

Massive protests, faith leaders, oppose harsh steps against illegals: Demonstrations nationwide

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Rallying against a bill passed in the House of Representatives that would accelerate deportations, increase border security and treat illegal immigrants as felons, masses of immigrants appeared in multiple demonstrations in U.S. cities in March and April.

A more lenient reform bill was approved by the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee but fell victim to an impasse before the senators began a two-week break last month.

Catholic and mainline Protestant leaders have backed compassionate reform measures. Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles made national news early in the protest movement when he declared that he would defy any new law that made it a serious offense to give aid and comfort to immigrants lacking legal documents.

Republican leaders have been divided on whether to support President Bush's proposals for a guest worker program and new ways for immigrants to gain citizenship.

But there is a backlash against the roughly estimated 11 million immigrants who are in the U.S. illegally, a backlash exacerbated by the sight of Mexican flags waved by protesters. For a rally on the Washington Mall on April 10, at which Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick spoke, organizers passed out U.S. flags.

If Congress cannot agree on legislation soon, the backlash may translate into tougher new state laws. Nearly 400 immigration-related bills have been introduced in 42 states since January because of the outcry, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

In Arizona, several bishops and other religious leaders appealed in a joint statement to state legislators "to bring undocumented immigrants out of the shadows" and begin treating them fairly in the many menial jobs they have taken in the U.S.

economy.

“There is no question that Arizona is at the epicenter of what is now a national policy issue,” the April 4 statement said. “The negative rhetoric used by some in our state that demonizes undocumented immigrants has contributed to a polarized atmosphere both locally and nationally.”

Among the signers were Bishop Kirk Smith of the Episcopal Church, Bishop Gerald Kicana of the Tucson Catholic Diocese and United Methodist Minerva Carcano, who is bishop for Arizona and southern Nevada.