group and the army has spread throughout the country. The conflict has brought a sharp increase in the number of people kidnapped for ransom or killed in bombings and other violence.

“The official census says that there are 130,000 Colombians in the tri-county area of south Florida,” said Republican State Representative Juan Carlos Zapata, a Colombian who lives in Miami. “But there are probably 200,000 in the area. In addition, part timers who live here part of the year and people in transition who stop here before moving on to Tampa, Orlando, Atlanta or New York bump the numbers even higher.”

“Of those who come here, half of them will eventually go back,” Zapata said. “But, of those who go back, 25% of them will return here.”

Zapata said that while two years ago, 1,000 Colombians were coming to Florida each week, now the number of immigrants is down to 100 to 150 a week. And, those who are coming are different than those who came then. Previous immigrants made up what Zapata called the “solid middle class,” but today, immigrants are more likely to be from the working class.

Residents in South Florida say that those returning to their homeland are from all socio-economic classes, from well-to-do business owners to laborers who have grown discouraged.

Colombian leaders in the area say that the reasons for the return are improving conditions in Colombia and a high level of frustration that Colombians have found adapting to life in the United States.

“Things are getting better in Colombia,” said Fabio Andrade of Weston, the founder and president of the Americas Center, a social service agency that helps all immigrants in the area. The center has offices in Weston and the Kendall area of Miami-Dade County.

“There is an opportunity there and a future,” Andrade explained. “The current administration is securing the country.”

Uribe was elected last year on a platform of taking a hard line against the almost 40-year-old guerrilla conflict. In the early months of his government, Uribe retook a Switzerland-sized swath of land that had been designed as a neutral zone by the previous administration in hopes that such a move would spur peace talks.

“This is the president that we have needed for years,” Jaramillo said. “The feeling of the people is very different, they feel that they own the country and can travel.”

Jaramillo said that many Colombians are returning because they feel the need to go back to their roots and resume the style of life they had before they fled. “From our heritage, our family is our first society. By going back, we will have more time for a social life and our families.”

The struggle to live and work in the United States is also playing a role in the decision of many to return home. “Life is tough here,” Zapata said. “South Florida is not a place of opportunity for immigrants. It’s oversaturated with them and the obstacles are huge.”

For example, many immigrants have had difficulty obtaining the proper documents to continue living here. “They have invested hundreds of dollars and cannot get their visas or permission to stay,” Andrade said. Many decided to return rather than to stay on illegally and jeopardize a future attempt at immigration.

“The social structure is different here,” said Sandra Espinosa of Weston. “You have to work hard just to survive,” she said, explaining that long work hours keep her from caring for her children in the manner that she would like.

Others have found it difficult to establish their business here because of costs and regulations that they do not understand. “The need much more support from the business community if they are going to be successful,” Andrade asserted. “They don’t know how to do business here.”

Also a consideration for the current wave of returnees is that property and business start-up costs are low in Colombia now, so it is advantageous for business people to return and get in on the ground floor of what they expect will be an increase in the economy as Uribe’s policies take hold.

These difficulties come in spite of efforts by groups like Andrade’s Americas Center and the Colombian-American Service Association in Miami. “We assist Hispanic immigrants coming here to adjust,” said Esperanza Martinez, the Association’s Executive Director. “We give immigration assistance, provide attorneys and paralegal assistance and help them to know how to process their papers.”

“We also help them to prepare their résumé and to find the best jobs. Our goal is self-sufficiency,” Martinez said.

Not all Colombians plan to return, however. Some still fear violence from the ongoing war. “I was involved with País Libre, an NGO that was set up to help the victims of kidnapping,” explained Espinosa who has been here for three years. “I received threats and so I came here with my three children.”

Espinosa said that she would like to return because with the new president, “people have a new hope. There are more opportunities and people can return to their land. But, I can’t return yet because I won’t have enough security.”

Others have settled well into life here. “If your kids are here, you are going to stay,” said Jaramillo who indicated that because of her previous governmental service in Colombia she might be more visible and subject to threats.

For those who remain, political efforts are underway with the Colombian government to recognize the needs of expatriate citizens, and with local groups to involve more residents here in political action that will represent their needs.

Andrade recently attended a two-day seminar with President Uribe in Bogotá to discuss the issues affecting Colombians overseas. “Ten percent of the population lives outside of the country, primarily in the United States, Spain, Venezuela and Ecuador,” Andrade said.

“We want to help unify them and assist them in helping Colombia,” Andrade said. Among the plans are to register Colombians to vote in elections both back home and here, (the Colombian constitution allows dual citizenship), and to encourage expatriate Colombians to help Colombian businesses in south Florida.

Andrade said that the Colombian government wants to encourage expatriate to use Colombian businesses to import and export goods and to purchase Colombian products.

Andrade and others also want Colombians in south Florida to become more involved in U.S. local and national politics to help address their particular needs.

One political issue is that of Colombian’s legal status here. “Temporary Protective Status (TPS) is available to the citizens of some countries, but not to Colombians,” Gomez said. “It should be offered to those who are threatened by the guerrillas.”

*Employment is a major issue, according to Juan Camilo Tamayo of Boca Raton. “There is no employment for Colombians in South Florida who want to stay here,” said Tamayo who indicated that he is considering entering politics either here or in Colombia in three to four years.*

*“We need strong leadership to help develop community integration,” he said. “We can make a difference, but to do that, we need to build community.”*

Zapata, the only Colombian elected to public office in South Florida, said President George W. Bush’s Plan Colombia, a package designed to help Colombia deal with drug cultivation and shipment and guerrilla’s threats, is also an important issue for Colombians here.

But, political participation by local residents is low. “Many Colombians have a negative perception of politics and politicians,” Zapata charged. “Too many of them are disengaged. They need to become engaged and involved.”

“Sixty percent of Cubans here in south Florida vote,” Zapata said. “But only about 20-30% of non-Cuban Hispanics vote. If they do not take part, they will get hurt.”

Jaramillo agreed. “Colombians need to take advantage of the window of opportunity for citizens. We need government representation.”

Events:

11 a.m.-6 p.m., Saturday, July 19, Independence Program, featuring music, dancing, typical food and the Esmeralda folkloric group at Butterfly Park, 3600 W. Sample Road, Coconut Creek.

7 p.m., Saturday, July 19, Celebration of Mass and the coronation of the Virgin of Chiquinquirar at the San Isidro Roman Catholic Church, 2310 Martin Luther King Blvd., Pompano Beach.

8 p.m., Saturday, July 19, mass at the Good Shepherd Catholic Church, 14187 SW 72<sup>nd</sup> Street, Miami

8:30 p.m., Saturday, July 19, Peña and typical Colombian Food at San Isidro Church including folkloric music, dancing, raffles.

9 p.m., Saturday, July 19, Fiesta Independencia de Colombia with the La Suprema All Stars orchestra at San Brendan Church, 8775 SW 32<sup>nd</sup> Street, Miami

Noon, Sunday, July 20, Mass at the Cathedral, 7525 NW 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue, Miami

Festival, Sunday, July 20 at Tamiami Park, 11201 SW 24 Street, Miami

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