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Mexican Congress votes to decriminalize illegal immigration

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MEXICO CITY — Migrant rights activists applauded a vote by Mexico's Congress to remove long-standing criminal penalties for undocumented migrants found in the country.

The measure passed unanimously in the lower house on Tuesday, a day after Senate approval. President Felipe Calderón's office declined to say whether he would sign the popular measure into law.

Mexican lawmakers saw the harsh penalties as an anachronism, and some noted that Mexico also owes migrants better treatment.

Immigrants here, mostly Central Americans trying to reach the United States, are often robbed, mistreated and subject to extortion by bandits and even police.

"It is very positive that they have removed the criminal penalties from the current law," said Karina Arias, the spokeswoman for Sin Fronteras, a Mexican group that promotes rights for migrants in Mexico. "It is a big step forward."

Current law lays out punishments of 1 1/2 to six years, while the new measure makes undocumented immigration a minor offense punishable by fines equivalent to about \$475 to \$2,400.

Some Mexican officials acknowledged that the current harsh penalties weakened Mexico's position in arguing for better treatment of its own migrants in the United States.

Arias said Mexico "is in a much better position" after voting for eliminating prison terms that are seldom enforced anyway. Most undocumented migrants caught in Mexico are simply deported.

Congresswoman Irma Pineiro of the small New Alliance Party said Mexico has a moral duty to protect migrants.

"Mexico is politically and morally obligated to treat migrants with dignity and to make a commitment to human rights, as a country that both exports and receives migrants," she said.

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