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Son Pham, left, did not get out of North Vietnam when his extended family fled South Vietnam three decades ago. He pines to live near his father, Khoung, right, in Houston. But proposed changes in U.S. immigration law could prevent that from happening.

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SEPARATE WORLDS

An ocean apart on immigration

A U.S. policy overhaul could end son's unified family dream

By **LORI RODRIGUEZ**

Houston Chronicle

When Saigon fell more than three decades ago, 75 members of Truong Pham's extended family were desperately airlifted to safety through the American Embassy. Only Son Truong Pham, who was trapped in North Vietnam, was left behind.

Pham, now 56, was lost to his family until the war dust had settled in 1985. He has since visited his parents and other relatives in Houston twice, but dreams of being permanently reunited with them.

That dream would most likely die if the U.S. Senate passes a landmark immigration bill that it has debated for several weeks.

Despite a deeply divided Congress, the once-stalled bill could be revived in the Senate next week. If it passes, it will mean a profound shift in immigration law, away from a system enacted in 1965 that has been focused on reuniting families. Instead, entry to the U.S. would be granted based on a point system heavily weighted toward those with skills, education and economic need.

In Harris County's fast-growing Asian population, the brunt of that fundamental change would fall on the Vietnamese, the largest and newest of the area's four leading Asian-Pacific Islander groups. According to 2005 census data, at least 54,000 Vietnamese reside in the county.

But it is a relatively young community from a poor country with a low level of education, and most Vietnamese still have family members they are trying to bring to the U.S.

Son Truong Pham is a case in point. In the years since reuniting with his family, Pham, now living in Hanoi with his wife and three teenage children, has only managed to obtain two hard-to-get visitor's visas. His second was last month, to celebrate his father's 80th birthday. Pham's parents have visited his Vietnam home twice but are getting too old to travel.

"I have been living apart from my parents since I was 3 years old, and it has been my lifelong wish to live close to them," Pham said. "Now that my own children have grown up, I dream more about being reunited with my parents during their golden years."

"Is there any miracle to make my and my parents' dreams come true?"

If the law passes, the short answer is no.

When Pham's parents found him again, he was married with young children in school, a government job and an extended family on his wife's side.

"My Uncle Son had a life there and, at the time, didn't really think immigrating here was an option," said Kristen Truong Burke, his 32-year-old niece who, as an immigration attorney in Houston, must explain the law to her parents and grandparents.

"But after he came to Houston to visit for the first time, he liked it here and began thinking it was a future possibility."

Under Senate Bill 1348, Pham's parents would not be able to sponsor him because only minor children and spouses could apply for family visas. It also would eliminate the ability of any of his many siblings here to sponsor him for permanent residency or any of his extended family members because the bill would end most family-sponsored categories.

"Uncle Son would never be able to immigrate to the U.S. based on his family ties," Burke said.

Nor would he based any other way, if the bill passes as is. Under the new system, Pham would not get enough points for job skills, education and English proficiency, which are the bulk of the requirements.

About two-thirds of people who have received green cards under current law were sponsored by relatives. But besides barring citizens from petitioning for adult children and siblings, the proposal would cap the number of parents allowed in to 40,000 per year.

Supporters of the merit-based system, who include President Bush, say it will make America more competitive in today's global economy by drawing the best-skilled immigrants most likely to make long-term contributions to the U.S. But advocates for family unification say it is essential for a stable and strong immigrant community.

"Lots of people have come here by themselves, and they still need family around them for a sense of mental security," said state Rep. Hubert Vo, who represents southwest

Houston, the heart of the local Asian community. He is the first Vietnamese House member.

Immigration attorney Charles Foster, longtime chairman of the local Asia Society and a member of the Greater Houston Partnership executive committee, said the business groups support "broadly" the basic tenets of the proposed legislation.

That includes border enforcement, increased work-site verification by employers, a viable temporary-worker program and a workable path to citizenship for undocumented families already in the U.S.

A majority of Asian-Pacific Islander adults immigrate to the U.S. and Houston with at least an undergraduate college degree. Many have advanced degrees, and most are highly skilled. Vietnamese are a notable exception.

"They weren't even here before 1965 and, after the Vietnam War, they came first as refugees, then became permanent residents and, finally citizens," Foster said. "They're the ones that have most used current law to bring back family members."

"Irrespective of their socioeconomic level, most still have family left abroad."

For the Pham family, the proposal would mean a sad end to what began as a love story. Son Truong Pham was at the time the third child and only son of Khoungh Pham and Thuong Nguyen. In 1954, when Pham was 3, his father, a Vietnamese Army officer, was dispatched to South Vietnam, leaving his family in North Vietnam with his mother.

Nguyen longed to be with her husband and, finally, she quietly left for South Vietnam with her two daughters. But, as a sign to her mother-in-law that she someday would return, she left her youngest child; sons are highly prized in the culture.

Saigon fell and Pham's family evacuated in 1975.

Growing up without his parents was hard, Pham said, and he still remembers the emotional reunion. By then married with children of his own, Pham said he felt like a child again.

"I am also happy to see my brothers and sisters and their families," Pham said. "Our family has expanded to the fourth generation. All my siblings in the U.S. are happy, have good jobs, and their children are doctors, lawyers and professionals who are contributing to the success of their new country."

Pham has wanted that for his children and, someday, theirs. But if he had applied for a permanent visa under the current system, he would have been barred from visiting the U.S. until the process concluded. That takes upwards of a decade, and his parents are elderly.

So he decided to wait. But now, if the point system survives the congressional debate, Pham may lose his only chance.

Today, after six weeks of joyful parties and reunions and area tours, all of them bittersweet, Pham returns to Vietnam with his dreams.