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By Tom Miller: Cross-border migration result of push-pull factors

By Tom Miller

When Mexican President Vicente Fox begins a two-day visit Friday with President Bush in Crawford, Texas, the subject of immigration will surely dominate.

To reach Prairie Chapel Ranch, Fox will fly over the U.S.-Mexican border and land at Waco, then motor a half-hour west.

But what if he were coming to the United States not as a neighboring president-rancher-former governor from the state of Guanajuato?

What if he were heading for the States as an impoverished *campesino* from Guanajuato whose cousin, Manuel, had wired him money from Kansas to come to the bewildering promised land?

First, Fox would travel either by trying to flag down a series of trucks heading north about 500 miles on four different highways, or, for less than \$50, he'd journey by 12-hour bus ride to the border town of Nuevo Laredo.

He might spend that first night in the local migrant refuge, one of many shelters established for northbound travelers in Mexican border towns.

Earlier, smugglers, commonly called *coyotes*, would have spotted him at the terminal and tried to sign him up for a trip north leaving at dawn the next morning.

Next, for a fat fee, the *coyote* would shepherd Fox and probably many others across the Rio Grande slightly upriver from Laredo.

If all went well, they'd be picked up and taken to a safe house before being ferried to a possible job in North Carolina or Illinois or just about anywhere in the states.

Fox might stay in Texas, of course, but historically that state has been simply awful for Mexican labor, legal or otherwise.

Conditions were so bad during the 1941-1964 *bracero* program that Mexico refused to send workers to Texas much of the time, even legally.

There are horror stories these days about *campesinos* cheated and robbed by *coyotes* at the border, stuffed into trucks and freight cars on their way north, dehydrated in the Arizona desert, exploited in Florida citrus fields and living miserably in California labor camps.

These dreadful reports are true - every one. What's seldom heard about, however, is the Mexicans and others who make it with minimal difficulty, whose success is not measured in statistics but on construction crews and in our kitchens and front yards.

Many are quick to blame the U.S. Border Patrol, now part of the Department of Homeland Security, for border

problems.

And to be sure, its policy of massing agents near relatively safe urban areas results in crossers' entering in more precarious locales.

But the hapless Border Patrol is neither the cause of nor the solution to the problem.

Immigration results from push-and-pull factors. The pushers can be famine, hurricanes, civil war, lack of jobs and drought. The pullers may be social stability, economic strength or real job possibilities.

It's as true in sub-Saharan Africa and throughout Eastern Europe as it is across the 1,933-mile U.S.- Mexican border.

And, in the case of the border, the push factors are mainly economic, exacerbated by the North American Free Trade Agreement, which has worsened the plight of low-income Mexicans by allowing agricultural imports, such as corn, to undercut the price of their own products and by promoting market conditions to encourage growing crops for export rather than for subsistence.

The pull factors are job possibilities, and, increasingly, they're cultural as well: Look at American billboards, watch American movies.

Wouldn't you like to live in that unreal world? From everything he's seen, northbound *campesino* Fox certainly would.

Unless the two presidents meeting this week act on the push-pull premise, yet another stab at stabilizing the southern frontier will surely meet the same fate as previous ones, and thousands more Foxes will enter the United States every week.

° Tom Miller is the author of "On the Border" and editor of "Writing on the Edge: A Borderlands Reader." This commentary was distributed by The Christian Science Monitor, 1 Norway St., Boston, MA 02115; www.csmonitor.com.

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