

Haitians stand to benefit from bill

Immigration advocates and others are hopeful lawmakers reach a compromise in a landmark immigration bill that includes a provision that would benefit thousands of Haitian immigrants.

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Marie Michel still recalls seeing dead bodies in her Port-au-Prince neighborhood and the fear she felt remaining in a country wracked by so much violence.

The Haitian woman escaped using a fake passport to board a flight to the Bahamas and a second flight to Miami. The year was 1994.

"I used those documents because I was trying to save my life and my son's life," said Michel, 46. "We would have died if we had stayed in Haiti."

Michel sought legal residency through the 1998 Haitian Refugee Immigration Fairness Act but was deemed ineligible because she had used false documents to enter the United States.

Congress approved the law to rectify the mistreatment of Haitians who fled their country's bloody governments of the 1980s and early 1990s by offering them legal residency.

Nearly 13,000 Haitians were allowed to remain here. Excluded, however, were Michel and thousands of Haitians who had used false documents or were children when they applied and later "aged out" before their status was approved.

A provision added to the landmark Senate immigration bill approved Thursday could change that by expanding eligibility.

Last week, as news circulated of the provision, Haitian immigrants flooded the telephone lines at Haitian advocacy organizations and radio stations.

"People have been calling all day," said activist Lucy Tondreau. "There are so many people who could be affected by this."

U.S. Rep. Kendrick Meek, a Miami Democrat who sponsored a similar bill in the House, said the legislation is long overdue. "These people were fleeing for their lives because of what was happening in Haiti at that particular time," he said.

There is no exact number on how many Haitians could benefit from the provision, but Meek's office estimates it could cover as many as 8,000 people. Steve Forester, an immigrant activist with Haitian Women of Miami, calculates the number would be closer to 1,250.

Meek, who has been pushing similar legislation for three years, worked with Republican Sen. Mike DeWine of Ohio and Democratic Sens. Bill Nelson of Florida and Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts to make it part of the Senate bill.

Meek was unsuccessful in his attempt to attach a similar amendment to the immigration bill approved by the House in December.

Final approval of the provision rests with a group of House and Senate lawmakers who must negotiate the differences between the Senate and House versions of the immigration bill. Those negotiations begin next week but could take months to complete.

The main sticking point has nothing to do with the provision that would benefit Haitians.

The Senate bill contains what many House Republicans consider deal-breaker provisions that would create a guest-worker program and grant legal status to millions of undocumented immigrants. To soften objections from conservatives, the Senate added some tougher law-enforcement provisions, including building 370 miles of fences along the border.

House Republican leaders continue to support a border-enforcement-only bill that the House passed in December. President Bush has urged Congress to approve comprehensive immigration reform.

"We are cautiously optimistic, but we have serious concerns in terms of the position of House Republicans," said Jean-Robert Lafortune, president of the Haitian-American Grassroots Coalition.