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MEXICO

Fox says U.S. will need Mexican labor by 2010

Mexican President Vicente Fox predicted that border tensions with the U.S. will ease because the retirements of baby boomers will create a demand for workers.

By Kevin G. Hall

Knight Ridder News Service

ABOARD THE PRESIDENTE JUAREZ -- Flying high above the Yucatán peninsula, Mexican President Vicente Fox leaned forward and pointed a finger to make this point: In a few years, he said, the United States may be begging Mexico for the very workers it's now proposing to keep out by building a wall along the border.

With the looming retirement from the work force of the U.S. baby-boom generation, and with Mexico's population growth-rate declining, immigration from Mexico will slow just as demand for workers in the United States will be growing, he told Knight Ridder in an interview aboard his presidential jet.

"I am absolutely convinced that by 2010, the United States will have a great demand for workers and laborers to sustain its economy and to sustain its population of retirees and pensioners," the president said. "And in that very year, Mexico will need its young people to help its own economy and to attend to its own retirees."

When Fox took office in 2000, he vowed to make an immigration accord with the United States a top priority, and he thought he had a likely partner in President Bush, who took office less than two months later. But the 9-11 terrorist attacks derailed Bush's plans for an immigration accord as the U.S. adopted a tough, national-security view of all border issues.

Now, in the final months of his six-year term -- Mexico limits presidents to one term -- Fox shows no disappointment as he suggests that the sides eventually will come to terms with migration realities, even if no accord is reached before he leaves office Dec. 1 or before the 2008 U.S. presidential election.

'CLOSER THAN EVER'

"Yes, we have sought an immigration accord for 80 years. It hasn't been reached in 80 years. However, today, we are closer than ever," Fox said.

Demographic experts said Fox was at least partly right. The rate of Mexico's population growth has slowed, from 1.4 percent annually in 2000 to 0.99 percent today. That means that fewer Mexicans will be joining the work force, making it easier for them to find work in their own country. Fewer will feel pushed to the United States.

But U.S. jobs still might draw Mexicans across the border, especially as the wave of some 76 million baby boomers -- those born from 1946 to 1964 -- begins reaching retirement age in 2011.

Fox secured his place in Mexican history by defeating the candidate of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, which had ruled Mexico without interruption for 71 years.

But Fox's National Action Party never enjoyed a majority in Congress, and the Institutional Revolutionary Party blocked many of its initiatives. Fox never quite figured out a way around that obstacle, and many Mexicans think he should have achieved more.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

That theme came across in a lengthy conversation with Knight Ridder on Monday as Fox traveled by plane and helicopter across the Yucatán peninsula, part of a nationwide five-day blitz to inaugurate 46 highway and public-works projects in 15 Mexican states.

Mexicans didn't err in electing him, Fox said. He cited stability as a vastly underappreciated accomplishment of his tenure after seven decades of one-party rule.

On his list of accomplishments: Mexico's credit rating has improved, its reserves of foreign currency now exceed its foreign debt and it has a balanced budget.

Fox is particularly proud that Mexico's inflation rate is now below that of the United States -- 3.3 percent, versus 3.4 percent for the U.S. in 2005. Interest rates in Mexico fell more than 52 percent in the first four years of his term.

With nine months left in his presidency, Fox remains a popular figure. His approval rating is a solid 70 percent in recent polls. Still, he's not without controversy.

CRITICISM

Critics say his trips are barely disguised campaigning for his party's presidential candidate, Felipe Calderón, a former energy secretary who's trailing the standard bearer for the Party of the Democratic Revolution, Andrés Manuel López Obrador by 4 to 10 points in the polls as July 2 elections near.

The president still is taking heat from his in-office marriage to his press aide, Marta Sahagún. Gone is concern that Sahagún wanted to succeed Fox, a move that many Mexicans thought smacked of imperial designs. But that has been replaced by allegations that her children used family connections to win construction contracts.

For an interview transcript go to www.MiamiHerald.com and click on Today's Extras.