

[Ambassador Discusses U.S.- Mexico Relations;](#) [Proposed Fence Highlights Immigration Issues](#)

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Byline: [Ambassador](#) of [Mexico](#) to the United States

Highlight: A bill passed in the House of Representatives last month is [proposing](#) the construction of a nearly 700-mile [fence](#) along the [U.S.-Mexico](#) border, one of the most prominent measures in recent history aimed at discouraging illegal [immigration](#). The Border Protection, Anti-Terrorism, and Illegal [Immigration](#) Control Act would also classify illegal immigrants as felons and impose harsher penalties on those who assist them.

Body

A bill passed in the House of Representatives last month is [proposing](#) the construction of a nearly 700-mile [fence](#) along the [U.S.-Mexico](#) border, one of the most prominent measures in recent history aimed at discouraging illegal [immigration](#). The Border Protection, Anti-Terrorism, and Illegal [Immigration](#) Control Act would also classify illegal immigrants as felons and impose harsher penalties on those who assist them.

The [proposal](#) has sparked a new round of debate on a long contentious [issue](#). Mexican President Vicente Fox has called for [immigration](#) reforms that would benefit the many Mexicans living in the [U.S. Relations](#) between the two nations have at times been strained since 9/11 as concerns over security and terrorism have clouded the border [issue](#). Fox has publicly opposed the [fence](#), calling it "shameful" and damaging to democracy. In a joint meeting Monday, [Mexico](#) and its Central American neighbors announced their opposition to the bill, saying it is unnecessarily harsh in its attempt to criminalize the estimated thousands of people that attempt to cross the border into the [U.S.](#) each day.

Carlos de Icaza , [Ambassador](#) of [Mexico](#) to the United States, was online Thursday, Jan. 12, at noon ET to [discuss U.S.-Mexico relations, immigration issues](#) and [Mexico's](#) opposition to a [U.S. proposal](#) to build a [fence](#) along the border.

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Read Marcela Sanchez 's column on the [proposed fence](#): That Divisive Anti-Immigrant [Fence](#) , (Post, Jan. 6, 2006)

La divisiva valla antimigratoria , (Post, Jan. 6, 2006)

World Opinion Roundup : [Proposed](#) Wall Divides the Americas.

The transcript follows.

Biographical Information:

Ambassador Discusses U.S.- Mexico Relations; Proposed Fence Highlights Immigration Issues

Ambassador de Icaza was born in 1948, is a career diplomat and joined the Mexican Foreign Service in 1970 as Vice-consul. He was promoted to the rank of **Ambassador** in 1982.

Ambassador de Icaza has represented **Mexico** in several multilateral meetings of the United Nations, the Organization of the American States, the International Labor Organization and Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).

Ambassador de Icaza has published two books on international **relations** and has received decorations from 17 countries.

Marcela Sanchez: Good afternoon everybody, welcome! Buenas tardes a todos, bienvenidos! During the next hour, I will be hosting Mexican **Ambassador** Carlos de Icaza who has agreed to answer questions about the important and difficult **issue** of **immigration**. Please feel free to ask in Spanish if you are more comfortable (envíen sus preguntas en español si así lo prefiere)? But let's begin. Bienvenido embajador y muchas gracias por su tiempo. Welcome **ambassador** and thanks so much for your time. I am taking the prerogative as a host to start with a question that a few readers have been asking but I would like to summarize.

Marcela Sanchez: You attended Monday's meeting in **Mexico** City, some readers would like to know what gives other governments the right to get involved with this **issue** that should concern only Americans. What's more, some officials in this city might not tell you directly -- after all Washington is known to get involved in many **issues** south of the Rio Grande -- but they fear that anything other governments say, particularly **Mexico's**, may end up being counterproductive. Why hold the meeting then?

Ambassador Carlos de Icaza: The **immigration issue** is not only a domestic policy concern. The **immigration** phenomenon goes across borders and involves people traveling in response to labor market forces. Today in the world we have more than 200 million people of different nationalities working in the so-called rich countries. In the US, there are more than 5 million hard-working Mexican nationals contributing to your economy and our economy. The only way in which we can tackle the **immigration** challenge is through international cooperation. In this globalized world, cooperation is essential among neighbors.

Washington, D.C.: Mr. **Ambassador**, as a legal immigrant who waited in line and followed all the laws for the privilege of working and living in this great country, why should Mexicans be given special treatment over others from other countries?

Ambassador Carlos de Icaza: We are not asking for special treatment and we do not favor illegal **immigration**. We are only stating our willingness to reach an agreement with the US government in order to achieve a legal, orderly, humane, and dignified migration flow between our countries.

Dallas, Ga.: Could the **Ambassador** please explain the rationale behind the tacitly expressed opinion that their citizens have some kind of right to enter America less than legally if they want to?

Ambassador Carlos de Icaza: We are not saying that citizens have the right to enter any country illegally. We are also a country of laws. Illegality is something that happens when **immigration** is left to market forces instead of regulating it through international cooperation. **Mexico**, as the United States, strives for legal **immigration**.

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Detroit, Mich.: What is "shameful" (as stated by President Vicente Fox) about a country protecting its borders? Why can't a country decide for itself who it will admit for immigration? There are many places around the world where people have to flee for their lives (Rwanda, Sudan, etc.). When the U.S. puts up with illegal immigration from Mexico, it makes it only harder for people with more legitimate needs to come to this country.

Ambassador Carlos de Icaza: We respect the right of every country in the world to protect its border. But at the same time, we have to acknowledge that there is a de facto labor market complementarity between our countries. The US economy demands every year around 500,000 low-skilled workers and only offers around 5,000 visas for this category. We have to match the realities of the market with the security needs. There needs to be a balance between these concerns. Because what happens today is that there is a double standard. On the one hand, migration is encouraged, and on the other, there is no legal way to meet the market demands. What we propose is to recognize that immigration is a shared responsibility and that international cooperation is essential, especially between countries that are partners, friends and neighbors.

Cranford, N.J.: NAFTA was supposed to integrate the economies of both countries. If this was done how come the Mexican economy not kept up with the job growth needed to sustain the [population] growth in Mexico? Should not the Mexican government eliminate the corruption that is prevalent in Mexico? To make the economy more viable?

Ambassador Carlos de Icaza: NAFTA is a free trade agreement, nothing less nothing more. It has made our countries partners in trade. Our economy is doing quite well these days. We have sound economic policies and the country is growing. The American economy is 15 times the size of Mexico's. No matter how well we do, there is a great magnet of attraction for migrants that want better jobs and opportunities. In addition, the US economy is demanding foreign workers for many jobs. We have come a long way in reshaping our economy and political life, including the fight against corruption. We know that we have a long way to go on this path. Immigration issues have a lot to do with supply and demand.

Dallas, Ga.: The perception the American public has is that the Mexican government has no interest in securing their side of the border and nothing but hostility to us trying to secure our side. One assumes that Mexican nationals understand that crossing the border without documentation is illegal. Do our southern neighbors hold the law in such contempt that attempted enforcement is a cause for such rancor? And exactly why does Mexico feel that their border-jumping citizens deserve anything from our government other than summary deportation?

Ambassador Carlos de Icaza: I don't share your opinion about the perception. We have achieved an unprecedented level of cooperation on security matters with the US. Today we are partners in the fight against terrorism, we cooperate in fighting against smugglers, traffickers and organized crime. The millions of hard-working Mexicans in this country came attracted by the jobs that your economy is offering. They are honest people, forced to live in the shadows, in many cases frequently object of abuse. Every human being has the right to be respected. That is what the US, Mexico and all civilized nations believe in.

East Windsor, N.J.: Ambassador Icaza,

I find the opposition from Mexico and other Latin-American governments to the fence a little hypocritical. They argue about immigrants' human rights (and rightly so) but they don't do much to discourage illegal immigration in the first place, because they obviously know that the economic/social situation in their countries would be extremely difficult to sustain with those thousands of jobless people that decide to emigrate to the U.S. searching for jobs not available in those countries (even though the goofy Mexico's press Secretary says otherwise). Don't you think is time for Mexico to stop depending so much on illegal immigration to the U.S.?

Thanks!

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Ambassador Carlos de Icaza: **Fences** don't always make good neighbors. If we are going to face the challenges of the 21st century in North America, we need to cooperate as partners on trade, in the fight against terrorism, as well as find a way to work together to accomplish a safe, humane, legal and dignified migration flow between our countries. **Fencing** is not the way to construct a better understanding.

One must also understand that the magnet of the American economy attracts migrants regarding how well or how bad we do in our own economy.

Munich, Germany: The thought of a wall between NAFTA partners is quite strange from a European perspective, where citizens of the EU can chose to live and work in any other country within the European Union.

Do you think that the NAFTA agreement will ever broach the **issue** of residency and employment within the member countries **Mexico**, United States and Canada?

Ambassador Carlos de Icaza: Europe has been a source of inspiration for the rest of the world. If in North America we are going to face the challenge of Asian economies, we need to increase our ability to compete in the globalized market. Instead of **fences**, let there be more bridges. Recently, the US, Canada and **Mexico** launched a Security and Prosperity partnership (SPP), which aims to make our economies more resilient and our security stronger. If we are going to further integrate North America, we need to find a balance between security concerns, economic opportunities, and **immigration issues**. We have to recognize that our ability to compete in international markets depends on our resolve to face the **immigration** challenge.

Maryland: If you do not favor illegal **immigration** and you are willing to reach an agreement with the US government in "order to achieve a legal, orderly, humane, and dignified migration flow", then why is **Mexico** oppose to building a **fence** along the border? Wouldn't a **fence** deter illegal **immigration**?

Ambassador Carlos de Icaza: **Fences** will not suffice to deter illegal **immigration**. Enforcement-only initiatives will not solve the dilemma, because there is a real demand from the US economy for foreign workers.

Guatemala City, Guatemala: Would the **Ambassador** care to comment on how **Mexico** treats undocumented migrants in **Mexico**? While there is no **fence**, per se, the abuse of migrants by Mexican officials is legendary, as is the subsequent impunity for such action.

Ambassador Carlos de Icaza: This is an important point you raise. My government is committed to decisively improve the way undocumented persons are treated in my country. Most of them, by the way, are crossing **Mexico** to reach the United States.

We have less resources than the US to cope with the increasing flow of migrants through Mexican territory. As of 2005, we deported 250,000 people, which represented a great effort on our part. This shows that no single country can cope by itself with such a challenge.

Alexandria, Va.: There is really no end in sight for illegal **immigration** as long as there is such a huge difference in income and opportunities between the **U.S.** and **Mexico**/Calif. And, there is no way that most of these immigrants would ever qualify for a legal visa to the **U.S.**

I work with recent immigrants in Northern Virginia. When I see a mom who worked earning \$50/week in El Salvador, and feels the only way she can support her three kids is to get a job up here, she really doesn't have many good alternatives.

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We say "we all came here legally", but for past immigrants to the U.S., "legal" meant paying for a ship ride and having \$30 in your pocket upon arrival. A huge proportion of our immigrant ancestors would never have made it here under current visa requirements.

So, I don't think that a wall is the answer. Could the U.S. work on really serious, hard-core development projects in Central America to help these countries reach a higher economic status? Should we say "we use 25% of the world's resources with 5% of the population; let's let our neighbors who had worse luck (they are certainly not less hardworking or enterprising) have more of a share of this?" -- I know that this is not popular in the U.S. culture where we always want more and more, but maybe the only real alternative is accepting that we will share a little of our incredible bounty with our neighbors who want to come here and work hard.

What a thought.

Ambassador Carlos de Icaza: Your point is well taken. We have to understand the links between economic development and immigration flows. That is why it is so important that we work together in bringing more economic opportunities, trade, investment and integration in the Americas. We are very committed to this idea.

Washington, D.C.: Mr. **Ambassador**. Do you agree that subtle, quiet and active diplomacy and lobbying in Congress on this issue are more effective in Washington than bombastic, nationalistic and over the top statements made against the US from Mexico City? Aren't you frustrated sometimes with the words coming out of Mexico City's press conferences?

Ambassador Carlos de Icaza: Immigration debate in both countries have quite an emotional component. We are free countries and everybody has the right to give their own opinion. I am confident that reason will prevail. The US and Mexico are partners in trade, partners in the fight against terrorism, and partners in the fight against organized crime. Why can't we be partners on immigration, and work together to regulate the immigration flow between our countries? No, I am not frustrated because the majority of the people in the US and Mexico want our neighborliness to be a source of understanding, friendship and cooperation.

San Diego, Calif.: What is Mexico willing to do in terms of dealing with immigration?

Ambassador Carlos de Icaza: Mexico wants to be a partner with the US regarding immigration issues. For more than a century, there has been a constant flow of immigration between our countries, helping both of our economies and our peoples. We have to recover the circularity. That means building a legal way for migrants to work in work in the US and return home. For over thirty years, we have had an agreement with Canada that works well. That means that every year, when two countries work together, they can share responsibilities such as training, background checking, covering insurance, and having proper labor contracts. If we could achieve such an agreement, both of our economies would benefit. Obviously, we are willing to do our share.

Gaithersburg, Md.: Mr. **Ambassador**, I don't have a question, but wanted to comment on what the U.S. government is doing in response to our immigration problems. First, as an American I feel the need to apologize to you, the people of Mexico, and the rest of Latin America for the wall we are about to build.

Our Republican congress deals in black and white, in the absolutes that the real world does not. To them, building this wall is nothing more the friendly neighbor who puts up a privacy fence so you can't see their swimming pool. The wall will further antagonize skeptical leaders such as Hugo Chavez and the newly elected president of Bolivia. What they fail to see is how this wall - this barrier - is a visceral and tangible extension of Bush's failed foreign policies in Latin America.

For the perceptions of America that that will cause in your country and others, I personally apologize.

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Ambassador Carlos de Icaza: You need not apologize. In **immigration issues**, we all have to work together. Everyday I receive calls from American friends commenting how committed they are to the friendship between our countries. I believe that if we place the human dimension of our understanding at the center of our relationship, we will be able to solve together any **issue** that arises, no matter how complex it is.

Arlington, Va.: Do you believe that the current controversy within **Mexico** toward these congressional **proposals** on **immigration** will be a major factor in this year's presidential election? Can you shed any light on where the major candidates (Obrador, Calderon, Medrazo) stand on this **issue**?

Ambassador Carlos de Icaza: In an election year, every party has its own stand on the political **issues**. Nevertheless, in the case of **Mexico**, there is common ground among the different political forces, such as our willingness to engage in serious discussions with the US to negotiate an **immigration** agreement. The need to recognize the contribution of migrants to both our societies and the demand that their human rights are respected. The need to have a secure, legal, orderly and humane migration flow between our countries. Obviously, migration is a big **issue** in both countries.

Baltimore, Md.: Mr **Ambassador**:

But you do appear to be asking us to stop a measure that seems to be our last best hope to control the illegal alien problem...what would you even suggest that could remedy that situation. Many of us here see all Latin American countries as opposing this and favoring amnesty especially because of the economic gains you receive when workers send money home.

Ambassador Carlos de Icaza: The best hope for the control of **immigration** is a comprehensive reform that balances security concerns with the realities of the economy.

Harrisburg, Pa.: I have asked this question of others, and the answer is usually the same: interesting theory but impractical to execute. So, let me ask: is there any way you could see making this possible, or is it just an interesting but impossible dream?

Mexico has a relatively less wealthy economy, which is why Mexican employees go to the United States for higher wages. At the same time, **Mexico** is rich in resources such as oil and agriculture, many of which are supported by American investments. If we in America could provide greater investment in **Mexico** under a condition that employees are paid more decent wages, and if we could assist in the expansion of the Mexican economy, especially in oil (rather than buying so much from the Middle East), both countries gain. What is preventing this from happening?

Ambassador Carlos de Icaza: That is not happening because we do not have an institutionalized dialogue on **immigration issues** between our countries. Until there is a comprehensive **immigration** reform in the US, it will be very difficult to have an objective debate on this important **issue**.

Falls Church, Va.: Mr. **Ambassador**, Could you please explain the rationale behind the hiring of a US lobbying firm to promote **Mexico**'s position on the **proposed** security measures? How would you explain to the American public that the Mexican government is attempting to sway public policy in its favor and to our potential detriment in terms of securing our borders? Thank you.

Ambassador Carlos de Icaza: We are not hiring any lobbying firm. We have hired a PR agency for image and media purposes only.

Atlanta, Ga.: But we in the US are compelled by our own problems, for example the rising cost of health care. Do you know that in border states health care at ER's for illegals is bankrupting our healthcare institutions. Most of the money for these services comes out of U.S. citizens taxes. As Americans we are among the most generous to countries around the world in the face of disaster. We need to take care of ourselves and Mexico needs to care for its citizens. This makes you look as if you are unwilling to provide those humane circumstances for your citizens. How can you see it any other way?

Ambassador Carlos de Icaza: If there were a comprehensive immigration reform, healthcare issues could be dealt with more adequately. For instance, last year undocumented migrant workers contributed more than 7 billion dollars to Social Security that went unclaimed. It is obvious that if they were authorized workers, these contributions would have been useful for the welfare system.

Berkeley, Calif.: How can the US and Mexico better fight human trafficking? What, in your view, is a superior alternative to a border fence?

Ambassador Carlos de Icaza: Recently, we launched a joint US-Mexico operation called OASSIS, which means Operation against Smugglers, Security Initiative. With this partnership, we have had important results fighting against this scourge. The alternative to a border fence is expanding cooperation in order to fight together the criminals that are endangering the lives of innocent people.

Ambassador Carlos de Icaza: Mexico and the US share a solid friendship. With a spirit of understanding, partnership and cooperation, I am confident that we can face any challenge.

I would like to express my appreciation to the Washington Post for giving me the opportunity to respond, and to the many readers for their insightful questions.

Thank you all and Happy New Year!

Carlos de Icaza

Marcela Sanchez: Thanks so much **Ambassador** de Icaza, you've been more than generous with your time and answers. Thank you also to everyone who joined us. Have a wonderful day! Feliz dF0ara todos!

Editor's Note: Washingtonpost.com moderators retain editorial control over Live Online discussions and choose the most relevant questions for guests and hosts; guests and hosts can decline to answer questions.

Classification

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