

Calderon tells Bush Mexico needs more

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MERIDA, Mexico --President Bush, working to rebuild strained U.S.-Mexico relations, promised Tuesday he would do his best to get a deeply divided U.S. Congress to change American immigration policies that are hated south of the border.

"My pledge to you and your government, but more important to the people of Mexico, is I'll work as hard as I possibly can to pass comprehensive immigration reform," Bush said during a sun-splashed arrival ceremony that opened two days of meetings with Mexican President Felipe Calderon in this Yucatan Peninsula tourist haven.

Relations between the two border countries have only grown worse since Bush signed a law calling for construction of more than 700 miles of new fencing along the long border the two countries share.

Calderon has lambasted the fence - a mix of physical and high-tech barriers. He likens it to the Berlin Wall, and argues that both countries need to improve Mexico's economy to lessen the desire to seek work in the United States.

Before their talks, Calderon had a tough message for Bush: The United States must do more to solve thorny issues of drug-trafficking and immigration.

He was gentler at Bush's side, but with the same message.

"We fully respect the right that the government and the people of the United States has to decide within its territory what will be best for their concerns and security," he said as he welcomed Bush. "But at the same time we do consider in a respectful way that" migration can't be stopped with a fence.

At the same time, Calderon said much responsibility lies with his government.

"Mexicans lose in each migrant the best of our people - young people, working people ... strong people," he said. "We want to generate jobs for Mexicans here in Mexico. Because that is the only way to truly solve the migratory issue."

Calderon said "we wish the best of successes" to Bush as he deals with Congress on the politically tricky issue.

Bush said he respected Calderon's views, and signaled the importance he places on the U.S.-Mexico relationship.

The two also brought up narcotrafficking - an issue Bush thinks needs to be tackled regionally.

Calderon also is critical of the Bush administration's efforts to stem the flow of drugs into the United States.

"We need the collaboration and the active participation of our neighbor," he said Tuesday. "Knowing that while we will not reduce the demand for drugs in a certain area, it will be very difficult to reduce the supply in ours."

Security was extremely tight in Merida. Schools are closed. The area around the hotels where Bush and Calderon are staying is guarded by police and surrounded by metal barriers. Before Bush's arrival Monday evening, about 200 people marched through the streets, carrying Mexican flags and chanting "Bush is a murderer and he's not welcome!"

Gerardo Fernandez, a spokesman for Mexico's leftist Democratic Revolution Party, arrived in Merida on Monday with a bag of toy soldiers he wanted to leave at Bush's hotel so he could "play war and leave the world alone." When he couldn't get through security, he climbed a rusty metal barrier and threw the plastic troops into the secured area.

When he first became president, Bush promised that Latin American would vault to the top of his agenda. But after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, the administration's focus was riveted on South Asia and the Middle East. That left many Mexicans feeling neglected by their northern neighbor, and some view Bush's trip as a case of too little, too late.

Bush and Calderon's two days of talks are meant to better relations, not yield dramatic announcements.

The two have some things in common. Both went to Harvard University. Both are conservative and pro-business. Each wants to stem illegal immigration. Yet Calderon has a more wonkish and less charismatic personality than his predecessor Vicente Fox, who like Bush, owned a ranch.

Bush's five-nation tour of Latin America also is acting as a counterweight to Hugo Chavez, Venezuela's leftist leader who is carrying the flag for the leftward shift in Latin America.

Calderon, a conservative who narrowly won the contested July election, is under pressure from a strong leftist opposition to alleviate poverty affecting half of Mexico's citizens, and refrain from being a subordinate to the more powerful United States. The Mexican leader has said he's not interested in being Bush's front man for battling Chavez' rising influence.

Brazil, Uruguay, Colombia and Guatemala were the first four stops on Bush's trip that began last week. He returns on Wednesday to Washington, reinvigorated to press Democrats and Republicans to overhaul U.S. immigration

law. Bush is hoping that a measure will materialize by August - before spending bills begin to crowd the legislative calendar.

The biggest hurdle, Bush said, is figuring out what to do with the 12 million illegal immigrants already in the United States. The president has proposed a guest worker plan that would allow legal employment for foreigners and give some illegals a shot at becoming American citizens. Critics say this rewards unlawful behavior.