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President Felipe Calderón Presses Immigration, Weapons-exports Control During Washington Visit

by Carlos Navarro

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In what might have been described as a "diálogo de sordos" (a dialogue of the deaf), President Felipe Calderón addressed a handful of controversial issues, including immigration and the drug trade, in face-to-face meetings with US President Barack Obama and during a speech to the US Congress, but little is expected to come from the encounters. Calderón who visited Washington on May 19-20 received standing ovations more than two dozen times during his 30-minute address on Capitol Hill. In his speeches in the US, Calderón addressed topics related to economics, trade, and Mexico's social programs. But the main issues for discussion were US immigration policies and concerns that the uncontrolled flow of weapons from the US was contributing to the explosion of violence in Mexico.

Immigration tops agenda

The Mexican president's decision to press the US on issues related to immigration was especially relevant in light of Arizona's new law targeting undocumented immigrants. Arizona's initiative, approved in April, requires state and local police to determine the status of people if there is "reasonable suspicion" that they are undocumented immigrants and to arrest people who are unable to provide documentation proving they are in the country legally ([SourceMex, April 28, 2010](#)).

At a news conference at the White House and again at the address before Congress, Calderón criticized Arizona's new law, saying that it "introduces a terrible idea: using racial profiling as a basis for law enforcement."

Accompanying Calderón on his trip to Washington were Foreign Relations Secretary Patricia Espinosa, Finance Secretary Ernesto Cordero, Economy Secretary Gerardo Ruiz Mateos, and several politicians, including Sen. Carlos Navarrete of the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD), Deputy Francisco Ramírez Acuña of the governing Partido Acción Nacional (PAN), and Beatriz Paredes Rangel, president of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI).

The Mexican president also asked Congress to take action on new immigration reforms as soon as possible. "We must find together a better way to face and fix this common problem," said Calderón.

Calderón received support from a sympathetic audience on Capitol Hill, but only because most Republicans boycotted the speech. Thus the 27 standing ovations were led by Democrats sympathetic to efforts by Calderón and Obama to enact comprehensive immigration-reform legislation. The Mexico City daily newspaper Milenio highlighted the address with the headline, "27 Standing Ovations but No Answers."

This unlikelihood of action was evident in Obama's response to his Mexican counterpart, in which he pointed to a major obstacle standing in the way of an immigration-reform initiative. "I don't have 60 votes in the Senate," said the US president.

Obama explained that he does not have enough support from Republicans, even though he is proposing a plan that would include increased border security, penalties against employers who hire undocumented workers, and requirements that undocumented workers who want to attain legal status pay back taxes and heavy fines, learn English, and "get to the back of the line" for permission to live in the US. Some version of many of these proposals was included in a bipartisan immigration-reform plan introduced in the US Senate in 2007 ([SourceMex, May 23, 2007](#)) and ([Jan. 2, 2008](#)). That proposal never came to the full Senate for a vote ([SourceMex, Jan. 21, 2009](#)).

Several Republican legislators weighed in on the immigration debate following Calderón's speech. Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX), a member of the Republican leadership, chided the Mexican president for his comments on immigration and criticisms of the Arizona law. "It was inappropriate for President Calderón to lecture Americans on our own state and federal laws," said Cornyn.

Others were more blunt, accusing the Mexican president of interfering in the internal affairs of the US. "Mexican government officials openly talk of a Mexican government boycott of Arizona but make no effort to prevent their citizens from going there," said Rep. Smith (R-TX), the senior Republican on the House Judiciary Committee. "These latest actions are part of a long history of interference in sovereign American affairs."

And Rep. Brian Bilbray (R-CA), who chairs the House Immigration Reform Caucus, outwardly rejected any efforts by Obama to legalize the status of undocumented immigrants already in the US. He said these immigrants broke US laws and should not be given any form of amnesty. "What part of illegal does President Obama not understand?" said Bilbray.

Calderón asks US to control illegal arms flow to Mexico

Calderón raised another issue that was just as controversial, the seemingly unrestricted flow of high-caliber weapons from the US to Mexico, which has contributed to widespread drug-related violence in the country. Mexico has said controlling the flow of these weapons is a necessary element in its battle against drug traffickers ([SourceMex, Nov. 28, 2007](#)) and ([June 11, 2008](#)). In 2009, Obama announced a plan to beef up the number of agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) in the border area as part of an effort to stem the weapons flow into Mexico. But critics, including the Mexican government and many ATF agents, say this effort is ineffective because of the ease of purchasing weapons at gun shows and other events ([SourceMex, April 1, 2009](#)).

One point of disagreement is whether stopping the weapons flow from the US would be a deterrent to the drug cartels in Mexico. The Calderón administration contends that 80% of the estimated 75,000 guns and assault weapons seized in the last three years can be traced to the US. In his address to Congress, the Mexican president also noted that there are 7,000 gun shops in US border states where weapons can be easily purchased. "I would ask Congress to help us, with respect, and to understand how important it is for us that you enforce current laws to stem the supply of these weapons to criminals and consider reinstating the assault-weapons ban," said Calderón.

Others contend that the cartels have obtained weapons from other sources and can easily increase their purchases. The Houston Chronicle, citing informed sources, said drug-trafficking organizations are acquiring weapons from sources in Central and South America. "A strengthened commitment to control the traffic of assault weapons from this side of the border will thus be frustratingly ineffective unless it is bolstered by similar efforts aimed at other identified sources of the weapons,"

the newspaper editorial said. "Mexico must make a good-faith effort, with our help, to choke off these other sources, too."

The Calderón government is likely to face even greater difficulty convincing the US to implement tighter controls on weapons sales than in obtaining comprehensive immigration reform. The Mexican president acknowledged this in his address to Congress, suggesting that the US should regulate the sales in the "right way."

Calderón's problem is that he does not have the same support on this issue from the Obama government as he has on immigration reform. "We do not foresee promoting any legislation on this issue in Congress," said Dan Restrepo, Obama's senior advisor on Latin America.

But Restrepo said this does not mean that President Obama is abandoning efforts to control the arms flow into Mexico. "The president has made it clear that he believes we need to do more to cut off the flow of illegal weapons from the US to Mexico and that we're taking steps and will continue to take steps in that regard."

Of course, the Republican opposition in Congress was just as vocal as it was on the immigration question. Republicans believe that any effort to control weapons sales would violate the Second Amendment of the US Constitution, which deals with a citizen's right to bear arms. Sen. Cornyn made it a point to express appreciation for Calderón's efforts to fight drug-trafficking organizations. "I have a lot of respect for President Calderón and his commitment to combat the cartels," said the Texas senator. "But I do not think that US citizens should renounce any of their liberties in response to the problems faced by another country."

Sen. Jeff Sessions (R-AL) said the US already has legislation regulating the sale of automatic weapons, and another law is not necessary. "The request that we do more to control the flow of illegal weapons to Mexico is something I support," said Sessions. "This is a legitimate request."

Mexican legislators also weighed in with their opinions on immigration, drug trafficking, and other bilateral issues related to Calderón's visit to the US. Sen. Navarrete praised Calderón's "direct and energetic" speech to Congress. "Both his own people and outsiders were surprised by the clarity with which he outlined bilateral themes," Navarrete said. "But it is obvious that issues like weapons and immigration can only be dealt with in November, if the Democrats do well then and gain seats in Congress. We have to be aware of that and not be asking for something that is impossible."

Other legislators accused the US Congress of not taking the US relationship with Mexico seriously. In the same week that Calderón traveled to the US, key senators threatened to cancel an interparliamentary meeting, scheduled for Campeche state in June, if the US delegation did not include influential senators.

PAN Sen. Gustavo Madero, chair of a political-coordinating committee in the Mexican Congress, said there have been requests to cancel the interparliamentary meeting "if the US Senate insists on sending senators with little clout to the meeting, particularly in these critical times when the legislative agenda is full of important issues, including the criminalization of migration and security."

"The US Senate always participates less in the intercongressional meeting. Those who attend the meeting are always the same ones," said PRD Sen. Silvano Aureoles Conejo. "If US senators think that it is pointless to come to the meeting, that it is just a waste of time and of no interest for

anybody, it is a lack of respect to send reduced delegations that have limited power in the decision-making process."

Navarrete was expected to bring the concern to US Vice President Joe Biden during the visit to Washington.

Mixed reaction to speech in Mexico

The reaction to Calderón's speech to the US Congress was mixed in Mexico. Commentators generally agreed that Calderón presented Mexico's positions very clearly but also acknowledged that very little was expected to come from the trip. "It is a gratifying feeling to see a Mexican president receive repeated standing ovations...and to hear from him such a strong speech," Gabriel Guerra Castellanos, a former Mexican diplomat and private political consultant, said in a radio interview. "There is good chemistry between Calderón and Obama, and that's a good thing. It does not solve the problems."

But others suggested that Calderón traveled to the US as a president who has shown little leadership in bringing the various factions in Mexico together, reducing his legitimacy in the eyes of his hosts. "The institutional weakness, corruption, and the precarious respect for the rule of law all conspire to reduce Mexico's credibility overseas," said an analysis from the Centro de Diálogo y Análisis Sobre América (CEDAN), a think tank at the Instituto Tecnológico de Monterrey (ITESM)-Mexico City campus.

The Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal also predicted a lack of success for Calderón, especially on immigration. In an editorial that carried the English-language headline, "Sorry Mr. Calderón," the newspaper noted that, despite the pleas from the Mexican president, political realities would preclude passage of an immigration-reform bill. The editorial pointed to Obama's statements that immigration-reform legislation was unlikely in the near future because he lacks the 60 votes in the US Senate needed to make this measure a reality.

Therefore, said El Universal, Calderón could make some inroads with the US on matters related to security. "Once again, as was the case during the administrations of former Presidents George W. Bush and Vicente Fox, border security became the central point of discussions," said the editorial.

El Universal noted, however, that Obama and Calderón were able to expand the scope of their discussions on security. "There were new areas of emphasis in the fight against organized crime," said the newspaper. "Among them were protecting human rights, active participation of civil society, constructing communities with greater social cohesion, efforts to reduce consumption of illicit drugs, and the search for alternatives for the youth [in Mexico] that gravitate to the cartels."

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