

WashingtonPost.com

In Morocco, a Gray Area for Growth

By Jim Hoagland
Sunday, February 19, 2006; B07

MARRAKECH, Morocco -- While French authorities tighten restrictions on Moroccan youths seeking work in France, Lahcen Daoudi encourages French elders to move here to work no more. A leader in Morocco's growing Islamic political movement, Daoudi has glimpsed an important change on the horizon for international affairs.

It is a reverse flow of immigration patterns, which in the second half of the 20th century streamed from south to north. Now a small but growing number of retirees and affluent second-home buyers from the industrial North are relocating to developing nations in the South. What Mexico is to more and more Americans, Morocco is to more and more Europeans.

That is, a hospitable *land* where retirees from abroad can find affordable housing and hire health care and residential workers at salaries that stretch euros and dollars much farther. Generous tax breaks are also available here. Rather than bringing Moroccan nurses and janitors to France, today's cross-border migration channels aging Frenchmen to ocher-tinted villas in Morocco.

Those same considerations are also drawing Europeans who can no longer afford a weekend house and staff in the French or Belgian countryside but who can buy or build here. Residents of Paris or Lyon take low-cost, frequent flights to make a door-to-door trip of four hours or so for a weekend in the North African countryside.

Francoise Smilenko, a French interior designer, goes such weekenders one better. Smilenko spends three weeks a month in Morocco and stays one week in Paris to set up projects she will complete and oversee from her home near Marrakech. Cross-border telecommuting "is essential to a life I could not have in Paris," she says.

This is still an elite phenomenon. Daoudi, foreign affairs spokesman for the opposition Justice and Development Party, estimates that 20,000 to 30,000 French retirees are permanent residents in this former French protectorate. That is a fraction of the tens of thousands of Americans reported to be retiring to Mexico each year.

"Demographics and globalization are changing immigration, too," Daoudi told me at his party's headquarters in Rabat. "Developed countries see their workforces aging together in a big demographic bulge. They do not have -- or do not want to import -- the workers needed to replace or care for their retirees."

Moroccan contractors are already building a large retirement home with medical facilities for foreigners here in the foothills of the snow-capped Atlas Mountains. A small apartment can be bought for \$100,000, a villa for five times that amount.

But why in the world does a leader of a party that bases its political program on Islam favor bringing entire communities of foreigners here during an era of rising cultural tensions between Muslims and the West? Well, everything is relative. Daoudi hinted that retirees are the lesser evil in the search for important foreign exchange and revenue earnings for Morocco's budget.

"Rather than this government's plan to bring 10 million foreign tourists a year, we favor programs to encourage 1 million retirees to settle here over the next 10 or 15 years, and have only 4 or 5 million tourists a year," he said.

"That would relieve pressures on Moroccans to go abroad to find work. It would bring people here who have much to contribute financially and intellectually to the country."

Which means, I concluded, the retirees will presumably not go topless on beaches, get drunk in bars or create other problems associated with mass tourism.

My visit coincided with the introduction of legislation in France clearly aimed at reducing the number of Arab and African immigrants living there. Moroccans do not hide their resentment at this perceived cultural rejection.

"If Europe and North America close their doors to immigration, the consequence will probably be the moving of businesses to where workers are," said Nouzha Chekrouni, the deputy minister for Moroccan emigres whose department oversees relations with the roughly 3 million Moroccans who live abroad. "Retirement services could be an important component of that," she added.

Increasingly the world's workers -- and young would-be-workers -- live in the Southern Hemisphere while Northern populations diminish or go gray. Half of Morocco's 33 million people are under 25. Since 1990 the country's population has grown by 6 million -- a total that represents about 40 percent of the population growth in that same period for the 25 European Union countries, which have 456 million inhabitants.

North-to-south immigration is a tiny wavelet of common sense in an angry, polarized sea of international troubles. But it is an instructive, intuitive response to the huge demographic challenges of the future that are usually neglected by governments beset by seemingly more urgent problems.