

10-11-2006

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## **U.S. Senate Approves 700-Mile Wall Along U.S.-Mexico Border**

*by LADB Staff*

*Category/Department: Mexico*

*Published: 2006-10-11*

In late September, the US Senate overwhelmingly approved a plan to extend a fence along 700 miles of the US-Mexico border. In voting 80-19 to approve the Secure Fence Act, the Senate essentially ratified legislation approved by the House, H.R. 6061, which directs the US Department of Homeland Security to install a two-layered wall along five areas of the US-Mexico border, along with access roads, lighting, cameras, and sensors.

The Senate also approved a separate \$34.8 billion homeland security spending bill, which contained US\$21.3 billion for border security. Of that total, US\$1.2 billion is to be devoted for the border fence and associated barriers and surveillance systems.

The legislation approved by the House and Senate deals only with security measures and does not address other issues supported by some advocates of immigration reform, such as a guest-worker program and the legalization of millions of undocumented immigrants (see SourceMex, 2006-03-08, 2006-05-31, and 2006-08-30).

Under the recently approved measure, the secretary of homeland security would have 18 months to achieve "operational control" of the US-Mexico border, using unmanned aerial vehicles, ground-based sensors, satellites, radar and cameras to prevent all unlawful US entries.

The legislation authorizes the construction of at least two layers of reinforced fencing around the border town of Tecate, CA, and a huge expanse stretching from Calexico, CA, to Douglas, AZ, which would virtually cover the entire Arizona border with Baja California and Sonora. A third segment would extend across the southern portion of the New Mexico border with Chihuahua.

Two sections are planned for Texas, one from Del Rio to Eagle Pass, and a second from Laredo to Brownsville. Some US Senators acknowledged, however, that the fence may take longer than 18 months to erect. "It's one thing to authorize," said Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX). "It's another thing to actually appropriate the money and do it."

"There also are questions of whether the fence will be more of a symbol to be used in elections than a reality along the border," said The Washington Post. "For one thing, shortly before Congress adjourned, the House and Senate gave the Bush administration leeway to distribute the money allocated for the fence to other projects, including roads, technology and other infrastructure items to support the Department of Homeland Security's preferred option of building a 'virtual fence.'

### ***Mexican government strongly criticizes decision***

The Mexican government immediately condemned the congressional decision via a diplomatic note, which said the wall would hurt relations between the two countries. President Vicente Fox's

administration also urged US President George W. Bush to veto the measure. The US president had not acted on the bill as of mid-October, but said he was planning to sign the measure into law.

President-elect Felipe Calderon, who takes office on Dec. 1, also condemned the plan during a trip to Central and South America. Several regional leaders joined Calderon in denouncing the wall (see NotiCen, 2006-10-12). "I think it is a deplorable decision that has been made by the United States Congress for the construction of this wall, and it does not solve our common problem, which is emigration," Calderon told a news conference in Santiago, Chile.

Mexican Economy Minister Sergio Garcia de Alba warned that the wall could disrupt trade between the two countries and lead to a shortage of farm laborers in the US. "Any worry should be bilateral," Garcia said. Mexico's Foreign Relations Secretary Luis Ernesto Derbez, speaking during a European tour, raised the possibility that Mexico might bring the issue to the UN or to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in The Hague. "This is an unfortunate decision that has more to do with short-term political considerations," said Derbez in reference to the upcoming US congressional elections in November.

House Republican leaders pushed hard for the bill, partly to meet their pledges to take a tougher stance on illegal immigration. President Vicente Fox's administration later ruled out the option of bringing the case to the UN or the ICJ, suggesting that this was a bilateral dispute between Mexico and the US and not a matter for an international forum. Presidential spokesperson Ruben Aguilar said he expected a comprehensive immigration bill to be approved eventually, which would eliminate the need for the wall.

Some immigrant-rights advocates agree that Mexico has little leverage to stop the wall. Long-time border and emigration expert Jorge Bustamante, a Mexican citizen who holds the post of special advocate for human rights at the UN, said the US has the sovereign right to erect the wall. Conversely, Bustamante said the decision to erect the wall represents a "hostile" action against Mexico and other countries.

"The US is treating Mexico as an enemy," said Bustamante, a candidate for the Nobel Peace Prize and former president of the Colegio de la Frontera Norte. Still, the Mexican Chamber of Deputies and the Senate insist that this is a matter that should be brought to the international community. "[The decision to erect a wall] runs counter to the principle of protection of human rights, the spirit of justice, of international law, of friendship, and of cooperation among countries to resolve common problems, all of which are values promoted by the United Nations," the Senate said in a resolution.

The wall has acted as a unifying force for a divided Mexican Congress. Resolutions in both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate have received unanimous approval, as the center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD), the Partido del Trabajo (PT), and the Partido Convergencia por la Democracia (PCD), have set aside their differences with the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) and the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) to form a united front to condemn the wall. A resolution approved in the lower house urges US President Bush to veto the bill. The resolution also proposed that Mexico and the US enter into closer cooperation on migration issues.

### *Critics say wall won't stop migrants*

Even if the wall is constructed, many critics say immigrants and smugglers will find other ways to cross into the US, such as boats and tunnels. Currently, immigrant smugglers seldom use these two methods, which are popular among drug traffickers. "When migrants are determined to cross, they find a way to jump the fences," said Guillermo Alonzo, a migration expert at the Tijuana-based Colegio de La Frontera Norte. "Walls don't stop anything."

Some immigrant-rights advocates are concerned that the wall could greatly increase the number of deaths, as undocumented immigrants seek other, more dangerous routes to cross into the US. Almost 2,000 migrants died between 2001 and 2006 while trying to sneak into the United States, said El Colegio de la Frontera Norte. Other critics noted that roughly one-half of the 12 million undocumented immigrants in the US entered the country on bona-fide visas and stayed after they expired. (Sources: The New York Times, 09/30/06; The Houston Chronicle, 10/03/06; The Rio Grande Guardian, 10/04/06; El Financiero, La Cronica de Hoy, 10/05/06; El Economista, 10/06/06; The Herald-Mexico City, 10/09/06; The Washington Post, 09/30/06, 10/10/06; Associated Press, 10/01/06, 10/05/06, 10/07/06, 10/10/06; Reuters, 10/02/06, 10/10/06; Milenio Diario, 10/06/06, 10/10/06; El Universal, Associated Press, Bloomberg news service, 10/10/06)

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