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Against tide, some seek Mexican citizenship

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MEXICO CITY - Some came for love. Some came for work. Others just wound up here and decided to stay.

On a recent sunny day, 50 immigrants from the United States, China, Italy, Spain and elsewhere rose to their feet before a crowd of dignitaries and took a life-changing step: They became Mexicans.

"Citizens," President Vicente Fox intoned. "Do you renounce your nationality of origin . . . to assume all the rights and obligations that the acquisition of Mexican nationality confers?"

"Yes, we renounce it," the immigrants said, and the crowd broke into applause.

With a half-million Mexican migrants leaving their country for the United States each year, Mexico itself may seem an unlikely Promised Land. But last year, at least 4,349 people from other countries became naturalized Mexicans, up more than sevenfold from 510 in 1995. And that's not counting the 98,019 Mexican-Americans who have reclaimed their Mexican citizenship since 1998.

The rise is partly due to new laws relaxing Mexico's immigration rules. Some of the new Mexicans are poor people who want to become part of Latin America's strongest economy. Others are professionals who see advantages in having two passports in a globalized world.

Most naturalized Mexicans come from Guatemala, followed by Colombia, Cuba and China, the Mexican Foreign Ministry says. The April naturalization ceremony included a Spanish writer, a British housewife, a Cuban chemist, an Argentine pastry chef, a Russian orchestra conductor, an Italian priest and a U.S. businessman.

Mexico's rise in immigration is part of an international trend, as people increasingly move from country to country in search of work. Mexico's per capita income of \$5,910 is the highest in Latin America and has risen 56 percent since 1995, making the country an attractive destination for people from poor regions.

But there are native-born Americans, too, among the ranks of naturalized Mexicans.

Frank Goebel, a U.S. businessman who used to live in Phoenix, decided to get his Mexican citizenship after marrying a Mexican woman. "It just seemed like the natural thing to do," he said.

In all, about 1,200 native-born Americans have become Mexicans since 2000, the Foreign Ministry says. The Mexican government is hoping the U.S. Congress will

eventually confer preferential treatment on Mexico when it comes to issuing work visas. If that happens, a Mexican passport could be a valuable thing to have.

The United States has 11 million to 12 million undocumented immigrants, at least half of them Mexican. President Bush has called for reforms that could legalize those migrants and allow them to apply for citizenship.

Becoming Mexican

Under Mexican law, any foreigner living legally in Mexico on a work or residency visa for five years can apply for citizenship. Applicants must prove they are proficient in Spanish and pass a test on Mexican history and culture.

The waiting period drops to two years if residents are married to a Mexican, give birth to a child in Mexico or provide a "special benefit" to Mexico. Big investors, actors and professional athletes often get this special treatment.

Candidates for citizenship used to have to have an FM-2 visa, which forbids residents from leaving Mexico for more than 18 months during a five-year period. But in 1998, Mexico began allowing residents with the less restrictive FM-3 visa to apply for citizenship, too. It also reduced the residency requirement from five years to two years for anyone from Latin America, Spain or Portugal.

Technically, foreigners are required to renounce their citizenship of origin when they become naturalized Mexicans. Any naturalized citizen caught using a foreign passport or living abroad for more than five years could be stripped of his or her Mexican citizenship, said Sandra Elisa Hernández Ortíz, director of legal affairs for the Foreign Ministry.

But, in practice, most foreigners keep their old passports, immigration lawyer Federico Vergara said. As long as foreigners agree to be treated as Mexicans when in Mexico and not seek diplomatic help if they get into legal trouble, Mexican authorities usually look the other way, he said.

The U.S. government does not recognize the renouncing of U.S. citizenship, so an American who becomes a naturalized Mexican continues to be a U.S. citizen in the eyes of the United States, according to the U.S. Embassy.

Another passport

Americans make up only a small part of the new citizens, but that is partly because the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement made it easier for Americans and Canadians to get residency visas in Mexico, meaning there is less incentive for them to become citizens, said Jesús Pérez Cisnero, an immigration lawyer in Mexico City. However, foreigners who do become citizens reap some nice benefits: They can directly own oceanfront property without setting up a complicated legal trust. They can get Mexican bank loans and finance homes more easily. And they can work in Mexico without visas.

Despite the steep increase, the number of people immigrating to Mexico is still tiny compared with those immigrating to the United States. A total of 537,151 foreigners, including 63,840 Mexicans, became U.S. citizens in fiscal 2004.

But for people from other countries, Mexican citizenship is increasingly seen as a resumé-builder.

"It's a very valuable thing to have because you can work and get credit without problems," said Venezuelan Geraldine Itriago, who became a citizen during the ceremony in Mexico City. She held a folder containing her red, white and green certificate of naturalization.

Coming home

In addition to relaxing the rules for foreigners, Mexico has been opening its arms to emigrants who left their homeland years ago.

Mexico used to automatically revoke the citizenship of any Mexican who became a citizen of another country. But with migrants sending home about \$20 billion a year to their families, the Mexican government has been trying to reward expatriates for their loyalty. In 1998, it began issuing "nationality declarations," which restored Mexican citizenship. Tens of thousands of Mexicans applied for them in the first few years of the program.

"It was a way of helping all those people who had gone abroad," Vergara said.

Last year, Mexican lawmakers relaxed the rules even further by allowing immigration officials to certify Mexican nationals even if they lack an official document like a birth certificate. Unlike naturalized Mexicans, native-born Mexicans are allowed to hold the citizenship of another country under Mexican law.

The changes have opened the door for Mexican-Americans who want to move back to Mexico when they retire.

It also allows them to buy homes where foreigners are barred from owning property.

Under Mexican law, no foreigner can own property within 60 miles of the U.S. border or 30 miles of any coast. Some foreigners get around the law by setting up legal trusts that hold deed to the property. But once they have citizenship, that is no longer necessary.

Feeling Mexican

But the legal perks aren't all that draw people to become Mexicans.

"For them, it's truly an honor to be Mexicans," said Hernández Ortíz of the Foreign Ministry, which oversees naturalization. "They're not simply doing it in some hope that someday in the future being Mexican will give them some sort of preference in the North American labor market ... or add a plus to their resumé."

Indeed, some foreigners go decades before deciding to take the plunge. Lucia Zanetti of Italy and her Peruvian husband lived in Mexico for 26 years as legal residents but never applied for citizenship.

"After having children here, and now grandchildren, we realized we no longer had a sense of belonging to any other country," Zanetti said.

She and her husband received their naturalization papers last month.

"I still love Italy," Zanetti said. "But I feel Mexican."

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