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Immigration Reforms Top Discussions At Summit Of U.S. And Mexican Legislators In Seattle

by LADB Staff

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US and Mexican legislators used their annual summit to address ongoing bilateral issues such as immigration reform, arms trafficking, and the environment and new topics such as the recent outbreak of the H1N1 virus in Mexico. The summit, which has been held for the past 48 years, took place in Seattle during the first weekend in June. For Mexico, the most significant outcome was a commitment from the US delegation to push for comprehensive immigration reform. The two sides also agreed to create a special commission to follow up on funds disbursed by the US Congress to Mexico through Plan Merida.

US delegation pledges to push for immigration reforms

The US delegation backed its pledge to push for comprehensive reform by telling Mexican counterparts that key Democrats and Republicans from the US House of Representatives and Senate, as well as members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, were planning to meet on June 17 with US President Barack Obama in the White House to discuss strategy on this issue. Efforts to push through immigration reform stalled during the administration of US President George W. Bush, even though the Senate crafted immigration legislation in 2007 (SourceMex, May 23, 2007) Obama's election and obtaining Democratic majorities in both houses of the US Congress in 2008 raised hopes that the stalled immigration-reform efforts could get back on track (SourceMex, January 21, 2009).

Rep. Ed Pastor (D-AZ), who led the US delegation in Seattle, said Democratic legislators have put together a package of proposals to bring to Obama that continues efforts to secure the US-Mexico border but also seeks provisions to allow guest workers for certain US industries and offers opportunities for undocumented immigrants in the US to gain legal status. "We hope that the 12 million undocumented immigrants who are already in the country can become legal," Pastor said. The Arizona legislator also suggested that any new immigration legislation would seek to avoid the mistakes of the 1940s Bracero program, which gave Mexican workers jobs in the agriculture sector but did not offer legal and labor rights. Any worker allowed entry to the US under a guest-worker program will have access to unions and legal representation, said Pastor.

Pastor said another element of the immigration proposal that will be brought up to Obama contemplates changing the structure of visas to minimize separation of families. Mexican legislators also discussed family separations during private immigration discussions with US counterparts. In particular, there was concern about the children of expatriates who are deported back to Mexico. In most cases, the children have the right to remain in the US because they are US citizens. "There are about 130,000 children who have been abandoned because of deportations," said Deputy Edmundo Ramirez, a member of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). "This is despite the fact that these minors were born in US territory."

Bilateral legislative commission to track effect of Plan Merida

In addition to immigration, participants in the interparliamentary summit discussed security proposals, including new oversight mechanisms for Plan Merida. The plan was conceived during the Bush administration to help Mexico with its efforts to fight increasingly violent drug-trafficking organizations (SourceMex, November 28, 2007 and May 21, 2008). PRI Sen. Rosario Green said an important outcome of the discussions was commitment by the two sides to create a bipartisan commission to examine the effectiveness of the program and whether the funds have been used for the right purposes. "It is our intention to maintain communication and evaluate the impact of this financial assistance provided by the US government to fight crime," said Green, who once led the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE). US legislators said they would continue to support and enhance efforts by the Obama administration to control the illegal exports of weapons into Mexico.

In April of this year, Obama announced a border-security initiative that includes new controls near the US-Mexico border to prevent smuggling high-caliber weapons into Mexico (SourceMex, April 01, 2009). Legislators also discussed creating mechanisms to keep the lines of communications open for a wide range of bilateral issues, especially in cases such as the recent outbreak of the H1N1 virus, also known as swine flu, in Mexico. The outbreak paralyzed the Mexican economy for several days and caused alarm around the world (SourceMex, April 29, 2009 and May 20, 2009).

Legislators from both countries praised the Calderon administration for its quick actions in the aftermath of the H1N1 outbreak. Although the number of new cases of H1N1 infections has dropped significantly in Mexico, legislators cited the need for both the Mexican and US governments to remain vigilant, especially when the flu season returns to North America during the winter months. The World Health Organization (WHO) continues to monitor the situation and is still considering declaring the outbreak a pandemic. "Both countries have to remain alert and not let their guard down because of the possibility that we could have a pandemic," Sen. Gustavo Madero, a member of the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) and leader of the Mexican delegation to the Seattle meetings. Other legislators raised the need for the legislative branches in the two countries to keep in contact about H1N1 and other important bilateral issues like trade and environmental protection. "Two days of meetings are not sufficient to address all the issues that are important to Mexico and the US," said PAN Sen. Luis Alberto Villarreal.

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