

IMMIG RULES SPUR EXODUS

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Body

From the streets of the city's immigrant communities to the boardrooms of its top firms, hundreds of newcomers are booking flights out of the country as they eye a legal deadline that looms 48 hours away.

Those who have lived in the U.S. illegally since April 1 face a three-year reentry ban if they leave after Saturday and try to return afterward.

Many lawyers say they have advised clients to fly out now and apply for visas or green cards in their homelands.

"Now the big crunch is coming. This law was designed to get rid of illegal aliens, and it's doing that," said Ronald Storette, an immigration law expert in Manhattan. "No one wants to risk being barred."

Alexander Popovic is leaving tonight for Belgrade. When he'll come back to see his wife and 3-day-old son in Brooklyn is as uncertain as the peace in his homeland.

The artist came to the U.S. in 1988 on a scholarship and earned a master's degree at Brooklyn College. His visa expired in 1993, the year before he married an American.

Twice, Popovic applied for a waiver of a special visa provision that requires him to go back before seeking U.S. residency. Twice, he was denied. Fearing a three-year separation from his wife, Jennifer, and son, Henry, he hired a lawyer to fight his case and booked an Air France flight.

"I'm not sure what will happen," Popovic, 40, said glumly. "The one thing I know is I'm not going to be able to get a job there. The country has about 50% unemployment now."

Since 1995, a federal law enabled many of the estimated 400,000 illegals in New York to seek a green card without leaving the U.S. All they needed was \$ 1,000 and sponsorship from an employer or a relative with legal status.

But that law will expire on Tuesday, barring unlikely action on an extension by a divided Congress. Therefore, many illegals are leaving before Saturday's legal deadline triggers the three-year ban. The penalty is even worse 10 years if they stay past April 1, 1998, and Congress doesn't approve a renewal.

The departing throng includes many foreign-born executives for top New York firms, said Storette, a Proskauer Rose law firm partner who counsels corporate clients. Typically, the executives are awaiting approval of residency applications.

Lacking that approval, said Storette, "I've told my clients they should leave."

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