

Haitian Refugees Rally for Equality; At Capitol, Protesters Say Laws Favor Cubans, Nicaraguans

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Body

Nearly 2,000 **Haitian** immigrants and **refugees** from Miami, New York and Boston **rallied** yesterday on the U.S. **Capitol** steps demanding "equal treatment" with Cuban and Nicaraguan **refugees**, who were granted permanent residency in the United States under a **law** passed in November.

"The message is simple . . . we can't have green cards for **Cubans, Nicaraguans** and other Central Americans without amnesty for Haitians," Rep. Carrie P. Meek (D-Fla.) told the crowd. Meek has introduced legislation to grant residency to all Haitians who entered the United States before Jan. 1, 1996.

The **protesters**, who boisterously chanted in **Haitian** Creole, included **refugees** who fled Haiti in flimsy boats after a 1991 military coup and were detained by the U.S. Coast Guard at Guantanamo Naval Base in Cuba. Many have been living in the United States under a temporary amnesty, but have little chance of obtaining permanent residency.

"It seems that Congress has been treating Haitians differently than others. I do not understand why," **said** Abel Pierre, 47, a restaurant worker in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., who **said** he fled Haiti in 1992 after the army burned down his sister's house and threatened other relatives who had worked for democratic elections.

Haitians are not the only **refugee** group that has complained of unequal treatment.

The Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act, which became **law** in November, granted permanent residency to Nicaraguan and Cuban **refugees** who arrived by December 1, 1995, even if they entered the United States illegally. But the legislation gave only partial relief to 250,000 illegal immigrants from El Salvador and Guatemala by allowing them to appeal deportation orders under more lenient rules than current **law** allows. Those groups are still pressing for permanent legal amnesty.

In December, President Clinton used his executive authority to spare as many as 20,000 **Haitian refugees** from deportation for one year.

But **Haitian** advocacy groups **said** that the gesture did not go far enough and that lack of congressional support for full amnesty was a sign of racial discrimination against Haitians.

"The United States is a democracy where there is supposed to be equal treatment for all, not just for one group," **said Haitian** native Michel Nestor, a retired hospital worker and legal resident from New York. "Haitians are hard workers and taxpayers, and they deserve something in return."

Meek's bill has little support and powerful adversaries, including Rep. Lamar S. Smith (R-Tex.), who heads a House immigration subcommittee. But a less far-reaching bill to help a smaller number of Haitians, sponsored by Sen. Bob

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Graham (D-Fla.), has more backers and is scheduled for discussion in a Senate immigration subcommittee next week.

In addition, some refugees from Honduras are seeking relief from deportation, through legislative proposals and lawsuits.

The Hondurans complain that although they, too, suffered during Central American wars in the 1980s, they have been "left out" of recent efforts by Congress and Clinton to help refugees.

Yesterday, some refugee advocates noted that groups with anti-communist credentials, such as those who fled the leftist Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, have been able to win more political support here than those who suffered under right-wing military regimes, including Haitians and Salvadorans.

"It is a question of fairness and parity," said Jocelyn McCalla, director of the National Coalition for Haitian Rights in New York, who spoke at the rally.

Graphic

Photo, ray lustig, The protesters included refugees who fled after a 1991 military coup and Rep. Carrie P. Meek, who has offered a bill to grant residency to Haitians. A Haitian refugee joins almost 2,000 others from New York, Miami and Boston at the Capitol to urge Congress to amend the immigration laws.

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