

## **Bush Set To Send Guard to Border**

Assignment Would Be Temporary; Critics Cite Strain on Troops

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President Bush tried to ease the worries of his Mexican counterpart yesterday as he prepared for a nationally televised address tonight unveiling a plan to send thousands of National Guard troops to help seal the nation's southern border against illegal immigrants.

Mexican President Vicente Fox called to express concern over the prospect of militarization of the border, and Bush reassured him that it would be only a temporary measure to bolster overwhelmed Border Patrol agents, the White House said.

"The president made clear that the United States considers Mexico a friend and that what is being considered is not militarization of the border but support of Border Patrol capabilities on a temporary basis by National Guard personnel," said White House spokeswoman Maria Tamburri.

Yet the idea has further stirred an already volatile debate about immigration on both sides of the border even before the president makes his prime-time speech from the Oval Office at 8 p.m. A number of Democrats and even a few key Republicans voiced skepticism or outright opposition to the reported plan yesterday, calling it a politically motivated move that will only further strain units already stretched by duty in Iraq without solving the underlying problem of illegal immigration.

"We have to be very careful here," Sen. Chuck Hagel (R-Neb.) said yesterday on ABC's "This Week." "That's not the role of our military. That's not the role of our National Guard. . . . That's a short-term fix, and I'm not sure that's a very wise fix."

The White House formally insisted that no decision has been made and that Bush was still considering options yesterday. But aides left little doubt that the president intends to call for an expanded Guard deployment at the border involving several thousand troops, a significant increase from the 200 or so now there.

Officials suggested their mission would be to play a supporting role by providing intelligence, training, transportation, construction and other functions, while leaving the actual guarding of the 2,000-mile line separating the United States and Mexico to the Border Patrol. The National Guard would be a stopgap force until the federal government could hire civilian contractors to take over administrative and support functions from the Border Patrol, freeing more agents to actually hunt for immigrants slipping into the country.

"This is not about militarizing the border," national security adviser Stephen J. Hadley said on CBS's "Face the Nation." "The president is looking to do everything he can to secure the border. It's what the American people want, it's what he wants to do."

The plan won support from several powerful Republicans. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) dismissed the "whining and moaning" of critics and said the National Guard was the only option in the short term.

"We've got to secure our borders," Frist said on CNN's "Late Edition." "We hear from the American people. We've got millions of people coming across that border. First and foremost, secure the border, whatever it takes. Everything else we've done has failed, we've got to face that."

Some in the president's conservative base called on him to be even more aggressive. Rep. Charles Whitlow Norwood Jr. (R-Ga.) said Bush should send 36,000 National Guard troops and eventually up to 48,000, drawn from around the nation. "If President Bush signed that order Monday night, our border would be secure for the first time in decades by Memorial Day at the latest," Norwood said in a statement. "Mr. Fox and [the National Council of] La Raza wouldn't like it -- but the American people sure would."

The president's plan could increase the strain with Fox, who has grown disenchanted with Bush's failure to ease immigration rules as promised. Fox for years has pressured Bush to help the 11 million illegal immigrants now in the United States, many of them from Mexico, with little to show for it. In their 15-minute call yesterday, "the president reiterated to President Fox his commitment to comprehensive immigration reform," Tamburri said.

Tonight's speech is aimed at assuaging House Republicans who have insisted on tougher enforcement measures against workers illegally in the country. If the House contingent feels action is being taken, White House officials hope they may yet sign off on some version of Bush's guest-worker proposal, which would provide a way for undocumented immigrants to stay here legally if they pay back taxes and penalties.