

IMMIGRATION EXPECTED TO DOMINATE CALDERÓN-BUSH TALKS

Mexico's conservative president-elect, Felipe Calderón, makes his first White House visit Thursday.

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MEXICO CITY – The nearly 700 miles of fencing President Bush authorized for the US-Mexican border two weeks ago could overshadow other issues when Mexican president-elect Felipe Calderón makes his first visit to the White House on Thursday.

Unlike recently elected leftist leaders in Latin America, Mr. Calderón is a pro-business, US-friendly candidate who narrowly won July's presidential election against a leftist leader.

Yet, the additional fencing Mr. Bush approved threatens to create a political barrier even before Calderón officially takes office on Dec. 1.

On a recent trip to Canada, Mexico's president-elect compared the fence to the "Berlin Wall," the former barrier between Communist East and democratic West Berlin.

"The most important thing for him is to end the monothematic tone [between the two nations]," says Luis Rubio, president of the Center of Research for Development, a think tank in Mexico City. He says the US-Mexican relationship, dominated by drug trafficking in the 1980s, now is being driven by differences over US immigration policy.

The US border fence, meant to enhance security and deter illegal immigration, is one step in a comprehensive immigration reform plan that Bush hopes can later include a guest-worker program and amnesty plan for some undocumented immigrants. Half of the estimated 11 million undocumented migrants living in the US are believed to be Mexican.

Monday, Calderón said the US-Mexican relationship is the "most delicate, most complex, and most important" in terms of Mexican foreign policy.

He did not say whether he would reiterate Mexico's objection to the law authorizing a major extension of the fence, which Mexican officials say will cause more deaths by making it even harder for would-be immigrants to cross the border. "The only thing [the wall] will do is create more death," says legislator José Edmundo Ramírez Martínez, an opposition Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) member and secretary of the immigration committee in Mexico's Congress.

Immigration was not among the main issues on the original agenda for Thursday's meeting. White House spokesman Tony Snow said last month that the discussion would focus on competitiveness, free trade, economic growth, and security in North America.

Calderón may have wanted to avoid immigration altogether given the failure of outgoing president and fellow National Action Party (PAN) party member Vicente Fox to get what he called the "whole enchilada": Mexico's leader had hoped to convince the Bush administration to push through the guest-worker plan and a path to citizenship for many undocumented Mexican workers.

"We didn't even get a nacho," says Mr. Ramírez Martínez.

Bush's move to authorize the fence underscored the Fox administration's failure to help Mexicans working illegally in the US and appears to have forced his successor to make it a priority. "If the US had not passed a law authorizing 700 miles of fencing, he could almost ignore

immigration entirely. It was such a failure for Fox," says David Shirk, director of the Transborder Institute at the University of San Diego. "Now he can't ignore it."

Mr. Shirk says Calderón's No. 1 task should be to address the economic inequality in Mexico underscored by the country's July presidential race. Leftist candidate Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who attracted the nation's poor, lost by half a percentage point and challenged the legitimacy of the election during a seven-week sit-in in Mexico City.

"The way [Calderón] rose to power requires his single-minded focus be on economic development if he is to legitimize his presidency," says Shirk. He'll need to "enlist US support in a variety of ways to make it happen."

Calderón has floated a plan to put the country on the list of the world's fastest growing economies. "Mexico 2030" aims to help reduce extreme poverty by boosting annual per-capita income from \$8,000 today to \$30,000 over the next 25 years. Calderón hopes that improving conditions at home will reduce the number of Mexicans seeking opportunities in the US.

Calderón's top foreign adviser, Arturo Sarukhan, said Friday that the president-elect plans to meet in Washington with officials at the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank. Under discussion: programs that will create infrastructure and capitalize on the \$19 billion Mexican immigrants in the US send home each year.

Ramírez Martínez, the lawmaker, says it is imperative that the president-elect discuss the wall with US officials. "We want him to go to the meeting with an agenda to talk about a migration policy - not just economics, commerce and free trade, but a new discussion about a migration policy."