

Governor Ridge Speaks at Embassy in Mexico

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Remarks by Homeland Security Director, Governor Tom Ridge

United States Embassy Mexico City, Mexico

Good afternoon. I am very pleased to be here again and feel very much privileged to be part of an effort that is so important to the countries of the United States and Mexico. President Bush on many, many occasions has stressed to me just how important the relationship is between our two neighbors. Six months ago, tomorrow, he stood together with President Fox at the White House and said it very directly and very plainly: We have no relationship in the world that is more important than the one with Mexico. He talked about the ties of "commerce, culture and kinship" that unite us. And President Fox talked about the mutual respect that is, and must be, at the core of this partnership.

It is also nearly six months since September 11. The events of that day have compelled us to come to grips with critically important new priorities.

These new challenges underscore the continuing importance of our relationship with Mexico and together, our relationship with our other democratic partners in this hemisphere. That is the essence of why I am here today. President Bush has asked me to come talk with your leaders and consider steps we can take together to make our societies and countries not only safer, but also stronger, better and more prosperous.

Together, we will find better ways to combat international terrorism. More broadly, we will find better ways of protecting the important human and economic interests at the heart of the U.S. - Mexican ties. We have a remarkable demographic relationship and one of the most dynamic and modern trading relationships in the world today. And so much of these hinges on the way we manage the long border that joins our two countries.

Speaking frankly, our relationship long ago outpaced both our border infrastructure and our approaches to border management. We're trying to serve and enhance a 21st century relationship with an old intellectual and physical approach to our borders.

It is vital to both countries that we move beyond this. That we embrace technology. That we take advantage of the growing trust and opportunity in this relationship and that we find ways to make our border more secure, more efficient, and more friendly to the legal traffic -- both people and goods.

We certainly have some ideas on specific steps that could start this process and are eager to hear the views of our Mexican counterparts. I am here with a highly talented team of senior U.S. officials:

Amb. Otto Reich, Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs

Amb. Frank Taylor, Secretary Powell's top official for counterterrorism

Amb. Mary Ryan, Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs Judge Robert Bonner, United States

Commissioner of Customs

INS Commissioner Jim Ziglar

Amb. John Maisto, President Bush's special assistant for Western Hemisphere

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These officials have already been working very hard with their Mexican counterparts on these challenges. These challenges are associated with the creation of a smart, user-friendly 21st century border.

I'm personally most grateful to President Fox and his administration. They've greatly extended themselves during our days here with planning and preparations and accommodations. They certainly are looking forward to meet and discussing these issues with President, with Secretary Creel, Secretary Castaneda, Attorney General Macedo, Secretary Vega, Secretary Peyrot, and Secretary Gertz.

I am anxious to learn how the Mexican government believes we can move this extremely important process along. Since I am here at the direction of President Bush, I will be reporting back to him upon my return to the States. And I know he is very eager to continue this dialogue with President Fox when they meet in Monterrey later this month. Thank you.

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