

# Bush Meets Anger Over Immigration Issue as He Promotes Free Trade in Guatemala

The New York Times  
March 13, 2007

GUATEMALA CITY, March 12 — President Bush came to this struggling Central American nation on Tuesday bearing a message that free trade with the United States would improve conditions for even the poorest Latin Americans.

But he was also confronted with an angry, outside-in perspective on the [immigration](#) debate raging at home, with even his otherwise friendly host, President Óscar Berger, using a ceremonial welcome to criticize the arrest of several hundred illegal workers, many of them Guatemalans, in Massachusetts last week.

“As is the case in every mature relationship, once in a while differences of opinion arise,” Mr. Berger said in the central courtyard of the grand presidential palace here. “For example, with regard to the issue of migrants, and particularly those who have been deported without clear justification.”

The remark, coming during otherwise warm comments by Mr. Berger, reflected the longstanding anger here over deportation of Guatemalans from the United States, which has been stoked by a raid last week in which more than 300 workers were arrested at Michael Bianco Inc., a company in New Bedford, Mass., that provides vests for the military.

It gave Mr. Bush a taste of what is to come in the next and final stop in his Latin American tour, to Mérida, Mexico, where immigration is expected to be high on the agenda with President [Felipe Calderón](#).

But with a much smaller population, [Guatemala](#) is also a focal point in the immigration debate — 10 percent of its population resides in the United States, according to officials traveling with the president.

While Mr. Bush’s agenda here included a proposed new regional effort to attack the drug syndicates — a majority of Colombian cocaine that finds its way to the United States comes through here —

free trade and even adoption, Mr. Bush and Mr. Berger said immigration was a major topic of discussion.

Newspapers here have been dominated by news of the raid, and stories abound of families torn apart and children left behind as their parents were sent off to Texas and New Mexico for deportation, but federal officials say 60 people were released for humanitarian reasons.

Facing pointed questions from Guatemalan journalists, Mr. Bush stood by the raid, saying, "People will be treated with respect, but the United States will enforce our law."

Mr. Bush said he disputed "conspiracies" relayed by Mr. Berger that children were taken away from families.

Mr. Bush denied such accounts. "No es la verdad," Mr. Bush said, "That's not the way America operates. We're a decent, compassionate country. Those are the kind of things we do not do. We believe in families, and we'll treat people with dignity."

Some of those theories have also held that the raid was executed in advance of Mr. Bush's visit here, to send a message, an idea that United States officials denied.

In fact, an American official who was part of Mr. Bush's delegation said the timing of the Massachusetts raid could not have been worse, and served to inflame an already emotional issue, adding more passion to anti-Bush protests here.

"Bush doesn't accept us on his land, so why should we let him on ours," said Armando Chavajay, a protester outside the Mayan spiritual site that Mr. Bush visited at Iximché.

"They grab us in the U.S. and send us out like criminals," he said. "We are going there to work and help our families. Now he will know how we feel."

The protest at Iximché came on top of fierce confrontations throughout the capital, Guatemala City, in the afternoon, with riot

police officers firing tear gas at protesters who were hurling stones and eggs, setting off fireworks and burning American flags. One McDonald's restaurant had anti-Bush slurs written on it.

American officials have suggested that the protests dogging Mr. Bush throughout his trip are being instigated and paid for by his chief nemesis in the region, President [Hugo Chávez](#) of Venezuela.

Along the winding road to Iximché, Mr. Bush's motorcade passed hundreds of indigenous demonstrators who faced off with police and soldiers to oppose the president's visit to the Mayan spiritual site. At one point protesters managed to block the president's route with boulders, but soldiers cleared them away in time for the motorcade to pass.

"Iximché represents the dignity of the Mayan people and we can't have a man who represents war come to this place," said Jorge Morales, a protest leader. "Our ancestors have spent hundreds of years on this ground and they will feel his presence."

Mr. Morales and other leaders of indigenous groups said they would perform a ritual cleansing of the negative energy at the site, complete with candles, flowers and song and dance. "We will do a thorough spiritual cleaning," he said.

But after Mr. Bush left, the initial cleanup took a different form. Local people picked up the kernels of corn that had been thrown on the ground as part of the welcome of Mr. Bush. With the bulk of the population living in poverty, local people said they did not want the food to go to waste.

It is that kind of crushing poverty that Mr. Bush said he came here to address. And it is that kind of poverty that fuels anger at the United States and its trade policy. Mr. Chávez has tapped that anger in his push for nationalizing industry and cutting interaction with the United States.

While Mr. Chávez was in Haiti promoting his aid to the region, Mr. Bush was in the Guatemalan countryside to highlight his aid efforts and to tout the benefits of trade.

Mr. Bush started his day in Santa Cruz Balanyá, visiting a medical operation run jointly by the United States and Guatemalan militaries. On another stop, in a traditional, embroidered jacket, Mr. Bush helped load crates of lettuce onto a truck at a packing station in the village of Chirijuyu. The station was operated by Labradores Mayas, a food cooperative that was started by a local farmer who took advantage of an irrigation system built with a Usaid loan to transform subsistence farms into commercial enterprises that now distribute to Wal-Mart Central America and McDonald's.

“Free trade is important,” Mr. Bush said. “It's a gateway. It creates jobs in America and it creates jobs here.”

It was a message Mr. Bush would repeat in fending off criticism of his free-trade policy, saying at his press briefing with Mr. Berger: “I also believe most citizens in Guatemala would rather find meaningful jobs at home instead of having to travel to a foreign land to work. And therefore, the more we can enhance prosperity in our neighborhood, the more we can encourage trade that actually yields jobs and stability.”