

U.S. Eases Rules for Students From Economically Troubled Asian Countries

BY PAUL DESRUISSEAU

WASHINGTON
THE U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service last week issued an interim rule that enables some Asian students at colleges and universities in this country to work more hours at paying jobs and take fewer courses than is normally allowed under their student visas.

The regulation is aimed at providing temporary relief to students from a handful of Asian countries that have experienced economic turmoil and currency devaluations in the past year.

Specifically, the rule allows non-immigrant alien students from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, South Korea, and Thailand to take a less than full course load, and to work for more than 20 hours per week at jobs either on or off their campuses, without losing their F-1 visa status. About 85 per cent of foreign students in the United States are on F-1 visas.

'INFLEXIBLE' REQUIREMENTS

Ordinarily, foreign students who are in this country on such visas are permitted to hold jobs only if they meet certain requirements, described by the I.N.S. as "inflexible." Among these is that they carry a full load of courses. Under the interim rule, however, students who, because of working more hours, want to take fewer courses, can do so and still retain their visa status, as long as they remain registered for a minimum course load. That is defined as six semester or quarter hours for undergraduates, and three hours for graduate students.

The usual 20-hour weekly limit on work is also suspended under the new rule. Other requirements for foreign students who want to work are also suspended, although the students still must obtain campus au-

thorization and I.N.S. approval before they can take an off-campus job.

"This will be of enormous help to students from these countries," said Matthew Schulze, a government-relations analyst at NAFSA: Association of International Educators.

An estimated 80,000 students from the five countries were enrolled at U.S. institutions at the start of the academic year. Personal and family resources are the primary source of financial support for more

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than two-thirds of all foreign students in the United States.

The notice about the interim rule in the *Federal Register* on June 10 said: "Given the magnitude of this student population in the United States, the economic crisis in these students' countries is also having an indirect but serious adverse impact on campuses across the country."

College lobbyists and several organizations involved in international education had asked the Clinton Administration to consider such a rule when it became clear earlier this year that personal financial problems might force large numbers of Asian students at U.S. institutions to drop out or to defer their education in this country.

"Together, these steps would enable students to reduce their tuition costs and increase the amount of income they could generate from working," said Marlene M. Johnson, executive director of NAFSA, at that time.

The rule had been anticipated since mid-March, when the White House, during a visit by Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai of Thailand, said it had directed the I.N.S. to find ways to provide economic relief to students from the Asian countries affected by the financial crisis.

"We have been waiting to hear the final word on this for some time," said Noppadon Moapichai, a guidance officer in the education office at the Thai Embassy here. "I'm glad for this. It will be a relief for the

sponds sympathetically to such a severe need, and we are extremely pleased to see this kind of response and willingness to help students.

"Of course, we're disappointed that it was not implemented until after spring semester was over," she added. "This would have helped many students who are now gone, and who had a hard time getting through the semester. But this is still going to help a lot of people."

The interim rule took effect with its publication in the *Federal Register*. A "good cause" exception, which allows the I.N.S. Commissioner to suspend the application of some regulations for emergency reasons, made it possible for the rule to go into effect before the public could comment on it. Written comments on the rule, however, can be submitted until August 10.

As originally drafted, the rule was to remain in effect for only one year. However, the notice said it would remain in force until rescinded by the Attorney General.

"That's a good thing," said Mr. Schulze, of NAFSA. "The economic situation in some of these countries might continue longer than anticipated."

One concern expressed by Mr. Moapichai, of the Thai Embassy, was echoed by some campus officials: that students not neglect the pursuit of their academic goals while trying to help support themselves.

"I am concerned about people taking less than a full load of courses and prolonging their study, which in the end can be more expensive than finishing on time," said N.Y.U.'s Ms. Szenes.

Mr. Tudisco, of Columbia, said: "Our students will need to think about how much longer it will take them to complete their studies if they are devoting more time to earning their way. That's something we're going to have to keep an eye on." ■

RELIEF ON THE CAMPUSES

Campus officials welcomed the news. "We are certainly relieved that, for students facing dire circumstances, there is now an avenue to help them get back on their feet," said Richard B. Tudisco, associate provost and director of the International Students and Scholars Office at Columbia University. "We're very happy that the I.N.S. has come forward to help students from this region. And, the way the rule is written, it would seem possible for the service to suspend some visa provisions for other countries if a similar emergency came up. I think this establishes a good principle."

Gail Child Szenes, director of the Office for International Students and Scholars at New York University, said, "It's always heartening when the U.S. government re-

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