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Obama launches new push for immigration reform during Texas visit

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Immigration and the Church

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(CNS photo/Gael Gonzalez, Reuters)

WASHINGTON -- President Barack Obama chose the Chamizal National Memorial in El Paso, Texas, near the U.S.-Mexico border to launch a push for immigration reform that the administration has been working toward for about a month.

As dozens of states this legislative session have considered -- and most have rejected -- measures that would localize immigration enforcement that comes under federal authority, Obama has been building support among religious leaders, business groups, prominent immigrants and others for a new immigration reform effort.

His May 10 speech was accompanied by the release of a 34-page 'blueprint,' called "Building a 21st Century Immigration System."

The document outlines an approach to immigration reform that includes: emphasizing federal responsibility for enforcement of immigration laws; holding employers accountable if they hire or exploit undocumented workers; creating a legal immigration system that adequately provides for the demands of employment and family reunification; and holding people in the United States illegally accountable for their actions before enabling them to "get on the right side of the law."

Obama's address came just as the Texas Catholic Conference decried the passage May 9 of an immigration enforcement bill by the Texas House. The state's Catholic bishops called it "an affront to the dignity of Texans" that ignores the state's cultural diversity and heritage and oversteps the authority of state government. The bill, which still must go to the Senate, would require law enforcement agencies to treat immigration violations as having the same priority as other crimes.

Elsewhere, a federal judge blocked the implementation of a Utah immigration bill that included some enforcement measures but also longer-term provisions for work permits for immigrants already living in the state without visas. And Florida's Legislature failed to pass its version of so-called copycat legislation, which mirrors an Arizona law passed last year that is still tied up in court.

In a Texas park that commemorates the peaceful resolution of a 100-year border dispute, Obama accused congressional Republicans of "moving the goal posts" in their demands for the kinds of border security measures they want to precede measures that would address the problem of having 11 million undocumented immigrants already in the country.

"We have gone above and beyond what was requested by the very Republicans who said they supported broader reform as long as we got serious about enforcement," said Obama. "All the stuff they asked for, we've done. But even though we've answered these concerns, I've got to say I suspect there are still going to be some who are trying to move the goal posts on us one more time."

Although the Border Patrol has been tripled, for example "now they're going to say we need to quadruple the Border Patrol," he suggested. "Or they'll want a higher fence. Maybe they'll need a moat. Maybe they want alligators in the moat. They'll never be satisfied. And I understand that. That's politics."

He outlined the moral and economic reasons for fixing the system so that it's easier for people to come



into the country to fill demand for low-skilled labor and to reunite families.

Reacting to the president's remarks about border security, congressional Republicans reiterated their view that more still needed to be done to secure the border before immigration reform could be addressed. "Despite the president's rhetoric that he has gone 'above and beyond' to secure the border, this mission is not accomplished," said Rep. Michael McCaul of Texas.

In his address, Obama also bemoaned the failure of Congress to pass the DREAM Act, the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act, which would allow people who were brought to the United States illegally as children to attend college or join the military and follow a path to citizenship. The bill passed the House in 2010 but failed to get the 60 votes necessary to override a filibuster threat in the Senate.

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Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., reintroduced the DREAM Act May 11.

In a statement after Obama's speech, Los Angeles Archbishop José H. Gomez, chairman of the U.S. bishops' migration committee, welcomed the call for reform "that secures our borders and respects the human dignity and hard work of immigrants."

Gomez said that he's witnessed firsthand "the harmful effect our current immigration system has on families, separating husbands from wives and parents from children. Congress and the president have a responsibility to come together to enact immigration reform that corrects this humanitarian problem, providing undocumented immigrants with the opportunity to earn permanent residency and eventual citizenship, and reflecting America's proud history as an hospitable society."

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