

Mexico blasts Georgia illegals law

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Body

Mexico City --- The Mexican government **blasted Georgia's** new illegal immigration **law** Tuesday, calling it a half-measure that discriminates against Mexicans.

Implementing the **Georgia law** could result in "acts of discrimination" against Mexicans living in **Georgia**, Ruben Aguilar, spokesman for President Vicente Fox, told reporters Tuesday in an unusual public comment by a foreign government on an internal U.S. debate.

"It's the position of [Fox] that the half-measures in this **law** are insufficient to resolve ... the complex phenomenon of immigration between **Mexico** and the United States," Aguilar said.

The **Georgia** bill, signed into **law** Monday by Gov. Sonny Perdue, requires verification of the legal status of those seeking certain taxpayer-funded services. The **law** also prevents employers from claiming the wages of illegal workers as a state tax deduction.

Sen. Chip Rogers (R-Woodstock), the sponsor of the **law** --- Senate Bill 529 --- fired back at the Mexican government.

"I challenge President Fox to reread Senate Bill 529, and if he can find a single reference to **Mexico** or any foreign nation, I will move to repeal 529," Rogers said.

"I would suggest the government of **Mexico** stop concerning themselves with what we do in **Georgia** and instead worry about their own corrupt government, which has caused millions of their own citizens to leave their home country," Rogers said. "A foreign government has no place in making **Georgia law**."

Perdue spokesman Dan McLagan dismissed the characterization of the new **law** as discriminatory.

"This is not an anti-immigrant **law**. It is a fairness issue. This is saying that people should come in the front door, not the back door, and that the **laws** of our country and our state need to be obeyed. We are a hospitable people in the state of **Georgia**, but when folks wish to immigrate to the country, they need to do it in a legal way," McLagan said.

Polls show about 80 percent of Georgians want their elected leaders to confront the issue of illegal immigration.

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The Atlanta office of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund has said it is contemplating a legal challenge to the law, calling it "unjust and unfair." There are an estimated 250,000 to 800,000 illegal immigrants in Georgia.

Activists in Georgia for stricter immigration controls predicted the bill would be used as a model by other states and influence the national debate, which resumes in the U.S. Senate next week. That's something that worries some officials and observers in Mexico, who seek changes in U.S. law to legalize the status of illegal immigrants and offer guest worker programs.

"The news has everybody concerned," said Ana Cristina Castillo Petersen, an international relations expert in Mexico City. "It's having an impact on how [Mexicans] believe immigrants are perceived --- as a threat to cultural values, as a cost to the state."

Castillo said the Georgia law appeared to follow the lines of bills and laws in California and Arizona that are perceived as anti-immigration. "And now in Georgia," she said. "It's certainly seen as a negative impact."

While condemning the Georgia law, Aguilar praised Arizona Gov. Janet Napolitano, who vetoed a bill Monday that would have allowed local authorities to arrest illegal immigrants under broadened trespassing definitions.

Fox, a former Coca-Cola executive in Mexico, has pushed hard but unsuccessfully over five years for immigration changes to let more Mexicans work legally in the United States. Estimates of the number of illegal immigrants in the United States range from 10 million to 12 million.

Jorge Bustamante, who prepares reports for the United Nations on the human rights outlook of migrant workers and is one of Mexico's leading experts on the topic, called the complaints by Fox's government "absolutely irrelevant" because Mexico has so far failed to influence immigration policy in the United States.

"Unfortunately, some people are confused by these statements because they think Fox is doing the right thing by protesting, when in reality it has no impact," Bustamante said.

Staff writer Carlos Campos (ccampos@ajc.com) in Atlanta contributed the material from Georgia officials.

Graphic

Photo: President Vicente Fox said through a spokesman that the bill could bring discrimination.

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