

Harper, Calderon set to discuss visa dispute

BY JULIET O'NEILL, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE MAY 26, 2010



Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Mexican President Felipe Calderon during happier times in 2007. While the Harper government may commit to some housekeeping measures to smooth the visa program that was introduced to cut "bogus refugee" claims and reduce spiralling costs and delays, there is little if any chance of Canada eliminating the visas at this stage. Only one in 10 of the more than 9,400 refugee claims in Canada from Mexicans in 2008 were accepted.

Photograph by: Chris Wattie, Reuters

OTTAWA — Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Mexican President Felipe Calderon are expected to have a "pretty robust discussion" Thursday about Canada's 10-month-old visa requirements for Mexicans.

That description by a Canadian government official was a diplomatic way of describing the thorniest issue in discussions between the two leaders that are expected to centre mostly on the international economy after Calderon addresses the House of Commons mid-morning.

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Trade Minister Peter Van Loan last month introduced a fast-track visa process for specified Mexican business travellers, a step that Mexico's ambassador to Canada, Francisco Barrio-Terrazas, has said he hopes will be expanded to tourists and students.

Calderon, scheduled to arrive late Wednesday night from a U.S. visit where drugs and U.S.-Mexico border controls were prominent issues, is also expected to hear Harper highlight and perhaps bolster Canada's help to Mexico's law enforcement management and leadership skills. The RCMP trained dozens of Mexican police commanders last year.

The president is scheduled to lay a wreath at the national war memorial across the street from Parliament Hill before addressing the House of Commons. Accompanied by two Mexican state governors, he will also meet business people in Toronto and Montreal.

Canada and Mexico are among one another's top trading partners and Mexico is keen for continued large direct investments by Canadian companies in its economy, says Carlo Dade, executive director of FOCAL, the Canadian Foundation for the Americas.

"Mexico is not doing as well with recovering from the economic downturn as has the United States, the United States is not recovering as well as has Canada, so given North America, given NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement), Canadian investment becomes more important," Dade said in an interview. "Investment from Canada becomes more important."

Dade said there is a huge scope for business developments in the alternative fuels and transportation sectors and noted that mining in Mexico is a major target of Canadian investment there. Several provinces have trade representatives in Mexico. Given economic difficulties in Europe, he said, "a competitive window has opened."