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Homegrown Pressures for Reform

By Elias Castillo

For decades, America has helped take care of Mexico's wretched poor, fleeing the hopeless squalor and corruption of their country. Millions of Mexicans have fled nightmarish slums and illegally crossed into the United States in search of a better life. A few have succeeded economically. Most have not. Despite living in poverty in the United States, it is still a step up from the misery of being poor in Mexico.

Mexico's rulers have coldly counted on the United States to absorb the downtrodden, whose migration acts as a safety valve, easing pressures for reform in the nation to our south.

Yet if those millions of poverty-stricken Mexicans were forced to remain in Mexico, it is likely they would demand massive reforms against the dishonesty and inefficiency that has made a misery of their lives.

Reforms in Mexico must be made because the United States cannot continue caring for the citizens of another country while America tries to ease poverty among its own people. Already, Florida and California, in lawsuits filed against the federal government, say they cannot continue spending billions on health care, education and incarceration of illegal migrants. They demand the federal government compensate them for those costs.

Meanwhile, Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., and California Governor Pete Wilson have called on the U.S. government to seal the border with Mexico. Their idea makes sense. While adding border guards will probably evoke protests from Mexico, it could also force its government to begin caring for its own citizens, rather than shoveling them across the border like so much offal.

All nations have a responsibility to improve life for their citizens, and Mexico has tragically failed to fulfill that basic mandate.

The Mexican government, time and again, when confronted with its seeming lack of concern for its citizens, has pleaded that it is a poor nation, overpopulated and with scarce resources to properly care for them. However, this is difficult to believe since the Mexican economy in recent years has spawned 12 billionaires, dozens of millionaires and hundreds of other wealthy citizens.

The demand for reform reached a peak on New Year's Day when Indians in Mexico's state of Chiapas rebelled and demanded social, educational and political change in their poverty-wracked state. The revolt embarrassed the Mexican government, which quickly acceded to many of the Indians' demands. The Indian protest prompted millions of others to demand similar reforms nationwide. That protest was also voiced May 12, in Mexico's first debate among the three leading candidates in August's presidential elections.

Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, the top candidate of the leftist Revolutionary Democratic Party, and Diego Fernandez de Cevallos, of the conservative National Action Party, launched a blistering attack on the Institutional Revolutionary Party (known by the Spanish acronym PRI) that has ruled Mexico for 65 years and has been described by its opponents as a brutal, repressive and corrupt institution.

This may be the ideal time for the United States to seal the border while offering Mexico new eco-nomic aid to help provide a better life for its people.

PRI opponents who have sought support from the United States would gain millions of reform votes from those forced to stay in Mexico. These new voters would go a long way toward helping the country establish a healthy two-party system, paving the way for true democracy.

Unless the border is sealed, the United States will continue focusing its attention and anger on the unfortunate undocumented workers from Mexico instead of on the real culprit; the Mexican government.

This country cannot continue being the dumping ground for the poor of a neighbor whose government has allowed its rich to get richer while its humblest citizens are handed a road sign pointing north. ∎