

Fox Tries to Defuse Mexicans' Concerns Over Moving Troops to Border

THE NEW YORK TIMES
MAY 16, 2006

MEXICO CITY, May 15 — A spokesman for President Vicente Fox tried to defuse concerns on Monday about Washington's plans to send thousands of National Guard troops to reinforce border security by playing down the move as a logistical and administrative effort, rather than a military one.

[Mexico](#) and the United States remain friends, the spokesman said, adding that the dispatching National Guard troops is not militarization.

Mr. Fox and Mr. Bush continue to agree that strengthening security unilaterally was not enough to stop the surging flow of illegal immigrants.

The spokesman held out hope that Mr. Bush would press Congress to follow up with changes to expand immigrants' opportunities to seek work legally in the United States.

"There is an agreement between the presidents that the problem can only be resolved in a dynamic way," the spokesman, Rubén Aguilar, said at a news conference.

Referring to a telephone conversation by the presidents on Sunday, Mr. Aguilar said, "President Bush said to President Fox that the United States considers Mexico a friend and that he hopes that the problems of the border can be resolved in a joint way."

Political analysts like Guadalupe Gonzalez at CIDE, a research organization here, echoed the careful diplomatic language from Mr. Fox's office, saying Mexico needed to send the message that it was willing to accept increased security in exchange for expanded "guest worker" programs and legalizing illegal immigrants. Comments by others, however, indicated that even before Mr. Bush spoke, word of his plans had stirred profound feelings south of the border, because of the specter of American military intervention.

Putting National Guard troops on the border, some political analysts said, was just the latest in a long series of moves by the Bush administration to underscore how dramatically different the United States and Mexico see illegal [immigration](#).

The deployment, Peter Hakim of the Inter-American Dialogue said, sends a message that Mr. Bush has bowed to pressure from the most conservative leaders in the Republican Party to make border policy without regard for Mexico's interests.

It also sends a message, other political analysts said, that the United States views immigrants as a military threat.

In a country where an estimated 400,000 people a year move legally and illegally to the United States, troops along the border could stir such a firestorm that it could turn migration into a pivotal issue in the coming presidential election.

"We are not stupid," Jorge Montaña, a former ambassador to the United States, said. "The United States did not send the National Guard to Iraq for logistical purposes. This is a de facto militarization of the border and an unprecedented insult in relations between the two countries."

News about the proposed deployment began to filter here on Friday and made the front pages of most Mexican daily newspapers on Saturday. On Sunday, Mr. Fox called Mr. Bush to express his concerns and obtain first-hand details about the plans. Mr. Fox has staked significant political capital on building closer ties to the United States as several other Latin American nations have elected presidents who seek greater independence.

He was the first state visitor to the Bush White House in 2001. On that visit, he capitalized on his close relationship with Mr. Bush to challenge the United States to adopt changes that would, among other points, expand programs for guest workers and legalize millions of illegal workers.

The Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks delayed those plans. And the relations between the two governments chilled as the fight against terrorism and the Iraq war led to further delays.

The Pew Hispanic Center estimated that more than half the 11.5 million illegal immigrants in the United States were from Mexico.

The [International Monetary Fund](#) estimated that Mexicans in the United States sent \$20 billion to Mexico last year, the country's second largest source of foreign income after oil.

Rodolfo García Zamora of the National Autonomous University of Zacatecas, an expert on migration, said the exodus had sent the population declining in nearly 35 percent of all the states in Mexico.

As Mr. Fox's time in office winds to an end, the outcome of the immigration debate in the [United States Congress](#) could become a stumbling block for the candidate who Mr. Fox hopes will succeed him. According to at least three major polls, Felipe Calderón, from Mr. Fox's conservative National Action Party, has pulled ahead of his main rival, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, a leftist populist.

Officials in Mr. Calderón's campaign acknowledged that they were worried that troops along the border could hurt their candidate.

An official who was granted anonymity to speak publicly because of the sensitivity of his comments called Mr. Bush's plan, "a lousy move at a lousy time."

Arturo Sárukhan, another official in Mr. Calderón's campaign, said that Mr. Calderón did not consider the deployment of National Guard troops the equivalent of a militarization. However, he said that Mr. Calderón did not support the deployment.

Mr. Sárukhan pointed out that massive increases in law enforcement along the border over the last 10 years have increased the numbers of migrants who die trying to cross the border and sparked a boom in immigrant smuggling. But, Mr. Sarukhan said, police operations have done little to stop illegal migration. And he said he did not think the deployment of troops would be any more effective.

"Good fences," Mr. Sárukhan said, "do not always make good neighbors."

Manuel Camacho Solís, an official in the campaign for Mr. López Obrador, called the deployment a "historic measure."

"This is something that is difficult to accept," Mr. Camacho said about the troops. "Instead of finding a way to resolve our problems together, the United States has gone the way of walls and soldiers. This is only going to increase feelings of resentment toward the United States."