

U.S. extends Central Americans' protected status

THE HOUSTON CHRONICLE

May 2, 2007

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More than 300,000 Central Americans from countries affected by natural disasters will be allowed to stay in the United States for another 18 months, the Department of Homeland Security announced Wednesday.

The decision amounts to a temporary reprieve for some 78,000 Hondurans, 4,000 Nicaraguans and 230,000 Salvadorans who may otherwise be classified as illegal immigrants, said Maria Elena Garcia-Upson, a spokeswoman for U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. She said she did not know how many of the affected immigrants are living in Houston.

The news that the federal government again extended the "Temporary Protected Status" spread quickly through Houston's immigrant community. The special designation is granted to people from countries that are deemed unsafe, typically because of a natural disaster or an armed conflict. It gives people the opportunity to live and work legally here but offers no path toward a green card or citizenship.

The U.S. government granted "temporary protected status," or TPS, to Salvadorans after two massive earthquakes in 2001 killed 1,200 people. After Hurricane Mitch in 1998, Nicaraguans and Hondurans were also offered the special status.

"Although Honduras, Nicaragua and El Salvador have made significant progress in their recovery and rebuilding efforts, each country continues to face social and economic challenges in their efforts to restore their nations to normalcy," Emilio Gonzalez, director of Citizenship and Immigration Services, a division of the Homeland Security Department, said in a statement.

Rosa Escobar, 35, said the extension is a relief, if only a temporary one. The Salvadoran immigrant crossed the U.S.-Mexico border illegally in 1995. She was granted TPS in 2001, and works in a store that sells clothes and trinkets for baby showers.

She sends money home to her mother in El Salvador, who is caring for her children, ages 6 and 14.

"I called all of my friends, and I told them, 'We're protected. We're going to be able to work freely ... and we won't have to hide,' " she said.

Advocates for stricter immigration reform criticized the decision to continue extending the protected status, particularly so long after the disasters.

"I guess they've sort of forgotten about the T in TPS, which is supposed to mean 'temporary,' " said Ira Mehlman, a spokesman with FAIR, the Federation of Americans

for Immigration Reform, a Washington, D.C.-based organization that advocates stronger immigration controls. "That's the problem with the whole concept of TPS. Inevitably, it turns out to be just another permanent immigration policy."

"Conditions are never quite right for them to go home," Mehlman said.

Teodoro Aguiluz, the director of Centro de Recursos para Centroamericanos, or CRECEN, said the decision "temporarily relieves the uncertainty this community has lived with. These families can be calm, for the moment at least, while we keep working to obtain a more permanent program for all of them."

USCIS officials warned Wednesday that immigrants should not rush to file their applications for TPS extensions. Early applications will be rejected, they said.