

Bush Runs Into Opposition in Guatemala

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GUATEMALA CITY, Guatemala -- President Bush's message of goodwill in Latin America ran into a wall in Guatemala on Monday, as he defended his efforts to establish a temporary worker program but gave no ground on the deportation of illegal workers. "The United States will enforce our law," Bush said during a news conference with Guatemalan President Oscar Berger. "It's against the law to hire somebody who's in our country illegally."

Deportation is a sore issue in Guatemala, and Bush's host bluntly told him, "The Guatemalan people would have preferred a more clear and positive response _ no more deportations."

Bush's meetings here with Berger, a conservative leader who has become a strong U.S. ally, were dominated by trade and the difficult immigration issue.

It came after Bush and Berger spent the morning visiting villages in the mountains that ring the Guatemalan capital, as Bush sought to emphasize U.S. largesse.

They toured an American military center that provides basic medical care and physician training. He and Laura Bush handed out hygiene kits at an elementary school. And the president helped to load lettuce headed for the global market onto a truck at a farmers' cooperative.

That, he said later, was "one of the great experiences of my presidency."

Bush pleased Guatemalans by promising to push hard _ and quickly _ for changes that would include a temporary-worker program for illegal workers in the United States. He said he thinks it is possible to wrest legislation out of a deeply divided U.S. Congress by August.

He apologized that it has taken so long but said it was hard to find "a coherent Republican position in the Senate."

"If we don't get a consensus in the Senate, nothing will move out of the Senate ... and nothing will happen in the House," Bush said. He said the process was "time consuming, but worth it and necessary."

But he stood firm in the face of questions over deportations of illegal workers, such as a raid in Massachusetts last week.

Federal authorities detained over 300 employees of a leather goods maker _ most from Guatemala and El Salvador _ for possible deportation as illegal aliens. The raid left dozens of young children stranded at schools and with baby sitters.

"Just so you know, when we enforce the law we do so in a fair and rational way," he said. "People are welcome, but under the law." He tried to dispel suspicions, high here, that application of the law in the United States can be cruel and discriminatory.

Bush said he hadn't expected the level of questions he faced on the subject and tried to put the concerns in a positive light. Enforcing the law will, in turn, help persuade a skeptical Congress to pass a guest-worker program and other elements of a new immigration strategy, he said.

Berger did say he "was very pleased" that Bush sees high levels of deportations as a problem not just for migrants and their home countries, but Americans as well.

Bush left Guatemala on Monday night for Mexico, where he plans to discuss border issues Tuesday with President Felipe Calderon on his last stop of a five-nation tour. The tour is aimed at challenging a widespread perception that the United States has neglected the region and at combatting the rising influence of Venezuelan leftist President Hugo Chavez.

Meanwhile, Chavez, who has been shadowing Bush throughout this trip, was in Jamaica and Haiti, countries he is courting with preferential oil contracts and generous aid packages.

Bush and Berger did find common ground on the battle against drug trafficking.

Guatemala wants technical assistance, such as helicopters, radar and other equipment. Bush praised Berger's commitment, and said he wants the U.S. to work with Mexico and other Central American countries on a regional partnership to halt drug trafficking and gangs.

"I am a 'If they break the law, arrest them' person," Bush said. "I think we ought to find these people and bring them to justice. And it's tough because the richer they become, the more lethal they become, and the more dangerous they are to democracies. And that's why there needs to be a collaborative effort."

Bush was treated to a welcoming ceremony in the courtyard of Guatemala's National Palace, the site of the signing of 1996 peace accords that ended a 36-year civil war in which the United States often sided with repressive governments.

About 500 people marched toward the centrally located national palace _ site of the meetings and news conference _ to protest Bush's visit, some carrying signs with anti-Bush messages and others burning an effigy of the president. The demonstration was mostly peaceful, but more than 5,000 police and soldiers surrounded the palace.

During his helicopter visit with Berger to hill towns, Bush showcased the Central American Free Trade Agreement, which he just barely got through a then-Republican Congress in 2005. The Democratic takeover of Congress has left the prospects for further free-trade agreements dubious. But Bush was undeterred.

"Free trade is important for a lot of people. It's important for our country, it's a gateway. It creates jobs in America just like it creates jobs here," Bush told farmers and workers at a thriving vegetable packing station in Chirijuyu.

Before returning by helicopter to Guatemala City, the Bushes also took in Mayan ruins in the village of Iximche.

Mayan priests had decided to purify the sacred archaeological site to eliminate "bad spirits" after Bush's visit, according to Juan Tiney, the director of a Mayan non-governmental organization with close ties to Mayan religious and political leaders.