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Haitian activists want Obama to address immigration goals

With President Barack Obama coming to Miami, some Haitian-American activists want him to address the issue of Temporary Protected Status.

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WASHINGTON -- Haitian-American and immigrant activists who greeted President Barack Obama's election with high hopes are growing frustrated with the administration's failure to deliver one of their top goals.

Obama said in July he was "very sympathetic" to the community's request to allow Haitian immigrants now illegally in the country to stay temporarily, but no decision has been announced. Some activists say their patience is wearing thin.

"I feel they are stringing us along, and we are in an awkward position," said Randolph McGrorty, head of Catholic Charities Legal Services, who brought the subject to a head with a stinging e-mail sent to House, Senate and administration staffers last week. "Do we allow them to string us along because they are our allies or do we start calling them on the carpet for it?"

The unrest comes as Obama plans a trip to Miami on Monday to raise money for House and Senate Democrats. Presidential candidate Obama did not promise to grant undocumented Haitian immigrants temporary legal status in the United States -- a designation known as Temporary Protected Status, or TPS -- but activists said they believed the first African-American president would give the issue special consideration.

Instead, former President Bill Clinton -- a United Nations special envoy to the country -- and the United Nations have taken the lead in rebuilding a storm-battered Haiti after last year's four back-to-back storms that killed hundreds and left nearly \$1 billion in damages.

CHALLENGE

The issue of TPS poses a challenge for Rep. Kendrick Meek, a Miami Democrat who is depending on a robust turnout in the politically active Haitian-American community to boost his Senate bid. But critics say South Florida's congressional Democrats, including Meek, have not been as vocal about pushing the Obama administration on Haiti as they were during the Bush administration.

Meek, who represents the largest group of Haitian-American voters in the United States, said Friday he's had meetings with the administration and is optimistic that it is taking a serious look at the policy.

"It may not come as soon as we want to, but I can tell you the Obama administration has made steps the Bush administration wouldn't have made in 100 years," Meek said, noting that the administration has temporarily stayed deportations of noncriminals to Haiti. "The ultimate goal is to have Haiti in a position where Haitians can stay in Haiti and not take to the sea."

Still, Broward Democrat Rep. Alcee Hastings chastised the administration last week, looking to prod it by attaching an amendment to a Coast Guard spending bill that would require the agency to review the effect of changing immigration policy toward Haiti. Critics have suggested TPS could lead Haitians to rush to the U.S. shore.

"Temporary Protected Status or some other comparable relief for our Haitian neighbors is long overdue and this administration has been stalling for far too long," Hastings said in support of his amendment.

He said the review would "hopefully help us show that our government has rationally and realistically examined all possible scenarios and we are well-equipped to contend with any possible effects."

U.S. POLICY

When Obama brought up the issue in July, he said the administration is reviewing U.S. policy on deporting undocumented Haitians, suggesting that the issue would be "part of a broader conversation about immigration."

But immigration groups say the pace on overhauling the nation's immigration system is too slow and fear no progress next year during a volatile election.

The White House this week referred questions on TPS to the Department of Homeland Security, which said it had made no changes in policy, adding that, "no one should attempt to come to the U.S. in the hopes of being granted TPS."

Advocates for Haitian Americans, including Cheryl Little, executive director of the Florida Immigrant Advocacy Center, said they've written a number of letters and e-mails to the administration seeking a response to their request for TPS – and in recent months have offered less-sweeping alternatives to TPS to help the estimated 35,000 undocumented Haitians currently living in legal limbo.

"Washington needs to know we are not going to fade into the woodwork," Little said. "We are going to continue to make the case for TPS and be critical of this administration when they don't do the right thing."

ADVOCATE

Earlier this month, Little appealed to former President Clinton who, during two appearances in Miami recently, spoke of his support for TPS. He said if the decision was up to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, "it would have been done. Hillary strongly supports this."

A spokesman for the State Department declined to comment on Clinton's remarks, saying they were the former president's "personal comments" and it would be "inappropriate for us to make any official declarations on the issue" since the decisions are being made by Homeland Security.

Advocates acknowledge the administration has quietly made some changes. It has temporarily suspended the deportation of noncriminal, undocumented Haitians. Undocumented Haitians with no criminal records who are detained by immigration authorities are being released from detention centers as long as they agree to a final order of removal.

Once released, they can apply for work permits but must periodically check in with immigration authorities until they are eventually deported.

'BABY STEPS'

But critics dismiss the changes as "baby steps," noting that by not granting undetained migrants a chance to apply for work permits, they're unable to support themselves or assist struggling families back home. An impoverished Haiti is dependent on remittances from abroad.

"That is not nearly enough," Little said. "That is not even a half-hearted attempt at doing the right thing here."

The Haitian-American Grassroots Coalition met Wednesday to discuss the issue and plans to protest at Obama's fundraiser in Miami on Monday. Haitian activists protested outside the White House last month.

"As far as we are concerned, regarding Haiti, the Obama administration is maintaining the same status quo as the Bush immigration policy," said Jean-Robert Lafortune, the coalition's president.

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