

MEXICO - Not even Host Enthusiastic About 'Lame Duck' Bush

Diego Cevallos, IPS

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[IPS](#) - Mexican President Felipe Calderón met President George W. Bush Tuesday with complaints about U.S. migration and drug trafficking policies, after noting, through his press office, that the U.S. leader is in a period of declining popularity.

In his welcome ceremony, Calderón criticised a U.S. law for the construction of more than 1,000 kilometres of new fencing along the border between the two countries, and urged the United States to do more to reduce demand for drugs. For his part, Bush promised once again to "work as hard as I possibly can to pass comprehensive immigration reform," and to boost trade and investment.

Bush's two-day visit to Mexico, the last stop on a Latin America tour that has taken him to Brazil, Uruguay, Colombia and Guatemala, has been interpreted by many observers as an attempt to shore up the U.S. administration's ties with a government that is also conservative and pro-free market.

But even before the U.S. leader arrived, Calderón had called on the U.S. government to do more about drug trafficking, lashed out at the new fencing along the border, and said he would never be used as a "battering ram" against left-leaning governments in Latin America that have less than warm relations with Washington.

His press office also distributed an information packet to journalists in which the Mexican government points out that Bush now finds himself in a phase of "growing unpopularity", and that the pre-election fervour has already begun in the United States, even though Bush's term does not end until January 2009.

Political scientist María Amparo Casar told IPS that the Calderón administration was right to criticise Washington's policies and not to generate false expectations with respect to the U.S. leader's visit.

Bush is already a "lame duck" president, said Casar, a researcher with the Centre for Economic Research and Teaching (CIDE).

As in the other countries he visited, Bush's trip to Mexico has been surrounded by tight security, which has kept protesters away from the U.S. and Mexican presidents, who met in the city of Mérida on the Yucatan peninsula. Massive protest demonstrations have marked every stop along Bush's Latin America tour, which began Mar. 8 in Brazil.

Representatives of the leftwing opposition wanted to present Calderón with a small rug Tuesday so he wouldn't hurt himself, they said, when he "knelt down" before Bush.

Nevertheless, legislators from parties across the spectrum recognised that the Mexican leader, who took office in December, has not aligned himself with nor unconditionally backed the U.S. president.

In statements to the leftist daily La Jornada, Calderón said he would never attack the Latin American left at Washington's behest, and that during his government, Mexico would seek a regional leadership role characterised by "calm consideration, balance and sensibility."

Regarding Bush's visit, he said he had no great expectations, although he urged the United States to value its relationship with Mexico as "the most important one it has." In direct contrast to Washington's

position, he also said that he plans to improve Mexico's relations with Cuba, and even to visit Fidel Castro, who has temporarily delegated his authority for health reasons.

Columnist and political scientist Sergio Aguayo said that the Calderón administration still needs to clarify how it will handle its relations with the United States. In his opinion, the visit from "such a weak" president as Bush is not helpful towards this end.

Mexico and the United States share a 3,200 kilometre border and have a complex relationship, in which issues such as trade, migration, drug trafficking and the environment periodically raise tensions.

U.S. presidents have visited Mexico more than 70 times since the start of the 20th century, and according to Aguayo, this latest visit by Bush is probably the least transcendent of them all.

Relations between Mexico and the United States cooled off after the 9/11 attacks in the U.S. in 2001, and have not improved since, in spite of the apparent close friendship between Bush and then President Vicente Fox (2000-2006).

Although Mexico expressed its solidarity with the United States over the terrorist attacks, it refused to support the subsequent U.S. invasion of Iraq.

In October, Bush signed a law to extend the fencing along the U.S. border with Mexico from 112 to 1,226 kilometres. However, that may change now that the Democratic Party, winner of the U.S. congressional elections in November, is proposing alternative strategies.

The double-layered barrier of fencing is separated by a road for border patrol vehicles, and is equipped with new video cameras and sensors. The law also provides for unmanned surveillance aircraft, and for increasing the number of U.S. Border Patrol agents from 13,300 to 14,800. Advocates of immigration reform say that the new barriers can remain, but in addition they want avenues for legalising the status of the 10 to 12 million undocumented immigrants who already live in the U.S., most of whom are from Latin America.

The Calderón administration has promised to lobby hard for immigration reform, but says that the issue is not at the centre of its relations and negotiations with Washington, as it was during Fox's presidency.

Some 500,000 immigrants enter the U.S. illegally every year, in spite of immigration controls, and 1.5 million people a year are arrested and deported.

About 40 million U.S. residents are from Latin America and the Caribbean, by birth or descent. Most of them are Mexican.

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