

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 16, 2010 at 9:25am

US grants temporary protected status for Haitians

by Patricia Zapor by Catholic News Service



Residents reach for packets of water during a food distribution in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, Jan. 15, three days after a catastrophic earthquake rocked the impoverished Caribbean nation. (CNS/Reuters)

WASHINGTON

Haitians currently living in the United States without legal status will be granted temporary protected status, allowing them to remain in the country and legally hold jobs, announced Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano Jan. 15.

In a teleconference, Napolitano said temporary protected status will be extended to Haitians who were in the United States as of Jan. 12, the day a magnitude 7 earthquake flattened much of Haiti's capital city, Port-au-Prince.

The designation will continue for the next 18 months, she said, and people may apply immediately.

She said Haitians who are not currently in the United States should not attempt to travel there to qualify for the status. "They will not be eligible and will be repatriated," Napolitano said.

She said she understands that the dire conditions in Haiti make it "tempting to seek refuge elsewhere," but encouraged people to remain in their country to help in rebuilding.

Since the earthquake, calls have escalated to protect Haitians in the United States from deportation and allow them greater freedom to send money back to their homeland.

In the hours before Napolitano made her announcement, religious, political and human rights leaders had urged the administration to immediately grant the designation, which has long been sought because of Haiti's precarious conditions.

Cardinal Francis E. George of Chicago, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, said in a letter to President Barack Obama released minutes before Napolitano's teleconference that by offering protected status to Haitians they "would be better able to assist their families in Haiti through remittances and by working together as a community to garner other resources for their stricken homeland."

"By any measure, the conditions in Haiti meet the statutory requirements for TPS. Extending this mantle of protection to struggling Haiti is not only appropriate, but a just, compassionate, and concrete step the United States can take toward alleviating the human suffering of the Haitian people," he said.

Shortly before Napolitano announced the decision, a letter signed by 81 members of Congress, from both parties, was released, saying that the Jan. 12 earthquake "plunged Haiti into chaos while the country was still struggling to recover from the ongoing humanitarian crisis resulting from the 2008 storms. It is abundantly clear that extraordinary and temporary conditions now exist preventing Haiti from being able to adequately and safely handle the return of its nationals currently in the United States."

Napolitano described the protected status as "a sort of intermediate legal status," enabling Haitians to work and get on their feet, while sending money home.

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She said the application process for temporary protected status can begin with information available at www.uscis.gov, or by phoning a hotline at the office of Citizenship and Immigration Services at (800) 375-5283.

On Jan. 13 she suspended deportations of Haitians from the United States.

The U.S. government grants the designation of temporary protected status after determining that armed conflict, political unrest, environmental disaster, or other extraordinary and temporary conditions exist in a nation and that the return of that country's nationals would further destabilize the nation and potentially bring harm to those who return.

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