

Immigration chief resigns, will return to Miami

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Emilio T. Gonzalez, the accomplished Cuban exile appointed by the Bush administration to modernize the besieged federal agency that approves green cards and citizenship for immigrants, announced Thursday he is stepping down after two years as its director to return to Miami.

Gonzalez, 51, obtained mixed results in his efforts to adopt new technology, overhaul services for immigrants and expand the workforce at U.S. Immigration and Citizenship Services, which has been beset with severe backlogs since Sept. 11.

In a phone interview, Gonzalez said he was tired of traveling and wanted to rejoin his wife and family, who remained in Miami for eight years while he worked in Washington, first for the National Security Agency, where he served as director for Western Hemisphere affairs, and then at the Homeland Security immigration agency.

Gonzalez, who has been rumored to be interested in seeking elected office in Miami, acknowledged he has been approached by friends with that idea, but insisted he has no specific plans.

"I'm coming home," said Gonzalez, a U.S. Army veteran who retired with the rank of colonel and earned a doctorate in international relations at the University of Miami. "I just want to take some time off and see where things go."

While he earned praise from advocates for accessibility and responsiveness, his tenure was marked by a sharp increase in fees charged to immigrants, a step Gonzalez said was necessary to finance badly needed improvements at the agency, including hiring workers to reduce backlogs. The agency is funded almost exclusively by the fees.

Gonzalez was willing to face critics of the increases to make his case, a distinct turnaround for an office seen as unresponsive, said U.S. Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, R-Miami, herself an opponent of the higher fees.

"He came to Miami, he did TV and radio, taking on harsh questions and being accessible," she said. "He did a phenomenal job in a difficult situation. I think he put a human touch on what is otherwise a void of a bureaucratic mess."

In Miami, she said, Gonzalez set in motion a critical reform with a decision to shut down the notorious and antiquated immigration office at Biscayne Boulevard and 79th Street in Miami. The agency is building four regional state-of-the-art offices to make its services more customer friendly.

"That will be his lasting legacy, that folks don't have to go to 79th Street and wait in those humongous lines and get their cars towed," Ros-Lehtinen said.

UNPREPARED AGENCY

But some critics say Gonzalez left the agency unprepared for a surge in citizenship applications that resulted when 460,000 immigrants filed paperwork to beat the start of the higher fees last July -- more than six times the number who applied the previous July. The average processing time, which had been reduced to seven months in the early part of Gonzalez' tenure, ballooned to 18 months. At the end of last year, the number of pending cases stood at almost one million.

In a statement Thursday, U.S. Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., said the naturalization system is "in crisis," noting that many of those who applied for naturalization in the hope of voting in November's presidential election won't become citizens in time.

One advocate praised Gonzalez's accomplishments, even if the job of reform remains unfinished.

"It's a very tough agency to work at," said William Ramos, director of the Washington office of the National Association of Latino Elected Officials, which has carried out an aggressive campaign to get immigrants to apply for citizenship. "He set the ball rolling for improvements coming down the line. It's moving in the direction it needs to be going in. It's going very slowly, obviously."

The White House will name a successor. Gonzalez's resignation is effective April 18.

STEPPING UP WORK

Gonzalez, who said his resignation is unrelated to the backlogs, said the naturalization processing time has been reduced since the end of the year to about 16 months. The agency is adding 50 immigration officers per week and expects to significantly speed up the work flow this year.

Officials at Homeland Security, which oversee the immigration and citizenship agency, have estimated the backlogs may not be eliminated until 2010, but Gonzalez said it could happen sooner.

He said he has left the agency in markedly better shape than when he arrived, when it was severely underfunded and handicapped by antiquated equipment and procedures.

"We had a lot of work to do here with regards to getting the number of people, training and technology that we needed," Gonzalez said.