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LADB Staff

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Fox, Bush Discuss Immigration; Prospects Uncertain for Major Reforms

by LADB Staff

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US immigration-reform proposals were a central point of bilateral discussions between Presidents Vicente Fox of Mexico and George W. Bush at the recent Group of Eight (G-8) summit in St. Petersburg, Russia, in mid-July. Mexico was invited to the summit as an observer. There was confusion regarding the content of a conversation between Fox and Bush.

In a statement to reporters on July 17, Fox said he was informed by the US president that approval of immigration reforms would be almost impossible this year because of a lack of time. "[Bush] pointed out that this period is very short, there are only two or three weeks before Congress members go on the election campaign," Fox said in a radio interview while on a flight from St. Petersburg to Madrid.

Later, a US administration spokesman denied that Bush had made that pessimistic assessment. The Mexican president was flying to Madrid attend a two-day Iberoamerican meeting on migration and development hosted by Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero.

At the summit, he also took the opportunity to push for a comprehensive US immigration reform plan. "Migration must stop being considered as nothing more than an issue of security," Fox added. "We must drop the fear which stops us from recognizing migration as a factor of development," Fox said at the summit.

The approval of reforms is complicated by the wide divergence between the versions approved by the House in late 2005 and one passed by the Senate in May of this year. The House bill proposed to criminalize illegal immigration and placed a greater emphasis on securing the US border with Mexico (see SourceMex, 2006-01-11).

The Senate version is considered more "immigrant-friendly" because it eliminates the criminalization provision and contains a proposal for guest workers and legalization of some undocumented immigrants, provisions that were lacking in the House version (see SourceMex, 2006-05-31).

The Senate proposal does toughen border enforcement, including construction of new fences along the US-Mexico border. The two bills have not gone to a conference committee because of diverging philosophies among Republicans in the House and Senate. A solid group of House Republicans has formed strongly in opposition to elements of the Senate bill such as amnesty, which they say rewards people who broke US laws. "We have to protect America," House Speaker Dennis Hastert said during a tour of the US-Mexico border region in mid-July. "We don't think the Senate bill...is the right thing to do."

In his radio interview en route to Madrid, Fox said "the chance of the immigration issue reaching approval in the House of Representatives and reaching joint approval isn't very high." Fox's comments raised concerns both in Mexico and the US, forcing the two governments to go into spin mode. A day after he made the comments, the Mexican president said there was still hope for an immigration accord this year. He told reporters that President Bush conveyed to him "his firm commitment and conviction" that immigration reform will be approved before the end of the year.

But skeptics said Fox will not be able to deliver on his electoral promise to press the US to implement a comprehensive immigration reform plan with the US before his term concludes in December. Among other things, Fox pledged to push for a guest-worker program similar to the one proposed by Bush and the Senate six years ago (see SourceMex, 2000-11-08). "[US politicians] are already immersed in the upcoming elections," said Rufino Dominguez director of the California-based Frente Internacional de Organizaciones Binacionales.

The White House also issued a statement to attempt to set the record straight regarding Fox's comments on the radio interview. "Look, I'm going to clarify, because I asked the president about this," presidential spokesman Tony Snow told reporters. "He did not tell the president of Mexico that there was no chance that this was going to be passed before the elections. The president of Mexico may have misheard."

Bush would like legislation before US congressional election

Regardless of what Bush actually told Fox, or how it was understood, there is urgency among some Republicans to approve some sort of immigration-reform plan before the election. The differences between the two bills, however, have left immigration reform at an impasse ahead of the congressional elections. There is some concern among Republicans that the conflict might hurt Republicans among some voters.

While many Republicans who staunchly oppose reforms represent fairly conservative districts, some US public-opinion polls show that the US electorate may be ready to embrace an overhaul of US immigration policy. For example, a bipartisan poll conducted by the Tarrance Group, a Republican polling firm, and Democratic pollster Lake Research Partners, showed that more than 70% of respondents supported the immigration-reform plan approved by the Senate in May.

"There is solid support from three-quarters of the American people for a comprehensive immigration reform bill this year, and what's remarkable is that House Republican leaders have opted for a strategy of attacking a comprehensive immigration-reform package passed by the Senate," said Frank Sharry, director of the National Immigration Forum, a Washington-based group that favors more liberal immigration policies, in an interview with the San Francisco Examiner. "They seem to be doing so as a means of riling up their base that might otherwise stay home on election day in November."

"The Senate's comprehensive approach that has been maligned in the House was awfully popular with the rank-and-file Republican voters in our survey," said pollster Brian Nienaber of the

Tarrance Group. Nienaber said Republican leaders should be concerned that they are coming to be viewed as anti-immigrant and may alienate the nation's growing bloc of Latino voters. "If we as a party have this group walk away from us, it's a troublesome sign for 2006," Nienaber said.

Two Republican legislators propose compromise

The impasse on immigration reform has prompted two Republican legislators to propose an eleventh-hour compromise to try to bridge the gap between House and Senate versions of immigration reform. The proposal, presented by Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-TX) and Rep. Mike Pence (R-IN) on July 25, would take on some of the border-security measures proposed in the House version of the bill, but also opens the door for an eventual implementation of a guest-worker program. "We're concerned that there's not enough dialogue between the two houses to try to ... start the discussion," said Hutchison, who described the proposal as an attempt to combine the priorities of both chambers.

Hutchison and Pence emphasized that their proposal tackles the US security concerns first and the immigration question later. As part of the proposal, none of the immigration-reform provisions would go into effect until the president certifies that US borders are "secure." The proposal incorporates tougher provisions on the immigration question than those approved by the Senate. For example, the plan would require undocumented immigrants to return to their home countries to apply for a temporary-worker visa program administered by US employment agencies based abroad. After 17 years as guest workers, they could apply for legal permanent residence and eventual citizenship.

Support from Democrats and moderate Republicans is unlikely because of the stringent immigration requirements. Sen. Harry Reid, D-NV, who heads the Democratic delegation in the upper house, suggested the plan would do little to move stalled talks along. "It's to misdirect and divide and divert attention from what we're doing." Conservative commentator Fred Barnes, however, said Hutchison and Pence might be able to get many Democrats on board their proposal if they convince Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-MA, to back the measure.

Kennedy helped broker the Senate version of immigration reform that was approved in May. "If he looks favorably on the proposal, then it has a chance of winning Democratic votes in the Senate," said Barnes. "And it's likely to need them." Kennedy initially said he disagreed with the Hutchison-Pence plan, but commended the two legislators for proposing a compromise. Conversely, several Republicans have said they will not accept provisions that offer amnesty in any form to undocumented immigrants. "Having employers which have already broken the law determine the number of cheap foreign workers that will be admitted into the US is a classic example of the fox guarding the henhouse," said Rep. Tom Tancredo, R-CO, who has led the fight against immigration reform in the House.

The Hutchison-Pence plan was announced as proponents of the House and Senate bills attempted to gain support for their proposals at hearings around the country. House Republican leaders said their campaign intends to expose "troubling provisions" in the Senate bill. House Majority Leader, Rep. John Boehner, R-OH, noted that recent forums in San Diego and Laredo, Texas, focused on security threats created by lax enforcement of immigration laws. "They've put us in a stronger

position to craft a responsible bill that secures our borders and strictly enforces our immigration laws," Boehner said of the gatherings.

The Senate countered by scheduling hearings in Philadelphia and Miami to highlight the contributions of legal and undocumented immigrants to the US economy. Future sessions are scheduled for cities in Florida, Colorado, Arizona and Texas. Some observers noted that the time factor cannot be underestimated. "Congress will be in recess for most of August and October," said Barnes. "That leaves only September for debate and enactment if it is to pass by the midterm election on November." (Sources: Excelsior, Notimex, Agencia de noticias Proceso, 07/18/06; La Cronica de Hoy, Reforma, 07/18/06, 07/19/06; Milenio Diario, El Universal, 07/19/06; El Financiero, 07/18/06, 07/19/06, 07/20/06; La Jornada, 07/18/06, 07/19/06, 07/21/06; Associated Press, 07/21/06, 07/22/06; The New York Times, 07/24/06; Reuters, 07/17/06, 07/25/06; San Antonio Express-News, The Daily Standard, The Washington Post, 07/25/06; Los Angeles Times, 07/13/06, 07/14/06, 07/26/06; The San Francisco Examiner, The Dallas Morning News, 07/26/06)

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