

Give Haitians more time

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Body

Congress should pass a bill that would extend the amnesty deadline for Haitian refugees to apply for U.S. residency. Deporting the immigrants, many of whom were not aware of the March 31 deadline, would tear families apart.

To help guarantee that our immigration rules are uniformly applied, regardless of color or national origin, Congress passed the Haitian Refugee Immigration Fairness Act of 1998. The law, an amnesty program for **Haitians** who fled persecution in their homeland, was designed to expedite the process for making these immigrants legal U.S. residents. Instead, it could result in the wrongful deportation of thousands of **Haitians** unless Congress intervenes and changes the law.

HAITIANS

The current legislation **gave** Haitian residents until March 31 to file residency and work permit applications with the federal government. A few thousand **Haitians** did so, but the vast majority of the 50,000 people who are eligible to apply for amnesty did not, mostly through no fault of their own.

From the start, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service did a poor job of publicizing the amnesty program. Making matters worse, it took federal officials nearly eight months to draft rules outlining the application process. Even now, final rules have not been issued. Unreasonably high filing fees also have deterred many **Haitians** from applying.

U.S. Sen. Bob Graham of Florida has introduced legislation that would extend the application deadline by one year, delaying the removal of these refugees and providing **more time** for the government to publicize the program. It is a measure Congress should put on the fast track and President Clinton should sign.

Thousands of **Haitians** fled to this country in 1991 to escape the violence that accompanied a coup led by Gen. Raoul Cedras, who installed a brutal military dictatorship. The threat to those refugees diminished after American-led military intervention returned Jean-Bertrand Aristide, at the **time** Haiti's president in exile, to office. However, many of those refugees still live in the United States.

For some, deportation means taking them from U.S.-born spouses and children, from jobs and from the communities in which they have lived for years. Communities in South Florida, which is home to one of the nation's highest concentrations of Haitian families, could literally be torn apart if the government begins rounding up and deporting refugees.

President Clinton noted back in 1998 that the amnesty law would "help support a stable and democratic Haiti, which, in turn, is the best safeguard against a renewed flow of Haitian immigrants to the United States." Indeed, sending back tens of thousands of Haitian residents could have a devastating effect on that country's economy, which already is on the brink of collapse.

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But there is a **more** important symbolic reason for extending the application deadline for another year. Previous amnesty programs limited eligibility to Central American and Cuban immigrants, leaving an impression that the United States welcomes light-skinned immigrants **more** readily than dark-skinned ones. Graham's bill would help dispel that perception and **give Haitians** a fair chance to become legal U.S. residents.

Graphic

BLACK AND WHITE PHOTO; U.S. Sen. Bob Graham of Florida

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