

Mexico's first lady speaks at Denver fund-raiser

By Tom McGhee
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First Lady of Mexico Margarita Zavala speaks Wednesday, March 5, 2008 at the Hyatt Regency in downtown Denver. (THE DENVER POST | MARK T. OSLER)

Thousands of Mexican children cross into the United States without their parents, and many of them are never reunited with their families, Mexico's first lady, Margarita Zavala, said today.

"The problem is largely ignored by the media and the powerful," she said at a fund-raiser for Project C.U.R.E., which sends medical supplies to Mexico and other developing nations.

Zavala, wife of Mexican President Felipe Calderon, told about 1,800 people at the luncheon in Denver that she wants to raise

awareness about the problem.

"I am not here to talk about immigration policy . . . this is about children," she added.

The U.S. deports about 50,000 children to Mexico each year and about 22,000 of them are unaccompanied by parents.

"Behind those numbers are families and individuals that have a face and a name," she said.

While many of them cross the border on their own, some start the journey with parents and later become separated. She told the story of a 7-year-old girl who left Oaxaca with her mother looking for her father.

The smugglers who took them to Arizona and separated the children from the adults, and then abandoned the kids in a church when they reached their destination. It took four months for the mother to find her child.

Many children aren't so lucky, Zavala said. "Many migrant children never find their parents."

Project C.U.R.E. invited Zavala to Denver for the event, which will benefit the flood-ravaged states of Chiapas and Tabasco, and other areas of Mexico.

Zavala, a former member of the Mexican legislature and a lawyer, has been involved in an effort to improve Mexico's health care system, said W. Douglas Jackson, president of

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Project C.U.R.E., which is headquartered in Centennial.

Calderon wants to improve access to health care in Mexico, particularly for poor people who live in medically underserved rural areas, Zavala said.

The need is particularly great in Chiapas and Tabasco, where 2 million people were displaced by floods last October. "Rural hospitals were flooded to the ceiling," said Jeannie Ritter, wife of Gov. Bill Ritter, who attended today's luncheon at the Hyatt Regency at the Convention Center in Denver.

Chiapas and Tabasco "suffered one of the worst disasters in the history of Mexico," said Zavala.

Project C.U.R.E. is a non-profit relief organization that collects donated medical supplies and equipment and delivers them to developing countries.

The fund-raiser was expected to raise up to \$5 million for Mexico.

The money would pay for 10 full cargo containers of equipment and supplies, Jackson said.

The luncheon was sponsored by the Coors Brewing Co., ProLogis, and other corporations.

Tom McGhee: (303)954-1671 or tmcghee@denverpost.com

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