

## **Protesters Demand Immigration Amnesty**

The Washington Post

June 25, 1999, Friday, Sunday, Final Edition

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**Section:** METRO; Pg. B02

**Length:** 659 words

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### **Body**

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Hundreds of Central American immigrants from the Washington area and beyond staged a colorful demonstration in Lafayette Square yesterday to urge the U.S. government to grant all refugees who fled civil war and poverty in the region the same **amnesty** given to Cuban and Nicaraguan immigrants two years ago.

Waving flags from several countries and chanting slogans **demanding** "Residencia," they called on Congress to allow Salvadorans, Guatemalans and Hondurans to apply for permanent residency under the same generous terms it set for Cubans and Nicaraguans.

Although the left-wing Sandinista regime fell in 1990, lingering Cold War attitudes led lawmakers to grant an outright **amnesty** to immigrants from Nicaragua, as well as from Cuba, while offering less generous relief to refugees from Central American nations that once had U.S.-backed governments.

"It's not fair," said Milagro Perez, 36, a Salvadoran cook at Afterwords Cafe in Dupont Circle, who took her 7-year-old son, Jimmy, to the rally. "We all have the same needs. We all have the same problems."

During Central America's civil wars of the 1980s and early 1990s, more people from that region settled in the Washington area than in any other except the Los Angeles area. Central Americans are now, by far, the Washington area's largest immigrant population. But tens of thousands of them live in fear of deportation. Many have been granted permission to work but not to stay permanently; others are here illegally.

Last month, the Clinton administration issued regulations making it easier for as many as 50,000 Salvadorans and Guatemalans in the area to become permanent residents, including many who had been in legal limbo for as long as 15 years. But the measure did not apply to many others, including those who **immigrated** here illegally after 1991.

The administration indicated in May that it would support legislation to grant all Central Americans the same blanket **amnesty** that Congress granted Nicaraguans and Cubans who entered the country before 1995. But activists said yesterday that they are still waiting for Clinton to push a bill.

"We haven't seen anything concrete that we can take to Congress," said Saul Solorzano, director of the Central American Resource Center in the District. "It's a bad precedent for us, as Americans, to have this practice of dividing people based on their perceived ideological differences. That's not what America is about."

Rep. Luis V. Gutierrez (D-Ill.), who is pushing his own bill to help the immigrants, told the crowd that White House officials had assured him that they remain committed to "equal treatment" for all Central Americans. He said as many as 600,000 Central American and Haitian immigrants would benefit.

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But Allen Kay, spokesman for Rep. Lamar S. Smith (R-Tex.), chairman of the House Judiciary immigration subcommittee, dismissed the plan. He said Salvadoran and Guatemalan immigrants already have been granted "everything they asked for" when they sued the U.S. government in the late 1980s.

Juan Escobar, 26, a Guatemalan immigrant who works at a Delaware poultry plant, said he traveled to the rally to make a statement. "We want equal justice for our people," he said. "We'll keep coming until they hear us."

Felix Castillo, 33, a Salvadoran waiter who works at two Silver Spring restaurants, said he fled from leftist guerrillas during the civil war in 1988 while others fled from U.S.-backed government forces. "But we all suffered through the same situation, so it's only fair for us all to be treated the same," he said.

The Honduran flag is reflected in the glasses of Christina Miranda at the rally, which brought out many Hondurans, Salvadorans and Guatemalans. Central Americans rally in Lafayette Square for more relaxed immigration laws. Demonstrators say all immigrants from the region should receive the same sort of amnesty granted to Cuban and Nicaraguan immigrants.

## Graphic

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Photo, GERALD MARTINEAU

## Classification

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**Language:** ENGLISH

**Subject:** IMMIGRATION (92%); CIVIL WAR (90%); REFUGEES (90%); AMNESTY (89%); US REPUBLICAN PARTY (78%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (78%); HISPANIC AMERICANS (78%); IMMIGRATION LAW (78%); COLD WAR (78%); US DEMOCRATIC PARTY (78%); LEGISLATION (76%); INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS (75%); DEPORTATION (73%)

**Company:** CENTRAL AMERICAN LIFE INSURANCE CO (92%); CENTRAL AMERICAN PRINTING INC (92%); CENTRAL AMERICAN EQUITIES CORP (92%); CENTRAL AMERICAN LIFE INSURANCE CO (92%); CENTRAL AMERICAN PRINTING INC (92%); CENTRAL AMERICAN EQUITIES CORP (92%)

**Person:** LAMAR SMITH (56%); LUIS V GUTIERREZ (56%)

**Geographic:** TEXAS, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (96%); NICARAGUA (94%); GUATEMALA (92%); CENTRAL AMERICA (91%); HONDURAS (79%)

**Load-Date:** June 25, 1999