

DETENTION CENTERS FOR IMMIGRANTS BEING DEBATED

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WASHINGTON - The federal government, in a quandary over how to handle the influx of Central Americans seeking political asylum, is **debating** a range of approaches, including **detention centers**, sources said Saturday. One source said that the idea of **detention centers** was at the "conservative end of the scale." It drew immediate criticism from **immigrant** advocates. At the "liberal end," officials within the Department of Justice are advocating a special status called "extended voluntary departure." This plan would allow the **immigrants** to remain in this country until the situations in their homelands become stable. Also, officials said, President George Bush's administration is casting about for ways to pressure Mexican officials into helping to stem the flow of undocumented **immigrants** through Mexico en route to the United States. Referring to the Central American **immigrants**, an administration official said, "We're looking for Mexican help to cut them off." But the official acknowledged that this tack ran the risk of angering Mexicans, who might view it as intervention. The Immigration and Naturalization Service reports that since July, 30,000 Central Americans - about half of them Nicaraguans - have poured across the border into Texas. What the administration will do to handle the flux "is still up in the air," said Loye Miller, director of public affairs at the Department of Justice. "It's a . . . tough problem." For the last seven months, **immigrants** from Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have fled from their homelands in increasing numbers, joining hundreds of thousands already here.

They enter this country through Texas and seek political asylum on the ground that they have a "well founded fear" of persecution in their war-torn home countries. The Immigration and Naturalization Service asserts that almost all such claims from Central Americans are frivolous. In December, the agency issued rules that made the **immigrants** wait at the point of entry while their claims were processed. "Putting up some kind of **detention centers** (in the border areas) addresses the issue of meeting their human needs," said one administration official. But the lingering criticism of a federal policy that put Cuban and Haitian **immigrants** in such **centers** after their arrival in 1980 weighs heavily against the plan. "The notion of alien **detention centers** on U.S. soil is disturbing, because it violates the spirit if not the letter of the Refugee Act of 1980," said Wade Henderson, associate director of the American Civil Liberties Union office in Washington.

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