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Donald Trump plunges 800,000 young immigrants into uncertainty - but ball is in Congress' court

Nirmal Ghosh

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Fatima Claros, 25, and Yurexi Quinones, 24, were in tears outside the White House on Tuesday (Sept 5) as America's Attorney-General Jeff Sessions cancelled Barack Obama-era legislation that had allowed them to stay in the US after arriving years ago as children.

Ms Claros is from El Salvador, Ms Quinones from Mexico. Both went to school in the US and continue to study as well as work. Now, they are among an estimated 800,000 "Dreamers" allowed under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals programme (Daca) to study and work in the US who face possible deportation at the end of the terms of their current visas.

The decision was expected, given that US President Donald Trump had pledged it during his campaign, and broad details emerged before it was announced. The logic behind the decision was that former US President Obama acted unconstitutionally by outflanking Congress, and that "Dreamers" were depriving Americans of jobs.

Mr Obama's executive order was signed in 2012. It amounted to an amnesty and prompted thousands of children of illegal immigrants to come forward and enter mainstream American life.

By far the largest group benefiting from the Daca programme are Mexicans, followed by Guatemalans, Koreans, El Salvadorans and Filipinos. The list also includes young people from China and India.

Today, Daca recipients range in age from 15 to 36, with the majority being adults.

Congress has now been given six months to reform the US' immigration laws – leaving some hope for Dreamers that they will be allowed to stay.

But the decision immediately triggered an outpouring of condemnation, including a rare rebuke from Mr Obama.

"Let's be clear: the action taken today isn't required legally. It's a political decision, and a moral question," Mr Obama said in a lengthy Facebook post.

"We shouldn't threaten the future of this group of young people who are here through no fault of their own, who pose no threat, who are not taking away anything from the rest of us," he wrote.

"Kicking them out won't lower the unemployment rate, or lighten anyone's taxes, or raise anybody's wages."

Defending his 2012 order, he wrote: "It made no sense to expel talented, driven, patriotic young people from the only country they know."

Criticism came from the both sides of the aisle: Republican Senator John McCain, in a statement, said the decision was the wrong approach to immigration policy.

"I strongly believe that children who were illegally brought into this country through no fault of their own should not be forced to return to a country they do not know," Mr McCain said.

Republican Senator Jeff Flake in a series of Tweets was hopeful Congress would be able to address the issue of Daca without deportations.

"Congress must act immediately to pass permanent, stand-alone legislation to lawfully ensure that children who were brought here by their parents, through no fault of their own, are able to stay and finish their education and continue to contribute to society," he said.

House Speaker Paul Ryan said: "It is my hope that the House and Senate, with the President's leadership, will be able to find consensus on a permanent legislative solution that includes ensuring that those who have done nothing wrong can still contribute as a valued part of this great country."

The Daca programme only applies to those who have lived in the US for five years or longer and do not have a criminal record. Many Dreamers now have regular jobs. Over 250 serve in the US armed forces.

In a paper in January, the libertarian Cato Institute wrote: "Essentially, these are people who never knowingly broke any law and have been productive and peaceful members of society since their arrival.

"We estimate that the fiscal cost of immediately deporting the approximately 750,000 people currently in the Daca programme would be over US\$60 billion (S\$80 billion) to the federal government along with a US\$280 billion reduction in economic growth over the next decade."

In the 200-300 strong crowd outside the White House in Washington on Tuesday, 24-year-old Ms Quinones, struggling to keep her emotions in check, told The Straits Times her parents were now residents of the US, and her sister is a citizen.

Her own visa expires in March next year, after which she may be deported to Mexico – her country of origin but one she has never been back to since she arrived in the US.

Her voice cracking with emotion, she said: "I have spoken to lawyers, I may have no choice. I came when I was eight years old. I will continue to protest until they renew Daca or come up with a better plan."