

Mexico Plans A Tighter Grip On Its Border To the South; Security Effort Targets Flow Of Drugs, Migrants to U.S.

The Washington Post

June 18, 2001 Monday, Final Edition

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The Washington Post
washingtonpost.com

Section: A SECTION; Pg. A01

Length: 908 words

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Dateline: MEXICO CITY June 17

Body

The Mexican government plans to sharply increase the presence of soldiers, police officers, naval patrols and immigration checkpoints near its porous southern border. The plan, which has not yet been made public, is an unprecedented effort to choke off flows of illegal immigrants, drugs and guns entering the country from Central America.

Most of the illicit human and drug traffic coming into Mexico is heading to the United States, and Washington has long urged Mexico to control its 750-mile border with Guatemala and Belize more tightly. While much attention has been placed on Mexico's northern border, officials say many of the problems there start with the notoriously corrupt and loosely enforced protection of the southern border.

Hundreds of thousands of undocumented people, many from Guatemala and El Salvador but increasingly from as far away as China and Iraq, enter Mexico from the south. When immigration or police officials stop truckloads of these people, or shipments of cocaine or arms, they frequently wave them through in exchange for a cash bribe.

Interior Minister Santiago Creel said in an interview that getting Mexico's southern flank under control was critical to President Vicente Fox's promise to crack down on corruption, and to Mexico's commitment to Washington to reduce the flow of U.S.-bound illegal immigrants.

"We have never had the security we want in the south; things were very loose," said Creel, who is in charge of the South Plan, or Southern Zone Plan. "This is part of our big challenge to modernize and find new ways of doing things in Mexico."

"We are very encouraged to hear this," said Johnny N. Williams, western regional director of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service. "Mexico is used as a transit point" for illegal traffic into the United States, he said, and what happens on Mexico's southern border is of "extreme importance to both countries."

Williams said there has been a "revolutionary" change in the way Mexico and the United States work together on immigration issues. On Friday, the countries issued a statement outlining new joint rescue and training operations aimed at preventing more deaths of illegal immigrants crossing into the Arizona desert. During the hot summer

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months, the United States will put more helicopters and personnel in the region and Mexico has added rescue workers on its side of the border.

Creel said that in return for Mexican efforts to reduce illegal immigration, the United States should help with immigration issues important to Mexico. He said he hoped negotiations with Washington would produce results on increasing guest worker programs and "regularizing" the legal status of Mexican workers already in the United States. "The U.S. has to present results, as well as Mexico," he said.

No one knows exactly how many people cross into Mexico illegally via its southern border. Mexico last year deported more than 150,000 foreigners, almost all of them trying to reach the United States; most of them had entered across the southern border. Officials estimate that for every illegal immigrant caught, three to five more evade authorities.

U.S. officials last year caught 28,000 non-Mexicans who illegally entered the country across the U.S.-Mexico border. More than 22,000 were from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, and most of them are believed to have arrived in Mexico through its southern border.

Creel said \$ 10 million has been allocated for the National Immigration Institute, and much of that new money will go to modernizing 13 tumbledown southern border checkpoints. Four or five new ones also will be built. Construction is to start next month.

Perhaps the most innovative feature of the plan, whose final details have not yet been worked out, is the focus of elite groups of soldiers and police along a critical highway. The Trans-Isthmus Highway crosses Mexico at a narrow point, connecting the Gulf of Mexico in the north to the Pacific Ocean 150 miles to the south. It runs from the town of Coatzacoalcas in Veracruz state to the town of Salina Cruz in Oaxaca state.

All land traffic from the southern border to the rest of Mexico must cross this relatively short highway. Creel said that guarding this key choke point would be easier than trying to patrol the entire border. And to catch those who try to beat the new system by going by sea, the plan calls for naval ships to sharply increase their patrols in southern waters.

Creel said concentrating manpower in the narrow Isthmus of Tehuantepec would be less expensive and more efficient than the traditional system of haphazard checks and patrols. "In the past the policy wasn't effective at all. . . . There was no plan. Now we are working with clear objectives," Creel said.

Another critical element of the new plan is attacking official corruption and human rights violations. Officials said the new system will not work unless Mexico can stop bribery of officials and robberies of immigrants.

The immigration service has a new, reform-minded director and many other officials have been fired, from top management to those who work at remote border stations.

Creel said the government was conducting undercover sting operations to detect official corruption. He said that while there has been noticeable improvement in the effectiveness of immigration operations in the northern states, "in the south we have not seen even the start of results."

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: IMMIGRATION (91%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (90%); CORRUPTION (90%); CONTROLLED

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SUBSTANCES CRIME (90%); BRIBERY (78%); CITIZENSHIP (78%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (78%); TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL **BORDERS** (78%); **BORDER** CONTROL (78%); POLICE FORCES (78%); LAW ENFORCEMENT (78%); FOREIGN LABOR (78%); ILLEGAL **DRUGS** (77%); ARMED FORCES (73%); **DRUG** TRAFFICKING (72%); COCAINE (72%); INTERVIEWS (67%)

Industry: ARMED FORCES (73%); HELICOPTERS (50%)

Person: VICENTE FOX QUESADA (58%)

Geographic: **UNITED STATES** (99%); **MEXICO** (96%); GUATEMALA (92%); EL SALVADOR (79%); BELIZE (79%); IRAQ (79%); NORTH AMERICA (79%); CENTRAL AMERICA (79%)

Load-Date: June 18, 2001

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