

'Gift to Salvadoran Community'; Illegal Immigrants Granted Temporary Relief After Quakes

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Byline: Caryle Murphy, Washington Post Staff Writer

Body

President Bush announced yesterday that Salvadorans living illegally in the United States will be allowed to stay here and work for the next 18 months, a measure intended to help their homeland recover from the devastation of two recent earthquakes.

The move will enable undocumented Salvadorans -- including thousands in the Washington area -- to seek employment legally and send financial aid to relatives in the Central American country. The decision was widely praised by local Latino community leaders.

"It's a great gift to the Salvadoran community and a great way to help the reconstruction effort in El Salvador, and we are just glad he has done it," said Saul Solorzano, director of the Central American Resource Center in the District.

The Immigration and Naturalization Service estimates that 150,000 undocumented Salvadorans may come forward to take advantage of the temporary relief from the threat of deportation. The agency had no estimate of how many might apply in the Washington area, which has the nation's second-largest Salvadoran community after Los Angeles, but Solorzano said up to 50,000 might do so.

"We know we are going to receive a deluge of people to seek relief," said Yvonne Martinez Vega, director of Ayuda, a nonprofit social service agency in Adams-Morgan. The decision, she added, has "made me take a second look at the Bush administration."

Bush also said the United States would send El Salvador \$ 52 million in additional reconstruction aid this year. Washington already had sent \$ 16 million after the first quake hit El Salvador on Jan. 13. The administration promised to seek an additional \$ 52 million in relief funds for El Salvador next year.

"The recent earthquake in Washington state brings home to the citizens of our nation how natural disaster can strike any of us," Bush said. "And it reminds us of our obligation to reach out to help those in other nations struggling in the wake of disaster to rebuild their homes and lives."

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Bush's announcement followed his meeting at the White House with El Salvador President Francisco Flores, who last month asked Bush to offer undocumented Salvadorans "temporary protected status," as the measure is called. Flores also had pressed the administration for increased financial aid.

"It was a great success," Flores said of his meeting with Bush. "It was beyond what we were expecting. His campaign announcement that he would be close to Latin America was very true."

Flores estimated that if 100,000 Salvadorans legalize their immigration status, they could produce an additional \$ 300 million a year in remittances to their families. Already, Salvadorans send home \$ 1.7 billion annually.

"So [temporary protected status] is absolutely crucial to the reconstruction effort," said Flores, who made his comments during a meeting with Washington Post reporters and editors.

The Jan. 13 and Feb. 13 earthquakes left 1,100 dead, more than 2,500 missing and about 7,860 injured, the INS said. About 1.3 million people have been displaced, and the country has suffered \$ 2.8 billion in financial losses, according to the INS.

After the first quake, the INS halted deportation of 1,100 undocumented Salvadorans. Most of those are in detention, and "some might be eligible for [the temporary status] if they have no criminal background," said INS spokesman Bill Strassberger.

Salvadorans who can show that they have been in the United States continuously since Feb. 13 are eligible for temporary protected status. They are required to fill out two forms and pay \$ 150 in application fees. Anyone convicted of a felony or two or more misdemeanors while in this country is not eligible.

"It's very good that the president has [made this decision], because all the people in El Salvador are in great need of the help of Salvadorans who live in this country at this moment in time," said Ana Isabel Reyes, an undocumented Salvadoran who works as a housecleaner in the District.

Sonia Aquino, 30, a Salvadoran-born information specialist at the Spanish Catholic Center in Adams-Morgan who has legal status in this country, said that since the quakes, "everyone who lives here worries [about how] to send money to their families. . . . There is no way we can go back there and work. There are no jobs there."

Staff writer Syliva Moreno contributed to this report.

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