

The Deepening Dimensions of the U.S.-Mexico Border Crisis

By Kent Paterson | February 7, 2006

Long resentful at what they regard as second-class treatment by Washington, Mexicans across the political spectrum are blasting the Bush administration's border and immigration policies. Stinging criticisms, diplomatic tiffs, street protests, and even calls for boycotts of U.S. businesses have characterized the Mexico-U.S. relationship in recent weeks.

While the conflict has obvious ramifications for future Mexico-U.S. relations, it will likewise impact internal Mexican politics, including the upcoming presidential election, as well as shape Mexico's future relationships with Latin America and the rest of the world. Condemnations of planned U.S. border walls by European Union legislators demonstrate how the U.S.-Mexico border crisis is sending political fallout around the globe.

Fueling the discord are two recent events: the United States House of Representatives passage in December 2005 of HR 4437, the Sensenbrenner border security/immigration bill, and the December 30 shooting death of a young Mexican migrant, Guillermo Martinez, by U.S. Border Patrol agents near San Diego-Tijuana. In Mexico,

reactions to the events ranged from frustration to bewilderment to anger.

Like many of his countrymen, Hilario Garcia, a farmer from southern Guerrero state, has made the trek north without papers. A California ranch hand during the 1980s, Garcia is puzzled over the fuss in the United States about Mexican immigrants. "It's bad in one way," said Garcia about the planned border walls. "People in the United States need the Mexicans to do the work. Gringos come here on vacation with lots of money. One is poor, so what can one do? People have a necessity. Mexicans work like little burros."

The 239-182 House vote in favor of the Sensenbrenner bill generated sharp rebukes from Mexican media, human rights organizations, elected officials, and the Roman Catholic Church. Juan Antonio Guarjardo, a federal deputy from Tamaulipas state who represents the Labor Party (PT) and serves as the president of the Chamber of Deputies Population Borders and Migratory Affairs Commission, vowed that retaliatory measures—including a tax on petroleum exports—will be introduced in the Mexican Congress if the United States builds the proposed new border walls.

Although the Sensenbrenner legislation includes a host of measures considered anti-immigrant by many, most media attention in Mexico has zeroed in on the bill's provision that paves the way for a series of new border walls. Critics have evoked the



This stretch of wall along the California border is the second wall built on this section of the U.S.-Mexico border. Photo courtesy of www.pieceofmindfilms.com.



image of the Berlin Wall, causing an outraged protest from U.S. Ambassador Tony Garza.

Hesiquio Trevizo Bencomo, the spokesman for the Roman Catholic Diocese of the border city of Ciudad Juarez calls the wall a symbol of “racism, exclusivity, and egoism.” While not going as far rhetorically as Trevizo, Mexican Cardinal Norberto Rivera also slammed “U.S. xenophobia.” Like its U.S. counterpart, Mexico’s powerful Catholic Church is emerging as a key critic of U.S. immigration policy. Bishops on the border and in other parts of the country have joined protests and issued statements against the U.S. measures.

If the Sensenbrenner bill already had political temperatures in Mexico rising, the Martinez shooting pushed them over the boiling point. On the diplomatic level, the Fox administration sent a note to the U.S. Department of State, the Mexican Congress passed a joint resolution condemning the shooting, and the National Human Rights Commission declared it might file complaints with international human rights bodies.

At the grassroots, protests have been staged in Ciudad Juarez, Reynosa, Pilscaya, Guerrero, and elsewhere. In Ciudad Juarez, a group of activists affiliated with the center-left PRD party and led by city Councilman Jose Alfredo Jimenez called on Juarez consumers, who account for an estimated

90 percent of the sales in the downtown shopping district of neighboring El Paso, Texas, to boycott businesses on the U.S. side. A recent report in the *Dallas Morning News* indicated the potential clout Mexican consumers wield in the border economy. According to the paper, Mexican retail customers spend about \$3.5 billion dollars annually in U.S. border businesses. In another development of cross-border activism, organized clubs of immigrants from Guerrero state living in Illinois and Georgia are demanding that Guerrero state leaders take a firm stand against anti-immigrant measures.

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Pro-immigrant organizations in the United States, like the Border Angels and the American Friends Service Committee, are staging a cross-country caravan that set off February 2, the anniversary of the Treaty of Guadalupe that ended the U.S.-Mexican War in 1848. Organizers said they will embark from the place on the border where Guillermo Martinez was shot and then head north to the California capital of Sacramento before traveling on to Washington.

“We want to say that the United States doesn’t comply with the treaties, and this murder is one of the many violations of human rights,” Border Angels spokesman Enrique Morones contended.

Behind the Cleavage

Far-reaching economic and social transformations are thrusting the U.S.-Mexico relationship to the top of Mexico’s political agenda. Rural economic collapse, free trade, and intensive migration all define the landscape. Once the domain of men from states mainly located in central and northern

Mexico, migration to the United States now sweeps up women, children, and whole families from throughout the country in the process. The uprooted legions form what Mexico scholar James Cockcroft calls “the new international working class.”

A recent report in Mexico’s *Proceso* newsweekly noted that more than 90% of the country’s municipalities now have migration experience. Far removed from the northern border, the state of Guerrero is a case in point, and Orlando Coria’s family is increasingly typical. A young man from the Sierra Madres, Coria said that most of his family is in the United States now. Coria said prospective migrants meticulously plan their trips up north, precisely calculating how much time they will spend and how much money they will make. “They have everything calculated. It’s part of their lives,” he said. “Entire families are living off what their relatives send.”

Ramiro Morales Hernandez, a researcher with the Autonomous University of Guerrero, estimates that upwards of 73,000 Guerrero residents emigrate to the United States every year; another large group travels to the northern Mexican border states, where they labor as low-paid farm workers for the export-oriented agricultural industry.

Some political analysts, including Cardinal Rivera, blame the economic policies of the Fox administration in particular, and the neoliberal economic model in general, for the population expulsion and a U.S.-Mexico border crisis they say is erupting into violent, inhumane, and polarizing manifestations.

Silvestre Pacheco, a Guerrero-based political commentator, said the crisis exposes the social development deficits of the NAFTA economic model. “It’s a wake-up call to the Mexican government that it hasn’t created the conditions which discourage people from going to the United States,” Pacheco contended. “In spite of the news about economic stability, it points out the failure of the economic model.” Pacheco added that the crisis

over the planned border walls likewise underscores the contradiction between an economic relationship based on the free movement of commodities but not people.

A Mexico City meeting this month involving the foreign ministers of Mexico, Central America, the Dominican Republic, and Colombia, was officially convened to offer a joint response to Washington’s immigration policies, but the gathering ended up mostly as a ratification of more free trade and guest worker solutions. Ecuador later joined the initiative. Mexican Foreign Minister Ernesto Derbez was careful to not label the effort the start of an anti-U.S. bloc.

Which Path, Mexico?

In its last year in office, the Fox administration shows no sign of changing course. A Mexico City meeting this month involving the foreign ministers of Mexico, Central America, the Dominican Republic, and Colombia, was officially convened to offer a joint response to Washington’s immigration policies, but the gathering ended up mostly as a ratification of more free trade and guest worker solutions. Ecuador later joined the initiative. Mexican Foreign Minister Ernesto Derbez was

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President Vicente Fox and Foreign Minister Derbez remain confident that the current tensions with Washington will be smoothed over this year with the signing of an immigration accord between the United States and Mexico. Others are less optimistic. Pacheco believes that little is likely to change in the U.S.-Mexico relationship. “I think the United States has calculated what the effect will be with the wall,” Pacheco said. “The only thing that Mexico might accomplish is to prevent the wall, but it will leave the status quo intact. The United States will have more time to delay the demand for the free transit of people.”

Politically, the U.S.-Mexico border crisis is providing ample fodder for this year’s Mexican election

campaign. Both the former ruling PRI and the opposition PRD parties take aim at the Fox administration for not taking a stronger stand with Washington. PRD presidential candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador seized on the border wall issue to fire away at the Fox administration, and the PAN’s presidential candidate, Felipe Calderon. Lopez Obrador declared that President Fox lacks “the moral authority” to challenge Washington, because of disastrous internal economic policies that force Mexicans to migrate. As the Mexican presidential campaign gets underway, migration and its connection to domestic policies will certainly be one of the hottest-debated issues.

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