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Some Haitians Look at Canada for Help as They Face Loss of Protected Status in the U.S.

by George Rodriguez
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Tens of thousands of Haitian nationals in the US are at risk of losing the Temporary Protected Status (TPS), which might force them to return to a country that is in no condition to take them back.

The status was initially granted to more than 50,000 Haitians immediately after the catastrophic earthquake of 2010 and has since been extended for successive 18- to 24-month periods. It gives Haitians who were in the US prior to 2011 the right to stay and work in the country, among other benefits. The extensions have responded to successive social and economic blows suffered over the past seven years by Haiti, including a cholera epidemic and a devastating hurricane. About 80% of Haiti’s population of 10 million people are affected by poverty and, on average, survive on less than US$2.00 a day (NotiCen, Oct. 20, 2011, Jan. 10, 2013, Oct. 20, 2016).

During last year’s election campaign, at a rally in Miami, US President Donald Trump assured Haitian immigrants: “Whether you vote for me or you don’t vote for me, I really want to be your greatest champion. And I will be your champion, whether you vote for me or not.” But the Trump administration’s Department of Homeland Security announced in a May 22 press release that the TPS July deadline for Haitians had been extended only until January

“Haiti has made progress across several fronts since the devastating earthquake in 2010, and I’m proud of the role the United States has played during this time in helping our Haitian friends,” then-Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly said in the press release. Kelly has since been promoted to White House chief of staff.

“The Haitian economy continues to recover and grow, and 96% of people displaced by the earthquake and living in internally displaced person camps have left those camps,” Kelly said. “Even more encouraging is that over 98% of these camps have closed.”

Kelly also cited, as indications of the recovery in Haiti, the Haitian government’s plans to rebuild the Haitian president’s residence at the National Palace in Port-au-Prince, and the planned withdrawal of the Mission des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation en Haïti (UN Mission for the Stabilization of Haiti, MINUSTAH) in October. MINUSTAH will be replaced by the smaller, basically police, Mission des Nations Unies pour l’Appui à la Justice en Haïti (UN Mission for Justice Support in Haiti, MINUJUSTH) (NotiCen, May 11, 2017).

According to the press release, “Secretary Kelly was particularly encouraged by representations made to him directly by the Haitian government regarding their desire to welcome the safe repatriation of Haitian TPS recipients in the near future.”

The six-month extension, it said, should allow the affected Haitians to make the necessary arrangements to leave the US and should “provide the Haitian government with the time it needs to prepare for the future repatriation of all current TPS recipients.”
Kelly said the Department of Homeland Security plans “to continue to work closely with the Haitian government, including assisting the government in proactively providing travel documents for its citizens.”

Before the six-month period expires, the press release said, the department will re-evaluate the designation for Haiti to determine whether an extension is warranted.

“I believe there are indications that Haiti—if its recovery from the 2010 earthquake continues at pace—may not warrant further TPS extension past January 2018,” Kelly said in the press release.

**Memo recommends ending TPS**

According a May 19 story in the US daily The Miami Herald, a month before the announcement, James McCament, the acting director of US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), wrote a memo to Kelly stating that TPS for Haitians should end.

“Conditions in Haiti no longer support its designation for TPS,” McCament said in the document.

Kelly’s announcement and McCament’s memo sent shock waves through the Haitian community and human rights organizations.

Shortly after the USCIS official’s evaluation, Marleine Bastien, executive director of Fanm Ayisyen nan Miyami, called the statements “very, very distressing to the community.”

If the Trump administration ends TPS, Bastien warned, “it will be the most distressing, anti-family, anti-black, and racist decision any administration can take ... It’s cruel and inhumane ... Six months, and then what?”

She also disagreed with Kelly’s view of the situation in Haiti.

“If any country qualifies for TPS right now, it’s Haiti,” she said. “People are still dying as a result of the imported cholera epidemic, and Hurricane Matthew destroyed the southern peninsula, where we have people eating dirt and living in caves.”

The situation proves that “the conditions in Haiti are horrible enough for them to re new TPS for 18 months to 24 months,” she said during a forum in Miami’s Little Haiti, a neighborhood that is home to a large Haitian population.

Legal experts and human rights advocates at the FANM forum agreed that, as the six-month period unfolds, Haitian TPS beneficiaries should seek options in case there is no new extension.

**Canada becomes ‘Plan B’**

In fact, since the start of the Trump Administration in January, many US Haitians have begun implementing “Plan B”—fleeing to Canada and into Québec, Canada’s only French-speaking province.

Reporting early this month from Montreal, The Herald said, “Worried that the door to freedom is closing in the United States under President Donald Trump, Haitians are flocking to Canada to seek asylum.” The article quotes a tweet from Denis Coderre, the city’s mayor, saying, “According to my sources: 2,500 new arrivals in July (US border refugees).”
The Herald also quoted Frantz Benjamin, the Haiti-born chairman of the Montreal City Council, saying that about 6,500 asylum seekers had arrived since January, at least half of them Haitians “prompted by Trump’s hard line on immigration.”

“It’s clear for us that the new [policy] of Donald Trump, the new president of the United States, has created a panic that today has a lot of people believing that their future isn’t in the United States and by ‘any means necessary,’ they will get to Canada,” he said.

Benjamin, however, warned that Canadian law hadn’t changed.

“About half of the Haitians who sought refuge in Canada after the 2010 earthquake have since been returned to Haiti,” he said.

-- End --