

Handout 5.3 Migrants pawns in Mexico-U.S. game

By: John C. Wester

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Mexican President Felipe Calderon is scheduled to visit President Barack Obama at the White House on Wednesday, which is good news, considering the problems along the U.S.-Mexico border.

In fact, a strong relationship between Obama and Calderon may hold the key to the many problems affecting both the United States and Mexico domestically — drug-related violence, the economy and, of course, immigration.

One big misperception of the U.S. immigration debate is that if Congress could pass an immigration reform bill, it would be the magic bullet that kills illegal immigration.

Such a bill is indeed indispensable to a long-term solution and must be addressed — sooner rather than later. But it should be understood that the humane and lasting answer to this vexing social issue lies in regional, if not global, cooperation among nation-states.

Immigration is not just a domestic issue; it is keyed to foreign affairs.

If the world is a marketplace, then migrants and their labor help deliver the produce and stock the shelves. In other terms, while economically powerful nations hold the capital, migrants help fill the jobs needed to turn capital into profit. This important role in the world economic order should give migrant workers an honored place — with the appropriate legal and labor protections.

In North America, Europe and most places in the industrialized world, however, migrant workers are left without legal protection. They are characterized as criminals — as in Arizona — and blamed for myriad social ills.

The de facto migration relationship between the United States and Mexico is a prime example. Migrants from Mexico, unable to support their families at home, take a dangerous journey to the United States and fill menial but crucial jobs in the U.S. economy — dishwashers, farmworkers and day laborers, for example.

As a result, the United States receives the benefit of their toil and taxes without having to worry about protecting their rights — in either the courtroom or the workplace. When convenient, they are made political scapegoats and attacked — through both rhetoric and work-site raids — as if they were not human.

But Mexico also wins financially under this system. The country receives up to \$20 billion in remittances per year — perhaps down to \$15 billion during this recession — without having to pay attention to the lower rungs of its economy.

What is left is a “go north” policy that exposes Mexican citizens to the ravages of human smugglers, corrupt law enforcement officials and potential death in the desert.

The big losers in this globalization game are the migrants, of course. They have no political power and are unable to defend themselves from inevitable abuse and exploitation.

These migrants are pawns in a system that preys on their desperation and expropriates their work ethic. As in a chess match, they are expendable and at the service of the most valuable player, the king — in this case, the sovereign nations of the United States and Mexico.

As a moral matter, the United States and Mexico cannot have it both ways — accepting the labor and remittances of these immigrants without recognizing their basic human rights.

It is time for both nations to abandon this mutual “nod and wink” policy, not found in written law but still all too real.

In its place, they should reform their national immigration laws and enforce current labor and due-process protections, so that migrants can come out of the shadows and travel and work in a safe and controlled manner.

Over the long term, joint efforts could be pursued to promote development in communities now drained by the migrant outflow, so that Mexicans can remain at home to work and support their families.

At a minimum, both Obama and Calderon should strive to ensure that international economic agreements, like the North American Free Trade Agreement, do not devastate industries that hire low-skilled workers in their home countries.

Obama has indicated his support of U.S. immigration reforms and his interest in addressing the root causes of migration, like underdevelopment. Calderon has emphasized the need for job creation among Mexico’s poor, and he has acknowledged the continuing mistreatment of migrants within Mexico.

But neither leader has done enough to address these issues.

The state visit this week could be a good first step to help change that equation.

Together, the two leaders have the opportunity to reframe the immigration debate in a way that recognizes the effects of globalization on the movement of labor yet injects basic human rights principles into the system.

The world would take note.

They can also remind us — and the global community — that migrants, including those without legal status, are not goods to be traded but human beings to be protected.

John C. Wester is the bishop of Salt Lake City and chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Migration.

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