

# Asylum requests from immigrants on the rise in US

Asylum requests nearly quadruple, bulk of requesters are Central American immigrants

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Requests for asylum in the United States have nearly quadrupled in the last five years, mostly due to claims by immigrants coming from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, according to internal figures from U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services obtained by The Associated Press.

According to draft testimony for USCIS Associate Director Joseph Langlois that was to be submitted for a congressional hearing on asylum requests last month, USCIS received more than 19,119 asylum requests through the end of May. The agency anticipates receiving more than 28,600 by the end of the fiscal year.

According to the testimony, during the 2009 budget year the agency received just 5,369 such requests.

In the drafted comments, Langlois said about 2/3 of the requests have come from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala. He said the surge in asylum requests, which he describes in the document as "credible fear" claims, has occurred predominantly in the Rio Grande Valley in South Texas. So far this year, more than 12,400 requests have come from South Texas, compared to about 3,400 in 2009, according to Langlois' testimony.

Langlois attributed to the spike in asylum requests from Central Americans to reports of increased drug trafficking, violence and overall rising crime in those countries.

The jump in asylum requests coincides with a spike in arrests of illegal border crossers in the same area. At the end of May, Border Patrol agents in the area had apprehended more than 90,000 would-be immigrants. More than half of those people were from countries other than Mexico, primarily Central America.

That region, now the busiest Border Patrol sector along the Mexican border, started to see a spike in Central American immigrants during the 2012 budget year.

Langlois was initially scheduled to testify about asylum requests before a House oversight and government reform subcommittee last month, but that appearance was canceled. He is expected to testify Wednesday.

The asylum process has been among many points of contention in the ongoing debate over immigration reform. Under a recently passed Senate bill, immigrants already living in the United

States would no longer be required to apply for asylum within a year of arriving. Critics have complained that lifting that time limit will open the process to abuse and, potentially, fraud.

The prospects for asylum seekers are murky. Since 2003, the U.S. has granted an average of 11,890 requests. During that same time, a combined total of just 5,927 people from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala were given protection in the U.S., according to data published by the Department of Homeland Security. The number people who asked for protection during that time was not available.

In order to win asylum in the United States, an immigrant must to prove he is being persecuted because of race, religion, political view, nationality or membership in a particular social group. He also have to prove that his government is either part of the persecution or unable or unwilling to protect him.

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