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Acting DHS chief denies White House pressured her over immigration program

2 MIN READ

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - Acting Secretary of Homeland Security Elaine Duke on Friday denied reports that White House Chief of Staff John Kelly pressured her to end protections for tens of thousands of immigrants, and said she plans to remain in the Trump administration.

Acting Secretary of Homeland Security Elaine Duke testifies before a Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs during a hearing on "threats to the homeland" on Capitol Hill in Washington, U.S., September 27, 2017. REUTERS/Kevin Lamarque

The Washington Post reported on Thursday that Kelly pressured Duke to end what is called temporary protected status for tens of thousands of Hondurans living in the United States. The newspaper also reported that Duke has informed Kelly that she plans to resign.

The New York Times later reported that Kelly “made an 11th-hour plea” to Duke that she end the protections.

“The recent media reports regarding the TPS decision-making process are seriously flawed,” Duke said in a statement late on Friday evening.

She said she had conversations with Kelly, the former secretary of homeland security, leading up to her decision, but that he “consistently reiterated that, as the Acting Secretary, the current decisions were mine to make and should be done in accordance with the existing law.”

“At no time did he pressure me to terminate TPS for Nicaragua, Honduras or El Salvador: any reports otherwise are false,” she added.

In the end, Duke extended the benefits for Honduran immigrants until July 2018, though officials said it could then be terminated.

Duke decided to end the special status for Nicaraguan immigrants, however, and it will expire in January 2019.

Duke said it was “a tremendous honor” to serve at DHS, and said she planned to continue in the department’s second-highest position, deputy secretary, once Kirstjen Nielsen, the nominee for DHS secretary, wins Senate confirmation.

“I have no plans to go anywhere and reports to the contrary are untrue,” Duke said.

Thousands from both Nicaragua and Honduras were given the special status in 1999 after Hurricane Mitch devastated Central America. In all, temporary protected status protects more than 300,000 people living in the United States.

Reporting by Yeganeh Torbati; Editing by Mary Milliken

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