

## **Thousands may lose special U.S. status**

Salvadorans, Nicaraguans and Hondurans living in the United States could have their Temporary Protected Status revoked, meaning they could be deported if they didn't go underground.

By Pablo Bachelet  
The Miami Herald  
January 17, 2006

Washington -- The Department of Homeland Security wants to end the special immigration status that has allowed some 300,000 illegal Salvadoran, Honduran and Nicaraguan migrants to remain in this country, many of them in Florida, Bush administration officials say.

But the final decision on the Temporary Protected Status for the three nations, which would force those migrants to return home or remain here illegally and risk deportation, still is under intense debate within the administration, the officials add.

TPS, which bars the deportation of illegal migrants from those countries, was approved for Nicaragua and Honduras after Hurricane Mitch struck them in 1998, and for El Salvador after earthquakes there in 2001 killed more than 1,000 people and destroyed more than 220,000 homes.

TPS was intended to allow illegal migrants from these countries to stay in the United States temporarily and thereby soften the blow of the natural disasters. But today these poor countries rely heavily on remittances sent by their citizens working in the United States.

In the past, TPS renewals -- usually for 18-month periods -- have been almost routine for the Central Americans. But the mood in the administration and especially in Congress has been changing on immigration issues, as evidenced by the House passage of a bill last year that toughens border controls and cracks down on companies that hire illegal migrants.

### **Extension Sought**

Salvadoran President Tony Saca has been calling President Bush and other top officials in an effort to win another extension of TPS, officials said.

Across the nation, more than 220,000 Salvadorans, 70,000 Hondurans and 3,600 Nicaraguans could be forced to leave or go underground if TPS is removed, according to DHS numbers. The 2000 census showed Florida had 80,000 Nicaraguans, 41,000 Hondurans and 21,000 Salvadorans, almost all in South Florida, though there's no data on how many are illegal migrants.

The number of Central American beneficiaries of TPS has been declining gradually as they marry U.S. citizens, return home or find employers to sponsor a more permanent status, DHS data shows.

The Bush administration must make a formal announcement on TPS 60 days before its expiration -- in July for Nicaragua and Honduras and in September for El Salvador -- although a decision could come before spring.

One senior administration official involved with Latin American issues said that DHS officials he described as "criminal justice types" have decided that TPS for the Central Americans must end.

"It's a decision that can yet be changed, but really it's almost at the last stages," the official said. He and other administration officials interviewed for this story requested anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue.

Another official said some government members want to keep TPS or devise "an exit strategy" that would end the program but look for ways to avoid the public relations nightmare of having thousands of Central Americans being deported. DHS is still consulting with State Department and other U.S. agencies before making a final decision, officials added.

The case of El Salvador is emblematic because it is the biggest beneficiary of TPS and a loyal U.S. ally. It is the only Latin American nation that continues to contribute troops in Iraq. Not getting TPS renewed would be a major blow for Saca, who is facing legislative elections in March. Almost two million Salvadorans living in the U.S. send almost \$2.5 billion back home in remittances, a lifeline for the country's economy, according to the Inter American Development Bank.

Last year, the Salvadoran embassy hired the law firm of Greenberg Traurig LLC to lobby on its behalf on immigration matters. The Salvadoran embassy did not return calls seeking comments.

On Friday, Saca talked with Bush about trade and immigration issues, but apparently did not get a firm commitment on TPS. Bush "listened carefully and reaffirmed our continued focus on an approach that combines reasonable border enforcement with a temporary worker program," said White House spokesman Scott McClellan.

### **What Critics Say**

Critics say it is hard to argue for continually renewing TPS for a nation like El Salvador while denying it to Pakistan -- where 80,000 were killed in an earthquake last year -- or Colombia, where almost 3,000 die every year from a long-running civil war. Both are asking for TPS benefits.

DHS has already been showing signs of taking a harder line on El Salvador, the biggest source of illegal migrants after Mexico. In November, DHS persuaded the Department of Justice to file a motion to end the so-called Orantes injunction, a requirement put in place during the Central American wars of the 1980s, that Salvadorans caught trying to enter the United States illegally must have a hearing before an immigration judge before they can be deported.