



IMMIGRANTS OFFERED SANCTUARY IN U.S. CHURCHES

By JILL SERJEANT
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LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - Alarmed by immigration raids on illegal workers, a coalition of U.S. religious groups is launching a sanctuary movement on Wednesday to harbor immigrant families who risk being torn apart.

Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Muslim groups are opening churches and synagogues to shelter families who face deportation.

"This is a natural for the religious community," said Kim Bobo, founder of the national Interfaith Worker Justice organization and one of the "New Sanctuary Movement" coordinators.

"It is natural for us to find a much more public role, to stand up with the immigrants, to challenge the direction of the nation and suggest that we need a much more comprehensive immigration program," Bobo told Reuters.

An estimated 10-12 million undocumented workers live in the United States but congressional efforts to overhaul immigration laws stumbled a year ago.

Since last May, U.S. immigration authorities have been cracking down on illegal immigrants who ignore deportation orders and some 18,149 people had been arrested by February 23 in a series of raids across the country. Many families were split with U.S. born children left behind without one or both parents.

Under the sanctuary plan, six to eight congregations in Los Angeles, New York, Seattle and San Diego will initially harbor one family each of immigrant families who have at least one member facing, or at risk of, deportation.

Organizers expect to expand quickly to some 28 U.S. cities. Families being offered sanctuary have worked in the United States for some years, paid U.S. taxes and have no criminal records. They have also agreed to be publicly identified.

Sanctuary, or the right to be safe from arrest in a house of worship, has no legal standing in the United States but is a widely cherished tradition.

Organizers say they believe they are within U.S. law because the names and cases of families are being revealed.

But they are braced for opposition from anti-immigration groups and have already received hate mail and threats.

'PUBLICITY STUNT'

Steven Camarota, director of research at the Center for Immigration Studies, a Washington-based independent think tank on the impact of immigration in the United States, called the plan "a publicity stunt," saying people served with deportation orders had already been through the justice system.

"I think this will leave a lot of people scratching their heads," Camarota said.

"These are all individuals who have had their day in court, and often they appealed, and a judge said 'sorry, you don't qualify.' Under any conceivable immigration scheme there will still be tens of thousands of people who fall into this category unless you have completely open borders," he said.

The New Sanctuary Movement has its roots in the 1980s when U.S. inter-faith groups supported thousands of Central American refugees fleeing repression but denied political asylum in the United States.

According to the Pew Hispanic Center research group, some 2 million families in the United States have some undocumented members. Many of their 4 million children are U.S.-born, and thus U.S. citizens.

The New Sanctuary Movement was initiated by pastors in Los Angeles county, which is home to an estimated 1 million illegal immigrants. In one January raid, immigration agents arrested 338 undocumented immigrants in sweeps of Latino neighborhoods.

"So many of us in our congregations know these families -- decent good folks who have been working hard and contributing and have citizen children and are coming up against this irrational system that is tearing families apart," said the Rev. Alexia Salvatierra, a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

"Everyone from the President on down agrees that this system needs to be reformed. We really need to make sure that as decisions are made, they take into account the human and ethical realities of the situation."