

Clinton Bars Amnesty For Latin Immigrants; President Rebuffs Central American Leaders

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Body

President Clinton today **rebuffed** pleas from **Central American leaders** seeking **amnesty** for **immigrants** who fled their region during the civil wars of the 1980s, but he tried to assuage their concerns by vowing humane enforcement of a tough new U.S. immigration law.

During a summit meeting with fellow heads of state here, the **presidents** of El Salvador and Nicaragua pressed **Clinton** to come to the aid of hundreds of thousands of people who sought refuge in the United States a decade ago and face the prospect of expulsion now that peace and stability have arrived. The new law, which took effect April 1, could affect about 300,000 **Central** Americans in the United States, including more than 30,000 in the Washington area.

Clinton made clear that **amnesty** is not an option, according to participants in the closed-door session. However, in private and later during public remarks, the **president** repeatedly expressed sympathy for the plight of the **immigrants** who came legally, comparing them to boat people who escaped Vietnam in the 1970s. And he promised to avoid any Draconian roundups while he attempts to persuade Congress to soften the impact of the law, which he signed during last fall's election campaign.

"There will be no mass deportations and no targeting of **Central** Americans under this law," **Clinton** said at a post-summit news conference, repeating a pledge he has made throughout his trip this week. "I am working with Congress to implement the new law so that it does not produce these unintended results."

While disappointed not to hear more specific assurances, **Central American leaders** said they are convinced that **Clinton** understands their positions and believe he will translate his soothing words into tangible results.

"It is very encouraging for us to hear the profoundly humane position that he adopts when he looks at the people who have had so much pain," said **President** Armando Calderon Sol of El Salvador.

"We're always wanting to see more, but of course we understand the situation the United States is facing," said Leonel Fernandez Reyna, the U.S.-educated **president** of the Dominican Republic. "We do think there has been a consideration of the humanitarian problem involved."

On other topics, the United States signed an "open skies" agreement permitting unrestricted air service with Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala, while the region's **leaders** also discussed expanding free trade, joint law enforcement and environmental protection.

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But U.S. immigration policy came to dominate the meeting in a way it had not previously during this first **Latin American** trip of **Clinton**'s presidency. The issue resonates strongly here because of the imminent threat to **Central American immigrants** in the United States and the wide-ranging impact their deportation could have, not only on them and their families, but also on their home countries.

Those **immigrants**, who entered the United States under rules intended to grant them temporary sanctuary from political upheaval at home, collectively send home \$ 1.5 billion a year to relatives in El Salvador and Nicaragua. Analysts say shipping them home en masse could overwhelm **Central American** labor markets, which would not have enough jobs for all of them.

The new law has a variety of provisions intended to curb illegal immigration and was not aimed specifically at the **Central** Americans. But they became endangered when officials focused on a provision that allows the government to exempt only 4,000 people a year from deportation. The administration is postponing the effective date of that cap until Oct. 1, while negotiating with congressional **leaders** to find a compromise.

The emotion of the dispute was evident as **Clinton** rode in a parade through the streets of San Jose, the Costa Rican capital. Thousands of cheering, flag-waving schoolchildren lined his route and greeted him enthusiastically under brilliant blue skies. But one man held up a hand-scrawled sign that said, "Stop the Deportation," and a half-dozen others held up their middle fingers when he passed.

In a delicate balancing act, **Clinton** tried to satisfy audiences both at home and here by affirming the need for strong immigration laws even as he agreed to do what he can to soften their edges.

"It's a good thing that we try to stop illegal immigration, because if we don't, we won't be able to keep the **American** people in support of legal immigration," **Clinton** said. "But we have to understand, these **Central American** countries are in a different category because of what they went through in the 1980s."

Immigration and Naturalization Service Commissioner Doris Meissner, accompanying **Clinton**, said the **president** and his staff did not fully understand the law's ramifications when he signed it. "We have come to understand much more clearly . . . exactly how complex it is and exactly what the consequences would be," she said.

During their private session, U.S. officials said, El Salvador's Calderon Sol asked **Clinton** to consider **amnesty**, and Nicaragua's Arnoldo Aleman joined in pushing for U.S. leniency, reminding him that the United States had played a major part in creating the turmoil that drove away their citizens during its Cold War proxy confrontations with the Soviet Union.

Clinton acknowledged the U.S. role but said there was no practical way to seek **amnesty** because Congress will not accept it, Calderon Sol told reporters. **Clinton** aides said they did not recall the **president**'s responding directly on **amnesty** but rather offering more general reassurances that effectively made clear it was not an option.

"It's not the administration's position to seek **amnesty**," Meissner said later. "We believe this law is a good law, and by and large we think it is workable."

Graphic

Photo, afp//luke frazzat, **Clinton** speaks outside National Theater in San Jose, Costa Rica, where he met with **leaders** of **Central** America and the Dominican Republic. (Photo ran in an earlier edition)

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