

Mexico, U.S. Announce Joint Campaign to Protect Undocumented Immigrants

by LADB Staff

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The US and Mexican governments have launched a campaign to increase protection for undocumented immigrants who cross from Mexico into US territory. In an informal agreement reached at a bilateral forum on immigration in San Diego in mid-January, officials said they would develop a joint strategy to protect undocumented immigrants and ease violence along the US-Mexico border.

Leading the Mexican delegation were deputy foreign relations secretary Juan Rebolledo Gout, deputy interior secretary Fernando Solis Camara, and deputy attorney general Eduardo Ibarrola Nicolin. The US delegation was led by Doris Meissner, director of the US Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), and deputy secretary of state Jack Leonard.

As part of the agreement, officials said they would develop a program to train local and federal law-enforcement and immigration officials on methods to reduce the incidence of violence against undocumented immigrants. The two sides said they also want to reduce violence against US Border Patrol officers, who have been the target of snipers shooting from the Mexican side of the border.

The increased tensions have in part resulted from the US government's decision to boost the number of immigration personnel at the US-Mexico border in recent years. As part of his 1996 budget, US President Bill Clinton allocated US\$400 million to hire 1,000 new Border Patrol agents and 350 border inspectors to enforce US immigration laws.

In the federal budget proposed for 2000, Clinton has asked for an increase of 10.2% in the INS budget, including US\$153 million to combat illegal immigration. The funds include hiring 700 new Border Patrol agents in Texas. Most Border Patrol agents and INS inspectors hired since 1996 have been placed near population centers in Texas, Arizona, and California.

The tighter security has forced many undocumented immigrants to seek alternate and more dangerous- routes to the US. In the first half of 1998, at least 118 Mexicans died from such causes as dehydration, hypothermia, drowning, and fatigue attempting to enter the US through the deserts of Arizona, southern California, and Texas, according to a report published by the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (see SourceMex, 08/12/98).

Effort also seeks to reduce deaths

Under the agreement signed in mid-January, the US and Mexico agreed to increase efforts to reduce undocumented- immigrant deaths. The US pledged to intensify its campaign to warn immigrants about the dangers of crossing isolated desert areas and to send rescue teams when necessary. The Mexican government has created special units known as Grupos Beta to warn would-be undocumented immigrants about the dangers of crossing into the US through remote areas.

The Clinton administration's recently implemented immigration policies also include quicker deportation of undocumented immigrants. The INS reports that an unprecedented 171,000 undocumented immigrants were deported in fiscal 1998, which ended in September, an increase of 50% from the previous year. Roughly 138,000 of the deported undocumented immigrants were Mexican nationals. The INS said deportation figures for fiscal 1998 do not include the estimated 1.5 million apprehensions and voluntary returns reported at border ports-of-entry.

Because of dire economic conditions for most of the Mexican population, the flow of undocumented immigrants to the US is expected to continue at a pace comparable to recent years. Projections released by the Consejo Nacional de Poblacion (CONAPO) indicate about 364,000 Mexicans will attempt to cross into US territory during 1999, compared with an estimated 358,000 this year.

The CONAPO study said a lack of job opportunities in Mexico is the principal reason so many Mexicans attempt to enter the US. Many Mexicans residing in the US, legally and illegally, send part of their earnings to relatives in Mexico. Statistics compiled by the Banco de Mexico (central bank) show the amount of money sent to relatives has increased gradually from US\$3.47 billion in 1995 to US\$4.22 billion in 1997 and to an estimated US\$5.3 billion in 1998.

The Los Angeles Times reports that Mexicans also account for the highest percentage of legal immigration every year. Citing INS statistics, the newspaper said roughly 18% of all legal immigrants are originally from Mexico, compared with 6.2% from the Philippines, 5.2% from China, and 4.8% each from Vietnam and India.

California governor pledges to protect immigrant rights

The CONAPO report, released in late January, said a large percentage of undocumented and legal immigrants from Mexico intend to go to California. During a visit to Mexico City in early February, California Gov. Gray Davis pledged to make every effort to ensure that state and local authorities respect the human and civil rights of undocumented immigrants in that state. Davis pledged to reverse the policies of his predecessor Pete Wilson, who alienated Mexico by pushing through Proposition 187, an initiative to cut services to undocumented immigrants (see SourceMex, 11/02/94).

The Dallas Morning News reported that about 2 million undocumented immigrants reside in California. "I have no power to change [immigration laws], but even if I were in a position to change them, I would not change them," Davis said. "I think people should enter the country legally." Still, the California governor emphasized his commitment to ensure that all immigrants, regardless of legal status, be treated "with dignity and respect." (Sources: San Antonio Express-News, 01/09/99; El Economista, 01/27/99; Notimex, 02/01/99, 02/02/99; Excelsior, 01/18/99, 02/01/99, 02/02/99, 02/03/99; Los Angeles Times, 01/24/99, 02/03/99; Novedades, 01/25/99, 02/02/99, 02/03/99; El Universal, 02/02/99, 02/03/99; The Dallas Morning News, La Jornada, The News, 02/03/99)

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