8-27-2008

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Carlos Navarro

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Border Governors Address Violence, Avoid Immigration Controversies

by Carlos Navarro
Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2008-08-27

In a gathering that appeared very much orchestrated and free of controversy, the governors of six Mexican states and four US states met in Hollywood, California, on Aug. 13-15 to discuss concerns and search for solutions to common problems such as increased violence, trade, and the environment. Unlike previous gatherings, immigration was not a prominent topic of public discourse, although it is possible that disagreements were aired behind closed doors during private meetings and worktables. Instead, the governors discussed their success in forging closer ties, resulting in the creation of a single entity to lobby the federal governments of Mexico and the US.

A major focus of the conference was environmental sustainability for the US-Mexico border, an issue that California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has championed for most of the five years he has participated in the annual gathering of chief executives (see separate article in this issue of SourceMex).

Governors strengthen ties with federal governments

Almost all the governors referred to the increased cooperation among the chief executives, which they said was necessary to ensure that the needs of the citizens of the 10 states were met. Present at the meeting were the chief executives from the Mexican states of Baja California, Sonora, Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon, and Tamaulipas. The governors of the US states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas joined them.

In his opening remarks, Schwarzenegger described the border as a "line that unites us, not divides us." And the governors from both sides of the border paid lip service to that perspective in public comments. "Everything that we address is no doubt important, from the environment and green economies to weapons smuggling," Sonora Gov. Eduardo Bours Castelo said in his closing statement. "But the most relevant result [of this gathering] was the political will that we 10 governors demonstrated to understand each other better. Where many see threats, we see opportunities."

One point that many governors mentioned in their speeches was that the 10 states together form the third-largest economic entity in the world. To underscore the importance of the border economy, the governors announced that they had created a special advisory council to deal specifically with economic matters affecting the border region.

The council, which is likely to comprise members of the public and private sectors, is scheduled to meet at least once a year. It will issue recommendations on development and economic growth to the 10 governors. "It is encouraging to hear about the creation of this council," said Mexico's Interior Secretary Juan Camilo Mourino, one of several Mexican Cabinet officials who attended the
conference. "From this forum we can start to address the contrast that exists between the north and the south."

Other Mexican Cabinet officials who participated in the conference were Environment Secretary Juan Elvira Quesada and Health Secretary Jose Angel Cordova. US Cabinet officials included Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff and Interior Secretary Dick Kempthorne.

The presence of the federal officials provided the governors the opportunity to boast about their new effort to present a united front to the US and Mexican federal governments. Delegations from both sides of the border traveled to Washington in February to meet with US President George W. Bush. That trip was followed with a visit with President Felipe Calderon in Mexico City in March. "We lay the groundwork for a safer, even more prosperous border," said Nuevo Leon Gov. Natividad Gonzalez Paras. "Our main purpose is to work together on a plan for the medium and long term."

Several governors cited instances where cooperation was useful during natural disasters, including the joint response by local, state, and federal authorities from both sides of the border to flooding and other problems along the Texas-Tamaulipas border after Hurricane Dolly in July of this year. "The quality of the response is a good indicator of the degree by which we have achieved a level of cooperation," said Chertoff.

Chertoff said the close relationship among the border states made it easier for Mexican states and the federal government to offer assistance in fighting wildfires in Southern California in 2007. "It was a magnificent demonstration of the degree of friendship and the fact that good neighbors always work to help each other in a time of crisis," he said.

**Border delays remain major concern**

Governors of both countries, along with federal officials, raised concerns about the logjams that have developed at busy US entry ports along the border. At some locations, commercial trucks have waited as long as four hours to cross into the US. Passenger vehicles often face two-hour delays. "We see as a high priority developing new infrastructure at border crossings," said Baja California Gov. Jose Guadalupe Osuna Millan. "The long waiting times have very high economic and environmental costs, in addition to the personal inconveniences [they cause to people who want to cross into the US]."

Mourino said there was no reason why traffic could not be expedited with the technological advances that have occurred in recent years. "We have to find ways to ensure that bilateral trade remains safe and efficient," said the Mexican interior secretary.

Schwarzenegger said the Department of Homeland Security was willing to consider a partnership with private companies to develop new points of entry along the border, which would help ease some of the logjams. A toll would be charged at these new entry points, which would be used to repay construction bonds. "Everyone agrees that we need to expand the pipe...which means that we can get more people across quicker, more efficiently," Schwarzenegger said at a news conference.
Public discussion of border wall, immigration largely absent

Even as the governors were congratulating themselves on forging an effective coalition to address their common concerns, the divisive issue of immigration was largely absent from the public discourse. It is very likely some discussions took place in private meetings among the governors and in the security worktables, but none of this was aired to the media or to the public present at the opening and closing plenary sessions.

Mourino made a passing reference to immigration during his address to the governors, in which he called for the governments to "put a human face" on the decisions that affect the border region. "We cannot exclude from the debate the labor and immigration issues," he said. "These issues must be addressed in a comprehensive manner that views North America as a single integrated commercial unit, promoting greater levels of economic, social, and cultural cooperation."

And Coahuila Gov. Humberto Moreira Valdes, in his closing comments, spoke about the poverty that leads many Mexicans to emigrate to the US. He said there are many families in Mexico that lack the basic necessities like water and electricity. "For the border governors, this is a very important issue, which we are discussing in all our worktables," he said. Mourino met in private with Chertoff before the conference to discuss issues of mutual concern to the two federal governments. But neither official said whether immigration was one of the issues discussed.

And while the Mexican official made the passing reference to immigration during his address to the governors, Chertoff left it out of his speech entirely. The absence of public dialogue on immigration is a stark contrast to recent gatherings of the border governors, where it was a major topic of discussion. Just two years ago at the Border Governors Conference in Austin, Texas, several Mexican governors and federal officials used the forum to criticize the US government's decision to construct a barrier across several hundred miles along the US-Mexico border (see SourceMex, 2006-08-30). At the Austin conference, Chertoff was also forced to defend other Bush administration policies that would have an adverse impact on immigration, such as the decision to deploy National Guard personnel to the region.

Unlike the 2006 gathering, the Mexican governors refrained from criticizing the wall or other US immigration policies. The US government began limited construction of the wall in 2007 (see SourceMex, 2007-10-10). But the effort faces strong opposition from US environmental groups and local officials along the US border. The Texas Border Coalition (TBC), comprising local officials and business leaders in southern Texas, recently filed a class action lawsuit to halt construction (see SourceMex, 2008-04-23).

While there was no public discussion on the treatment of undocumented immigrants who attempt to cross the border willingly, there was a special panel discussion on the very much underpublicized problem of human trafficking. The problem primarily affects minors, who are smuggled into the US to work as sex slaves or to work for little or no pay.

"We are in the midst of a human-trafficking epidemic," said California first lady Maria Shriver, who moderated the panel. "And one of the problems is that people do not want to talk about this nor do
they want to understand it." Recent studies show that the number of undocumented immigrants who are minors has increased significantly in the past few years. Often these minors cross on their own, seeking to reunite with parents. But in many cases, they are victims of human trafficking (see SourceMex, 2005-06-08).

Actress Julia Ormond, one of the members of the panel, said roughly 70% of the victims of human trafficking are women and children. In many cases, minors are lured to the US with promises of jobs, marriage, or the opportunity to reunite with relatives. There also are instances where parents desperate for money sell their children into servitude for a few thousand dollars.

The state of Sonora, which has conducted a study on this issue, uncovered a case where a minor was sold for US$US10,000, said first lady Lourdes Laborin de Bours. The reality, said Ormond, is that few people are being sold for a high price because of the growing world population and the explosion of poverty.

"You can buy an adult for about US$300," said Ormond, a leading figure in the global fight against human trafficking. The panel did not estimate how many Mexican nationals are victims of human trafficking, but Ormond said there at least 27 million human slaves across the globe today. As many 820,000 individuals are trafficked across international borders each year, said a recent study from the US State Department.

Discussions focus on drug trafficking, violence

Instead of discussing immigration, Chertoff, Mourino, and the governors focused on cooperative efforts to curb drug-related violence, which has exploded in border communities as well as in the interior since President Calderon launched an intensive campaign against the powerful drug cartels that operate in Mexico (see SourceMex, 2007-01-24 and 2007-05-30).

"We must aspire to the goal of making the Mexico-US border one of the safest regions in the world," said the interior secretary. He emphasized that the effort should not fall entirely on the shoulders of the US and Mexican federal governments, but should be conducted in cooperation with state and municipal authorities.

Both federal officials said the border cannot prosper in a climate of violence. "Security is a prerequisite for development," said Mourino. "We all recognize that managing the border is not just about security but about fostering long-standing trade relationships," said Chertoff. He said the Bush administration and the US Congress had committed funds through Plan Merida to help Mexico fight insecurity in border regions and in the interior of the country. Under the initiative, the US government committed US$1.6 billion for drug-interdiction efforts for Mexico and Central American countries between 2008 and 2010 (see SourceMex, 2007-10-17, 2008-06-11 and 2008-07-11).

"This effort will buttress an already strong foundation of collaboration in successful programs like the operation against smugglers initiative on safety and security called Oasis, and the border enforcement security task forces, which work cooperatively with domestic and foreign law-
enforcement counterparts to dismantle criminal organizations operating near the border," said Chertoff.

The US official said 10 integrated teams are already working at several border points, including Imperial Valley, California, and the Phoenix area. "It is through these kinds of efforts, which include a significant amount of information-sharing, that we've been able to achieve major successes over the last year," said Chertoff.

Chertoff said the easy exchange of information provided valuable intelligence to the Mexican Navy, which led to the capture of a Colombian drug-smuggling submarine in Mexican waters this summer (see SourceMex, 2008-07-30). Mexican governors also raised concerns about the high level of insecurity along the US-Mexican border, calling for an integrated approach. "Organized crime has never been as strong a concern as it is now," said Nuevo Leon Gov. Natividad Gonzalez Paras, who will host the 2009 Border Governors Conference in Monterrey.

Gonzalez Paras called for a truly international effort to address drug trafficking, which crosses several borders from South America to Mexico to the US. "We see this as a top priority," he said. For Mexican officials, the increased cooperation has meant a greater commitment by the US government to curb the smuggling of high-caliber weapons into Mexico, which has contributed significantly to violence.

Until recently, Mexico had a difficult time convincing the US to act to stop weapons smuggling from US border states, particularly Texas and Arizona, into Mexico (see SourceMex, 2007-11-28). The US government has already taken some steps to stop the flow of weapons (see SourceMex, 2008-03-05), but Schwarzenegger reiterated the commitment of the border governors to tighten restrictions even more. "We have been working with the governments of both countries to track down the flow of illegal weapons," said the California governor. This story was supplemented with information from the following sources: Cox News Service, 08/14/08; El Universal, Reforma, Notimex, Spanish news service EFE, 08/15/08; Los Angeles Times, 08/16/08

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