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Canada Implements Visa Requirement For All Mexican Visitors

by LADB Staff

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Canada ruffled feathers in Mexico when it decided to require a visa for any Mexican traveling to that country, effective immediately. The Canadian government imposed the requirement on travelers from Mexico and the Czech Republic because of a surge in the number of citizens from the two countries who had requested refugee status in the past few years. There was immediate pressure from some quarters for President Felipe Calderon's administration to respond in kind, but others in Mexico, especially the tourism industry, warned against steps that would curb the number of Canadian visitors to Mexico.

Canada trying to stem increase in refugee requests

Canada announced its decision to require visas for Mexican and Czech travelers on July 13, although Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper had discussed this possibility with the Calderon administration as far back as November 2008. The Canadian Foreign Affairs Ministry informed Mexican and Czech officials of its decision a few days before the new regulations were put in place. Mexican officials said they immediately expressed their opposition to the Canadian government. "We disagreed with this measure," Mexican Foreign Affairs Secretary Patricia Espinosa told reporters. The move would affect tens of thousands of Mexicans who travel to Canada each year.

Mexico's Confederacion Nacional Turistica (CNT) estimates that more than 266,000 Mexicans visited Canada in 2008, an increase of almost 8% from 2007. "We don't want people with legitimate reasons to visit our country to be affected in a negative manner," said a Canadian official who promised a smooth implementation of the new rules. The visa is required not only for Mexican travelers whose final destination is Canada but also for those who pass through Canada on the way to another country. Canadian officials defended the new visa requirements as necessary to keep requests for refugee status from Mexican and Czech citizens under control.

Canadian Immigration Minister John Kenney said the number of asylum requests from Mexicans has tripled since 2005, with 9,400 applications presented in 2008. Only one-tenth of the applications were accepted. "There has been an increase in the number of immigrants who arrive in Canada looking for refugee status," said Canadian Foreign Minister Lawrence Cannon. "The number has been above the level that is acceptable." But critics said the Canadian government took the easy way out in addressing the problem. "There has been a lot of attention on the increase in the number of Mexicans requesting refugee status," social researchers Carlo Dade and Olga Abizaid of the Ottawa-based Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL) said in a guest column in the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma. "But the root of the problem was more the result of a lack of resources devoted to addressing such an increase."

Mexico fails to obtain delay in implementing new rule

The new requirements created a stir in the Mexican Congress, but legislators stopped short of asking for parallel actions against Canada. Leaders of the three parties in Congress said the regulations "leave a bad taste in one's mouth" and run counter to integration efforts in the hemisphere since the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect about 15 years ago. "This is a step backward," said Sen. Gustavo Madero, floor leader for the governing Partido Accion Nacional (PAN) in the upper house. "This occurs just when we were making good strides toward regional integration." Mexican legislators asked the joint committee (Comision Permanente), comprising members of the Chamber of Deputies and Senate, to issue a statement requesting that the Secretaria de Relaciones Exteriores (SRE) respond to the situation by seeking modification or a delay in the implementation of the requirement.

One proposal sent to Calderon was that his administration seek a 45-day delay in the implementation to allow Mexican citizens to adjust to the measure. The SRE presented this proposal to Canada, but the Canadian government declined to delay the effective date of the visa requirement. Some opposition legislators took the opportunity to question the Calderon administration's foreign policies. "One has to ask whether the federal government, and in particular the SRE, is following an effective international policy and whether our relations with other countries are effective," said Deputy Manlio Fabio Beltrones, coordinator of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in the Senate.

Mexican tourism sector opposes direct retaliation

Some suggested that Mexico retaliate by imposing similar visa requirements on Canadian visitors to Mexico. And even Canadian officials said they would understand if Mexico took such action. "Canada would respect any decision by Mexico to impose reciprocal restrictions," said Guillermo Rishchynski, Canada's ambassador to Mexico City. But the Mexican tourism industry pleaded with the Calderon administration not to take any actions that would discourage Canadian citizens from traveling to Mexico.

In a meeting with Tourism Secretary Rodolfo Elizondo Torres, members of the Asociacion Mexicana de Hoteles y Moteles (AMHM) said a reduction in Canadian visitors would further hurt the industry, which is already reeling from the global economic downturn and recent outbreak of the H1N1 virus (SourceMex, May 06, 2009 and May 13, 2009).

The Mexican tourism industry estimates that roughly 1 million Canadian citizens travel to Mexico each year, primarily to resort areas like Cancun, Puerto Vallarta, Los Cabos, and Ixtapa, and also to Mexico City. The Calderon administration agreed with the tourism industry. "We would not like to endanger the flow in any way," Espinosa said at a news conference with Cannon and US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. "We do not expect to impose a visa requirement on Canadian tourists." Mexican business organizations also expressed their displeasure with the Canadian decision. "This move to require visas from Mexicans is an obstacle for transactions between businesses from the two countries and for bilateral trade relations in general," said the Confederacion de Camaras

Industriales (CONCAMIN). But the organization also recommended against imposing restrictions on Canadian business travelers, since important sectors such as transportation would be affected. Canada's Bombardier is a major participant in Mexico's nascent aviation industry (SourceMex, June 06, 2007). The Calderon administration, needing to take some action to express its disagreement with the Canadian action, decided to impose a visa requirement for all Canadian diplomats, a move parallel to the one taken by the Czech Republic.

Canadian officials promise that measure is not permanent

Canadian officials said they would do everything to prevent long-term damage to relations between the two countries. "We are not looking for difficulties with our allies, and nothing about this situation leads us to believe that this action will be permanent," said Cannon. The Canadian foreign minister said the Harper administration would work closely with Mexico to try to find a solution that would eventually lead to eliminating the visa requirement. "From now until such time as that occurs, we have to be able to straighten this out," said Cannon.

Others concurred that it is unlikely that Canadian-Mexican relations would be damaged in the long run. "Of course, the Mexico-Canada relationship is going to overcome [this action]," Dade and Abizaid said in their column. "Trade between the two countries remains strong, the cooperation between ministries and secretariats is solid, and a number of exchanges and bilateral initiatives are in effect." Dade and Abizaid recommended that Canada take immediate actions to address the situation, beginning with a statement from Ottawa reaffirming the importance of relations between the two countries. Additionally, they said Canada should offer specific ways to solve the visa situation in the long run.

Finally, they suggested that the two countries establish a reciprocal mechanism to expedite the movement of frequent visitors from the other country once they have obtained a visa. They noted that the US already has a similar mechanism in place for business travelers and other frequent visitors from Canada and from Mexico. The US does not require visas from either country, however. Canada faces a riskier situation in its relations with the Czech Republic, since that country is a member of the European Union (EU). Although the Czech government initially imposed the same restrictions as Mexico requiring visas only for diplomats there is some support for retaliatory action against all Canadian visitors.

According to Canwest news service, Sweden, which holds the rotating EU presidency, said it favors imposing a retaliatory visa on Canadian tourists visiting the 27-country bloc. The imposition of the visa requirement created great confusion at the Canadian Embassy in Mexico City in the days following its announcement. Long lines formed outside the embassy, with 6,000 visa requests presented by would-be Mexican travelers. Embassy personnel said they gave priority to those travelers who already had airline tickets to a Canadian destination.

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