

Sharp Reaction to Immigration Bill's Defeat

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Body

Latin America reacted with sharp disappointment Friday to the U.S. Senate's defeat of an immigration bill, a decision that Mexican President Felipe Calder?n called "a grave error" and Salvadoran President El?as Antonio Saca said was "a pity."

Latin American governments have long hoped for a comprehensive reform package that would include guest-worker provisions and a route to legal status for the estimated 12 million undocumented migrants in the United States -- half of whom are Mexican. At the same time, the Calder?n administration has tried lately to lower expectations, in the belief that immigration reform is unlikely until after a new U.S. president is elected in November 2008.

In an editorial published Friday, the Mexico City newspaper El Universal said it is "highly hypocritical that the United States admits migrants as peasants, but does not accept them as citizens. A state that sends troops to the Middle East to try to implant democracy and respect for human rights does not practice such supreme values in its own territory."

But the paper also ascribed blame to Mexico, saying the country is itself guilty of hypocrisy for not creating enough employment to entice Mexicans to stay at home.

Calder?n predicted that the Senate's decision would increase illegal migration and "generate worse conditions and insecurity on both sides of the border. The migration problem cannot be resolved simply with speeches; it requires concrete resolutions."

Calder?n, speaking before departing Mexico City for a diplomatic visit to Belize, has been taking a more aggressive stance toward the United States than his predecessor, Vicente Fox, who had sought to parlay a personal friendship with President Bush into an immigration accord. Calder?n and his top lieutenants were incensed this week after discovering that portions of the wall on the U.S.-Mexican border are in Mexican territory. Calder?n said he

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complained to U.S. officials and received assurances that those parts of the wall would be removed before the end of the week.

Reaction to the **immigration bill's** failure might have been even more intense if not for concerns here that it put too heavy an emphasis on border security and involved overly complex provisions on granting citizenship to undocumented migrants, said Dan Lund, a Mexico City pollster.

Despite some heated comments from Mexican leaders, it appears the Calder's administration has adopted the philosophy that "no **bill** is better than a bad **bill**," Lund said in an interview.

"Life goes on," Lund said. "Here this is a hothouse issue for a few in the media and policy wonks, but everyone else will do what they have to do to get across the border."

In El Salvador, Saca said, "I lament what happened in the Senate. I hope that the senators consider this well, because there are 12 million people [in the United States] who are undocumented."

"What a pity, what a pity, but those are decisions of the legislators," Saca told reporters.

In Guatemala, the newspaper Prensa Libre described the Senate vote as "deplorable" in an editorial headlined "12 Million Victims." The vote, the paper said, showed that the United States is "a country hostile toward immigrants."

Prensa Libre predicted that the decision would hurt the economies of the United States and Guatemala by restricting the flow of people between the countries. But, the paper noted, there could be a subtler, even more damaging effect.

"Little by little, the number of people who lose their appreciation of [the United States] will grow," the paper said. "With what happened yesterday, everyone loses, sooner rather than later, and there are fewer possibilities of healing that wound."

Graphic

IMAGE; By Eduardo Verdugo -- Associated Press; Mexican President Felipe Calder's said the U.S. Senate's decision would increase illegal migration and worsen conditions on both sides of the border.

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