

Advocates decry Homeland Security's TPS decision for Nicaraguans

WASHINGTON — Immigration advocates decried a Department of Homeland Security decision to end Temporary Protected Status for 2,500 Nicaraguans who have been living in the United States for nearly 20 years.

They also lamented during a call with reporters Nov. 7 that Elaine Duke, acting secretary of Homeland Security, put off a decision on TPS for 57,000 Hondurans for six months, saying more time was needed to determine if they could remain in the U.S. because of adverse social and economic conditions in their homeland.

Randolph P. McGrorty, executive director of Catholic Legal Services in the Archdiocese of Miami, said U.S. law is meant to be implemented “with a certain degree of kindness and compassion,” and that sending people to countries that are ill-prepared to welcome them would do far more harm than good.

He called on policymakers in Congress and the administration of President Donald Trump to recognize that Nicaraguans, Hondurans and other TPS holders are vibrant members of their parishes, neighborhoods and workplaces.

“I think they deserve to have some sense of belonging,” he said.

Rather than ending TPS, the advocates from an array of agencies said, it was time for Congress to develop a legislative plan to allow Nicaraguans, Hondurans and others to remain in the U.S. permanently in the name of family unity and because they play vital roles in building American society.

They called for TPS to be extended at 18-month intervals, as the current law requires, until Congress hammers out a legal fix.

The TPS designation is for those who have come to the U.S. from certain countries because of a natural disaster, continuing armed conflict, criminal violence or other extraordinary conditions. It authorizes employment and protection from deportation for about 320,000 people from 10 countries.

On Nov. 6, Duke discontinued TPS for Nicaraguans, delaying the effective date for them to leave the country until Jan. 5, 2019. Duke also announced the automatic extension for six months of TPS for Hondurans, explaining that further study was needed on conditions in the northern Central American country. She set a new expiration date of July 5.

Royce Murray, policy director at the American Immigration Council, said that Duke's decision indicates that the administration is "struggling with the seriousness of the conditions and complicated situation" in Central America's so-called Northern Triangle, which includes Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala.

The advocates also pointed to decisions due in several weeks from homeland security on TPS for people from El Salvador and Haiti, calling on Duke to extend protections without delay.

Belinda Osario, a native of Honduras who works as a housekeeper at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida, told reporters that living her life in six-month increments waiting for a decision on TPS was "like a torture."

"They're putting us in limbo. That's unfair," she said of Homeland Security officials.

Osario added that she would resist returning to her homeland because she had made a life with her family in the U.S. She said she did not want her 14-year-old son to be subject to gang recruitment and threats of violence if he were suddenly forced to live in a country that would be foreign to him.

"I'm not leaving. No matter what, I'm not leaving" said Osario, who has been in the U.S. for 26 years, the last 19 as a TPS holder. "My hope is they change the legislation to make this a permanent thing for all the TPS recipients."

Some advocates on the call expressed concern that ending TPS would pose a threat to national security because the countries in question were ill-prepared to accept

tens of thousands of returnees.

Governments already stretched to adequately protect their citizens are unlikely to be able to assist people in their return, possibly leading to destabilization that could spill across borders, said Oscar Chacon, executive director of Alianza Americas.

“Congress has an opportunity to fix something,” he said. “We need to recognize that these communities have become a permanent part of our community.”

Duke’s decisions also drew criticism from the Catholic Legal Immigration Network. Jean Atkinson, CLINIC executive director, said in a statement Nov. 7 that the decision on Nicaraguans “is a cruel and ultimately short-sighted action.”

She said the lives of thousands of Nicaraguan families who “help make the United States vibrant” would be disrupted and that both the U.S. and Nicaragua would be harmed.

Bishop Kevin W. Vann of Orange, California, a member of CLINIC’s board of directors, added in the statement that American society is responsible for protecting all members of the human family and that “means TPS should not be revoked until safe return and reintegration can be assured.”

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