

Hispanic Group Assails INS Enforcement Plan La Raza Says Fla. Pact Stirs Immigrant Fears

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MIAMI BEACH, July 22 -- The National Council of La Raza thought this tropical resort city would be a perfect venue for its yearly conference, but today organizers said a number of smaller groups representing Latinos had called in the days leading up to the event to say people were afraid to come.

A Bush administration proposal to deputize local police to seize illegal immigrants as part of the war against terrorism scared them off, said Michele Waslin, the La Raza analyst who took the calls from affiliates in Iowa and Arizona. The proposal, disclosed in news reports in April, has become a formal agreement between the Justice Department and the state of Florida.

"Generally, people are just really concerned," Waslin said in an interview at the Miami Beach Convention Center, where 10,000 people have convened since Friday. "The undocumented community has been in fear since Sept. 11. It's increasing the level of stress, fear and anxiety they already have. It's driving the undocumented population deeper underground."

On Friday, the Department of Justice announced that it had signed an agreement with Florida under which the state would provide 35 "experienced, seasoned law enforcement personnel" for training on immigration law from the Immigration and Naturalization Service. After training, those officers will be assigned to seven regional domestic security task forces around the state.

The Justice Department said the agreement was "deliberately mindful of the constitutional rights afforded to all persons living in the United States" and that the local officers "will not be involved in immigration enforcement activities that do not involve terrorism or domestic security issues."

The fear at this year's La Raza conference is a dramatic contrast from the hope at the organization's conference in Milwaukee last year, after President Bush announced his intent to allow illegal Mexican immigrants the right to earn citizenship by working in the country for several years and living by the rules.

"We are angry," said Raul Yzaguirre, president of La Raza. "We are outraged. Eight million people work without their papers. Our economy depends on them. That issue got moved to the back burner."

In a speech at the conference today, House Minority Leader Richard A. Gephardt (D-Mo.) said the agreement between the Justice Department and Florida was a "bad idea" that would destroy the relationship between police and the communities they serve.

Gephardt also said he would recommend that the House Democratic Caucus introduce legislation within two weeks that would provide earned legal residency to illegal immigrants who work in the United States for two years and obey the law.

"President Bush talked about immigration reform, but there has not been enough action to match the rhetoric, in my opinion," Gephardt said.

The speech was an undisguised Democratic appeal to Hispanics, who have been courted intensely by Republicans since the 2000 presidential race. Democrats want to recruit them into the core of the party, where crossover Latino votes could strengthen an attempt to take control of the House.

La Raza is the largest civil rights organization representing Hispanic Americans, with affiliates in 37 states that reach 3.5 million people, the group said. The group is poised to one day equal the NAACP in clout: In the 2000 census, the population of Latinos nearly equaled that of African Americans, who make up about 12 percent of the U.S. population.

But Latinos are hardly the cultural monolith that Republicans and Democrats sometimes perceive them to be. Among the crowd at the convention were white, brown, black and Asian faces, all those of people who identify themselves as Hispanic.

They are descendants from nations and cultures that speak the same language, but often with a different pitch and cadence -- and they sometimes openly oppose one another. Even the name "La Raza," which translates as "the race," has been debated.

Jorge Herrera and Chris Pineda, two Mexican American student-government leaders in New York and Texas, respectively, led a seminar at La Raza's youth leadership conference to help young Latinos find ways to overcome their differences.

At Columbia University, said Herrera, "the Mexicans were on one side, doing their thing, and the Puerto Ricans were on the other side. If you come together, you build the numbers, you accomplish so much more."

In an interview later, he said, "We're all Latino. We should make it a big, safe haven for all of us. Go sit at the Puerto Rican table. Talk to Colombians. Find out what they're doing."

Maria Luisa Plasencia listened intently from her seat in the back of the room. The U.S.-born Venezuelan said members of the Latino student union at her school, the University of Massachusetts, turned their noses up at her because of her light complexion, thinking she must be a creida, or "conceited one." But they soon learned that she was a Latina activist and held no biases based on skin color.

Plasencia, who worked at bake sales and other fundraisers to attend the conference, ignored the call of the outdoors and the hedonism of nearby South Beach to sit in day-long seminars.

"I'm leaving on Tuesday," she said over the weekend. "I have little time, so I want to get everything in. There is tomorrow, but tomorrow there are also workshops. I worked so hard putting this trip together. How can I back out on this, on these people?"

The conference continues through Wednesday.