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Immigration judges exempt from Trump's federal hiring freeze

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President Donald Trump's federal hiring freeze will not apply to immigration court judges under an exception for positions that are needed for national security and public safety, the Executive Office for Immigration Review told Reuters on Friday.

The Trump administration has called for faster removal of immigrants in the United States illegally, but immigration courts, which rule on asylum applications and deportation appeals, are weighed down by a record backlog of more than 542,000 cases.

On Jan. 23, Trump froze hiring for all federal government positions, except for military personnel and in some other limited circumstances.

New Attorney General Jeff Sessions "determined that Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) positions can continue to be filled," EOIR spokeswoman Kathryn Mattingly told Reuters in an email response to questions about the freeze.

"As such, EOIR is continuing to advertise and fill positions nationwide for immigration judges and supporting staff," Mattingly said. The immigration courts are run by the Justice Department, unlike federal courts which are independent.

In a Feb. 20 enforcement memorandum, Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly said that long delays in immigration court hearings were "unacceptable" and allow "removable aliens with no plausible claim for relief to remain unlawfully in the United States for many years."

There are currently 301 sitting immigration judges in 58 courts nationwide, falling short of the 374 positions Congress has authorized. More than 50 immigration judge candidates are at various stages of the hiring process, which typically takes about a year, according to EOIR.

The courts would need about 520 judges to eliminate the backlog, according to a July 2016 study by the advocacy group Human Rights First.

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The new immigration enforcement guidelines expand the number of people that could be targeted for deportation. Depending on the circumstances, immigrants who are arrested or detained by immigration agents have the right to claim asylum or request deportation relief in immigration court.

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"The issue for the immigration court has really just been the pressing crush of cases," said retired immigration judge Eliza Klein, who sat on the bench in Miami, Boston and Chicago from 1994 to 2015.

"Judges are told this case is a priority this week and

this other kind of case is a priority next week," she said.

(Reporting By Kristina Cooke and Mica Rosenberg; Editing by Sue Horton and Mary Milliken)



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WASHINGTON Iraq's Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi will visit President Donald Trump in Washington during the week of March 19, a White House spokesman said on Tuesday.

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