

In Guatemala, Bush Vows to Push Immigration Changes

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GUATEMALA CITY, March 12 -- President Bush defended a recent surge of deportations that have inflamed passions here in Latin America, but vowed Monday to redouble efforts to overhaul immigration laws and called on the Senate to pass comprehensive legislation by summer.

"The system needs to be fixed," he said during his first visit to this impoverished nation, which many have fled seeking opportunities in the United States, legally and illegally. "It seems like to me, we've got to get this done by August."

Although he called that a goal rather than a deadline, it was the first time Bush has prodded lawmakers with a time frame since Democrats took over Congress. It also was a tacit acknowledgment that the next few months represent his last chance to push through the most significant domestic initiative remaining in his presidency. After that, aides contend, the approach of the 2008 presidential primaries would make consensus implausible.

The president's visit put him in the awkward position of defending tough new enforcement actions and expanded barriers along the southern U.S. border while assuring Latin Americans that he remains committed to not expelling from the United States most illegal immigrants. President Oscar Berger pressed him about recent deportations of Guatemalans that upset a country where 10 percent of its population has moved north of the Rio Grande.

"I'm sure they don't want to be sent home," Bush said during an appearance with Berger at the National Palace. "But nevertheless we enforce laws."

Berger was openly disappointed. "The Guatemalan people would have preferred a more clear and positive response -- no more deportations," he said. But he expressed confidence that Bush could push through legislation addressing the situation. "We have never been so close to finding a solution to this problem as now," Berger said.

The immigration issue dominated the fourth day of the president's six-day Latin America tour and was likely to continue for the remainder of the trip as he headed Monday night for two days in Merida, Mexico. Tension over the matter complicated Bush's efforts to use his trip to convince Latin America that "we care" about poverty, destitution and "social justice," as he has put it.

The president took a helicopter tour of the highlands Monday to reinforce his message that the United States is working hard to uplift its neighbors, even though they have felt ignored by his administration. He visited a U.S. military program that provides medical care to rural poor and an agriculture cooperative for indigenous farmers whose irrigation

system was built with U.S. aid. Wearing an embroidered Mayan jacket, he hefted lettuce into a truck and handed out bags of hygiene items.

Bush also played tourist for a change, stopping by Iximche, a 537-year-old Mayan ruin that was the inspiration for the name of the country, where he watched children perform the traditional Dance of the Deer before a marimba band launched into John Philip Sousa march music. The day-long swing through the country was, Bush said later, "one of the great experiences of my presidency."

As with stops in Brazil, Uruguay and Colombia, Bush's visit was cause for protest among people angry about his policies. Hundreds of demonstrators massed a block from the National Palace as a wall of riot police prevented them from moving farther. Clouds of dark smoke arose from something burning near the protesters. And even at Iximche, Mayan priests said they planned to "purify" the ruin after Bush left, to get rid of any "bad spirits" he might have left behind.

Guatemala is a case study in the sort of economic desperation Bush says he wants to address. Many in this Tennessee-size country of 12 million struggle to make ends meet. The per capita gross domestic product of \$4,900 a year is little more than a 10th of the \$43,500 in the United States.

Bush arrived at a time of scandal for the government. Four police officers killed three Salvadoran members of the Central American Parliament and their driver last month in what officials suspect was a planned killing carried out by professional assassins. The police officers were taken into custody, then were mysteriously killed in prison. Several top security officials of Berger's government have since submitted their resignations.

Berger used their meeting to complain about a raid at a New Bedford, Mass., factory last week that netted 361 suspected illegal immigrants, many of them Guatemalans, and in some cases left children abandoned at schools. Despite suspicion here, Bush assured him they were not singled out because they were Guatemalans.

It appeared that Berger inadvertently prompted Bush to publicly set the August goal for immigration legislation when he told reporters that the president had used the date in their private conversation. Bush acknowledged that, while tempering it by saying it was not a firm deadline. But he said it had to be done by then because the fall would be consumed by appropriations bills.

Bush said that there needs to first be "a coherent Republican position" before his party can go to the Democrats to negotiate, and he called the Senate critical to passage. "You know full well that if we don't have enough consensus, nothing is going to move out of the Senate," he said. "And if nothing moves out of the Senate, nothing is going to happen in the House."

As he has at home, Bush stressed that he favors a "rational middle ground," balancing strict enforcement with compassion for 12 million illegal immigrants in the United States. "The biggest problem in this debate is going to be what to do with the people who are already in our country illegally," he said he told Berger. "And I explained to him there will not be amnesty, automatic citizenship. It's just not going to happen. Nor is it feasible to try to kick everybody out of our country. That's not possible."

Bush's August time frame pleased Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (Mass.), the main Democratic author of a bipartisan plan that the president generally favors. "There is no excuse for inaction," Kennedy said Monday night. "We must get comprehensive immigration reform done this year and done right."