

05/24/2007

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COMMENTARY

Palaima: Immigration problems aren't confined to U.S.

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Austin American-Statesman Thursday, May 24, 2007

'The problem isn't the Chinese. They come here, work, pay their taxes and behave themselves well. We have more problems with the Moroccans and the Pakistanis.'

- Anonymous resident of Barcelona (source: La Vanguardia)

In the epigraph to his novel "Howard's End," E.M. Forster tells us: "Only connect." Easier said than done.

This may seem ironic. Isn't the modern world all about being connected? E-mail, mobile phones, super-jumbo jets, and super highways connect more of us more easily and more often than ever before. Cable and Internet news keeps us informed about our world as soon as anything happens anywhere. Aren't we suffering from over-connection?

Well, yes and no. We can be connected by nearness, spatial and virtual. Then there is true connection. True connection has many names: human sympathy, tolerance of diversity, a willingness to share and assimilate. The trouble with being really connected is that it asks us to change our ways of thinking and even what we call our way of life.

Immigration is a big issue in the United States right now. But it isn't only a problem for Americans. It is the major issue of upcoming local elections in Spain, and it affected the recent national elections in France. No matter what Congress decides about the estimated 12 million illegal immigrants living in the United States and about future controls of our borders, problems with immigration will begin again one minute after any new policies are enacted.

Our world is connected, ironically, by a great economic divide. The World Bank tracks the terrible poverty in other parts of the world that causes people to seek opportunity in Europe and the United States. About 2.6 billion people in developing countries (or about half of their populations) live on less than \$2 per day. More than 6 million young children in these countries die each year of malnutrition and hunger-related diseases.

The survivors live with violence, exploitation and poor health. In India, some children of the desperate poor are sold into prostitution or maimed to better exploit them as beggars. About 300,000 children live on the streets of Bombay alone.

Is it any wonder that thousands each month try to make it from Africa to Spanish shores in flimsy boats? Parents in Mauretania, Nigeria, Morocco, Senegal and Algeria use their last resources to buy their children illegal passage on these boats. Nafiseh, a 24-year-old from Ghana, recently survived the trip to Motril on the south coast of Spain. She brought her 10-month-old child. Her boat contained five other women, another baby and 100 men. She called what they did

"plain madness," on the open sea in a small flat boat, pitched by waves, uncertain of their course, no food, no water. Three would-be immigrants recently died en route at sea.

The poor of the world will not stop coming. They will not stop sending their children. Would you?

Here in Spain, the socialist government has ended the practice of intercepting the boats. But they still repatriate many desperate illegals once they land. Even so, it is predicted that by 2015, one out of every three people in Spain will be foreign-born.

So Spaniards have the same worries we do. They worry about the extra costs of social services, the effects of so many foreigners on their wages, businesses and schools, on their language and general culture. Headlines scream that in one town near Girona, 63 percent of the children born in 2006 were born to immigrants. And the government reports that the Islamic immigrant population in Catalonia is the main recruiting ground in Spain for al Qaeda-type suicide terrorists. Only connect. But how and where?

One 30-year-old Spaniard, Jaume Sanllorente, traveled to India four years ago. What he witnessed changed his life. He started Sonrisas de Bombay and works there saving orphans from prostitution, slavery, mutilation and abject poverty.

Freelance photographer Desirée Martin, 32, just won the Ortega y Gasset prize in photojournalism. Her award-winning photograph shows parched African illegals, quarantined in a small boat, stretching their arms upward for one small plastic bottle of water thrown toward them.

When asked what she would do with the prize money, Ms. Martin said she would travel to Senegal and find out what had happened to some of the poor souls she had met who had been sent back there from Spain, with little hope and no resources.

Martin and Sanllorente are not solving the big problems of immigration, but they are connected. And they know that the crisis of immigration begins not in our lands of promise, but back in countries where billions of human beings dream of being where we are.

Palaima is a classics professor at the University of Texas. This is the fifth in a series of columns from Spain.

May 24, 2007:

I hope that, after you have read this, you reflect on how odious the whole Paul Wolfowitz affair at the World Bank was. While the organization that he headed is supposed to address world poverty, he was busy diverting resources to a girl friend and then negotiating a severance deal that gave him \$400,000 (the high-end daily income of 200,000 of the people his organization is supposed to help) as a reward for his improprieties.

And put these poverty figures alongside the report that Hong Kong billionaire Billionaire Joseph Lau, and at least 5 other private individuals, have ordered their own personal \$153-million Boeing '787 VIP' Model jet planes.