

## **Bush Proposes Legalizing Illegal Workers**

**By Reuben S. Seguritan**

President George W. Bush is proposing major changes in US immigration policy that may provide legal status to millions of illegal workers in the US. Migrant rights advocates are optimistic over the proposal considering the fact that it was brought up by President Bush himself.

Under the Bush proposal, employers would have to demonstrate their need for workers and prove that US citizens would not take their jobs. Illegal immigrants in the US, and even those in their home countries, would be matched with employers and will be allowed to work in the US as "guest workers" for three years, renewable for three year periods but not indefinitely.

News reports note that it is not clear how long a foreign worker can stay in the guest worker program but some congressional officials were reportedly led to believe it could be no longer than six years.

The guest worker will be allowed to travel home and return, and will be permitted to bring their families for as long as they can support them. Guest workers could enjoy retirement benefits, and may eventually seek US citizenship. President Bush is also recommending an increase in the issuance of employment-based "green cards." At present, about 140,000 employment-based "green cards" are issued yearly.

The proposal signals the Bush administration's return to the issue of immigration reform after two years of being shelved in response to the September 11, 2001 attacks.

The American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA), the national organization of immigration law practitioners, welcomed the Bush initiative. It previously suggested four key components toward an overhaul of what it described as a "dysfunctional" immigration system. According to AILA, the key components of immigration reform are: (1) comprehensiveness of the reform; (2) legalization of the status of those already living and working in the US; (3) creation of a new worker program that addresses the US economy's needs; and (4) family reunification.

The proposal, however, still has to be submitted to Congress where it will reportedly "face an uphill fight" as the details will be worked out. It applies to all illegal immigrants in the US, which are estimated at 8 million to 14 million people.

The proposal has been criticized by conservative Republicans as an amnesty program that rewards those who have violated laws to get into the US. Organized labor, on the other hand, cautioned against policies that might take away jobs from US workers.

The proposal has also been viewed as a political move designed to score points with Hispanic voters, and an effort to improve the souring relations between the US and Mexico. Mexicans comprise one of the largest groups of undocumented migrant workers, and Mexican

President Vicente Fox had been seeking a safe and orderly US immigration policy toward migrant workers.

The Bush proposal to liberalize the rules on foreign workers could be the most sweeping change in US immigration law, following the Immigration and Reform Act of 1986 wherein permanent legal status was given to about 3 million people who proved that they had entered the US before January 1, 1982 and resided continuously in the US since that date.

The Bush proposal is said to be more generous than previous proposals in that a guest worker may apply for a green card right away. Previous proposals require a guest worker to wait three years before applying for a green card. President Bush defended this proposal by saying it will give authorities a better idea of who is in the country and crossing its borders, and would therefore make the country safer from terrorist threat. He added that the proposal would also bolster the economy by meeting employers' needs for willing low-wage workers.