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U.S. deportation flights on the rise

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By [Tim Gaynor](#)

GUATEMALA CITY (Reuters) - Guatemalan mechanic Erwin Baches walked for five days across the desert and broke into the United States in search of the American Dream.

Arrested, jailed and placed on a deportation flight back to Central America on Friday, he is one of a growing number of illegal immigrants being sent home with that dream in tatters.

"I just wanted a better life for my family," said Baches, 35, swiping away tears on a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, or ICE, charter flight to Guatemala City from a Phoenix-valley airport.

"We're all human beings, we all deserve a chance," he added, speaking in Spanish.

Immigration, particularly what to do with millions of illegal immigrants living in the shadows, is a divisive issue in the United States.

As President Barack Obama tries to rally support in the U.S. Congress to revive comprehensive immigration reform this year, his government is removing the United States' unauthorized population at a gathering pace.

ICE's Flight Operations Unit, carrying out a policy begun under former President George W. Bush, has moved an average of 4,200 unauthorized migrants a week this year, up from 3,700 last year.

"I wanted to find a better life, to help my nephew," said Ofelia Alvarado, 33. One of the 92 Guatemalans flown home from Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport, Alvarado had been nabbed after crossing the border from Mexico last month.

SHACKLES AND HANDCUFFS

Obama is seeking support among Democratic and Republican lawmakers to overhaul the broken immigration system in the United States, where almost 12 million illegal immigrants live and work in the shadows.

He supports offering those in good standing the chance to pay a fine and become citizens, at the same time cracking down on employers hiring undocumented workers and hardening security along the porous Mexico border.

Since taking office in January, Obama has shifted focus away from rounding up illegal immigrants in work place raids -- the policy under Bush -- to identifying criminal immigrants held in U.S. jails and removing them.

That shift in policy was reflected in the variety of deportees on Flight 9849 to Guatemala City on Friday, who were served a turkey and cheese sandwich, crackers and bottled water on the four-hour trip.

"The police were waiting for me when I got back from the shops," said Juan Sacaria, 29, a Mayan Indian who was convicted of spousal battery in California, and was among 12 criminals put on the flight in handcuffs and leg shackles.

Many deportees on the flight had been picked up after crossing over the border, like Alvarado, or in a variety of police operations during which their immigration status emerged.

"They got me at a traffic stop coming back from work," said Hedvin Galicia,

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28, a mechanic arrested in Phoenix for extreme drunk driving in April, who was subsequently handed over to ICE for removal.

Baches was arrested for soliciting for sex. He was not convicted, and denied the charge.

DETERRENT OR REVOLVING DOOR?

The ICE Office of Detention and Removal Operations departs to more than 190 countries.

Each weekday it averages 9 or 10 charter flights, a service dubbed "ICE Air" by news media, most of them bound for Central and South America and the Caribbean.

Critics say deportation is simply a revolving door as migrants frequently make their way back to the United States and resume their lives.

But ICE says deportation acts as a deterrent to many, and shows others that there are consequences for breaking into the United States, particularly if they commit crimes.

"If we encounter them, they have a criminal history and they've been previously deported, there's a very good chance that they are going to be prosecuted," said Eduardo Preciado, assistant director of ICE detention and removals program in Arizona.

As the aircraft banked over the tin-roofed shanties of Guatemala City to land, the deportees were divided on what they would do once through the airport, where Guatemalan immigration officials help them change dollars, call relatives, and give those that need it a ride to a bus terminal.

"I don't think I'll go back again, it's too hard," said Alvarado, who had spent thousands of dollars trying to reach the United States, and had been twice deported.

But Galicia, who had left his job, wife and a 21-month-old son back in Arizona, had other ideas.

"There's no work" in Guatemala, he said. "As soon as I get there, I'll be heading back."

(Editing by Mohammad Zargham)

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