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Mexico Seeks Immigration Accord in Second Term of U.S. President Bush

by LADB Staff

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The Mexican government is pushing for immigration to remain a major focus of US-Mexico relations during US President George W. Bush's second term, but other issues are expected to surface during the next four years. Among those are the US push to secure its southern borders, Mexico's unpaid water debt to the US, and the lack of US compliance with trucking, sugar, and other provisions in the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). All these issues came to the forefront during a meeting of US and Mexican Cabinet officials in Mexico City in mid-November, but the immigration issue took center stage. "The time has come [for an immigration agreement]," Interior Secretary Santiago Creel said in the aftermath of Bush's re-election.

President Vicente Fox went one step further, inviting Bush to make a state visit to Mexico during 2005. The Mexican president said he emphasized the need for an immigration agreement during a telephone conversation with the US president shortly after the Nov. 2 election. "What I discussed with President Bush is the fact that the next years represent a window of opportunity, given that neither of our countries have presidential elections scheduled," Fox told reporters at a meeting among Latin American leaders.

The Bush administration is willing to accommodate Mexico on the immigration issue to some extent, but much will depend on what influence the US president can have on a reluctant US Congress. Several Cabinet officials, including outgoing US Secretary of State Colin Powell, emphasized the Bush administration's commitment to place a high priority on securing an immigration agreement. Still, Powell was cautious in describing the type of agreement that the two countries could reach in the next two years. "We don't want to overpromise," said Powell, who led the delegation of US Cabinet officials to the meeting with their Mexican counterparts.

Bush may revisit plan to offer temporary work visas

One likely scenario is a renewed push by the US president to allow several million undocumented workers to apply for temporary legal status. That plan was first presented at the beginning of 2004 (see SourceMex, 2004-01-14), but was put on the back burner because of the US congressional and presidential elections. "In light of the campaign and other things that were going on, we weren't able to engage the Congress on it," Powell told reporters. "But now that the election is behind us...the president intends to engage Congress on it."

Powell, viewed by some in Mexico as a strong advocate of an immigration agreement with Mexico, has tendered his resignation. There is some concern that Bush's nominee to replace Powell, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, may not give US relations with Mexico and Latin America as much priority. "So far, she has been known for her expertise in the Soviet Union and Europe and maybe the Middle East; certainly not Latin America," said Andres Rozental, president of the

Consejo Mexicano de Asuntos Internacionales and former deputy foreign relations secretary. "I would be fairly pessimistic in terms of anything new or exciting happening in Latin America."

Some analysts say Rice's support for an immigration agreement may not be as crucial because of the strong personal relationship between Fox and Bush. The ultimate test is whether Bush has enough muscle and allies in Congress to ensure approval of an agreement, especially with strong pockets of resistance in the US to an agreement. "I don't see anything in the Washington landscape that would indicate conditions are better than they were two or three years ago," said Gabriel Guerra Castellanos, a former diplomat and presidential spokesman and now a public-affairs consultant. "We're looking at status quo, basically."

Some groups that support limits on immigration say they may have the upper hand during the next four years. "The White House might be tempted to make a renewed push [for immigration reform]," said Mark Krikorian, director of the Center for Immigration Studies (CIS). "But if they do, they are not going to get anywhere because Congress appears to have moved in the restrictionist direction."

The anti-immigrant sentiment was also evident in the passage of Proposition 200 in Arizona on the same day that Bush won re-election. The initiative, promoted by several conservative groups in the state, requires Arizona residents to show identification cards to vote and receive social services. The measure brought back memories of California's Proposition 187, which also sought to impose limits on services for immigrants (see SourceMex, 1994-11-02).

The proposition was approved by California voters but later ruled illegal. Arizona's Proposition 200, although much less restrictive than the California measure, could also be subject to legal challenges. "The Mexican government regrets passage of this proposal and states its outright rejection of what is a measure designed to promote discrimination based on ethnic profiling and limit access to basic educational and health services," the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) said in a statement.

Still, the Bush administration may have gained enough allies in Congress to push the agreement on temporary visas. The earlier version attracted strong bipartisan support, with conservative Sen. Larry Craig (R-ID) and liberal Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-MA) as its main sponsors. Craig has already announced his intention to bring back the initiative in 2005. If this measure stalls again in Congress, the Bush administration is prepared to push through a less comprehensive plan called the AgJobs bill, which would make an estimated 500,000 undocumented farm workers eligible for legal status.

Fox, who leaves office in 2006, is confident that his relationship with Bush will result in some accord for Mexico. He has even offered to serve as a liaison between the US and other countries in the hemisphere on the immigration issue. "Several Latin American presidents have asked Mexico to try to strengthen the US government's relations with Latin American nations," Fox told participants at the recent Rio Group Summit in Brazil. "We're going to try to be the bridge so that relationship can become much closer than it was during the last three years."

Some political analysts cautioned the Fox government to remain flexible, given the political climate in the US. "It won't be a question of whether we accept it or not, but whether the United States takes the decision," said immigration expert Francisco Alba of the Colegio de Mexico. Agreement could

be limited by US security concerns Another factor that could limit an immigration agreement is the Bush government's push to tie any accord to efforts to secure the US borders.

In spelling out Bush's commitment to some easing of immigration restrictions, Powell also acknowledged the need for "innovative efforts" to improve security along the US-Mexico border to combat smuggling of undocumented immigrants, curb the flow of drugs into the US, and prevent "terrorists" from entering the US. "Mexico will continue to be a strong link in the US security efforts," said a panelist at a forum sponsored by the college of political and social sciences (Facultad de Ciencias Politicas y Sociales) at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM).

Some of the US security policies implemented in recent years have created strong resentments in Mexico, since they are viewed as a violation of the country's sovereignty. This controversy came to the forefront in early November, when Energy Secretary Fernando Elizondo stated that US troops had been called to help guard Mexican petroleum installations in the Gulf of Mexico against a possible attack.

Other administration officials denied the energy secretary's comments. "This is a false statement," said Gonzalo Dimas Altamirano, a spokesperson for the Secretaria de Gobernacion. Elizondo later retracted his statements, saying he may have been misunderstood. "There is tight security at the installations in the gulf, and there is some level of cooperation," said Elizondo. "But I did not intend to imply that US forces are guarding our territory, nor that our forces are guarding theirs."

The US government also denied that there were any plans to station US troops at Mexican oil-drilling platforms. "These are sovereign responsibilities and the United States is not going to intervene in any way with the sovereignty of the Mexican government," Powell said.

Food-safety issues come to the forefront

Another aspect of US security that has created a strong level of discomfort in Mexico is the US bioterrorism law, which imposes very tight restrictions on shipments of produce and other food products to the US. The law requires Mexican exporters to file extensive paperwork to allow US authorities to closely monitor the content and origin of their products (see SourceMex, 2003-12-10). More than 7,500 Mexican companies that export food products to the US are complying with the bioterrorism law, said the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The US law especially affects Mexican agricultural producers, which supply a large share of US agricultural imports.

Outbreaks of hepatitis A have twice been linked to imports of Mexican produce in the past eight years. In the first instance, tainted strawberries caused more than 100 school children in Michigan to become ill (see SourceMex, 1997-04-09). More recently, an outbreak of hepatitis A in four states was traced to imports of green onions from Baja California state (see SourceMex, 2003-12-10).

Some critics in Mexico are wondering why the Fox government has not imposed similar guidelines on food products imported from the US. This criticism was especially relevant in early November, when imports of contaminated baby formula were discovered in Mexico. The baby formula, contaminated with mud and flies, was shipped to 14 importers in seven Mexican states, said the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada. Milky Way Traders, a company based in El Paso, Texas,

which supplied the formula, said the product was intended only as animal feed and not for human consumption.

US and Mexican authorities, however, contend the company misled buyers into thinking that the product was safe for human consumption. The Texas attorney general's office has obtained a restraining order halting the company from distributing its products south of the border. The case has prompted the Mexican Congress to call for tighter scrutiny and more accurate labeling of food imports, especially dairy, meat, and poultry products. "It is necessary that the Secretaria de Economia (SE) create norms governing food imports," said Deputy Rafael Candelas, a member of the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD). "Many products are sold in our country as milk or ham, when they are really manufactured with substitute ingredients."

While the immigration and security issues are taking center stage in the bilateral agenda, other issues such as Mexico's water debt were also discussed at the recent meeting of Cabinet officials. The Fox administration acknowledged that Mexico is still behind in its obligations to send water to Texas under a 1944 treaty, causing strong frictions with farmers in that state (see SourceMex, 2001-06-27, 2003-07-16 and 2004-09-01).

At the same time, officials from the Comision Nacional de Agua (CNA) said the debt has been cut in half since 2000. The CNA predicted that Mexico would be able to retire that debt "in the next few years," if the recent rainy patterns continue in northern Mexico.

Mexican trade disagreements regarding truck access and restrictions on tuna and sugar imports were also discussed at the bilateral meeting, but seemed to take a back seat to other issues. US restrictions have created roadblocks to Mexican sugar and tuna imports and prevented Mexican truck drivers from operating in the US (see SourceMex, 2001-08-15 and 2004-06-09). Economy Secretary Fernando Canales Clariond went as far as to call these issues "minor" disagreements in the overall scheme of US-Mexico trade relations. "This doesn't mean that we don't have to find a solution to these problems," said Canales. (Sources: Agence France-Presse, 10/24/04, 11/02/04; San Antonio Express-News, 11/05/04; El Financiero, Spanish news service EFE, Reuters, 11/08/04; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 11/04/04, 11/09/04; La Crisis, 11/08/04, 11/09/04; United Press International, 11/04/04, 11/10/04; Associated Press, 11/06-08/04, 11/10/04; The New York Times, La Cronica de Hoy, 11/08-10/04; The Miami Herald, The Washington Post, Copley News Service, 11/10/04; Notimex, 11/03/04, 11/07-11/04; The Herald-Mexico City, 11/04/04, 11/05/04, 11/10/04, 11/11/04; La Jornada, 11/04/04, 11/08-11/04, 11/16/04; Los Angeles Times, 11/06/04, 11/10/04, 11/16/04; Unomasuno, 11/09/04, 11/16/04; The Dallas Morning News, 11/04/04, 11/10/04, 11/17/04; El Universal, 11/08-12/04, 11/17/04)

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