

Temporary Permits to Be Extended
U.S. Order to Help 300,000 Immigrants
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The Bush administration has decided to grant a one-year extension of temporary permits allowing about 300,000 Salvadoran, Nicaraguan and Honduran immigrants to remain legally in the United States, officials said last night.

The move is expected to benefit thousands of immigrants in the Washington area, who otherwise would lose their ability to live and work legally in the country. The decision on whether to extend the program, known as Temporary Protected Status, had been hotly debated in the federal bureaucracy.

The official announcement of the one-year extension is expected tomorrow, when Salvadoran President Elias Antonio Saca is scheduled to visit Washington, officials said. But word leaked out yesterday when Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) said the White House had given her advance notice.

In a news release, she said she was pleased to learn of the decision. 'This extension to Nicaraguans, Hondurans and Salvadorians will provide much needed relief to these individuals,' Ros-Lehtinen said, adding that it would also 'assure regional stability in our hemisphere.'

Department of Homeland Security spokesmen declined to confirm Ros-Lehtinen's announcement. One U.S. official briefed on the matter said, 'It's definitely correct.' He spoke on condition of anonymity because officials were not supposed to comment before the White House release of the news.

About 80,000 Hondurans and 4,000 Nicaraguans hold temporary permits that are scheduled to expire in July. They were initially provided after Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and renewed several times. About 220,000 Salvadorans also have permits, granted because of a pair of earthquakes that devastated their country in 2001. The permits expire in September.

Temporary Protected Status is designed to help immigrants who have difficulty returning to their homelands because of natural disaster or war.

The program is controversial, with advocates of tighter immigration controls arguing that the beneficiaries are allowed to stay long after the crises have abated back home. Many of the immigrants arrived in the United States illegally.

Immigrants from countries such as Colombia, Guatemala, Pakistan and Haiti, meanwhile, complain that their nations have been left out of the program, despite suffering disasters.

For countries such as El Salvador, the program means millions of dollars in additional remittances from immigrants. Without Temporary Protected Status permits, the workers face the prospect of lower-paying jobs or even deportation. Central American political leaders, as well as immigrant groups in the United States, have lobbied energetically to keep the program.

Salvadorans are the largest immigrant group in the Washington area. The latest extension is available only to Salvadorans who were in this country at the time of the 2001 earthquakes.