Mexico's president causes a stir with candid admission

by S. Lynne Walker

MERIDA, Mexico - When President George Bush and Mexican President Felipe Calderon talked about the thorny issue of immigration reform Wednesday, the conversation turned deeply personal.

Bush expressed concern about the crime, exploitation and human rights abuses caused by "a system that encourages people to sneak across the border," while Calderon revealed that members of his own family are working north of the border.

Calderon's comments about his family members came during a joint news conference, when a reporter asked whether he had relatives working in the United States and whether they were there legally.

"Yes," Calderon said, "I have family in the United States and what I can say is that they are people who work and respect the country, people who pay taxes to your government, people who harvest the vegetables you probably eat, people who serve food in restaurants, people who contribute to the prosperity of the United States."

Calderon said he has not seen those family members for a long time and is unaware of their legal status. He went on to point out that one-third of the population of Michoacan, his home state, is working in the United States.

His revelation underscored Mexico's emotional and economic ties with the United States, where an estimated 12 million Mexicans now live.

Calderon said he is "working for the day that investment comes here, where there is labor, instead of labor crossing the border in search of capital." And he expressed the feelings of many Mexicans when he said "we want them to return one day, we want Mexico to have work for them because we miss them a lot. I hope one day to see them and greet them and embrace them."

The candid admission by Mexico's president, made in an arena usually reserved for political rhetoric and posturing, caused a buzz of excitement that overshadowed Bush's statement that the U.S. must find a "rational way" to resolve the immigration problem.

Bush acknowledged that the debate over immigration is often used to "inflame passions," and said the administration and Congress must search for "middle ground - somewhere in between automatic citizenship

and kicking people out of the country."

"Look, amnesty is not going to fly. There is not going to be automatic citizenship," he said. "People in the United States don't support that, and neither do I. Nor will kicking people out of the United States work. It's not a realistic situation."

At the same time, Bush said immigration reform must address complaints of many Americans that authorities are not pursuing people who cross illegally into the United States, resulting in a myriad of crimes that threaten border security.

He said the U.S. approach "is a system that leads to human rights abuses. It's a system that promotes coyotes and document forgers."

"If we have immigration reform, it will make it less likely that somebody will feel like they have to sneak across the border and therefore, take pressure off the border," Bush said. "In other words, security for the country, border security, will be enhanced by a good migration law. And then it will make it easier for us to focus our assets on drugs, terrorists, criminals and guns moving both ways."

Bush continued to say he is "optimistic" about immigration reform passing Congress, even though many on Capitol Hill doubt a bill will be approved before he leaves office.

"The mood in the Congress seems like it has changed, from skepticism last year to knowledge that getting a comprehensive bill will be in the nation's interest," he said.

During Bush's three-day visit, the two presidents also discussed other key issues in the bilateral relationship, including drug trafficking and provisions of the North America Free Trade Agreement, or NAFTA.

Bush praised Calderon for his tough stand against drug cartels, which has included sending the military to Tijuana and other cities plagued by drug violence as well as the extradition of key traffickers.

The presidents also discussed strengthening a task force that is overseeing the process of fully opening Mexico's market to beans and corn in 2008. Faced with increasing opposition from Mexican farmers, Calderon's government wants to roll back the NAFTA deadline.

"Negotiating NAFTA is a mistake," Bush said. "You don't want a weaker NAFTA. You want to make sure it stays strong in order that prosperity continues to expand and people benefit on both sides of the border."

Bush appeared relaxed - perhaps even relieved - at his last event in Merida before leaving Mexico for Washington, D.C. For six days, he set a grueling pace to five Latin American countries, facing sporadic jeers from Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and violent protests along the way.

Bush said he'd had a "fascinating trip," and even sprinkled his remarks Wednesday morning with Spanish. "Glad to be back in Mexico. The hospitality was very generous and the meals were quite good.

"Estoy lleno." he said, drawing laughter. "I'm full."

Mexico's president causes a stir with candid admission by S. Lynne Walker