

Economic issues on Obama's trip agenda lead back to migration

Patricia Zapor Catholic News Service | Mar. 21, 2011



A girl holds photographs of U.S. President Barack Obama at the United States of America School Center in the Comasagua, El Salvador, March 17. (CNS photo/Luis Galdamez, Reuters)

WASHINGTON -- Much of the official itinerary of President Barack Obama's trip to Latin America March 20-23 deals with economic, development and trade issues, which to the thinking of Salvadorans ought to start with the issue of immigration.

Obama was to visit Brazil and Chile before concluding his trip with a swing through El Salvador.

Of course, any visit to three predominantly Catholic countries would likely include making some religious connections. In this case, Obama and his wife, Michelle, planned to pay visits to the 130-foot-tall Christ the Redeemer statue that overlooks the Brazilian city of Rio de Janeiro and to the tomb of slain Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero in San Salvador's cathedral. The first lady's itinerary includes many social and family programs, while her husband's is dominated by economy-related events.

A White House briefing March 15 to lay out the agenda for the trip emphasized economic and development issues. In Brazil, for instance, said Mike Froman, deputy national security adviser for international economic affairs, topics on the table include energy, oil deposits and infrastructure related to the country hosting the World Cup in 2014 and the Olympics 2016.

The planned participation at that stop of the U.S. secretaries of the Departments of Treasury, Commerce and Energy, as well as the heads of the Export-Import Bank and the Environmental Protection Agency left little doubt about the importance of economic and energy issues.

Chile's agenda was described by Froman as more related to free trade and the country's own economic reform, which has given it a 4 percent or so growth rate each year of the last decade.

In El Salvador, however, discussions about trade and the economy were likely to be tied to immigration and security, because that's where Salvadorans believe its most crucial economic problems are rooted, said Katharine Andrade-Eekhoff, a researcher and author on migration and development, who runs a Catholic Relief Services project for at-risk youth in El Salvador.

"There's a lot of anticipation about what they'll be talking about," said Andrade-Eekhoff, who has been living in El Salvador for nearly two decades, "and most of it goes toward immigration. That's where people's concerns lie. That's the main way this country enters into globalization, through migration."

Panelists from the Center for Strategic & International Studies in a March 16 briefing about the trip said the three countries represent a broad cross-section of the economic and development situations in Latin America.

Stephen Johnson, director of the think tank's Americas Program, described them in the context of Obama's agenda, starting with Brazil, the seventh-largest economy in the world, "a very rich, populous country with a \$1.3 trillion gross domestic product, ... about the gross metropolitan product of the New York City area."

Johnson said Chile is "sort of midway, with 17 million people and about \$164 billion gross domestic product, comparable to about the Phoenix metro area, and then El Salvador with 7 million population and about a \$20 billion gross domestic product, comparable to about Santa Rosa, Calif."

Brazil and Chile have enjoyed strong economies recently, with both growing economically to the point where Brazil has joined the ranks of nations that help it financially support poorer countries, and Chile "has aspirations to become what they call an 'advanced economy' by 2018, said Daniel Runde, director of the project on prosperity and development at the center. "This is a country that's on its way to becoming a very wealthy country."

El Salvador, on the other hand, while it's made "great strides" in the last 20 years, as Runde put it, is still largely dependent upon foreign aid and an estimated 17 percent of its GDP that comes from remittances from Salvadorans who live abroad.

Andrade-Eekhoff, who spoke with Catholic News Service March 17, noted that a quarter of El Salvador's population lives in the United States, with some being naturalized U.S. citizens and others whose legal or illegal status varies. They're the ones whose U.S.-earned income goes back to support family members back home.

Many of those expatriates would love to be able to return to their homeland and help it develop, she said, but they know the economy is too fragile and everyday security problems -- largely related to narco-trafficking and related gangs -- combine to make that an impractical prospect.

Salvadorans are waiting hopefully for Obama to announce efforts that will make it easier to go to the United States, make some money or visit relatives and return home, for instance, she said.

Current waits for visas to go legally can be 10-12 years, said Andrade-Eekhoff. That's too long for families without jobs or parents whose young children are being tempted by the easy money offered by narco-trafficking.

"People don't want to have to go illegally," she said. "But they're going because there are labor openings, the U.S. needs migrant workers to pick fruit and vegetables, mow lawns and care for kids. Essential services in the U.S. rely on migrant labor."

The Central American region would be eyeing Obama's visit for the same reasons, she said. Security and immigration are regional problems affecting El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, especially, in similar ways.

"Migration is our back door to globalization," said Andrade-Eekhoff.

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