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## Many Mexican migrants secure jobs in U.S. before crossing border

**JULIE WATSON**

**Associated Press**

**SASABE, Mexico** - When Pedro Lopez Vazquez crossed illegally into the United States last week, he was not heading north to look for a job. He already had one.

His future employer even paid \$1,000 for a smuggler to help Vazquez make his way from the central Mexican city of Puebla to Aspen, Colo.

"We're going to Colorado to work in carpentry because we have a friend who was going to give us a job," Vazquez said.

Vazquez, 41, was interviewed along the Arizona border after being deported twice by the U.S. Border Patrol. He said he would keep trying until he got to Aspen.

His story is not unusual. A growing number of U.S. employers and migrants are tapping into an underground employment network that matches one with the other, often before the migrants leave home.

"It continues to become clear who controls immigration: It's not governments, but rather the market," said Jorge Santibanez, director of the Tijuana-based think-tank Colegio de la Frontera Norte.

As debate over immigration heats up in the United States, more and more U.S. companies in need of cheap labor are turning to undocumented employees to recruit friends and relatives back home, and to smugglers to find job seekers.

Darcy Tromanhauser, of the nonprofit law project Nebraska Appleseed, said companies in need of workers rely on the networks to "pass along the information more effectively than billboards."

"It started out more explicitly, where (meatpacking) companies used to have buses to transport people to come up, and they would advertise directly in Mexico," she said. "Now I think that happens more informally."

At the same time, it has become less risky for companies to recruit illegal migrants. Since the Sept. 11 terror attacks, U.S. prosecution of employers who hire such workers has dwindled to a trickle as the government puts its resources toward national security.

The few cases that are prosecuted, however, highlight how lucrative a business recruiting undocumented workers has become. In one case, a single smuggler allegedly earned \$900,000 over 15 months placing 6,000 migrants in jobs at Chinese restaurants across the upper Midwest.

Shan Wei Yu, a 51-year-old Chinese-American, was sentenced in December to nine years in federal prison on charges involving the transportation of 40 of those migrants. Investigations involving the others continue.

Rick Hilzendager, special agent for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement in Grand Forks, N.D., said Yu connected 6,000 migrants from Latin America with jobs in Chinese restaurants in Illinois, Michigan, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wisconsin.

Based in Yu's home in McKinney, Texas, the Great Texas Employment Agency placed ads in Chinese-language newspapers in the Chicago area offering cheap labor from Latin America, investigators said.

Yu sent a recruiter with Spanish interpreters to find migrants in Dallas willing to be fry cooks and dishwashers, Hilzendager said. A team made up mostly of illegal Chinese immigrants rented cars and drove them up.

Yu allegedly charged a \$150 finder's fee for each migrant while the drivers earned \$300 per worker. Restaurant owners deducted the \$450 from workers' first-month paychecks of \$1,000.

"It was just so easy," Hilzendager said.

Nick Chase, assistant U.S. attorney in North Dakota, said Yu even offered to replace workers free of charge if one left within two weeks of starting.

"It was a 2-for-1 special - like a pizza," Chase said. "Everything about it was ugly."

The employees, housed in cramped apartments provided by employers, worked 14-hour days and had little outside contact. The case broke open in August 2004 after two Mexican migrants working at the Buffet House in Grand Forks fled poor conditions and were picked up along a highway by Border Patrol agents.

Many of the drivers involved in the scheme were deported to China. Two North Dakota restaurant owners were sentenced to four months each for harboring illegal immigrants.

But many migrants, and many employers, say the recruiters provide a valuable service. Sergio Sosa, who organizes Nebraska meatpackers, said many are seen as heroes in the Mexican towns where the workers come from.

Sosa, speaking by telephone from Omaha, said that in the 1990s companies bused migrants from the U.S.-Mexico border, paying them room and board plus salaries of \$100 a week. But after a government crackdown, they began to rely more on their workers to recruit friends and family back in Mexico.

"One of the meatpacking supervisors is from Michoacan, and most of the people working for him come from his town," Sosa said. "There's no official recruiting - it's more internal through family."

Migrants setting out along the border confirmed his account. Guadalupe Mendez, 26, said her sister found her work as a seamstress in Los Angeles. Lorenzo Garcia Ruiz, 38, said friends arranged a gardening job for him in Kentucky.

To make a real dent in this network, the U.S. government would need to go after employers or make them pay the costs of

legalizing workers, migration activists say.

But an August 2005 report of the Government Accountability Office, the investigative arm of Congress, indicates the opposite is happening. After the Sept. 11 attacks, work-site inspections by U.S. immigration officials plummeted as they focused on national security cases.

From 1999 to 2004, the number of businesses that faced fines dropped from 417 to three, the GAO said. Data after 2004 could not be compared because the government changed the way it records data.

Investigators say fake documents makes it difficult to prove an employer has knowingly hired an undocumented worker. The business community argues that employers aren't equipped to spot fraud and warns that more investigations could lead to workplace discrimination.

Chase said businesses must be kept in check.

"There are employers out there who are always going to be tempted by the bottom line," he said.

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Associated Press writer Julie Watson reported this story from Mexico City and AP writer Olga R. Rodriguez reported from Sasabe, Mexico.

