

LATIN AMERICA - Governments Against Border Fence (Diego Cevallos, IPS)

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16/01/2006 - [IPS](#) - The governments of five countries of Central America, Colombia, the Dominican Republic and Mexico met Monday to join forces against the U.S. plan to build a high security fence along portions of its borders to keep out undocumented immigrants, a goal that many U.S. citizens support.

The foreign ministers and other delegates from Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama and the Dominican Republic, meeting in Mexico City, criticised the U.S. immigration reform bill that will likely be considered by the Senate in February.

If it is passed, the bill would hurt millions of immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean, whose remittances are essential to the economies of their home countries.

However, the ministers clarified that they respect "the sovereign right of countries to follow their own migration and security policies."

"Incomplete measures that only involve the stiffening of immigration policies do not represent an integral solution for dealing with the challenges posed by the phenomenon of migration," they stated in a joint declaration.

Activist Enrique Morones with Ángeles de la Frontera (Border Angels), a migrant welfare group, told IPS by telephone from San Diego, California that "we agree with (the ministers') initiatives, because by working together, governments and society, we will stop this stupidity, which is fuelled by racism and xenophobia."

The government representatives meeting in the Mexican capital announced that they had set up a working group to exchange proposals on migration issues and promote respect for the human rights of people of Latin American extraction living in the United States.

Ángeles de la Frontera is planning a protest convoy that will set out on Feb. 2 from the U.S. border with Mexico and will end up in Washington, D.C. at an unspecified date.

"There will be hundreds of us. We want the United States to see that immigrants are very upset by the deaths along the border, the construction of fences, and by the perception that we are criminals, drug addicts - the enemy," said Morones. On Dec. 30, Guillermo Martínez, a young Mexican, died on the U.S. border after he was shot by a U.S. border patrol agent.

The incident drew a diplomatic protest from the Mexican government of Vicente Fox.

Martínez became one of the more than 3,800 people who died along the border between 1993 and 2005, most of whom fell victim to thirst, heatstroke, exhaustion or exposure when they tried to cross less carefully guarded desert areas.

The proposal to build 1,100 kilometres of new high security fencing along the 3,200-kilometre border separating the United States and Mexico would further reduce the areas where would-be migrants would attempt to cross. But according to informed observers, it would not cut off the flow of immigration.

Authorities in Mexico estimate that around 400,000 immigrants made it into the United States last year without legal documents, despite the already stiff controls in place, while one million were intercepted

and deported in their attempt to enter the country.

Some 40 million people of Latin American birth or descent live in the United States today, including eight million undocumented immigrants.

The bill that would entail the construction of new fences with cameras, lighting and sensors was approved on Dec. 16 by the U.S. House of Representatives, but must still make it through the Senate.

The bill, which would make unlawful presence in the United States, currently a civil offence, a felony, drew loud protests from governments in Latin America and human rights organisations.

Guatemalan Vice President Eduardo Stein said the bill was "an affront to Latin America by a government that claims to be our partner, but which apparently only wants our money and our merchandise, and that sees our people as an epidemic."

In a poll carried out by Fox News in October, 51 percent of respondents said they were in favour of building a fence along the border with Mexico.

And 57 percent of those interviewed in a December survey by CNN (Cable News Network), the newspaper USA Today, and the Gallup polling firm called on U.S. lawmakers and the George W. Bush administration to adopt changes in the country's immigration policies.

The polls showed that a majority of respondents see illegal immigration as a negative phenomenon that must be curbed.

"There is great manipulation of public opinion in the United States, and some political factions are using the immigration issue to win votes," said Fabienne Venet, director of Sin Fronteras (No Borders), a non-governmental Mexican organisation that works on behalf of migrants and carries out research on migration issues.

Venet said she hopes that the united front put up by the Latin American governments, led by Mexico, against the construction of the fence along the border will be successful.

But she warned that it could fail if the governments do not act with their sights set on long-term goals, and if they do not come up with coherent proposals.

Called together by Mexico, several Latin American governments held a conference in 1996 on migration whose central focus was to design policies and strategies with a view to influencing the issue in the United States. But the initiative gradually petered out, and did not meet any of its objectives.

According to Venet, the governments must maintain a united front and hammer out joint strategies to attempt to bring about a shift in the widespread perception in the United States of immigrants as a threat.

In 2004, immigrants from Latin America and the Caribbean sent home 45 billion dollars in remittances, double the total of a decade earlier, according to the Social Outlook 2005 report by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC).

These funds lift more than 2.5 million people out of poverty, the regional U.N. agency estimates.