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DREAMS OF CITIZENSHIP RIDE ON DELUGE OF MAIL

By ESTHER B. FEIN, SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES
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LEAD: Just seconds before midnight, the countdown began Tuesday: "Nine, eight, seven, six, five, four three, two, one."

Just seconds before midnight, the countdown began Tuesday: "Nine, eight, seven, six, five, four three, two, one."

And suddenly, like confetti on New Year's Eve, hundreds of letters, some squeezed and kissed for good luck, soared through the air, floating until they landed atop thousands of other letters in a bin outside the main post office here.

The letters had been written by people from 36 countries or territories, each seeking a one-time-only chance to avoid years of red tape to get a green card, and with it the opportunity to become a United States citizen in five years.

Ten thousand citizens of countries who have been "adversely affected" by past American immigration laws will receive the visas on a first come, first served basis. The special provision was part of the immigration overhaul approved by Congress last October.

By midday today, a spokesman for the State Department said more than 250,000 letters had been received. Reasons for Seeking Visas

In one envelope was Olga Szymanski's wish to earn enough money here as a maid so that her husband and son could join her from Poland. In another, was Birgit Noh's attempt to stay in her job in New York City and not have to return to West Germany. Still another held Budi Pramano's hopes of freeing his family from poverty in Indonesia, and bringing them here for a fuller life.

Ordinarily, applying for citizenship is complex and cumbersome. Each year 270,000 immigrant visas are granted in seven classifications, including victims of political torture and people with skills needed in this country. Those in the seventh category, nonpreference, have little hope of getting permanent residence in this country.

It is under that nonpreference category that the 10,000 visas will be allocated. Half of the visas are to be issued this fiscal year, ending Sept. 30, and half the next.

The State Department announced early this month that it would register, "in strict chronological order," applications received at the District of Columbia's Brentwood Avenue post office between Jan. 21 and Jan. 27.

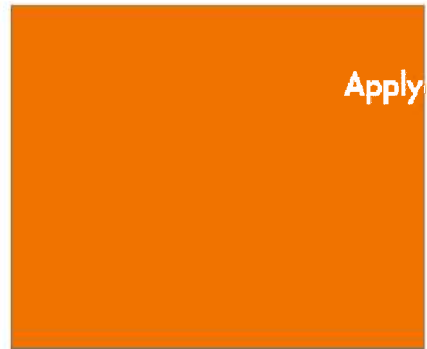
Eager to improve the chance that theirs would be among the first 10,000 to be slotted in the State Department's mailbox, about 200 people waited outside the post office for the stroke of midnight, then cast their letters and their lots into the postal service bins.

People laden with letters drove up to the remotely located post office in limousines, taxis

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and automobiles. Some came with beach chairs and thermoses brimming with hot coffee. Others found a pay phone and ordered pizza. Heavily accented English and the cadence of different foreign languages mingled in the crisp night air.

Among those gathered, Michael Lalonde of Windsor, Ontario, took the volume award, for licking, sealing and stamping 6,000 letters all on behalf of his own application.

Thomas Ho, an attorney, took the long distance prize for traveling from Honolulu with close to 700 letters for 35 of his clients. Keith O'Malley, an attorney, won in the long distance category, international division, for flying in from Ireland on Sunday, dividing the cost of his air fare among the 700 clients who gave him letters to post. "Why Not Try?"

The candor award went to Mohamed Talbi, a native of Algeria who is now a United States citizen. Mr. Talbi said his brother, Abdel Krim, "does not need to be here" to escape poverty or political persecution, but since the program offered him a chance, "Why not try?"

Even as the hour of midnight drew near, Mr. O'Malley, himself a dual citizen of Ireland and the United States, was bent over his attache case, folding letters and scrawling NP-5, P.O. Box 96097, Washington, D.C. 20090-6097, across the envelopes.

The idea behind the "grab bag visas," as some have dubbed the program, was to correct imbalances in immigration patterns by issuing 5,000 visas a year for two years - above the 270,000 annual limit - to people from countries that have shown a decrease in the number of immigrants admitted to the United States.

The State Department determined that 36 countries and territories had been "adversely affected" by previous immigration laws. They are Albania, Algeria, Argentina, Austria, Belgium, Bermuda, Britain and Northern Ireland, Canada, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, East Germany, West Germany, Finland, France, Gibraltar, Guadeloupe, Hungary, Iceland, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Monaco, Netherlands, New Caledonia, Norway, Poland, San Marino, Sweden, Switzerland, Tunisia and the Soviet republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Origin of Special Category

The provision was introduced by Representative Brian J. Donnelly, a Democrat from Massachusetts, but it is widely believed to have been a pet project of Thomas P. O'Neill Jr., the former Speaker of the House of Representatives, whose concern for Ireland is well-known.

"Everyone knew Tip would smile more favorably on the immigration bill if this were included," said Representative Charles E. Schumer, a Brooklyn Democrat who is on the immigration subcommittee of the House Judiciary Committee.

The law, and the countries selected, have been criticized by lawyers and human rights groups, who say the list may redress past imbalances, but that it is blind to current ones.

Many of the letters received today were posted by several hundred people who stood outside the post office on Brentwood Road late Tuesday night, hoping to increase the chances that their letters would be among the first 10,000.

"All you can do is say three Hail Marys and three Our Fathers and throw the letters in," said Michael Maggio, an immigration lawyer from Washington. "God will play a larger role in this than a lawyer."

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