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THE STORY UNDERNEATH

Tuesday, January 26, 2010 19:10 GMT

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MIGRATION-US: Haitians Welcome TPS Status

Ron Howell*

NEW YORK, Jan 22 (IPS) - Throughout the New York region, but especially in Brooklyn and Queens, there is measured relief that the U.S. is finally addressing a longstanding issue: that of thousands of Haitians who have been living and – in so many cases – working and paying taxes, but are undocumented.

Immigration expert Ronald Aubourg said he welcomed the news earlier this week that the Barack Obama administration will give temporary protected status to Haitians who came to the United States before the devastating earthquake hit Haiti on Jan. 12.

But he made it clear that he and other immigrant advocates have been seeking similar protection for some time, especially since deadly hurricanes struck their home country in recent years.

Aubourg said advocates also want protection that has no time limits, as the current one does.

The U.S. plan being put into effect now allows eligible Haitians to apply and be protected for 18 months. (Some are hoping there will be an extension of that limit.)

Aubourg said the Obama plan was "welcome" even if "late."

"I think it's a good step," he said.

Meanwhile, at Medgar Evers College, part of The City University of New York, administrators say they are planning a daylong event at which scores of immigrant experts, including lawyers, will give advice to Haitian immigrants.

"This is certainly the place to do something such as this," said Dr. William L. Pollard, the president of the college.

Pollard said the college decided to host such a gathering after the announcement about temporary protected status.

There are 700 students of Haitian descent at Medgar Evers College, making it the largest body of Haitian college students in the region, perhaps the nation, said Executive Dean Richard Jones.

The advisory session will be held on Saturday, Jan. 30 at the college and is being sponsored by CUNY's Citizenship Now! programme.

At St. Joachim and Anne Roman Catholic Church in Queens Village, the Rev. Jean Delva said he was happy about the granting of temporary protected status.

"It will allow people to find a job and work and send money back to their families," the priest said.

At Holy Innocents Roman Catholic Church in Brooklyn, the Rev. Rony Mendes said Haitians have been waiting a long time for such relief, even before the earthquake made it all but impossible for most to return to their homeland.

"They have been waiting on something like this to relieve their suffering here," Father Mendes said.

Those applying for temporary protected status will have to pay 470 dollars, and many will clearly need help of some kind in paying that amount. The government was set to begin taking applications Thursday, when it was slated to be published in the Federal Register.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services officials expected 100,000 to 200,000 people to apply.

Previously, the United States has granted so-called TPS status to about 350,000 people from a number of Central American and African countries.

The Catholic Church has been involved around the country in providing immigration advice to immigrants from Haiti, a heavily Catholic nation.

In New York City, The City University of New York has been deeply involved in educating immigrants about their rights and helping them obtain necessary legal documents.

*Special to IPS from The Haitian Times.

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