

MEXICO REVISITS EFFORT TO GET AMNESTY FOR 4 MILLION HERE  
**Interior minister says move would bolster U.S. security**

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TIJUANA - Mexico renewed its call for the United States to grant amnesty to some 4 million undocumented Mexicans inside U.S. territory, this time arguing that U.S. security is at stake.

The message was delivered yesterday by Mexico's interior minister, Santiago Creel, who is meeting in San Diego with Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge to talk about border security.

Creel hopes to revive the immigration proposal that was quietly abandoned after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

"It's hard to understand that there could be millions of people working in the United States where the U.S. government has no record of who they are, where they are working, when they arrived, and when they will leave the country," Creel told The San Diego Union-Tribune during a stopover in Tijuana, before heading across the border for talks yesterday with Ridge, which will continue today.

The meetings mark the first high-level talks between the United States and Mexico since the Iraq war. U.S.-Mexico relations plummeted after Mexico opposed President Bush's decision to wage war against Iraq.

Mexico is now trying to repair relations with the United States, its largest trading partner. In Mexico City Tuesday, President Vicente Fox stressed that the bilateral relationship remains strong as he called for an extension of the North American Free Trade Agreement, dubbed NAFTA Plus. "The Iraq conflict has led to a much more intense and close" relationship, the president said.

Guaranteeing U.S. security should be a key part of NAFTA Plus, Creel said - but so should legalizing Mexicans in the United States. Creel, 48, is considered a leading contender to become the next presidential candidate for the National Action Party in the 2006 election.

"If we don't see reciprocity, it will be impossible to persuade political forces, or the government, to take steps beyond what we've been taking," Creel said. "We need to see some concrete steps by the U.S. government, so that we can go to our Congress and say, 'Look, the Americans are making progress on a topic that for decades has been stagnant,' and this will give us the space to politically bring about other changes."

Legalizing the status of Mexicans living without documents in the United States has been a key foreign policy goal of the Fox administration, championed by former foreign minister Jorge Castañeda. But the proposal languished after the terrorist attacks, and relations with Mexico became less of a priority as the Bush administration grew preoccupied with terrorism and the war.

By linking amnesty to security, the Mexican government is taking a new approach.

"Mexico seems to be trying to frame this to the U.S. in a way we can understand given that we're obsessed with security right now," said Erik Lee, assistant director at the Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies at UC San Diego. "Mexico has finally figured out a way to speak the language that we are speaking in terms of security."

George Grayson, a Mexico scholar at the College of William & Mary in Virginia, sees little possibility of U.S. support for Mexico's proposal to "regularize" the status of undocumented Mexicans.

"I don't think Congress is in the mood," he said. "The U.S. economy is limping along and unemployment rates are rising. It's the least propitious time to try to return to the Castañeda agenda."

The talks between Creel and Ridge come a year after the United States and Mexico reached a "smart borders agreement" to increase security while ensuring the steady flow of goods and people. Creel said the meetings in San Diego will include a private session between himself and Ridge.

Security measures "should by no means . . . slow the healthy traffic of people," Creel said.

Mexico will urge the United States to expand the Senti program, a high-speed, high-tech crossing system aimed at Tijuana-San Diego commuters who have U.S. security clearance. Currently about 30,000 people participate.

Despite differences over the Iraq war, Creel said Mexico has been a strong U.S. ally throughout the conflict. He cited the success of Mexico's Plan Centinela, which dispatched 30,000 soldiers and federal police to safeguard key installations, including electric plants, airports and border crossings.

Mexico also offered special protection to key U.S. installations in Mexico, including the embassy and consulates as well as neighborhoods and schools with large numbers of U.S. citizens.

The idea of linking U.S. security to amnesty for Mexicans has been debated by academics and government officials, said Jorge Santibañez, president of the Colegio de la Frontera Norte outside Tijuana.

"It's not that Mexico is saying, 'Give me an immigration accord, and I'll give you security,' " said Santibañez. "It's saying, we're neighbors, we're partners, we are a single region, and I take on your problem, but you also take on my problem."