

# Bush vows to work for immigration change

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**MERIDA, Mexico** --President Bush, seeking to rebuild ties with Mexico, pledged Wednesday to intensify efforts to overhaul U.S. immigration laws and crack down on illegal drug trafficking.

Bush said that he senses there has been a change of attitudes in Congress about updating immigration laws, from skepticism last year to recognition now that changes are in U.S. interests.

"I will work with Congress, members of both political parties, to pass immigration law that will enable us to respect the rule of law - and at the same time, respect humanity," Bush said in a news conference with Mexican President Felipe Calderon.

Bush, facing a huge fight within his own party for his immigration plan, called it an important but sensitive issue.

"I say important because a good migration law will help both economies and will help the security of both countries," Bush said. "If people can come into our country, for example, on a temporary basis to work, doing jobs Americans aren't doing, they won't have to sneak across the border."

The meeting with Calderon capped a seven-day trip through five countries in Latin America. While Bush sought to shore up relations with Latin America and showcase U.S. compassion, he was shadowed by protests and taunts by leftist President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela. Chavez has accused Bush of turning his back on the region.

As he has throughout the trip, Bush shrugged off a question about Chavez and would not use name.

"Our conversations focused on democracy and the rule of law and prosperity," Bush said of his talks with Calderon.

Calderon took a question about Chavez more directly.

"Mexico is respectful of the opinions of other leaders," he said. "We are respectful of the heads of state of other countries, such as Venezuela."

Calderon - a fierce critic of plans for new U.S. fencing along the Mexican border - said his neighbor to the north must take other steps to ensure orderly migration. He thanked Bush for pressing Congress on the matter.

"We have seen the political will in order to reach shared goals," Calderon said.

Bush said he's optimistic that an immigration bill would get through Congress this year. His plans calls for a guest worker program and a path to citizenship for immigrants, but critics are wary that will amount to amnesty for illegal residents.

Bush praised Calderon for his tough stand on organized crime and drugs, and said the United States has a responsibility to reduce its demand for narcotics. Bush also said he would fight efforts to weaken the trade relationship with Mexico.

"When Mexico grows, the United States benefits," Bush said.

"There are strong protectionist sentiments in the United States," Bush said. "I will work, Mr. President, to reject those protectionist sentiments."

Calderon was asked if reports were true that he had relatives in the United States, and if so, whether they were here legally. He responded that he does have family in the country and they work on vegetable farms.

"What I can tell you is that these are people who work and respect that country. They pay their taxes to the government," Calderon said.

He also said he hoped that Mexicans who have left the country for jobs across the border would return one day.

"We want them to find jobs here in Mexico. We miss them," he said.

Just before the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, Bush stressed the importance of the U.S. relationship with Mexico. The war in Iraq, which Mexico did not support, and in Afghanistan shifted Bush's focus to the Middle East and Mexicans felt neglected.

The anti-American sentiment rose when Bush signed a bill to install hundreds of miles of new fencing, vehicle barriers and infrared cameras along the border.

Mexicans view the fence as an insult that has aggravated already strained relations with their powerful northern neighbor. Bush worked to allay their concerns, saying the barrier and stepped up enforcement along the border were only the first steps in a comprehensive immigration law overhaul.

The president says his administration is trying to forge a cohesive Republican block of support on the issue in the Senate.