

MEXICAN LEADER HAILS MIGRANT WORKERS IN CALIFORNIA; VICENTE FOX PLEDGES TO WORK ON ISSUES AFFECTING THEIR LIVES

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Body

Often scorned at home and ignored in the United States, migrant laborers found themselves celebrated as heroes Thursday by Mexican President Vicente Fox.

Nearly 3,000 people crowded into a convention hall to hear Fox, who praised field workers and promised to work on issues that matter most in their lives. About 2,000 more listened outside through loudspeakers.

Fox pledged to push Mexico's Congress to allow people to vote from outside the country, to work with U.S. officials on a solution to long-standing disputes over immigration and to make it easier for expatriates to return to Mexico.

"You are important, believe me, very important," Fox said, as cheers drowned out his words.

Such talk is a change for Mexican leaders. Money sent home by expatriates is one of Mexico's largest sources of income. But past leaders did little to court the men and women who fled their homes to work long hours and difficult jobs in the United States.

Fox campaigned in California last May and views expatriates as a source of financial and moral support for his right-of-center National Action Party and its legislative agenda.

"You are permanent ambassadors of Mexican culture," he told the crowd. "You have become a link between the United States and Mexico."

Fox pledged that Mexican consulates would do more to investigate civil rights abuses against Mexicans in the United States, and he said he would devote more money to rural Mexico so people might not have to leave.

Fox was expected to visit an elementary school in San Fernando with President George W. Bush's wife, Laura, and attend a town hall meeting in Los Angeles with Gov. Gray Davis.

Fox's visit brought out protesters for and against immigration. Some argued that Fox wasn't doing enough to help the field workers, while others regarded the workers as part of an "invasion by Mexico." But the majority of people at the event in Fresno seemed enthusiastic, saying Fox's visit gave overdue attention to immigrant laborers.

"Finally, we have a president who seems concerned with the plight of poor people," said Jessie Oviedo, 56, who came to the United States from Mexico as a child and worked as a farm laborer before eventually landing a government clerical job.

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"This is a big day for us," said Emilio Bolanos, 80, who showed up at the convention center at 6 a.m. for a front-row seat. "President **Fox** represents the future."

Fox's tour also represents the growing influence of Latinos in the nation's most populous state. The governor noted that more than a third of **California's** 34 million residents are of **Mexican** descent.

Graphic

PHOTO PHOTO by THE ASSOCIATED PRESS - **Mexican** President **Vicente Fox** and 3-year-old Luis Piedad Ayala of Avenal, Calif., gesture to a crowd at a rally in Fresno, Calif., on Thursday.

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