

# Amid U.S. pressure, Fox balks at drug decriminalization bill

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**MEXICO CITY** - U.S. officials welcomed Mexican President Vicente Fox's decision not to sign a drug criminalization bill that some had warned could result in "drug tourism" in this country and increased availability of narcotics in American border communities.

Fox reversed course and said he was sending the bill back to Congress for changes, just one day after his office had said he would sign into law the measure, which would have dropped criminal penalties for possession of small amounts of marijuana, cocaine, heroin and other drugs.

Fox's statement said he will ask for corrections "to make it absolutely clear in our country, the possession of drugs and their consumption are, and will continue to be, a criminal offense."

San Diego, California, Mayor Jerry Sanders applauded Fox's decision. On Friday, Sanders said he was "appalled" by the bill, saying it could increase drug availability north of the border.

"I'm glad that he's listened to the many voices opposing the bill and made changes that will make good enforcement and not legalize drugs," Sanders said. "We have been a partner with Mexico in fighting against illegal drugs, and this will only help in the long-term in that relationship."

San Diego sits a short drive from the border town of Tijuana, Mexico.

Earlier Wednesday, U.S. Embassy spokeswoman Judith Bryan said that U.S. officials had "urged Mexican representatives to review the legislation urgently, to avoid the perception that drug use would be tolerated in Mexico, and to prevent drug tourism."

That was apparently a reference to concern that the measure could increase drug use by border visitors and U.S. students who flock to Mexico on vacation.

Bryan said the U.S. government wants Mexico "to ensure that all persons found in possession of any quantity of illegal drugs be prosecuted or be sent into mandatory drug treatment programs."

Fox's statement did not mention the U.S. criticism, but did acknowledge that the bill had been controversial.

"With sensitivity toward the opinions expressed by various sectors of society, the administration has decided to suggest changes to the content of the bill," the statement said.

On Tuesday, Fox's spokesman had called the bill "an advance" and pledged the president would sign it.

Congress has adjourned for the summer, and when it comes back, it will have new members following the July 2 elections, which also make Fox a lame duck.

However, Sen. Jorge Zermeno, of Fox's conservative National Action Party - a supporter of the bill - said he thought Congress would be open to changing the legislation to delete a clause that extends to all "consumers" the exemption from prosecution that was originally meant to cover only recognized drug addicts.

"The word 'consumer' can be eliminated so that the only exemption clause would be for drug addicts," Zermeno told The Associated Press. "There's still time to get this through."

The bill contained many points that experts said were positive. It empowered state and local police - not just federal officers - to go after drug dealers, stiffened some penalties and closed loopholes that dealers had long used to escape prosecution.

But Mexico's top police official, Eduardo Medina Mora said legislators had changed Fox's original proposal by inserting a controversial table laying out maximum amounts of drugs considered for "personal use."

Current Mexican law allows judges latitude to drop charges if suspects can prove they are addicts and the quantity they were caught with is small enough to be considered "for personal use," or if they are first-time offenders.

The new bill would have made the decriminalization automatic, allowed "consumers" as well as addicts to have drugs, and delineated specific allowable quantities, which do not appear in the current law.

Under the law, consumers could have legally possessed up to 25 milligrams of heroin, 5 grams of marijuana (about one-fifth of an ounce, or about four joints),

or 0.5 grams of cocaine - the equivalent of about four "lines," or half the standard street-sale quantity.