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# As Protected Status Ends, Hundreds of Thousands of Immigrants Risk Deportation to Central America and the Caribbean

by George Rodríguez

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First, it was Haitians, followed by Nicaraguans, with Hondurans and Salvadorans on a waiting list: The Temporary Protected Status (TPS), which for years allowed hundreds of thousands of immigrants to stay in the US, is quickly being dismantled by the Trump administration.

TPS was originally granted to Haitian nationals in 2011, after the earthquake that devastated Port-au-Prince in January 2010 ([NotiCen, Jan. 21, 2010](#), [Feb. 18, 2010](#), [April 29, 2010](#)). About 60,000 persons have remained in the US under that status, which was routinely extended for successive 18- to 24-month periods.

But on Nov. 20, the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said it was issuing a final, 18-month extension, and that TPS for Haitians would end in July 2019. In a press release, DHS said the final extension was intended to give Haitians in the US enough time to get ready to return to their homeland. Seeing the decision coming, many Haitian began crossing the US border to Canada earlier this summer ([NotiCen, Sept. 7, 2017](#)).

The DHS has also set its sights on Central American TPS beneficiaries.

On Nov. 6, DHS served notice to the approximately 5,300 Nicaraguans under TPS that the final expiration date for their status would be Jan. 5, 2019. As a reason for this decision, DHS said that the Nicaraguan government had not requested an extension ([NotiCen, Nov. 30, 2017](#)).

DHS said at the time that it was preparing to announce a decision regarding the approximately 263,000 Salvadorans and 86,000 Hondurans under TPS, whose respective deadlines are March and July 2018.

Nicaraguan and Honduran migrants received TPS after hurricane Mitch ripped through Central America in 1998 ([NotiCen, Nov. 12, 1998](#)), causing extensive damage in these two neighboring nations. Salvadorans became eligible after two powerful earthquakes hit their country in January and February 2001.

TPS grants protection from deportation to immigrants at risk in their home countries because of "extraordinary and temporary conditions," such as armed conflict, destructive natural events, or epidemics. TPS allows the immigrants to stay and work in the US regardless of their visa status.

Central Americans make up the majority of the general Latin American immigrant population in the US. People from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras—the countries that make up Central America's so-called Northern Triangle, make up the largest portion of that group. Guatemalan immigrants, however, are not under TPS ([NotiCen, Jan. 7, 2016](#), [May 12, 2016](#), and [Aug. 4, 2016](#))

The Central American figures show a tenfold increase, from the 354,000 arrivals in 1980 to almost 3.4 million in 2015, according to a report issued in April by the Migration Policy Institute (MPI), a US-based think tank.

The report, titled “Central American Immigrants in the United States,” said that of the region’s 2015 total, over 1.3 million Salvadorans accounted for 40% of the immigrants, followed by 928,000 from Guatemala (27.4%), and 599,000 (17.7%), from Honduras. Nicaragua’s 256,000 (7.6%) ranked fourth.

Most immigrants have arrived in the US fleeing from poverty and lack of opportunities, and in the case of Northern Triangle nationals, also from gang and drug-related violence.

Their earnings in the US are a relief for relatives and friends back home—and indirectly for their countries’ economies—through remittances, which for Northern Triangle nations and Nicaragua add up to billions of dollars.

A report by the Inter-American Dialogue, a Washington-based hemispheric forum, said those remittances had increased from 2015 to 2016.

Using these countries’ central banks figures, the report, “Remittances to Latin America and the Caribbean in 2016,” noted that money transfers by immigrants from the Northern Triangle and Nicaragua rose from approximately US\$15.1 billion to just under US\$16.8 billion. Individually, remittances to Guatemala jumped from US\$6.2 billion to US\$7.2 billion, followed by transfers to El Salvador (US\$4.2 billion to US\$4.5 billion), Honduras (US\$3.6 billion to US\$3.8 billion), and Nicaragua (US\$1.1 to US\$1.2 billion), it reported.

## *Concern in Central America*

During previous US administrations, regional governments have traditionally panicked—and their presidents hurried to Washington, individually or together—at the possibility of massive deportations, which would bring an influx of jobless nationals and the resulting loss in remittances.

This time was no exception. Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernández and Salvadoran Vice President Óscar Ortiz met on June 15 in Miami with US Vice President Mike Pence and US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to request a TPS extension for their fellow citizens.

“We recognize that [granting TPS is] a sovereign decision of the US, but we see also how troubled our compatriots are,” Hernández said during a press conference after the meeting, held within the framework of the Conference on Prosperity and Security in Central America ([NotiCen, Aug. 10, 2017](#)).

“We can say that actually these are people who are the best immigrants you can have in this country ... who are working, who are paying their taxes,” he added. “We hope that when the time comes when they follow this process in the US, that we will have the opportunity to have a renewal of the Temporary Protection Status or some way to have our countrymen continue to live in this country ... it’s not only that they are Hondurans, but these are human beings who have families.”

Ortiz noted that during the meeting, the parties had addressed broad issues of interest in their respective agendas, along with the concern over TPS status.

“There are a good number of Salvadorans who fall within that program,” he said. “No definitive approach has been reviewed in today’s meetings, but as the president of Honduras has said ... we

will continue working toward these goals because these hardworking people have been making great contributions to the United States, and we hope that they continue to enjoy that opportunity.”

Ortiz said that TPS was a key factor in building a joint strategy “that would meet our shared interests and avoid a short-term negative impact in the Northern Triangle region.”

Tillerson noted that the authority for TPS extension rested with DHS, although with input from the State Department. “It is very specific to the circumstances for each country,” Tillerson said, adding that he did not want to speak for DHS.

### *Wide impact*

A negative decision on TPS for Salvadorans and Hondurans could hit the Northern Triangle as a whole, warned a recent analysis by Alianza Americas, a Latin American and Caribbean immigrants’ organizations network in the US. The organization took its present name in 2015, after having worked for a decade as the National Alliance of Latin American and Caribbean Communities (NALACC).

If the status were to end for both protected communities, the scenario would be one of “negative impacts ... for US investments in improved security, prosperity, and governance in the region,” said the study, titled “Negative Consequences of Ending Temporary Protected Status (TPS) in El Salvador and Honduras for US Interests in Promoting Prosperity, Security, and Governance in the Northern Triangle.”

“Deported TPS beneficiaries would be returning to an extremely unstable security situation in both El Salvador and Honduras ... undermining public safety and security,” Alianza Americas warned. “The security situation for the average citizen remains extremely precarious” in both countries, it said, pointing out that the World Economic Forum had ranked El Salvador and Honduras the third and ninth most dangerous countries worldwide in 2016.

Among other perils, if they were sent back to El Salvador and Honduras, “returned migrants would ... be at high risk for extortion,” Alianza Americas said.

The organization went on to explain that “levels of internal displacement are high in both countries,” referring to a phenomenon caused by high violence levels, including gang recruitment of youths. “Internal displacement is often a precursor to migration,” it said.

Alianza Americas also warned that forced deportations would place the migrants in “precarious situations, forcing them to go underground into hiding, to enter the informal economy, or to flee the country again.”

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