

Senator tries to keep valedictorian from deportation



- Story Highlights
- Teen's deportation on hold while Senate weighs bill that will let him stay in U.S.
- Arthur Mkoyan, 17, came to U.S. with family in 1995, but they never gained residency
- Sen. Dianne Feinstein introduced bill at the same time Mkoyan graduated
- Bill must pass House and Senate and be signed by President Bush to take effect

From Chuck Afflerbach
CNN

FRESNO, California (CNN) -- Plans to deport an Armenian high school valedictorian in Fresno, California, were put on hold Tuesday after Sen. Dianne Feinstein took steps to make him and his family legal U.S. residents.

While 17-year-old Arthur Mkoyan celebrated at his Bullard High School graduation ceremony, the Democratic senator introduced a bill on his behalf in the Senate.

"I'm just excited," Mkoyan said. He hopes to study medicine at a state university in the fall. "It's really amazing they're going to do this, because it's going to stop everything."

The family arrived in the United States in 1995 on six-month tourist visas, said Virginia Kice, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Settling in Fresno, Arthur's father, Ruben Mkoian (he and his son spell their last names slightly differently), worked as a truck driver. The teen's mother worked in a jewelry store, and the family set about living their lives, which soon included a younger brother for Arthur.

Mkoian believes that if they were to return to Armenia, his family would be subject to reprisals because of his attempts to expose corruption at the government agency where he worked.

After the family's visas expired, they applied for U.S. residency. That application was denied, Kice said.

Immigration wheels turn extremely slowly. An immigration judge finally ruled in 2002 that the family had no legal right to remain in America.

The family tried again by applying to the Board of Immigration Appeals; that was rejected, also. The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals last year denied their petition for a hearing.

"I would remind people that this family had ample access to due process," Kice said. "The case has been in litigation for more than 10 years. Immigration experts on every level determined that they had no legal basis to be in the United States."

Mkoyan doesn't know much about Armenia. He feels like an American teenager.

"I haven't been in Armenia since I was 2, so I don't really know anything about the place," Mkoyan said. "All I've seen is just videos my mom has watched on the Internet."

Mkoyan and his mother, Asmik Karapetian, learned that Feinstein was fighting for them when they returned home from graduation. The senator's office left a message on the family's answering machine.

"It gives you a little hope that maybe it will pass and maybe we can stay," the teen's mother said.

Both houses of Congress would have to pass the bill -- and President Bush would have to sign it -- for it to take effect. However, the bill's introduction is enough to halt deportation, which was scheduled for June 20.

"As a matter of policy, we won't proceed with a deportation as long as a private bill is pending," Kice said.

But the odds remain long against the family staying in the United States.

There is "almost no chance" that the family's quest for a private bill will succeed, said Daniel Kowalski, editor in chief of Bender's Immigration Bulletin.

"Very few are being passed," he said.

Of the 21 private immigration bills introduced last year, none was enacted. None of the 117 introduced was enacted in 2006. The year prior, 98 were introduced, and four were enacted.

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