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U.S., Mexican Legislators Take Low-key Approach on Immigration at Washington Meeting

by Carlos Navarro

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Several-dozen legislators from Mexico and the US met in Washington, DC, in mid-June, with predictable results. The legislators agreed to agree. By all accounts, the discussions were civil and the spin in the post-meeting announcements was positive, in contrast to a similar gathering in Campeche in 2010, when reports surfaced that Mexican legislators lashed out at their US counterparts about US immigration policy and the US failure to prevent the flow of weapons into Mexico.

At the 49th US-Mexico intercongressional meeting in 2010, US Rep. Brian Bilbray (R-CA) insisted that his party would not allow immigration reform to pass. "Migration is a privilege, not a right. My family came from the other side of the Atlantic, not by way of a land border," the California Republican said at that meeting ([SourceMex, June 23, 2010](#)). This led to a strong rebuke from Mexican legislators and US Democrats, who condemned Arizona's anti-immigrant law SB1070([SourceMex, April 28, 2010](#)).

Apparently no such angry exchanges occurred at the 50th intercongressional meeting in Washington, at least none that were made public. Bilbray was named to co-chair a panel comprising members of the Chamber of Deputies and US House of Representatives to follow up on the immigration-related issues discussed at the bilateral meeting. The other co-chair is Deputy Armando Ríos Piter, floor leader of the Partido de la Revolución Democrática.(PRD).

Still, the potential for conflict was present at the meetings because they took place shortly after state legislators in Georgia and Alabama approved measures perceived as anti-immigrant.

In Alabama, the state House approved HB56, which among other things requires schools to report how much they are spending to educate children of undocumented immigrants. The law was due to take effect in September.

Georgia Gov. Nathan Deal signed into law HB87, which allows law-enforcement officers to ask about immigration status when questioning suspects in certain criminal investigations. The measure, due to take effect in July, also imposes prison sentences of up to one year and fines of up to US\$1,000 for people who knowingly transport illegal immigrants during the commission of a crime. But enactment of the law could be delayed, pending a court decision on a challenge filed by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Mexico and 10 other countries joined in the legal action.

The Texas Senate also recently approved legislation targeting undocumented immigrants. SB9 would halt state assistance to local governments that prohibit local officers from inquiring about immigration status.

The reports coming from the intercongressional meeting did not say to what extent the Georgia and Alabama measures were discussed, and the Texas legislation was approved after the meetings had concluded.

No legislators from Alabama or Georgia were in the US delegation, but Texas was well-represented in the group. Among the participants were Sens. Kay Bailey Hutchison and John Cornyn and Reps. Francisco Canseco, Silvestre Reyes, Rubén Hinojosa, and Michael McCaul. Reyes and Hinojosa are Democrats, while Cornyn, Hutchison, Canseco, and McCaul are Republicans.

Deputy Josefina Vázquez Mota, floor leader for the governing Partido Acción Nacional (PAN) in the lower house, said the decision to not press harder on immigration was pragmatic. "We were told that, considering the current political environment in the United States and what we will be experiencing in a few months in the country, to speak about immigration reform wouldn't have much weight at this time," said Vázquez Mota, who is seeking her party's nomination in the 2012 presidential election. "But there was a commitment within this group to explore diverse initiatives to strengthen the immigration process regarding safeguarding human rights and, within the framework of the law, allow people to come and participate in various markets and employment options."

Immigration was also discussed by senators in a separate meeting. "The first topic that we addressed was that we cannot see migration as an isolated element," PAN Sen. Luis Villarreal told a press conference.

Still, Mexican legislators did not miss the opportunity to tout the achievements of the Mexican Congress in approving a law to protect the rights of migrants from other countries in Mexico ([SourceMex, May 18 2011](#)). "In Mexico, we approved the Immigration Law, which protects the human rights of migrants and eliminates all immigration-related crimes," said Deputy Francisco Rojas Gutiérrez, floor leader of the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) in the lower house.

Rojas Gutiérrez then suggested to US counterparts the importance of observing and respecting the human rights of migrants in any effort to pass comprehensive immigration reform. "Any law must reflect the realities of the labor markets in our countries," said the PRI legislator.

PRI Sen. Manlio Fabio Beltrones, president of the Senate, also offered conciliatory statements. He said the two countries "must advance simultaneously in border security and migration, without neglecting either of them. We must also focus on human rights enforcement that allows us to take concrete and progressive steps, as is the case with the Dream Act that the US Senate is promoting and the recent Mexican migration law."

The positive spin

Many other comments from legislators on other issues carried a positive spin. These included statements out of the working groups that were created and the separate meetings held among senators from the two countries and members of the respective lower houses.

"The simple thing I want to say is that we found a lot of common ground," said Sen. Tom Udall (D-NM), who was appointed coordinator of the US delegation. "We're legislators. We're going to go back to our respective legislatures to work on that common ground."

There were few, if any, fireworks regarding recent controversies on security. Mexico has consistently criticized the US for its inability to control the illegal flow of high-caliber weapons south of the border ([SourceMex, May 26, 2010](#)) and ([Feb. 2, 2011](#)). The most recent controversy involved an operation set up by the Arizona office of the US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), by which the agency allowed arms to enter Mexico freely to attempt to track their movement. This

operation, known as Fast and Furious, backfired badly, as some of these weapons were traced to high-profile killings ([SourceMex, March 23, 2011](#)).

Ríos Piter said there were productive discussions on how to prevent rogue operations like Fast and Furious. He said legislators from the two countries agreed to conduct studies to determine the exit points for arms and entry points for drugs and take actions based on those studies.

"We discussed that the Mérida Initiative is a valuable initiative but the North American legislators have suggested going above and beyond the Merida Initiative, saying that we could have processes of wider cooperation than previously presented," said Vázquez Mota.

Just as they did with immigration, the legislators decided to form a special committee on security co-chaired by Rep. McCaul and PRI Deputy Claudia Ruiz Massieu.

"Not only did we agree to continue our bilateral collaboration in the fight against transnational organized crime but we also agreed to intensify the cooperation in technology and training," said Beltrones.

Rojas Gutiérrez told reporters that both countries remain committed to fighting organized crime regardless of the outcome of their respective presidential elections in 2012.

"Independently of who wins the 2012 elections here in the United States and in our country, the fight against organized crime is a main point in the national security for both countries," said the PRI legislative leader. "We are absolutely committed, categorically committed, all of the parties, to continue the fight against organized crime."

The legislators from the two lower houses also agreed to form a third committee to discuss trade-related issues. The panel, co-chaired by Rep. Ed Pastor (D-AZ) and PAN Deputy Jesús Ramírez Rangel, will look at such issues as customs procedures, infrastructure, and increasing efficiency at border crossings.

Committee members are also charged with supervising the reform and the mandate of the North American Development Bank (NADBank), created under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to fund infrastructure projects along the US-Mexico border. Under legislation introduced by Rep. Hinojosa, the NADBank's mission would be expanded to ensure that projects both increase economic development in communities along the US-Mexico border and comply with existing environmental laws and regulations.

"We must continue our efforts to improve economic development and safety in the border areas of both the United States and Mexico," Hinojosa said in a press statement.

Not all harmonious in Mexican delegation

Despite the appearance of harmony on the Mexican side, there were grumblings among legislators before the intercongressional meeting. Several members of the PAN, PRD, and Partido del Trabajo (PT) questioned whether the meeting was useful for Mexico, given that each party traveled to the gathering with its own agenda.

PT Sen. Ricardo Monreal questioned whether these meeting really achieved anything. He described the gatherings, which have taken place for 50 years, as simply "congressional tourism."

"Everyone is there for their party's personal interests, and there is no common agenda," said former PRD Sen. Tomás Torres. "We have to stop holding these gatherings only for the sake of protocol.

"These reunions have the bad reputation of being only media events, giving politicians a photo opportunity and a chance to spend the congressional budget," said Diego Rivero Corona, a columnist for the newspaper. "This is a plan that has run its course and lacks the type of effectiveness that we need to deal with issues such as immigration."

PAN Sen. Santiago Creel, a veteran of these meetings, raised concerns about the decision to have senators dialogue with counterparts rather than have legislators of all four chambers enter into broader discussions. Furthermore, said Creel, the US Congress has had a history of sending legislators with little influence to the gathering. The PAN senator's statement was well-taken, since US legislative leaders had in the past not participated in these gatherings.

Sen. Udall, however, made it a point to emphasize to reporters that this year was different, noting that Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid was among the members of the US delegation.

Reid has made a strong commitment to seek comprehensive immigration reform, and Rivero Corona agreed. "In a recent interview in Nevada, [Sen. Reid] assured me that he will continue fighting for immigration reform," said the columnist.

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