

Mexico's Calderon urges better cooperation in tightening border

by Ed Mendel

SACRAMENTO - Mexican President Felipe Calderon said Wednesday that illegal immigration should be replaced with safe and legal migration, arguing that the California economy needs the labor.

In a carefully balanced address to the Legislature, Calderon also called for improved border security and outlined steps being taken to create more jobs in Mexico to reduce the need for migration.

The president also touched diplomatically on one of the main themes of his five-day tour of the United States: urging the protection of human rights as the United States tries to crack down on illegal immigration.

"I know that immigration is a controversial issue today in this great nation," Calderon told the lawmakers. "But I strongly believe that Mexican and Mexican-American workers are a large reason for the dynamic economy of California."

He pointed to previous "exemplary" cooperation between Mexico and the United States that produced the Bracero guest-worker program that allowed 4.5 million Mexicans to work here for two decades after World War II.

Calderon, near the end of his first trip to the United States since taking office in December 2006, met privately with Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and legislative leaders before addressing a joint session of the Assembly and Senate.

When former Mexican President Vicente Fox addressed the Legislature in May 2006, some Republican legislators wore yellow lapel buttons saying "no mas," meaning "no more" illegal immigration.

This time, Calderon drew praise from Republican legislative leaders for emphasizing the need for economic development in Mexico and acknowledging that immigration is a shared responsibility between the two nations.

"I think what he was talking about also was the dignity of workers when they are in the United States," said Assembly Minority Leader Mike Villines, R-Clovis, who supports strong measures to combat illegal immigration.

"Everybody shares the concept there, regardless of positions - do you build a border wall or do you not?" Villines said. "There is human dignity in every person around, and we have to make sure that we treat each other well, our countries and our state. That's really what I took away from it. I think he's right."

Senate Minority Leader Dick Ackerman, R-Tustin, said Fox began the task of economic development and ending corruption in Mexico. He said Calderon is "taking it to a new level," particularly with a crackdown on drug-trafficking gangs.

"Fox was in fear of his life for a number of years," Ackerman said. "I am sure this guy is, too. When we had our meeting, (Calderon) said they had 300 law enforcement killed in the last year on this drug stuff."

Calderon said targeting the drug trade has had an impact.

"As a consequence of our action, the price of drugs in the American market grew by almost 50 percent last year," said Calderon, who delivered his speech in English.

In his call for more cooperation to tighten the border, Calderon mentioned improving security, not halting illegal immigration. Preventing terrorist attacks is one of the U.S. goals for securing the border.

To improve its economy and create more jobs, said Calderon, Mexico has enacted tax and pension reforms, encouraged foreign investment and launched a five-year plan to spend \$250 billion on public-works projects

For the first time in its history, he said, Mexico had a lower rate of inflation last year than the United States. He said \$100 billion a year is being spent on social programs to close the gap between rich and poor.

"I am a president who is not glad to see Mexicans migrating to the United States," Calderon said. He said families and communities are split, and Mexico loses "the best among us: our bravest, our youngest and our strongest people."

But there is a financial benefit to his nation: Mexicans living in the United States send home \$23 billion annually.

Calderon said the United States and Mexico have a strong economic link. Mexico needs capital investment from the north, and the United States needs what he called the "strength" and "talent" of Mexican workers to continue to prosper.

The two nations are at a "historical turning point," Calderon said.

"Future generations will judge us by the decisions we take today," he said. "Did we work together to provide organized and humane migration, or did we continue to allow hundreds to die each year (in dangerous illegal border crossings)?"

Schwarzenegger and first lady Maria Shriver hosted a luncheon for Calderon and his wife, Margarita Zavala, attended by 250 people.

"Lots of toasts and things like that," said San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders, one of the guests. "Both of them (Schwarzenegger and Calderon) spoke briefly. It was really about partnership and trade."

Officials of California and Mexico signed a memorandum agreeing to "work cooperatively on ways to enhance policies for environmental policies." Calderon said during his speech that he is personally committed to development that respects natural resources.

"I feel particularly attached to California, due to the commitment this great state has shown in the preservation and sustainable use of natural resources," he said.

Calderon gave an address Monday evening at Harvard University, where he received a master's in public administration. He also stopped in New York and Chicago.

As he left Sacramento Wednesday afternoon, he was to visit the Robledo winery in Sonoma County, which was founded by a Mexican immigrant, before arriving in Los Angeles in the evening.