

Ridge urges 'legal status' for illegals

JERRY KAMMER and MARCUS STERN

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WASHINGTON -- In the strongest sign to date that the Bush administration is considering a major immigration initiative next year, Homeland Security Secretary Tom Ridge has called for "some kind of legal status" for the estimated 8 million to 12 million immigrants living illegally in the United States.

Ridge, who oversees the nation's borders, also said that such an unprecedented legalization program should be coupled with a decision about "what our immigration policy is," followed by a firm commitment to enforce it.

But those who are granted legal status should not receive citizenship, added Ridge, who made the comments Tuesday during a town hall-style meeting in Miami.

"I'm not saying make them citizens, because they violated the law to get here," Ridge said. "You determine how you can legalize their presence. Then, as a country, you make a decision that from this day forward ... this is the process of entry, and if you violate that process of entry we have the resources to cope with it."

Congress did just that back in 1986 when it granted legal status to 2.7 million of the country's illegal immigrants.

Congress coupled the amnesty with tough new policies aimed at ending illegal immigration. However, the illegal flow continued and is twice what it was before the landmark 1986 action, experts say.

Efforts to enact a legalization program that would be five times the size of the 1986 amnesty would face stiff opposition in Congress.

Although such a program might boost Bush's popularity with Hispanic voters, it almost certainly would be divisive for Republicans during an election year.

Ridge's top spokesman, Brian Roehrkas, said yesterday that his boss's comments weren't intended to signal any shift in administration policy or an impending push to revive discussions over the status of illegal immigrants.

"He acknowledged that we have several million people who are here illegally," Roehrkas said, "and he also understands that for homeland security reasons, national security reasons, at some point there needs to be an accounting for those individuals so we can better identify them."

Although Ridge said he did not favor citizenship for people who entered the country illegally, he did not spell out what kind of status he had in mind.

"We just don't know that," Roehrkas said. "Those are all the various components of this issue that we are in the process of taking a look at. We continue to look at various pieces of legislation."

Ridge's remarks drew a range of reactions.

"I can think of few things that could be more dangerous for homeland security than granting amnesty to 8 to 12 million illegal aliens," said Rep. Tom Tancredo, R-Colo., an outspoken critic of legalization.

"Perhaps the administration ought to dedicate more energy to enforcing our existing immigration laws and less on finding ways to allow millions to skirt them," he said.

Immigration advocate Cecilia Munoz, vice president of the National Council of La Raza, was guardedly optimistic. "I think it's a positive sign that the secretary is sending," she said. "Obviously, the jury is out until (Ridge's comments) are associated with some substance."

An overload?

Mark Krikorian, director of the Center for Immigration Studies, which produces research supporting restrictive immigration policies, said that a legalization program on the scale Ridge suggested would swamp an already overburdened Department of Homeland Security.

"They know perfectly well they don't have the capacity to do the job they have now," Krikorian said.

Ridge's comments come amid signs that the administration is considering a major election-year immigration initiative.

In September, Sen. Larry Craig, R-Idaho, said he had received White House assurances that if a bill he drafted to legalize between 500,000 and 800,000 farm workers reached the president's desk, Bush would sign it.

Last month, after Secretary of State Colin Powell met with Mexican officials, he stated his intention "to make sure that we treat those who come to our country in a very, very appropriate way, and to do everything we can to regularize this traffic back and forth."

And this week, Rep. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz., said in an interview that Karl Rove, Bush's chief political strategist, promised a presidential push to deliver on immigration reforms sought by Mexican President Vicente Fox and advocates for undocumented workers.

"He said the administration plans to make a major push on immigration," Flake said.

Flake is co-sponsoring a bill that would combine sweeping legalization with a promise to clamp down on immigrants who circumvent the new federal program.

No commitment

Flake said Rove did not commit to support his bill and offered no specifics about White House plans. "I think they will establish a set of principles and then look for legislation that matches that," he said. "And we hope that ours is close to what they want."

Ridge's sweeping proposal caught many by surprise, partly because no high-ranking member of the Bush administration has signaled support for legalizing the entire undocumented population.

"I don't think Ridge is going to be saying this without some sort of presidential OK," said Robert Leiken, an immigration policy analyst at the Nixon Center in Washington, D.C.

Leiken said Democratic proposals for legalization have raised the immigration stakes for Bush and other Republicans eyeing the growing Latino electorate.

"I think the pressure from the Democrats is having an effect," Leiken said. A month after Bush took office in 2001, he and Fox agreed to consider the legal status of millions of undocumented Mexican immigrants.

But resistance from within the Republican Party thwarted the initiative, even before a border clampdown in the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, said Jeffrey Davidow, who was U.S. ambassador to Mexico from 1988 to 2002 and participated in the talks.

In his just-published memoir, Davidow, now president of the Institute of the Americas in San Diego, said Rove had "calculated that any move that could be portrayed as legalization of undocumented aliens would alienate the president's political base."