THE IMMIGRATION CRUNCH As politicians push their plans to locak out illegal aliens, millions of newcomers to the United States fear being kicked out of the country they love Reluctant to leave: Many Salvadorans in the United States don't want to return to a country with no jobs.

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Body

Carlos Lazo knew exactly what he had to do that summer day in 1987 when the Salvadoran army grabbed him off the street, shaved his head and threw him in a military fort for induction.

First, a relative helped get him ***out*** of the army. Then he paid a smuggler $ 2,000 to bring him to the ***United States***.

"There was much war going on," he said recently from his Stone Mountain apartment. "They had already grabbed me once. I came so they wouldn't grab me again."

He's one of nearly 1 ***million*** ***Salvadorans*** who fled to the ***United States*** during a 12-year civil war that killed more than 75,000 people before a truce was reached in 1992. About 200,000 remain as legally sanctioned refugees. ***Many*** more live here as ***illegal aliens***.

But with peace has come ***U.S.*** pressure to go back to El Salvador, which ***many*** - in fact, most - would rather not do. They won a reprieve June 30 when President Clinton extended for 18 months the asylum they had been granted.

Their Salvadoran government ***wants*** them to remain abroad, at least for a while, because there are ***no*** ***jobs*** to come back to.

Salvadoran refugees mail home $ 700 ***million*** to $ 1 billion a year, more than all foreign aid their ***country*** gets from the ***United States*** or all the profits of El Salvador's largest industry, agriculture.

The money sent home, according to Salvadoran officials, finances an estimated 60 percent of all family purchases in the ***country***.

"There's ***no*** work there," said Sonia Salazar, a hotel housekeeper who has lived in Atlanta since 1988. "They depend on us. We ***want*** to stay for our family that we have back there."

Ms. Salazar and her husband, Jose Antonio Gonzalez, have two children living with her parents in El Salvador. The couple and Ms. Salazar's sister share a tiny one-bedroom Chamblee apartment. Ms. Salazar earns $ 125 weekly, her husband $ 320. Each month, they send home $ 100 to $ 150.

"We live better in this ***country*** than we could in ours right now," said Mr. Gonzalez, a landscaper. "My brothers have written me that I shouldn't even think of going back."

Many Latin American analysts see the asylum extension as informal foreign aid. "I ***don't*** see any other interpretation that's possible," said Robert Pastor, a Carter Center expert on Latin America and the Caribbean.

The last thing the fragile Salvadoran government ***wants*** is thousands more disgruntled ***Salvadorans*** with much free time and little hope.

"They say the war is over, but that's a lie," Mr. Gonzalez said. "There is much thievery. The ***country*** has not changed. It's dangerous, and there's ***no*** work."

"There's another war - crime," said Juan Cordourier, a Mexican immigrant in Atlanta married to a Salvadoran.

The thieves, Mr. Lazo said, "***don't*** work. They got ***out*** of the army. They got ***out*** of the guerrilla bands. And they ***don't*** like to work. So they do the easy thing."

Salvadorans in the ***United States*** may face tough times when the program expires Dec. 31, 1994. In these days of strong anti-immigrant sentiment, when recent polls show that most Americans ***want*** to shut down borders, an increasing number of ***Salvadorans*** ***fear*** they'll have to make a difficult choice - ***return*** home against their will or try to stay here illegally.

Many say they'll attempt the latter.

"As long as ***immigration*** [officials] ***don't*** bother me, I'm thinking of staying here," said Mr. Lazo, the father of three children born in Atlanta. "My children need to learn English."

"A lot would depend on conditions in our ***country***," said Mr. Gonzalez, who allows that he's thinking of bringing his children here from El Salvador.

That worries ***immigration*** opponents.

"This just goes to confirm that all these so-called temporary programs turn ***out*** to be permanent," said Ira Mehlman, a spokesman for the Federation for American ***Immigration*** Reform. "It winds up being a back- door amnesty program for ***illegal immigrants*** from El Salvador."

But refugee rights activists say the ***Salvadorans*** should be allowed to stay.

"***Many*** have children born and raised here," said Reynaldo Guerrero, executive director of the Center for Immigrants' Rights. "They're established here in the ***U.S.***

"Their income is a source of aid to the Salvadoran people in El Salvador," he said. "The current situation in El Salvador is uncertain. I ***don't*** think it would be very wise to send back these people."

Immigration policy arguments are lost on Blanca Estela, a 22-year- old housekeeper studying English at night. She's on the go 14 hours a day, grosses $ 300 a week and sends $ 200 to $ 500 a month to her family back home.

All she cares about is that in the ***United States*** she can work, continue her education and live in peace.

"I ***don't*** have to live with the tension that there may be an attack," she said, "or that a member of my family may turn up dead."

And if her temporary asylum is not renewed, will she stay?

"I think so."

Graphic

Photo: Carlos Lazo, with his wife, Teresa, and 8-month-old son, Carlos Jr., in their Stone Mountain apartment, says thieves make life difficult in El Salavdor. /FRANK NIEMEIR / Staff

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