

Mexican Immigrant Who Sought Sanctuary in Church Can Stay in US

A Mexican immigrant who took refuge in an Arizona church to avoid deportation from a country where he has lived illegally for over a decade and raised a family can stay in the United States, a federal official said on Tuesday.

Daniel Neyoy Ruiz, 36, had been ordered to report for voluntary deportation in May. But in a high-profile challenge to U.S. immigration policy he instead turned to a Tucson church whose leaders were involved in a movement to give sanctuary to Central American refugees in the 1980s.

After spending nearly a month in the church, Neyoy Ruiz was notified by immigration officials on Monday that he had been granted a one-year stay, which can be renewed annually and includes a work permit. A U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement spokeswoman confirmed a stay of removal had been issued.

"I cried," Neyoy Ruiz said of the decision granting him a stay, which had been twice denied previously. "I cried out of happiness and we hugged each other knowing that this was done."

Neyoy Ruiz, who has a teenage son who is a U.S. citizen, was ordered to report for voluntary deportation stemming from a 2011 traffic stop. After he took refuge in the church on May 13, immigration officials said they would not immediately act to deport him. Now that a stay has been granted, the family plans to leave the church.

"Daniel's case is not exceptional, and the fact that he was never granted prosecutorial discretion and then later denied a

stay of removal should be reviewed by immigration officials," said Margo Cowan, the family's lawyer.

Federal immigration officials have focused their enforcement efforts on stopping illegal border crossers and deporting unauthorized immigrants convicted of crimes. Ruiz has never been convicted of a crime, his attorney said.

Ira Mehlman, a spokesman for the Federation for American Immigration Reform, which seeks to limit numbers entering the United States, criticized the action.

"While law enforcement agencies should prioritize cases, there's no reason that a deportation order shouldn't be enforced," Mehlman said.

Neyoy Ruiz is not the first immigrant to turn to a church for refuge from deportation. In 2006, Mexican immigrant activist Elvira Arellano famously entered a Chicago church and stayed there for a year, but was ultimately deported.

Editing by Cynthia Johnston and Lisa Shumaker

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