

Congress is asked to let Haitians stay

Rep. Alcee Hastings is seeking an 18-month reprieve for Haitians living in this country illegally, so they can stay and work legally.

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Citing an ongoing wave of violence and kidnappings in Haiti, U.S. Rep. Alcee Hastings has filed a bill to temporarily protect thousands of undocumented Haitians from deportation.

The South Florida Democrat said his proposed Haitian Protection Act of 2007 is designed to give "temporary protected status" or TPS to an estimated 20,000 Haitians living illegally in the United States. That would give them residence and work papers for up to 18 months.

SURGE IN VIOLENCE

The bill also would prevent the deportation of criminal detainees back to Haiti, where the government has blamed a surge in violence and kidnappings following the 2004 ouster of former Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide on the U.S. government's long-standing deportation policy.

"The Haitian government and the Haitian people need to catch a break," Hastings said. "There is no question violence is on the rise there, and tragically, kidnappings and more specifically child kidnappings are occurring in great numbers."

Hastings' bill was welcomed by South Florida Haitian and immigration activists, who in recent months have stepped up their call for TPS despite successful elections in Haiti in the past year. The country continues to suffer from instability, they argue.

In December, The Miami Herald reported that schools in and around Port-au-Prince were forced to close days early following a spike in for-ransom kidnappings of Haitian kids. At least 48 such kidnappings were reported Nov. 10-Dec. 15.

Though kidnappings appear to have decreased following joint operations by the National Police and the 9,000-strong U.N. stabilization force, insecurity remains as President René Prével and Prime Minister Jacques-Edouard Alexis struggle to return the country to stability. A recent update of a State Department travel warning on Haiti tells U.S. citizens that ``there is a chronic and growing danger of kidnappings."

SUGGESTED REQUEST

Hastings, whose bill faces an uphill battle even in a Congress controlled by Democrats, said he has written to Prével asking him to make a formal request for TPS to help bolster the effort.

While Congress can pass legislation designating TPS, it is usually the Department of Homeland Security that decides if a country qualifies, based on criteria that include political strife and natural disasters.

Chris Bentley, a spokesman for the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, said that to the best of his knowledge, ``it only happened once before when [TPS] was created -- extending it to El Salvador. We know of no time since then Congress has actually designated TPS to another country."