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Calderon and Harper to talk visas, security

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OTTAWA – Almost a year after Canada started requiring visas from Mexicans visiting Canada, the issue will still be on the agenda as Mexican President Felipe Calderon arrives in Canada Wednesday for an official visit.

Calderon will have a packed agenda over his two-day trip, with a meeting with Prime Minister Stephen Harper, an address to the House of Commons and meetings with Canadian business in Toronto and Montreal.

Alberto Lozano, a spokesman for the Embassy of Mexico, said the goal is to promote trade and investment, and develop more co-operation on issues of security, the environment and education.

“Of course the president will discuss with the prime minister topics related to the mobility of people,” Lozano added, a diplomatic reference to the ongoing dispute over the visas required for Mexicans to travel to Canada.

Last July, Immigration Minister Jason Kenney announced Canada would require visas from Mexican citizens entering the country. It was an attempt to cut down on what Kenney and Harper have called “bogus” refugee claimants.

Kenney announced a new program last month for business travellers, guaranteeing 24-hour processing for pre-approved companies.

“That was a big, big step and we will look forward and hope also that this would be the beginning of a simplified process for our people to travel to Canada,” Lozano said.

Calderon is going to arrive late May 26, too late for a dinner with Harper, Lozano said. He will travel to Toronto the following day after a meeting with Governor General Michaëlle Jean and a joint press conference with Harper. He'll cap off the trip with a visit to Montreal on May 28.

Calderon comes to Canada fresh off a visit in Washington, D.C., with U.S. President Barack Obama.

Continental security is going to be a focus for Canada and Mexico, says Carlo Dade, executive director of FOCAL, the Canadian Foundation for the Americas.

“The new definition of North American security is not nukes and Russians, it's drugs and thugs,” he said, adding that at some point Canada will be called on to contribute more to fighting drug gangs in Mexico.

“This would be the perfect time to begin making that case to Canadians that this is North American security we're talking about,” Dade said.

Harper announced funding last summer to send eight Spanish-speaking RCMP instructors to provide basic training to Mexican police and to bring 32 Mexican commanding officers to Canada for management, decision-making, investigation and intelligence training.