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Yemeni Americans in New York City demonstrate Dec. 27, 2017, against then-President Donald Trump's travel ban and recent denials of visa applications. On July 6, 2021, the Biden administration announced an 18-month extension of Temporary Protected Status for the approximately 2,200 Yemeni nationals in the U.S. (CNS photo by Amr Alfiky, Reuters)



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Faith groups that work with immigrants are applauding a decision by the U.S. government to extend immigration protections for nationals from Yemen whose citizens find themselves dealing with war and famine, as well as the coronavirus pandemic.

On July 6, U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas announced an 18-month extension of Temporary Protected Status, or TPS, for Yemenis in the United States in effect from Sept. 4, 2021, through March 3, 2023.

"Yemen continues to experience worsening humanitarian and economic conditions that prevent individuals from safely returning to their homes," said Mayorkas in a statement released by DHS. "We will continue to protect and offer these individuals a place of residency temporarily in the United States."

TPS grants a work permit and reprieve from deportation to certain people whose countries have experienced natural disasters, armed conflict or exceptional situations so they can remain temporarily in the United States.

"Protecting Yemenis in the U.S. from the devastating conditions in Yemen is a legal and moral duty," said Anna Gallagher, executive director of the Catholic Legal Immigration Network Inc.

"As a blanket protection for nationals of an entire country, TPS plays a unique and important role in our humanitarian immigration system," she said. "We call on the Biden administration to use it broadly and boldly to save lives and keep families together and stabilized."

Faith-based organizations such as CLINIC earlier joined the Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, or LIRS, in calling for the TPS extension in a letter to the Biden administration.

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LIRS, in a statement, said the decision recognizes the "perilous conditions" that make it impossible for Yemeni nationals to safely return to their home country: "lack of access to food, water and health care; large-scale destruction of Yemen's infrastructure; significant population displacement; an ongoing cholera outbreak since 2016; and the COVID-19 pandemic's worsening of a dire economic and humanitarian situation."

The decision could affect more than 2,000 Yemenis seeking protection in the U.S.

Krish O'Mara Vignarajah, president and CEO of LIRS, said the decision extended "a literal lifeline for Yemeni nationals residing in the United States."

"The United States could not, in good conscience, force the Yemeni people to return to a country experiencing what the United Nations has called 'the largest humanitarian crisis in the world,'" she said in a statement.

"Escalating violence, warring factions, deteriorating infrastructure, and widespread internal displacement worsen countrywide extreme poverty, resource scarcity, lack of access to health care, creating conditions that are by all accounts unlivable," she said. "The extension and redesignation is more than a bureaucratic policy change; it is a chance at survival for the more than 2,000 Yemeni nationals living in the United States."

Both organizations have asked the government to take part in outreach to get the information about this protection to the Yemeni community because, while 1,700 Yemenis already have TPS status, some 500 nationals from Yemen in the U.S. may be eligible to apply.

"Now that we have the decision, we call on the administration to implement it in a way that ensures access and protection for all eligible Yemenis," said Lisa Parisio, CLINIC's director of advocacy.

"This includes immediately opening the registration process through publication in the Federal Register and launching a robust, culturally-competent government outreach plan to get information to the community," Parisio added. "Without a strategic and well-resourced implementation, a life-saving decision like this one can turn into an empty promise."