

Asylum process to be reworked

WASHINGTON (AP) — A streamlining of the review of aliens' claims for asylum was proposed by the government Tuesday to cope with a backlog of 370,000 cases and reduce abuse of the system.

A representative of an attorneys' group said she feared even an increased number of immigration judges under the proposal wouldn't be able to reduce the backlog.

And Rep. Charles E. Schumer, D-N.Y., termed the proposal "incomplete and inadequate." He said it "would not plug the loopholes in the asylum law that allowed Sheik Omar Abdel Rachman to remain in the United States while allegedly masterminding the World Trade Center bombing."

The asylum plan is one of several changes in immigration policy recommended by the Clinton administration as related issues — such as public services provided to immigrants — have become increasingly sensitive on Capitol Hill and in statehouses.

Sen. Alan Simpson, R-Wyo., for example, introduced a bill this month that would cut the number of legal immigrants into the United States and establish a legal limit of 80,000 on the number of refugees allowed to gain asylum each year.

Schumer and Reps. Romano Mazzoli, D-Ky., and Bill McCollum, R-Fla., have sponsored a bill that would give asylum applicants one hearing and one administrative appeal rather than the two hearings in the administration's plan.

The Immigration and Naturalization Service estimates the backlog of asylum cases could hit 500,000 by the end of the year. In New York and Miami, it can take more than a year for an asylum case to go before an immigration judge.

At a news conference, INS Commissioner Doris Meissner announced a proposed "fast-track" method of reviewing asylum applications that

includes granting legitimate claims within 60 days. Unapproved claims would be referred to immigration judges for a decision within 180 days of filing.

"The reforms we propose will preserve fundamental legal protections for legitimate asylum-seekers while addressing the problems of asylum abuse," Meissner said. "We do not want to close the door on people who are persecuted, but we cannot allow others to take advantage of a process they don't really need or deserve."

The proposal also would:

- Grant work permits only to asylum applicants whose claims are approved. They wouldn't receive the permits until six months after applying for asylum.

The INS says many people with no legitimate claim apply for asylum just to get work permits, which now are available 90 days after applying. They disappear into the population and work while awaiting processing of their applications, which can take years.

- Take over processing of new claims immediately.

- Impose a new \$130 fee to help pay the \$615 cost of processing an asylum application. The fee would be waived for those who cannot afford it.

Meissner said the INS doesn't expect the approval rate, now about one-third of all applications, to change significantly under the new plan.

Proposed regulations for the plan will be published this week in the Federal Register.

The requirements for obtaining asylum are unchanged: An applicant must have a well-founded fear of ethnic, religious or political persecution if returned to his or her country of origin.

Meissner said the Justice Department is ready to increase the number of officials who adjudicate claims from 150 to 334.

U.S. tough on Japan's market-opening plan

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. Trade Representative Mickey Kantor rejected Japan's market-opening proposal Tuesday as a "half-finished work" that did not meet President Clinton's concerns.

Careful to say the United States was still hopeful Japan could meet its demands, Kantor said. "We have reviewed these measures and they do not meet the concerns the president raised on Feb. 11 during his meeting with Prime Minister (Morihiro) Hosokawa."

Secretary of State Warren Christopher echoed Kantor's appraisal.

He said the Japanese package "does not appear to meet our concerns" and that it was quite significant that Japanese business executives and the Japanese press had said as much.

But, Christopher said, "Our door is open. We'd like to hear further information that they indicated they might give us."

Emerging from a White House meeting with Clinton's chief economic and foreign policy advisers, Kantor said, "Our door is opened and we are prepared to work with our ally with this."

The remarks were the latest in a series of tough United States responses to Japanese overtures on trade. Kantor reiterated Clinton's comments when trade talks broke down earlier this year, saying, "We're not going to paper over our differences."

He said the Japanese proposal "is not enough to reopen these talks."

"The package of measures is of limited substance and appears to be half-finished work," he told reporters.

House Majority Leader Richard Gephardt, D-Mo., agreed, saying Japan's package of reforms "leaves a lot to be desired."

"Japan has once again offered to make changes sometime in the future, hoping to reduce tensions without acting," he said. "We should no longer accept recycled promises from the past."

The comments reflect the confrontational style that the Clinton administration has used in dealing with Japan.

Kantor disputed that the U.S. response could make a trade war more likely, saying that the Japanese themselves characterized the package as a first step.

Kantor said last week that the United States had told Japan its new package "should be bold and aggressive" in rectifying the trade problems. On Tuesday, he said the proposal offered by Japan lacked "concrete steps" that would lift barriers against U.S. goods.

If the hard-nosed diplomacy fails, Clinton could try to force changes by imposing sanctions on Japanese products under the newly revived Super 301 provision of U.S. trade law. The first step toward that could come Thursday, when a U.S. report will detail foreign trade barriers.

Japan's government said it would spend the next three months on steps to cut bureaucratic red tape in 11 key areas where foreign companies say it is too difficult to enter the market, such as insurance, retailing, pharmaceuticals and food. But Japan said it would not decide until June on specifics of how to bring product regulations and standards more in line with world norms.

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