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Living under the radar – Part III

~ Illegal immigration in St. Maarten ~

By Judy H. Fitzpatrick

PHILIPSBURG--A major concern of some St. Maarteners is that, in their view, St. Maarten, already one of the most densely populated island territories, is rapidly becoming “over-populated” because of the many undocumented people living here under the Immigration radar.

This, they say, is placing a tremendous burden on government organisations and institutions as well as on the education, housing and health care services.

They point to the frequent traffic gridlocks, the unavailability of low-cost housing, the hefty unpaid bills left behind at St. Maarten Medical Center (SMMC) by uninsured undocumented immigrants and to the estimated 3.6 million to 4.8 million guilders per year it will cost St. Maarten to educate the estimated 600-800 undocumented children attending undocumented schools, to justify calls for more stringent measures and action against undocumented immigrants.

In the case of the hospital, for example, unpaid tabs by “self-responsible” patients remain a “serious” concern for SMMC General Director Dr. George Scot, who said funds from unpaid bills could go a long way in accelerating the upgrading of the hospital and its staff.

Figures from the hospital show that 4.8 per cent of the 28.2 million guilders it billed in 2008 represents unpaid tabs from uninsured patients, mainly undocumented residents. Some 4.2 per cent of 25.7 million guilders billed in 2006 was left unpaid and three per cent of 23.6 million guilders billed in 2006 also comprised unpaid tabs from the uninsured.

The growth of the undocumented population in St. Maarten has also brought about major challenges for education, among them the language barrier and social issues, said Interim Sector Director for Welfare Claudette Forsythe-Labega.

A very candid Leader of Government Sarah Wescot-Williams said that while the immigration situation had many dimensions, the fact was that persons who resided here and did not contribute taxes were a burden on society. And, with the global financial crisis strengthening its grip on the region, this burden becomes more of a strain for St. Maarten currently seeking a new constitutional status as a separate country within the Dutch Kingdom.

She said too that the pressure to provide housing to match the influx of immigrants to the island was “tremendous.”

“With such a tremendous demand immigrants are forced to live in less than adequate circumstances,” she said, adding that this was one of the reasons employers were required under the revised employment permit policy to guarantee basic accommodation for their immigrant workers. “If someone is brought in they should be treated humanely.”

St. Martin Nation Building Foundation President Leopold James said he was very concerned about the effects of illegal immigration on, in particular, “native St. Maarteners,” who he said had been “neglected and oppressed” for years and who he contended should come first in their own “ancestral land” and not be treated as second-class citizens, lest that fuel potentially explosive resentment.

The flip side

On the flip side, many argue that despite their status, many illegal immigrants make major contributions to the St. Maarten economy.

Guyanese national Shirley, her partner James and her brother Derrick, (see Parts I & II) as well as Haitian nationals Jean and Dominican Deon (not their real names), for example, said that individually they ploughed thousands of dollars back into the local economy each year through rent, food, grocery and utility bills and other spending here. Taxes are also deducted from Derrick’s salary, but it could not be ascertained whether the money is ever turned over to government.

“The Caribbean people spend much more than the foreigners who live on boats and don’t pay rent and support the economy as we do,” said Derrick, contending that there was a significant number of “boaties” from Europe and North America here.

St. Maarten Marine Trades Association President Robbie Ferron dismissed this argument, saying it was a misconception that there were a significant number of people living on boats in the lagoon. He said that while that practice had been prevalent in the past, it was no longer the case.

Other knowledgeable persons close to the marine industry also contend that many yacht crew members, who sometimes frequent the Simpson Bay area, are merely short-term visitors and do not live on boats and work on the island, as is sometimes perceived. They also contend that many Americans and Canadians who have vacation homes here and may visit from time to time cannot be misconstrued as living and working in St. Maarten illegally.

10,000 ‘illegals’ insured with SVB

SVB Head Reginald Willemsberg acknowledged the social security contributions of undocumented immigrants.

He estimated that some 65 per cent of the 16,000 workers (10,400) who were insured under SVB in St. Maarten were undocumented immigrants whose premium contributions to the social security bank amounted to 22.7 million guilders in 2007 and were projected to top 23.4 million guilders in 2008. Overall, the insurance service provider collected 35 million guilders in premiums in 2007 and is projected to collect 36 million guilders in 2008.

Willemsberg said undocumented persons filled a gap that wasn’t easily filled by locals. “Even if we have enough employees, we have to look at whether they are willing to do these jobs,” he explained.

Medical burden

Undocumented immigrants qualify for medical insurance under SVB provided they are registered with the scheme and the figures show that they account for a big chunk of the insurance coverage expenses.

Willemsberg said the medical cost for non-nationals was usually higher than that for the “average resident.” “They usually work very hard and don’t take care of themselves. Even when they are sick they continue working. When they do decide to go to the

doctor is when their illness is at a critical stage and the cost to get them better is high.”

SVB records show that 95 per cent of the patients sent abroad for urgent medical treatment in recent years were insured undocumented workers. This poses additional challenges. Their illegal status coupled with visa requirements limits the overseas destinations to which SVB can send undocumented immigrants from countries such as the Dominican Republic, Guyana, Haiti, India and Jamaica for treatment not available locally.

The SVB head also explained that there had been cases in which undocumented residents in need of medical treatment overseas opted not to travel because of their concern that they might not be allowed to re-enter St. Maarten. “That’s why some patients will continue to live with the problem, and this is a health risk.”

No babies for ‘illegals’?

Willemsberg said undocumented persons tend to procreate much more than “the average” legal resident.

“They make the most children and they are taking chances, because the child would not be insured. They are not being responsible for the consequences and this is irresponsible. My personal opinion is that someone who is illegal should not be making babies, because they are bringing problems for themselves and their children and someone else usually ends up with the responsibility,” he said.

Shirley has firsthand experience of the consequences of becoming pregnant as an undocumented immigrant. She delivered at the maternity home care service of a midwife after she was told this would be less of a financial burden. However, after the delivery, she was told she could not receive the “documents” to register her child in the civil registry unless she settled the more than US \$1,000 tab she had incurred.

However, according to an official at the Civil Registry, documents from a midwife are not necessary to register a newborn, as long as the mother is aware of the birth details.

Shirley longs for the chance to register her baby, but given the time that has already elapsed since her baby’s birth, a petition would now have to be made to the court for a pronouncement on the child’s registration. Until she clears this hurdle, her daughter does not exist on paper. Officially, she is without identity.

Nation of immigrants

Aside from all the challenges, James said the large number of undocumented immigrants and other residents “could threaten” the native indigenous population if they were to be granted the same rights as “native people,” as these numbers reflected “tremendous power.”

James is particularly concerned about the diluting of the island’s culture, including the language, through the impact of the Spanish- and Creole-speaking residents who constitute the largest immigrant blocks here.

“I don’t believe in hatred, but we can’t live in denial of the problems that exist. The diversity of St. Maarten could be a blessing and can therefore enrich us as a nation. Conversely, diversity not well managed can also be divisive and also an explosive factor, and I am concerned about this,” he explained.

St. Maarten Tourist Bureau Head Regina Labega said “too much of an issue” was being made of the cultural mix in St. Maarten, which

was in fact a positive selling point for the island's tourism product.

“Whether it is 70 or 100 (different nationalities), it is purely a statistical figure. ... If you have one person each from 100 different nations registered at the Census Office that will give you 100 different nationalities on our island. That wouldn't have any serious impact on our culture. Our tolerance is not weakness, it is strength.

That is why St. Maarten is perhaps the most cosmopolitan destination in the Caribbean. That is a strong selling point.”

She said the island's success as a tourism destination was paradoxically the main cause of the immigration problem. “But we should not exaggerate this, either. Like the United States, we are a nation of immigrants.”

Read more in the conclusion to be published in tomorrow's issue.

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