

Salvadorans Get Reprieve as U.S. Amnesty Ends

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The Clinton administration announced yesterday it will end a temporary amnesty program for about 200,000 Salvadorans living in this country, but officials reassured the refugees they will not face massive deportations and extended their permission to work here for nine months.

Doris Meissner, commissioner of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, said the protection could no longer be continued because the human rights situation in El Salvador has "improved significantly" since its civil war ended in a 1992 truce.

But Meissner said the measure would be implemented in a "delayed and gradual" way. "There is no reason to fear large scale and immediate deportations," she told reporters at the Justice Department.

Salvadoran authorities and refugees alike reacted with grateful relief to the news, which they had feared would be worse. The administration has been under pressure to curb illegal immigration, and many Salvadorans had anticipated they might lose their legal right to be here on Jan. 1, when the protection expired.

"All Salvadorans here should spend a peaceful Christmas with their children and not dread the coming year," said Ambassador Ana Cristina Sol, the Salvadoran envoy in Washington. "We have nine months, and we will work hard to find a permanent solution for all of them."

"This is a great relief. We have a nice house in Hyattsville, we all have jobs, and I am going to college. We were afraid we would lose all of that and maybe be deported as well," said Nelsy Parada, a 21-year-old secretary.

An estimated 26,000 Salvadorans in the Washington area have been living here under the amnesty program, which was first approved in 1990 by President Bush. The protection has been extended twice since.

In San Salvador, President Armando Calderon Sol called the reprieve "a true diplomatic success" for his country. The ailing economy cannot absorb tens of thousands of returnees, and it depends heavily on about \$ 825 million sent home annually by Salvadorans working in this country.

Meissner said work authorization for all refugees in the temporary program will be extended for nine months. She stressed that employers should continue to honor existing work papers.

During the period, officials said, about 190,000 refugees will be able to apply for political asylum under the terms of a 1990 court settlement. It was reached after a class action suit alleged that some Central Americans had been unfairly denied asylum during the 1980s.

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Salvadorans also can try to avoid deportation by claiming it would pose a special hardship. Meissner said a large number would likely have valid claims because they have been in the **United States** for years and have children born here.

"People have made their lives and families here," said Ambassador Sol. "Any Salvadoran who wants to come home will be welcomed with open arms, but we still cannot offer them the same economic opportunities they find here."

Refugee advocates in the D.C. area said their agencies are preparing to handle a flood of paperwork. They also warned against unscrupulous lawyers who may take advantage of desperate or uninformed refugees.

"We now have a window of opportunity to help people find a permanent solution. Our greatest fear was a total cutoff. Now we can **get** to work," said Saul Solorzano, director of Carecen, a refugee agency in Mount Pleasant.

Some refugee advocates said they were not relieved by the nine-month grace period, pointing out that nervous employers may begin firing affected **Salvadorans** anyway.

"People are still desperate and anguished," said the Rev. Jorge Morales, a minister in Arlington. "I hear some bosses are saying after Dec. 31, there is no work. Everything is still very uncertain."

Correspondent Douglass Farah contributed to this story from San Salvador.

CAPTION: Salvadoran Ambassador Ana Cristina Sol, right, told citizens of her country living in the area not to panic. Astrid Ariz, left, and Gerardo Sol Mixlo listened.

Graphic

PHOTO, LUCIAN PERKINS

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