



NEWS RELEASE

Contact: Media Services
Office of Public Affairs
(202)514-2648 Fax:(202)514-1776

February 1, 2000

Asylum Reform: Five Years Later

Backlog Reduced and Number of Non-Meritorious Claims Drops

WASHINGTON – The U.S. asylum system today celebrates five years of successfully providing safe refuge for individuals escaping persecution and torture while at the same time reducing the number of non-meritorious claims, said Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) Commissioner Doris Meissner. The agency marked the fifth anniversary of asylum reform at a symposium in Washington, D.C., hosted by Commissioner Meissner, with opening remarks by Attorney General Janet Reno.

"Five years ago, INS launched badly needed reform of an asylum system that was overwhelmed, unresponsive and vulnerable to misuse," said Commissioner Meissner. "We now have an asylum program that ensures claims are decided in a fair and timely manner. At the same time, we have built professionalism in the Asylum Officer Corps and improved our treatment of asylum-seekers by working closely with non-governmental organizations that assist persons fleeing oppression."

Asylum reform was implemented in 1995 after a severe backlog developed in the early 1990s. By 1992, almost two-thirds of all claims became part of a burgeoning backlog due to a lack of resources and effective procedures for processing those claims. By 1993, the asylum system was in a crisis, having become a magnet for abuse by persons filing applications in order to obtain employment authorization. As a result, most claims languished in the backlog for years, without being processed. By the end of Fiscal Year (FY) 1994, there were almost 425,000 cases in the backlog, nearly double what it had been two years earlier.

Asylum reform has led to a decrease of 75 percent in the number of new claims being filed with INS, from 127,129 in FY 1993 to 30,261 in FY 1999. Conversely, the approval rate of cases heard by INS asylum officers has increased from 15 percent of cases adjudicated in FY 1993 to an approval rate of 38 percent in FY 1999, another indicator that INS is receiving more valid claims. This is further illustrated by comparing the cases approved in FY 1999: Only 19 percent of the pre-reform claims were approved while 44 percent of the post-reform cases were approved.

"The United States has been a country of refuge throughout our history. The foundation for this basic tenet of our immigration policy and values has never been stronger," said Commissioner Meissner, adding, "Today, INS is processing asylum applications more expeditiously, more equitably, and more humanely than ever before."

The 1995 reforms covered three key areas:

Employment authorization was no longer automatic upon filing an asylum application. Instead, asylum-seekers became eligible to apply for employment authorization only after asylum was granted or 150 days after the date of filing if a decision had not been made. Asylum applications that are not approved by asylum officers are referred directly to the immigration court if the applicant does not have legal status.

Through funding from the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, the number of asylum officers increased from 150 to 325, and the number of immigration judges from 112 to 179.

The United States has a long tradition of offering safe haven to persons fleeing oppression, persecution and torture. The United States offers asylum protection based on an inherent belief in human rights and the right of the individual to be free from persecution and inhumane treatment. Asylum is an important protection, provided in international and domestic law to qualified persons who are unable or unwilling to return to their country of nationality because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.