

Opening Remarks by Secretary of Homeland Security Tom Ridge at Press Availability With Mexican Minister of Governance Secretary Santiago Creel

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SECRETARY RIDGE: Well, good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. It's a pleasure to join with you and my friend, Secretary Santiago Creel at this joint press conference as we conclude, at least from our perspective, a very productive day of the Binational Commission as two neighbors and two very close friends, the governments and the people of Mexico and Canada, continue to work together to resolve a variety of challenges, and to meet some opportunities that we think we have and that we can, if we complete our work together, mutually beneficial to both countries.

Are you -- am I going too fast, or will you, are you going to interpret -- what's going on here?

PARTICIPANT: She's going to interpret the Secretary --

SECRETARY RIDGE: Very good. Very good, because I certainly cannot speak Spanish as well as the Secretary can speak English, so I apologize for that.

So I, first of all, publicly recognize the extraordinary leadership of Secretary Creel. We have, I think, particularly in the past six months, and we've been hard at this for the past 18 months on our border agreement, but we have a sense of momentum that has been building in the past six or seven months as we've addressed issues at the border, and issues, very important issues regarding to the personal safety of migrants, very important issues with regard to critical infrastructure, so there's a momentum that we have sensed and experienced as our teams have worked together.

We were able to talk about that at length today and use the work we've done to date and our conversations today to prepare for our next meeting. The Secretary has invited me to Mexico and I'm grateful for that invitation, and we are going to set mid-February, no later than mid-February, the next meeting between our teams, and the next milestone in our collective work, so that we can continue to push our teams and our governments to more and more results and more solutions.

So I thank you very much for the invitation, and if that time frame is satisfactory with you, I will look forward to joining you in Mexico City at that time.

We obviously know the United States and Mexico shares substantially more than just a border. We share a desire for economic development, we share an interest in maintaining the security of our people, and we certainly share a commitment to the basic values embraced by our governments of freedom and justice.

Ours is a very long history of friendship and collaboration, and one which we have renewed again today with the annual meeting of the Binational Commission. By the way, it is the first meeting of the Binational Commission, during which the Department of Homeland Security actually had a formal role. As you know, we've only been up and running since March 1st of this year, and even though we've been working with our friends in the Mexican Government for nearly two years independently, it's the first opportunity we've had to interact in the Commission.

Together, we are working to protect the infrastructure on our borders and secure the flow of goods and people across it, hundreds of thousands of crossings each and every day. We certainly want to improve security, but we also want to do it in a way that we facilitate the legitimate flow of goods and people across our borders.

And with more than 2,000 miles of border to cover, that's not an easy task. But it is one toward which I believe we have taken concrete steps and we are making some very real progress.

Today we have agreed to form a technical working group to inform the process of deploying the U.S.-VISIT program on the U.S.-Mexican border next year. To give you a background on this, the Congress of the United

States has basically said that we need to develop some form of entry/exit system so that we can help monitor people coming across our borders. It's the primary -- one of the primary responsibilities of any sovereign government to control the flow of goods and people across the borders.

Congress has mandated a program, an entry/exit program; we call it U.S.-VISIT. And because of the enormous amount of traffic across our southern border, we've agreed to establish a technical working group between the two governments as we move toward the December 31, 2004 deadline to comply with a congressional mandate.

This coming year, in 2004, we are both committed to the expansion of the FAST lanes -- that's, to refresh your recollection, that's an acronym for fast and secure trade. This is a way we think that will ensure the engines of economic trade between our countries continue, and are actually accelerated, and at the same time, enhancing security at the border as well.

In addition to the FAST lane that opens in El Paso, will open in El Paso next month, we hope to identify several more by the time we meet again in February, and we hope to accelerate that process as well.

We will also see an improved and expanded sentry program. Again, this is another version, but this is for people that come across our borders. Now we have a program and a technology with Canada; we call it -- it's a NEXUS technology and the Secretary and I agree that we ought to use basically the same process and the same technology, both with our friends to the north, and our friends to the south.

So we are going to substitute sentry with what we consider even better technology, NEXUS technology, which is already in place on our U.S.-Canadian border. This new and improved infrastructure will be in place at new locations in 2004, including -- again, we're working on this -- the first ever NEXUS-type pedestrian lane, at the San Ysidro Port of Entry.

I think Secretary Creel and I visited that facility several months ago, and we both took a look at the long line of pedestrian traffic. And they were doing -- everybody was trying to oblige everybody, and waiting in line. We said there's got to be a way we can move pedestrian traffic through these border locations, so we're going to work on a pilot program there very similar to the NEXUS program for car traffic. And we hope to have that in place soon at the San Ysidro Port of Entry.

All of our work is aimed at creating a smart border for the 21st century, one that is open for business, secure for the flow of people, and closed to organized crime and terrorism. The threat of terrorism has forced our countries to work together in ways never before imagined.

The friendship between Mexico and the United States -- and it's a friendship based on a common desire for freedom and liberty -- is uniquely prepared to deal with the new world in which we live. And it's in that very spirit that we want to renew our efforts to reduce and ultimately eliminate migrant deaths across the border.

During the past several months, the United States Government has increased its manpower at the borders. We have increased our air and our land surveillance. We have worked very closely with Secretary Creel and the Government of Mexico to create a binational education program, an alert program, warning people about the hazards and the treacherous conditions of crossing some of these desolate, dangerous areas along our mutual borders. But we have agreed that we need to do more, and I think the Secretary will talk a little bit more about that in the future.

So we've got a great neighbor, who happens to be a great friend, and we want to build on the momentum and the work we've done, particularly in the past six to eight months, and so I'm very pleased at this point to turn over the -- this part of the press conference, for his perspective and his insights, to my friend and colleague in public service, Secretary Creel.

This page was last modified on 11/12/03 00:00:00