

Deals shield Haitians, but not state's tobacco money

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Body

In the last days of this Congress, Florida lawmakers won protections for 40,000 Haitian immigrants who have lived for years with the fear of deportation. But they failed to prevent the federal government from someday raiding millions of dollars gained from the state's lawsuit against Big Tobacco.

The provision making the Haitian refugees eligible for permanent residency was included in a huge budget bill that was being finalized Thursday night. It affects some 40,000 refugees, most in Florida, who fled their country after a military coup in 1991.

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"Thousands of hard-working families will no longer suffer in immigration limbo and will be truly free to realize the American dream," said Sen. Bob Graham, D-Fla., who worked with Sen. Connie Mack, R-Fla., to grant the protection.

Congress had failed to include the Haitians in legislation last year that protected some 150,000 Nicaraguans from harsh new requirements of a 1996 immigration law. African-American lawmakers complained the Haitians were the victims of discrimination, leading the Clinton administration to impose a one-year moratorium on deportations while Congress figured out a solution.

In addition to allowing the Haitian refugees to stay in the United States legally, the budget agreement increases the number of specialized foreign workers allowed in the country and earmarks \$ 171-million for the Immigration and Naturalization Service to reduce its backlog of citizenship applications (1.9-million people currently are waiting to become U.S. citizens).

Meantime, Graham and Mack lost their effort to block the federal government from staking a claim to part of the state's \$ 13-billion settlement with tobacco companies. The federal government might want some of the money, \$ 1-billion or more, by some estimates, to cover Washington's portion of Medicaid, the state-federal health care program.

The administration is in no hurry to collect the money, said Kimberly James, a spokeswoman for Graham.

In the confusion of the final negotiations, Graham's aides and the administration said the bill includes between \$ 40-million and \$ 60-million to help the state pay for land acquisition in the Everglades.

A separate spending bill funding the Pentagon includes several million dollars for local projects inserted by Rep. C.W. Bill Young, R-Indian Rocks Beach.

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The defense spending bill sends \$ 10-million to the University of South Florida for work on its underwater research vehicle; \$ 4.2-million for a police school at St. Petersburg Junior College; and \$ 6.5-million for breast cancer research at USF, according to Young's office.

Elsewhere, environmental groups failed to block a provision that allows 75 acres of coastal Florida to get federal flood insurance, which is expected to pave the way for development.

- Information from the New York Times and Knight Ridder Newspapers was used in this report.

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