

Trump orders 200,000 Salvadorans to leave U.S.

The Trump administration said Monday it is ending a temporary residency permit program that has allowed almost 60,000 citizens from Haiti to live and work in the United States since 2010. Haitian advocates quickly criticized the decision.

The Trump administration will end temporary legal immigration status for 200,000 Salvadorans who have been living in the U.S. for nearly two decades, the Department of Homeland Security announced Monday.

Salvadorans who currently have Temporary Protected Status (TPS) must return to their homeland by September 2019 or become undocumented immigrants if they remain without legal protections.

Salvadorans were first granted TPS in 2001 after a pair of devastating earthquakes that killed nearly 1,000 people and destroyed more than 100,000 homes in the Central American country.

Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen concluded that El Salvador has rebuilt and recovered enough so the emergency declaration is no longer necessary.

"The substantial disruption of living conditions caused by the earthquake no longer exist," Homeland Security said in a statement.

The decision runs counter to those made by Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama, who extended TPS protections for El Salvador every 18 months. Their administrations said the country had not fully recovered from the quakes and also had raging violence from drug cartels that made it impossible for so many people to return to the unstable nation.

The State Department issued a travel warning to U.S. travelers last February about widespread violence throughout that country. "El Salvador has one of the highest homicide levels in the world and crimes such as extortion, assault and robbery are common," the warning said.

Homeland Security said Monday that its decision was based on recovery from the earthquakes and not on the current state of gang violence in El Salvador.

The move comes after months of lobbying by El Salvador's government, a bipartisan group in Congress and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, all urging Washington to find a way that allows Salvadorans to remain in the United States.

El Salvador's embassy in Washington estimates that 97% of Salvadorans on TPS over age 24 are employed and pay taxes, and more than half own their homes. Salvadorans on TPS have also given birth to 192,000 children, all U.S. citizens, according to the Center for Migration Studies.

"To disregard the contributions that El Salvadorans have made in communities across this country by stamping an expiration date on their lives here is inhumane," said Amanda Baran of the Immigrant Legal Resource Center. "El Salvador is one of the world's most dangerous countries and will be unable to absorb the return of these thousands of people whose lives are inextricably intertwined with those of ours here in the United States."

The decision pleased immigration groups that advocate for lower levels of immigration, noting the TPS program, created by Congress in 1990, was a short-term fix abused by repeated extensions.

"By ending the Salvadoran TPS, Secretary Nielsen has taken a major step toward saving the TPS program so it can be used for future emergencies," Roy Beck, executive director of NumbersUSA, said in a statement. "The past practice of allowing foreign nationals to remain in the United States long after an initial emergency in their home countries has ended has undermined the integrity of the program."

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The administration has been phasing out temporary protected status granted by Republican and Democratic administrations to 437,000 people from 10 countries that have suffered armed conflicts, earthquakes and other natural disasters, according to the Congressional Research Service.

In November, Homeland Security announced it was ending TPS for about 59,000 Haitians living legally in the U.S. since the powerful 2010 earthquake decimated the country. They must return home by July 2019.

The department also eliminated TPS status for 5,300 Nicaraguans first granted in 1999 after Hurricane Mitch. They must leave by January 2019.

While the department extended TPS for 86,000 Hondurans affected by Mitch for six more months, the administration indicated those people may ultimately be eliminated from the program.

Source: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2018/01/08/reports-trump-order-200-000-salvadorans-leave-u-s/1012345001/>

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