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Mexicans Denounce Senate Border Plan

By WILL WEISSERT
The Associated Press

NUEVO LAREDO, Mexico - Mexican lawmakers angrily denounced a measure approved by the U.S. Senate to build new border fences, and illegal immigrants vowed to skirt them and cross into U.S. territory anyway.



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But the administration of Mexican President Vicente Fox, which had called the fence proposal "shameful" and "stupid" as recently as December, was conspicuously silent after the Senate bill passed Wednesday - perhaps because the measure also opens the door for millions of undocumented Mexicans to achieve some legal status in the United States.

"There are so many of us, most with families and roots in the United States. They are never going to stop us from crossing," said Julio Cesar Gutierrez, a 21-year-old from the western city of Guadalajara who was planning to swim across the Rio Grande into Texas from the border city of Nuevo Laredo. "We will dig under a wall, go over one. If the authorities over there want a war, we will fight."

Gutierrez, who was wearing a Washington Nationals baseball cap and a backpack carrying bottled water, said he had crossed three previous times and worked as a cook in Houston but was deported each time.

"They want to treat migrants like criminals," he said. "All we want to do is work."

The Senate agreed to give many illegal immigrants a shot at U.S. citizenship, but also backed construction of 370 miles of triple-layered fencing along the southern border. It is unclear where the new barriers would be built, though some have speculated they could go up in an area that includes Nuevo Laredo, across from Laredo, Texas.

The measure, which has yet to clear the House, comes as President Bush continues to flesh out his plans to deploy 6,000 National Guard soldiers along the border to support the Border Patrol.

In Mexico City, lawmakers from Fox's conservative National Action Party



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and both major opposition parties denounced the initiative.

"It's a lamentable development and more evidence of a step backward in bilateral relations between Mexico and the United States," said Inti Munoz, a spokesman for House lawmakers from the leftist Democratic Revolution Party. "The construction of a wall and the militarization of the border are signs that speak of the absolute failure and lack of Mexican foreign policy."

Mexican Foreign Secretary Luis Ernesto Derbez said late Wednesday that the government would not immediately comment on the Senate bill. Just days earlier, the Fox administration was quick to express concern that Bush's National Guard plan could "militarize" the border region.

In December, the Mexican president said extending border walls was "shameful," and Derbez called a U.S. House proposal to do so "stupid."

Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador - a fiery Fox critic and the Democratic Revolution Party's presidential candidate in July 2 elections - called the president's silence on the Senate bill a sign of weakness.

"The truth is the federal government and the president have no authority," Lopez Obrador said Wednesday. "And for that reason, Mexicans who cross the border out of necessity are being humiliated."

Migrants preparing to cross the border in Nuevo Laredo said they would prefer to climb walls than make dangerous trips through the desert into Arizona and New Mexico, routes that have become popular since U.S. authorities fortified barriers separating San Diego and Tijuana.

"In the desert, smoke rises from the ground and you can die while you're walking," Gutierrez said. "The river here, even with a wall, is easier."

Jose Antonio Maldonado, a 16-year-old from Honduras who was trying to make it into the United States illegally for the first time, said he had no family or friends across the border and was unsure where to find work if he succeeded in crossing.

"We have withstood days of train rides, risking our lives without eating, without sleeping, to get to the border," he said, detailing the trip from his homeland. Central Americans traveling without proper documents in Mexico face deportation and often complain of being beaten or extorted by corrupt authorities.

"If there were a wall here, or any other obstacle, we'd overcome it," he

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