News

President Joe Biden holds a virtual bilateral meeting with Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador from the White House in Washington March 1, 2021. Also pictured Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas. (CNS/Reuters/Kevin Lamarque)

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Chalatenango, El Salvador — March 2, 2021

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U.S. President Joe Biden and Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador began bilateral cooperation talks March 1 with humor, a focus on limiting immigration to the U.S. and talk about Our Lady of Guadalupe.

"In Mexico we had a president who dominated the country for 34 years, his name was Porfirio Díaz, who said 'poor Mexico, so far from God and so close to the United States,'" López Obrador told Biden during the meeting conducted by videoconference. "Now I can say that it is wonderful for Mexico to be close to God and not so far from the United States."

Smiling at the comment and setting a neighborly tone, Biden reportedly told López Obrador that while the two nations have not always been the best of friends, under his administration the U.S. would treat Mexico as its equal.

Mexico is an important player in the administration's plan for Latin America, which seeks to deal with limiting the flow of migrants from Mexico and neighboring countries to the south by promoting a better way of life in the region.

In an earlier readout of a January call between the two leaders, the White House said Biden and López Obrador had "agreed to work closely to stem the flow of irregular migration to Mexico and the United States, as well as to promote development in the Northern Triangle of Central America."

Though details were scant about how that might happen, finding ways to limit the migrant flow is not a different goal from what the Trump administration had sought out. The Biden administration also has kept in place a measure enacted by Trump officials during the pandemic that allows border agents to deport to Mexico illegal border-crossers coming into the U.S., citing public health concerns.

However, there are Trump-era measures in the process of being reversed.

The White House said the U.S. had "suspended all enrollments in the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) and is now processing migrants at select ports of entry" along the border with Mexico.

It was a change from a previous agreement known popularly as "Remain in Mexico." The measure sought to kept asylum-seeking migrants from advancing north through points of entry along the border and in some cases kept them there while deporting others to nearby countries to wait adjudication of their cases in U.S. immigration courts.

López Obrador had largely cooperated with agreements set by Trump, who had threatened economic fallout for Mexico if it didn't cooperate. Reports say the Mexican president had planned to propose to the Biden administration an immigration plan that would allow Mexican and Central American workers to temporarily work in the U.S.

A White House official said, however, the plan would require a proposal and approval from Congress.

Biden also spoke of his fondness for Mexico's beloved patron saint, Our Lady of Guadalupe, leading newspapers in Mexico to say the U.S. president is a "Guadalupano," a devotee of the Marian apparition.

Biden showed a rosary featuring the Virgin of Guadalupe that belonged to his late son Beau Biden, a former attorney general for the state of Delaware, who had it on him when he died of brain cancer in 2015.

The U.S. president has visited the shrine honoring the Mexican Madonna during official visits as vice president and also has spoken of his late mother's devotion to Mary.

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