

BISHOPS URGE PRESIDENT-ELECT OBAMA, MEXICAN PRESIDENT CALDERON, TO PROTECT RIGHTS OF MIGRANTS, ADDRESS ROOT CAUSES OF MIGRATION

WASHINGTON—Bishop John C. Wester of Salt Lake City, Utah, chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Migration, urged President-elect Barack Obama and Mexican President Felipe Calderon to work together to end abuses against migrants—both in the United States and Mexico—and to address “push” factors that compel migrants to undertake dangerous journeys to the United States. President-elect Obama and President Calderon were scheduled to meet in Washington on Monday, January 12.

“The issue of illegal immigration transcends borders and must be addressed on a regional, if not hemispheric, level. The United States and Mexico must cooperate to ensure that policies are adopted that permit migrants to migrate and work in a safe and controlled manner,” Bishop Wester said. “Today, they are subject to abuse and exploitation by unscrupulous employers and human smugglers and other criminal elements, as well as to lengthy and unnecessary detention in substandard jails.”

“Sadly, many have died tragically in the American or Mexican desert,” he said. Since 1994, more than 4,000 migrants have died attempting to cross the U.S.-Mexico border.

In addition, Bishop Wester stated that the two leaders should work to economically develop poor areas in Mexico and other nations of Latin America so migrants and their families can remain in their countries of origin and work and live in dignity.

President-elect Obama's immigration reform platform, announced during the presidential campaign, includes efforts to address the root causes of migration from Mexico. President Calderon has emphasized the need for job creation in Mexico for low-skilled workers.

“The long-term solution to illegal immigration is not militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border, but economic development in poor nations,” Bishop Wester stated. “At a minimum, U.S. trade and international economic policies should not contribute to this forced migration.”

“Migrants risk their well-being and lives to migrate in order to find work and support their families—it is a decision made out of necessity, not choice,” he added. “As a global institution present in both sending and receiving nations, the Catholic Church understands the economic and social forces that drive migrants to leave their families and home and seek work in another land.” Church-based organizations in both the United States and Mexico daily respond to the basic humanitarian needs of migrants and families separated across borders.

“The two nations must build bridges of cooperation, not walls of separation,” Bishop Wester said.

Upon his visit to the United States in April, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI and President Bush issued a statement recognizing the “need for coordinated immigration policies” between the United States and Latin American countries, “above all with regard to human treatment and the well-being of families.”

In the near future, the United States must reform national immigration laws, so that undocumented persons can come out of the shadows and fully participate in society. “Reform of U.S. immigration laws is crucial to ensure family unity and protect human dignity,” Bishop Wester said. “A majority of immigrant families in the United States have one or more members who are out-of-status and who are at risk of separation. They live in fear and alienation from the community.”

Mexico also must examine and reform its immigration laws, so that migrants from Central and South America are not subject to exploitation. In 2003, the U.S. and Mexican Catholic bishops issued a joint pastoral statement which outlined steps each nation should take to repair flawed immigration systems (<http://www.usccb.org/mrs/stranger.shtml>).