

## Alabama sets nation's toughest immigration law

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By Peggy Gargis

BIRMINGHAM, Ala (Reuters) - Republican Governor Robert Bentley on Thursday signed into law a crackdown on illegal immigration in Alabama that both supporters and critics consider the toughest in the nation.

The measure will require public schools to determine the citizenship status of students - a provision not included in an Arizona law that has been at the forefront of actions by several states to curb illegal immigration.

Under the Alabama law, police must detain someone they suspect of being in the country illegally if the person cannot produce proper documentation when stopped for any reason.

It also will be a crime to knowingly transport or harbor someone who is in the country illegally. The law imposes penalties on businesses that knowingly employ someone without legal resident status. A company's business license could be suspended or revoked.

The law, which is scheduled to take effect September 1, requires businesses to use a database called E-Verify to confirm the immigration status of new employees.

"We have a real problem with illegal immigration in this country," Bentley said after signing the law. "I campaigned for the toughest immigration laws, and I'm proud of the Legislature for working tirelessly to create the strongest immigration bill in the country."

Several states have enacted immigration restrictions, even though the U.S. government considers it to be a federal issue.

Immigration rights advocates called the new law "draconian " and vowed to challenge it in court. Rights organizations have sued to block similar measures in Arizona, Utah, Indiana and Georgia. The U.S. Justice Department also sued over Arizona's law.

"This law is an outrageous throw-back to the pre-Civil Rights era, said Cecilia Wang, director of the American Civil Liberties Union's Immigrants' Rights Project. Alabama was at the center of some of the bitter struggles over the civil rights of African Americans during the 1960s.

After Arizona passed its controversial measure last year, the courts blocked implementation of a provision allowing police to check the immigration status of people there.

But the U.S. Supreme Court recently endorsed a separate Arizona law requiring employers to use E-Verify. The court also ruled that Arizona could suspend or revoke business licenses of those companies that knowingly hire illegal immigrants.

#### WILL STUDENTS BE AFRAID?

Alabama's law is unique in requiring public schools to determine, by review of birth certificates or sworn affidavits, the legal residency status of students.

"We fear that it will, in effect, ban the student through fear and harassment," said Shay Farley, legal director of Alabama Appleseed, a nonprofit policy and legal advocacy organization.

Farley said there is also concern about the increased financial burden on schools to collect the information.

The Alabama bill passed the state House of Representatives and Senate by large margins before landing on Bentley's desk. Republicans took over majority control of both chambers of the Alabama legislature last year for the first time in 136 years.

Some farmers in the U.S. South are worried that new immigration restrictions could limit access to farm workers. But Gene Armstrong, mayor of Allgood, Alabama, a small community where the Hispanic population has grown to almost 50 percent, is not worried.

"We managed in the past without illegal immigrants to pick the tomatoes here, and I haven't heard anyone say that if we sent them all home nobody would be left to do that work," Armstrong said.

"When you have 9 percent unemployment, I think that some people who might not have wanted those jobs previously might reconsider."

(Editing by Colleen Jenkins and Greg McCune)