

U.S. Terminates Program for Central American Child Refugees



Washington, September 2 (RHC)-- The U.S. Department of Homeland Security has axed a program offering minors fleeing violence and poverty in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras a chance to settle in the United States, ending travel hopes for more than 2,700 children awaiting approval.

Authorities said that it would immediately terminate the practice of granting parole under the Central American Minors Parole Program, a petitioning process offered to children even if they had been denied refugee status. Migrant rights advocates fear that the elimination of the program will leave no recourse for children but to attempt entry into the United States on foot through the deadly frontier at the U.S.-Mexico border.

The program started at the end of 2014 under the administration of former President Barack Obama as a response to tens of thousands of unaccompanied minors and families from Central America who arrived at the U.S.-Mexico border seeking entry into the United States.

An executive order tightening border militarization and immigration enforcement measures signed by U.S. President Donald Trump days after he took office in January triggered a review of the program, putting on hold applications for those children who had been conditionally approved for entry into the United States. Now those applications will be canceled. The bulk of the children approved for the program were from El Salvador.

Immigration advocacy group Kids in Need of Defense (KIND) said that canceling the program would lead to more children to try to find other means to enter the United States. "These children have been repeatedly told by the U.S. government, including the Trump Administration, not to migrate to the United States due to safety concerns," the organization said in a statement. "Now this Administration is cutting off the only authorized channel and leaving children no choice but to make the perilous journey to the United States."

The program allowed children under 21 years old with parents lawfully living in the United States to apply for a refugee resettlement interview before making the journey to the United States. As of August 4, more than 1,500 children and eligible family members had arrived in the United States as refugees under the CAM program, according to the State Department. Children who didn't qualify for refugee status and had no other means of reuniting with their parents in the United States could also apply for entry through the program. They would be approved for parole for two years, allowing them to travel and stay in the United States and apply for work permits.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services said that 1,465 people had come to the country under the program, including 1,110 from El Salvador, 324 from Honduras and 31 from Guatemala. 2,714 people had been approved for entry prior to the cancellation of the program, including 2,444 Salvadorans, 231 Hondurans and 39 Guatemalans.

Now, they will have to re-apply for parole once their two-year term expires but will only be able to have it renewed if they can demonstrate "an urgent humanitarian or a significant public benefit reason" for them to stay, the federal register said. Parole decisions would be determined on a case-by-case basis.

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