

Trump administration threatens to deport tens of thousands of Haitian refugees

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Using a mixture of claims that conditions in Haiti have improved and a witch hunt for “criminal aliens,” the Trump administration is pushing to end Temporary Protected Status for more than 50,000 Haitian refugees living in the US.

Temporary Protected Status for qualified Haitians in the United States—granted after the 2010 earthquake—will expire on July 22. The Department of Homeland Security must decide and publish in the Federal Register at least 60 days before expiration whether it will extend the status for Haitians. Acting U.S. Customs and Immigration Services Director James McCament is seeking to shut down the program.

Emails obtained and summarized by the Associated Press show that Kathy Nuebel Kovarik, the new head of the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services Office of Policy and Strategy, has been pressuring staff—at the request of Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly—to dig for information on crimes or welfare “abuse” committed by Haitians covered by TPS.

Kovarik wrote to her staff that “I know some of it is not captured, but we’ll have to figure out a way to squeeze more data out of our systems.” Given the record to date of the Trump administration and the wording of Kovarik’s email, it is likely that DHS will manufacture data to meet its needs if none is found.

In an April 28 email Kovarik wrote that “we should also find any reports of criminal activity by any individual with TPS.”

Looking for ways to hide the cruelty of deporting tens of thousands of people to one of the poorest countries in the world, Kovarik requested that her staff “please dig for any stories (successful or otherwise) that would show how things are in Haiti ... we need more than ‘Haiti is really poor’ stories.”

Temporary Protected Status, by law, stipulates only

that an immigrant can live and work in the United States. It does not provide welfare, SNAP benefits, or other government aid. Nonetheless, the Trump administration is preparing to use allegations of welfare fraud as a pretext for planned deportations.

TPS does not lead to non-immigrant status, but also does not restrict a beneficiary from applying for that status. The total number of Haitian beneficiaries since the earthquake has been 58,700.

Kovarik’s emails are part of deportation plans which are being formalized. An April 10 letter from McCament to Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly recommended that the Temporary Protected Status for Haitians be extended six months from July 22 of this year to January 23 to “allow ... for a period of orderly transition.” People who have been living, working, and raising children in the United States for years would have only six months to prepare for deportation. While McCament wrote that six months would give Haitians time to “prepare for their departure,” he made no mention of the conditions in the detention centers through which this “departure” will occur.

McCament is a career official at U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, having served under George W. Bush and Barack Obama before Trump’s election. His USCIS biography calls him “a founding member of DHS” who served as a special advisor to Homeland Security secretaries Ridge and Chertoff.

Facts and statistics cited in McCament’s letter demonstrate both the arrogance of the Trump administration and the perverse logic of using of further calamities that have struck Haiti in the wake of the 2010 earthquake as a formal pretext for not extending TPS. Because Haiti’s misery doesn’t stem only from the earthquake, McCament argues, deportations should

proceed.

The letter states that “in September 2016, an estimated 3.2 million people (approximately 30 percent of the population) suffered from food insecurity. However ... Haiti has historic food security challenges, and ... currently, Haiti’s food insecurity problems seem related to tropical storms in 2012 and a drought rather than from lingering effects of the 2010 earthquake.”

Similarly, “since October 2010, close to 800,000 Haitians have contracted cholera, and nearly 10,000 people have died from the disease ... Nevertheless, Haiti faces longstanding public health challenges, where 40 percent of the population lacked access to basic health services before the 2010 earthquake.”

In September 2016 the Obama administration announced that it would begin deporting thousands of Haitians who had entered the U.S. on humanitarian parole after traveling from as far away as Brazil through Mexico. McCament’s letter cites and builds on that decision: “Haitian nationals may safely return to Haiti as evidenced by DHS’s decision to resume removals to Haiti in 2016.”

McCament’s letter cites a 2015 growth rate of 2 percent in Haiti’s economy. It doesn’t mention that inflation has risen to 14 percent, or that, as of March, 1.4 million of the people affected by Hurricane Matthew still didn’t have enough food or safe drinking water. A May 2 letter from the Congressional Black Caucus to Homeland Security Secretary Kelly argues that food shortages caused by the storm have contributed to inflation throughout Haiti.

On April 27, citing parliamentary delegate Max Serge Daniel, *Haiti Libre* reported that five days of rain had severely affected areas in the south of Haiti that have yet to recover from the hurricane. Fishing, livestock, and as much as 80 percent of the spring harvest suffered from flooding that damaged 10,000 homes and affected 350,000 people in the Sud departement.

McCament’s letter is silent on the benefits to the U.S. economy of immigrant workers. An April report by the Immigrant Legal Resource Center on upcoming Temporary Protected Status renewals estimated that the 300,000 Salvadorans, Hondurans, and Haitians currently in the country on TPS would add \$45.2 billion to the U.S. economy in a decade. Workers on TPS contribute to Social Security and Medicare through payroll taxes, and would effectively be robbed

of this money when deported.



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