

Mexico's leader calls for immigration talks

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Body

MEXICO CITY -- President Vicente Fox urged Secretary of State Colin Powell and other visiting U.S. Cabinet members Tuesday to restart stalled negotiations on improving immigration rules between Mexico and the United States, but Powell offered no hope of early progress on the divisive issue.

"The tragic events of (Sept. 11, 2001) obliged us to give priority to the topics of security and postpone solutions to other important matters on the bilateral agenda," Fox told Powell, Attorney General John Ashcroft and five other members of President Bush's Cabinet at an annual binational meeting. "Now it is the moment to take up our negotiations again with newfound energy."

Fox has been criticized here for having little to show for his extensive efforts to improve ties with the United States, particularly on the border issue that affects the many Mexicans who travel to work in the United States.

In several public addresses during a 24-hour visit here, however, Powell sought to lower expectations for any immediate agreement on immigration. At the same time, he assured America's southern neighbor that "there is no area in the world that is more important to us than our own neighborhood."

Powell's trip, like a similar one-day visit to Canada two weeks ago, was designed largely to mend fences with a neighbor that has felt ignored since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Many Mexicans, like many Canadians, believe that Washington has lost interest in bilateral relations as it focuses on fighting terrorism.

Mexican reaction to Powell's visit was generally upbeat. No one had expected much substance from the talks, but many were pleased that Bush sent a high-level delegation at a time when the administration is occupied with Iraq and the war on terror.

Still, Mexicans are disappointed that warm ties between Bush and Fox have yielded few concrete results, especially on changes to U.S. immigration policy, which is Mexico's No. 1 foreign policy priority. Despite heightened security in the past year, Mexican illegal immigrants continue to flow into the United States, and deaths along remote desert areas of the border have increased sharply.

Mexicans have urged Bush to grant more visas to Mexicans, create new guest-worker programs and legalize some of the estimated 3 million to 4 million Mexican illegal immigrants already living in the United States. Although Bush and Fox had agreed to seek an immigration accord early last year, momentum on that plan was stalled by the Sept. 11 attacks.

"U.S. migration policies must treat Mexican men, women and children with respect and dignity," Bush said in a videotaped message played for Fox and the other officials Tuesday morning. "Our Cabinet officials continue to work together on creative new policies so that immigration is legal, orderly and safe."

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Powell, in a joint news conference with Mexican Foreign Minister Jorge Castaneda, said the United States is "just as committed today" to **immigration** reform as before the Sept. 11 attacks. But he noted that those attacks, along with this month's election of a new Congress and creation of a new Department of Homeland Security, changed the political realities in Washington.

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