MEXICO - On immigration reform Mexico still wants the whole enchilada

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IPS - A bipartisan immigration reform agreement reached by the U.S. Senate Thursday, which would offer a path to citizenship for as many as seven million undocumented immigrants while creating a guest worker programme, met with mixed reactions in Mexico.

Although the agreement, which must now be reconciled with an earlier bill approved by the lower house of Congress, is not the comprehensive reform that the Mexican government had hoped for, it comes fairly close.

In December, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill that would build new fences along the border with Mexico, toughen immigration controls, and make it a federal crime to offer services or assistance to illegal immigrants.

Democratic and Republican leaders reported that under the compromise agreement reached by the Senate Thursday, only those who have lived in the United States for at least five years would be allowed to stay, and would be able to apply for citizenship if they met certain requirements, such as speaking English, paying a fine and back taxes, and passing a criminal background record check.

Those who have been in the United States between two and five years would have to return to their home country briefly, but would then be allowed to re-enter as temporary workers and could apply for citizenship.

Immigrants in the country for less than two years would be deported.

Mexicans account for a large proportion of the between 10 and 11 million undocumented immigrants in the United States, which is home to a total of around 28 million people of Mexican birth or descent.

"The Senate agreement might not mean a thing, because it still has to go to the lower house, where it could sink," Katarina Rodríguez, with the Human Rights Coalition/Indigenous Alliance Without Borders, told IPS by telephone from Arizona.

But Karina Arias, coordinator for liaison and promotion in the Mexican non-governmental organisation Sin Fronteras (Without Borders), said the agreement does indeed represent an advance, and may very well end up being approved by Congress.

Nevertheless, she added that it would not provide a full solution to the migration problem.

"What we are hoping for is that the Mexican government will continue to insist on an integral agreement that does not only include the legalisation of undocumented immigrants, but also addresses the issues of labour rights, border problems, and the development of regions in Mexico that ‘expel’ migrants," she commented to IPS.

The agreement hammered out in the U.S. Senate was described as a partial advance by former Mexican foreign minister Jorge Castañeda.

By contrast, he has labelled the comprehensive immigration reform sought by the government of Vicente

Fox since 2001 as the "whole enchilada", a U.S. slang term that refers to a typical Mexican dish.

But despite its limitations, the new proposal represents the most far-reaching reform of U.S. immigration law in recent years, said Castañeda, who headed up the Mexican Foreign Ministry from late 2000 to January 2003.

The last major overhaul, which extended an amnesty to undocumented immigrants in the United States, was signed in 1986 by then president Ronald Reagan (1981-1989), after five years of debate in Congress.

The Fox administration, meanwhile, sees the agreement as an important step forward. A Mexican Foreign Ministry statement said the initiative is moving in the direction of creating new mechanisms that would provide for orderly, safe migration flows in which human rights are respected.

The communiqué added that the government would closely follow the progress of the bill through the U.S. Congress.

However, the new proposal still has a long way to go. Some sort of compromise will have to be reached with the much more punitive bill passed by the House of Representatives, and any final bill will have to be signed into law by President George W. Bush.

Some observers believe that since a consensus has now been reached between the Democratic and Republican parties in the Senate, there is a good chance of final approval for the Senate initiative.

"But there’s also a chance that everything could remain the way it is now, with no migration agreement, and that would be disappointing," said Rodríguez.

The current immigration reform debate is taking place in the midst of massive rallies, unlike any ever seen, organised by immigrants rights groups in several U.S. cities.

The protesters have taken to the streets with signs and banners demanding the recognition of the basic rights of all immigrants, whether in the country legally or illegally. Many of the demonstrators are of Mexican origin.

In 2005, an estimated 400,000 migrants from Latin America and the Caribbean made it into the United States without visas, despite the strict border control measures in place, but roughly one million were intercepted and deported in the attempt.

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