

Many taking military shortcut to U.S. citizenship

16 Oct 2006 21:33:48 GMT

Reuters

By Adriana Garcia

WASHINGTON, Oct 16 (Reuters) - The U.S. military has provided legal immigrants a fast track to citizenship, and they are taking advantage of it in record numbers, even if it means facing the risk of death or injury in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Interest surged after President George W. Bush signed an executive order in July 2002 allowing immigrants with green cards to become citizens as soon as they are sworn in, according to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).

Since then, more than 25,000 immigrant members of the armed services have become U.S. citizens and another 40,000 are eligible to request naturalization, USCIS said in a statement.

The numbers rose to 4,614 in fiscal 2005 ended Sept. 30, 2005, from 749 in 2001, the agency's figures show.

Mexican-born Gabriela Begaye, 30, who joined the Army at the age of 25 and became a citizen last week in Fort Bliss, Texas, says she feels proud to wear a military uniform.

"I would die for this country. I would do it," she said.

Begaye admits that the new Bush administration law may be motivating more immigrants to join the armed forces.

"You get a lot of respect (by joining the army). Now that the law has passed, that has to be a motivator," she said.

The U.S. immigration agency started in 2004 to conduct the first overseas military naturalization ceremonies since the Korean War. During fiscal 2005, 1,006 foreign-born soldiers became citizens outside the United States.

But the chance to win citizenship fast and at no cost is not the main reason foreigners join the military, said Douglas Smith, Public Affairs Officer at the U.S. Army Recruiting Command.

"Money for education, wanting to serve the country, and to learn a skill are the top three motivations," he said.

Citizenship also means a green light to climb through the ranks of the military, said USCIS spokesman Daniel Kane, who added that patriotic pride is often a key factor.

"There's a strong surge of patriotism among immigrants who are serving. They are grateful to the United States and they want to give back," he said.

Even without the Bush administration fast-track order, the average time in the military required to apply for citizenship in peacetime has been reduced from three years to one under current legislation, USCIS said.

But the opportunity may come at the risk of life and limb in battle.

A total of 75 immigrant soldiers have become citizens posthumously during the U.S.-led military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq that began after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Mexican-born Cristian Valle, 23, of California lost both legs in an attack in the Iraqi city of Balad last October.

He joined the army five years ago not to gain citizenship, but because his mother insisted.

"She liked the men in uniform on TV. Being the older son in the family, it was my duty," Valle said during therapy at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, with his wife Blanca and his baby son looking on.

"I don't regret it. I would keep doing it, but this came my way and I can't do what I want any more," he added.