

# REFUGEE UPDATE

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**THE IMPORTANCE OF TRANSITIONAL  
HOUSING FOR REFUGEE CLAIMANTS**

**PATHWAYS TO GENDER JUSTICE  
HANDBOOK**

**RAPE AS A TECHNIQUE OF  
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**The future of Colombian refugees in Canada**

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**We welcome letters to the editor with your comments.**

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# RAPE AS A TECHNIQUE OF TORTURE

BY EZAT MOSSALLANEJAD AND ANDREA LAGIOS

What will follow is a series of tremendously impactful experiences shared by survivors at the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT). It is a devastating story that has affected me in a serious manner. I met her ten years back when she was brought to my office by a doctor. Overcome by emotion, she told me about her experience in her war-ravaged country of origin in central Africa. Her two brothers and husband were part of a rebel group, and had been in hiding somewhere in a cave, of which she knew the whereabouts. One day, government soldiers came to her house to inquire about them; she denied any connection with them, and told the soldiers that she had no information. The soldiers assaulted her, kicking her body, and then left.

The encounter heightened her concern for her husband and brothers, so early that evening, when she ensured nobody was following her, she went to them and informed them of the impending danger. The next day, the soldiers raided her house while holding her brothers and husband, whose hands were tied up. The soldiers then proceeded to rape her, and then killed her husband and both brothers. She begged them to kill her as well, but they refused and told her that she should suffer for the rest of her life. Unfortunately we were not able to serve this client as she refused to come to us. While we made numerous attempts to reach her, we were unsuccessful in doing so. In my experience with other cases of gender-related torture, survivors may develop a sense of withdrawal, rejecting all sorts of assistance. They suffer in silence for the rest of their lives.

In another instance, I was visited by a woman at the CCVT while she was on the verge of collapse, around 12 years back. I tried to have her torture documented by referring her to a physical practitioner and a psychologist. She casually mentioned her experience of gender-related persecution to me that occurred while in she was in political custody. At the time, this woman was in a very critical condition, to the extent that she was taken care of by her 9 and 11 year old children. This prompted me to think that something horrible had happened to her. It took me more than 9 months to develop a trusting relationship with her. One day, she told me about her horrible experience of rape as a technique of torture. The lawyer had already sent her medical and psychological report to the Immigration and Refugee Board but fortunately, it was not too late; by contacting the psychologist we were able to have a new, more accurate report written to document her experience. Thankfully, she was accepted as a Convention refugee in Canada. For the rest of her life though, she could not marry or engage in a relationship since she hated to be touched by any man.

I have shared the story of Saeideh in chapter 6 of my book, *Torture in the Age of Fear*. She is a woman from Iran who has spent four years in jail with her baby. Saeideh frequently experienced rape as a technique of torture by people obsessed with religious purification. She shared her experience 20 years after the initial trauma, and 5 years after initially seeing me at the CCVT. She bravely asked me to share her experience with everybody using my book, in the hope that her experience would never again become a reality for anybody else. Saeideh is doing very well and has had immense success in working to convert her trauma into something constructive in her life. She is a great mother, dancer, and cultural activist.

In July and August 1996, I traveled to Rwanda and visited 7 cities. I was told about women and their double victimization in the course of the 1994 genocide. I came to know that rape was systematically used as one of the weapons of genocide.

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Many women were raped and killed immediately and many survivors chose to hide their stories rather than being detested by their community. It was, therefore, difficult for anybody to guess the number of victims. However, according to an estimate, between 250,000 to 500,000 women (including girls as young as 5) experienced systemic torture, gender-related crimes and rape. Apart from the symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorders and severe retraumatization of the women survivors of genocide, hundreds of survivors gave birth to the babies of their cruel rapists. More than 5,000 pregnancies happened as a result of rape. Thousands of women are also still suffering from infections and diseases caused by rape, including AIDS. Despite all difficulties, I found Rwandan women highly determined, and I was inspired by their strong will to overcome the effects of their trauma. Rape is being used as a technique of torture not only against women, but also against men. I will never for-

and 8 of the Rome Statute for the International Criminal Court. It is, however, upsetting that rape is being used against women extensively in both countries of the North and South through various means ranging from intimate partner abuse to state sanctioned tactics of war. It is specifically used against vulnerable groups of people such as refugees and displaced persons in refugee camps and war ravaged areas who have remained without adequate protection.

As was mentioned previously, rape leaves durable impacts on survivors. Apart from physical complications, like infections or HIV/AIDS, its psychological scars are also devastating. Many survivors who have experienced rape have developed a sense of guilt and lack of self-worth. Instead of blaming their victimizers, they blame themselves. Internalization, as such, is highly detrimental to the recov-



get the experience of a man who visited me at the CCVT, who was from eastern Africa and had been raped by a religious leader. When he went to the police to report the act, he was imprisoned and tortured by the forces that were supposed to protect him. At the CCVT, we have served gay, lesbian, transgender and transsexual clients who have gone through rape as a technique of torture and as a means of humiliation in an attempt to make them confess about their sexual orientation. Another man I have served at the CCVT was arrested at the age of 14 due to his gender identity as a gay boy, and was repeatedly raped by a puritan judge who gave him the choice between execution and being his sex object. Further, following the election of June 2009 in Iran, many women were raped in Iranian detention centres. I have served at least 10 women who have endured this ghoulish crime – among them, two teenage girls.

It is a good sign that rape is recognized as both a war crime and crime against humanity under Articles 7

ery of the survivors. A client of mine told me, “I was a dignified woman. I was not a street girl. They took my dignity away.” I repeatedly assured her that undignified are those who perpetrated such heinous crimes against her, and over time, I watched her strength as she reclaimed her own dignity.

It is important for all of us to work against rape and other gender-related forms of torture on an ongoing basis. We must harness all our resources to provide holistic support to the survivors, and speak loudly against systemic tactics that seek to attain control over women while advancing oppression against them.

**The Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture aids survivors in overcoming the lasting effects of torture and war.**



# THE FUTURE OF COLOMBIAN REFUGEES IN CANADA

BY FRANCISCO RICO-MARTINEZ



Last November, I participated in a delegation to investigate the situation of Colombian refugees, and in particular to answer the question: do they still need Canada's protection?

For many years, Colombians have been among one of the top nationalities seeking refuge in Canada, both as refugee claimants and as resettled refugees. There is no surprise here – we should expect to see many refugees here from a country in our own region that has been suffering through years of vicious civil conflict and massive human rights violations, and whose citizens have been forcibly displaced in numbers that exceed all but a few other countries in the globe.

Recently, however, the acceptance rate for Colombian refugee claimants in Canada has dropped dramatically: from 76% in 2009 right down to 52% in 2010. And Canada has been resettling much fewer Colombian refugees. In 2008, the government planned to resettle 1,960 refugees through the Bogota visa office, which would be almost all Colombians. The Bogota target was reduced to 1,350 in 2009, and 700 in 2010.

The Canadian Council for Refugees heard from government sources, and read in decisions on refugee claimants by the Immigration and Refugee Board, that these declining numbers are to be understood to reflect a reduced need for international protection, based on the following alleged developments:

1. The FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) are no longer able to communicate nationally and have been defeated to the point that they have limited or no power to harm civilians other than locally.
2. The paramilitary has been demobilized and has largely disappeared as an armed actor.
3. Increases in the budget and numbers of the various security forces, including the army, police and state security, have resulted in increased state protection for civilians in Colombia.
4. Under these new conditions, Colombians under threat can improve their safety by moving from one place to another within Colombia, and in particular by moving to the capital city, Bogota.

Through a series of interviews with various institutional and individual experts in Colombia, the delegation tested these hypotheses.

The predominant response from those interviewed was dismay and rejection. We heard that while Colombia is now indeed safer for some, for others the danger remains. The FARC and the paramilitary have certainly changed significantly, but they retain the ability to persecute their enemies throughout the country – in fact in some circumstances working in collaboration with each other (as well as with purely criminal elements).

The various security forces (army, police and state security) commit human rights abuses, notably the “false positives”, whereby civilians are killed out of combat by army members and then presented as killed in com-

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bat. Colombian indigenous people have been frequent victims of the “false positives”, which can be attributed to the pressure on the armed forces to produce “results”.

People who are threatened in one region may not be safe, even in Bogota, because of the growth in informant networks and surveillance. As visitors to Bogota, we witnessed ourselves how there are fingerprints and scans and identity checks at every institution – and it seems that the information that is collected may easily be passed on to informant networks. Displaced persons, or Colombians forced back to Colombia from Canada, would necessarily expose their identity and thus their location (unless they were rich enough not to need to turn to any institution for help).

Disturbingly, the delegation also found that an “expert” whose opinion has been relied on in many negative Immigration and Refugee Board decisions does not have – or even claim to have – current knowledge of the matter on which he is cited. Other people to whom the delegation spoke, who do have the relevant up-to-date knowledge, took the opposite opinion. This raises the question whether Colombian claimants are being denied Canada’s protection based on faulty information.

## **THE FIRST DOOR: THE IMPORTANCE OF TRANSITION-HOUSING FOR REFUGEE CLAIMANTS; THE SITUATION IN MONTREAL**

*BY BEN FINKELBERG, NICOLE OLIVER AND SYLVAIN THIBAUT*

These days at Project Refuge - Maison Haidar, hearing Spanish is rare. French, Farsi, Kinyarwanda, Arabic, Fulani, and some English typically resonate through this transitional residence for refugee claimants – a place many call their first home in Canada.

Having fewer Spanish speaking residents at Project Refuge – Maison Haidar perhaps is not so surprising given the amendments made to the immigration act in July 2009. At that time, Immigration Minister Jason Kenney and the federal Conservatives imposed visa restrictions on Mexicans and Czechs wanting to come to Canada. For the past few years, these had been two of the countries from which the highest numbers of refugee claimants in Canada originated. The government also amended the Safe Third Country Agreement such that individuals who attempted to claim refugee status in Canada after passing through the U.S., regardless of whether they were from one of the moratorium countries, would be turned back at the border. Following both of these measures, the overall number of claimants dropped dramatically.

With all of that said, it is important to place these changes in refugee flows and immigration policy into

Visits to Panama and Ecuador also highlighted the vulnerability of the many Colombian refugees in those countries. We recommend that Canada increase resettlement of Colombians from both those countries.

We also recommend that Canada do more to resettle people at risk directly from Colombia, through the Source Country Program. Unfortunately, rather than choosing to reinforce this Program, which makes Canada one of the few countries in the world with a capacity to resettle people directly from the country where they are at risk, the government has just announced its intention of eliminating the Source Country Program altogether.

If Colombians continue to need protection, why the declining numbers? We can’t say for sure, but certainly many of those we interviewed felt that propaganda is an important tool for the Colombian government, and that it is winning the publicity battle. And there is the Canada-Colombia Free Trade Agreement, which requires an annual human rights report on Colombia. Is the desire for a positive review making the Canadian government more receptive to the Colombian government’s account of the human rights situation, and less receptive towards Colombian refugees?

context. Beginning in August of 2007, there was a dramatic increase in the number of claimants arriving in Canada, many (but not all) coming from Haiti and Mexico via the U.S. at a time of intense crackdown and deportation of non-status migrants there. On the municipal level here in Montreal, this influx necessitated an increase in transitional housing to accommodate all of these newcomers. This spike in numbers just added to the already pressing need for such housing among individuals, many of whom arrived with no money, no family or friends, and overall no resources to assist them.

Although the need for transitional housing remains today, the effects of the 2009 changes in immigration policy are still being felt here in Quebec, where PRAIDA, Quebec’s health and social service provider for refugee claimants, has recently decided to streamline their transitional housing referrals towards a single organization. This decision is most unfortunate as it does not, in our opinion, take into account the particular needs evidenced by refugee claimants upon their arrival in Canada.

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Refugee claimants face additional obstacles in their journey to resettlement compared to other immigrant groups given the circumstances surrounding one's involuntary migration. They often arrive with limited financial resources, few local friends or relatives, and a precarious status viewed as a "status in waiting" where their futures are dependent on the outcome of the refugee determination process. One of the strongest impediments to resettlement and socio-economic integration among asylum seekers is the prolonged periods experienced while awaiting determination of eligibility, for work permits (9 weeks on average), convention status (18.5 months average), and for permanent residence. Other barriers commonly experienced are lack of skill in Canada's official languages, problems in foreign credential recognition, difficulty finding employment, and last but certainly not least - discrimination.

In addition to the systemic socio-economic barriers that asylum seekers face, requirements such as the payment of rent in advance, deposits, employment status, locating a co-signer, and having a Canadian credit history all tend to present further impediments to obtaining adequate housing. One's precarious immigration status often makes landlords suspicious, thus creating a credibility problem for potential tenants.

These delays and barriers experienced in the early months of resettlement extend periods of unemployment or underemployment, and have great impact on claimants' housing prospects. Many studies reveal that asylum seekers often fall into the category of "at-risk or vulnerable tenants", meaning that these individuals are spending a minimum of 30% and more (often upwards of 50%) of their household income on rent. Often individuals in these circumstances shoulder a tremendous income-cost burden. Household incomes well-below average wind up paying above average rents. Consequently, most refugees need some form of assistance in accessing good-quality and affordable housing that provides adequate time necessary for transition.

In Montreal, however, the situation is such that the foundation of transitional community housing now stands on shaky ground. In the past, there were a few options in terms of transitional housing for refugee claimants. Refuge Juan Moreno (temporary shelter for 'vulnerable' female asylum seekers, their children, and female unac-



Picture published in the MCM Annual Report 2009

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companied minors), Project Refuge (collection of 3 temporary shelters for 'vulnerable' male asylum seekers and male unaccompanied minors), and the YMCA Tupper (temporary shelter for refugee claimants who are not identified as 'vulnerable' and thus are not seen to be in need of specialized, individual support). Most of those who ended up living in one of the three housing projects were initially referred by PRAIDA, which funded their stay using federal funds earmarked for refugees.

In August and September of 2009, Project Refuge was obliged to close two of its three residences due to the dramatic decrease in claimants following the aforementioned implementation of visa restrictions by the federal government. Almost overnight, the number of residents plummeted and where beds once remained unoccupied for a day at most, soon there were more empty beds than residents in each home. In December 2010, Refuge Juan Moreno closed due to an immense decrease in the number of female claimants. Also this past winter, Project Refuge - Maison Haidar, our refugee housing program, was notified that PRAIDA would be terminating its per diem contract in 2011. These moves threaten to bring the number of transitional housing projects for refugee claimants from three down to one, the last one standing being the YMCA Tupper, with its 500 bed setting. This last organization offers valuable services to refugee claimants,

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but cannot offer a small family-like setting that is found in a community resource. In our opinion, it is currently very difficult for them to provide the level of personalized services needed by the many vulnerable individuals who are seeking asylum.

Why are specialized and personalized services so important for refugee claimants? In order to answer this question, we can draw on the testimonies of current and former residents of Project Refuge – Maison Haidar who, upon hearing of its loss of funding, poured their hearts out onto paper in support of our continued existence. One individual wrote of the difficulty of arriving in Montreal and feeling lost, and how ‘Project Refuge welcomed me like a brother...showed me how to cook, how to look after a home, which I did not know how to do....Psychologically, it helped me a lot because it was small, without many people and with a very nice family-like atmosphere. It was exactly what I needed’. An unaccompanied minor wrote of the difficulty of his first days in Canada, ‘given the shocking and painful experiences I lived through in my country of origin....Meanwhile, I benefited from the moral support from those who I found [at Project Refuge]....This support greatly contributed to the calming of the stress and bitterness which dominated me.’ Another former resident maintained the importance of this personalized approach for claimants ‘who have left our families, our jobs, our friends, our roots. It’s very painful to leave one’s country...immigration is always violent’.

Access to transitional housing in a family-like setting is particularly important at the initial stages of settlement. Providing asylum seekers with much needed referral services, tenants’ rights education, and the opportunity to find a neighborhood in which to live as well as suitable housing options, all increase the potential for successful resettlement and accelerates the integration process. Additionally, having experienced staff who can offer guidance in how to navigate the complex immigration system is of particular value.

It is commonly recognized that access to adequate, suitable, and affordable shelter is an essential step for integration and arguably a fundamental human right that should transcend politically defined borders. For many claimants, obtaining adequate housing is important to establishing a strong foundation in a new environment. It can help to provide a sense of being grounded or rooted amidst the turbulent upheaval of fleeing one’s country of origin and seeking asylum. Project Refuge –

Maison Haidar is the first door, always open to new arrivals and former residents alike. It is a home where it all begins afresh, a space for newcomers to get their bearings, orient themselves in these unfamiliar surroundings, practice their newly acquired language skills without judgment, foster formal and informal support networks, and make links to the wider Montreal community. It is our hope that this door will continue to remain open.

1. Citizenship and Immigration Canada site that in 2009 those originating from Mexico make up the highest number of asylum seekers at 22.9%, the next group are those from Hungary at 7.7%, followed by Colombia at 7.4%, and then the Czech Republic at 6.3%.

2. The Canada – U.S. Safe Third Country Agreement came into effect in September 2004. Under this agreement, refugee claimants are required to request asylum in the first ‘safe’ country they arrive in, unless they qualify for an exemption. Thus, individuals who arrive in the U.S. and migrate north, attempting to claim refugee status at a Canadian land border crossing, are turned back since the U.S. is viewed by Canada as a safe country in which to seek asylum. By the same token, those who arrive in Canada first are not permitted to seek asylum in the U.S.

3. Canada has a list of countries for which there is a moratorium on deportations. The Safe Third Country Agreement originally allowed individuals who had come through the U.S. to remain in Canada and claim refugee status if they originated from one of those countries. However, in July 2009, this exemption was repealed, and many refugee claimants who had previously been allowed to seek asylum in Canada began to be turned back at the border.

4. Additionally, it is important to understand that the U.S. is not a safe haven for all claimants. For instance, those making claims based on sexual orientation do not fall under American refugee protection laws.

5. Programme d’accueil et d’intégration des demandeurs d’asile

6. The practice of requiring tenants to pay part of their rent in advance is not legal in Quebec. However, it is often used by landlords when renting to newcomers.

7. See Rose, D. (2009 & 2001), Murdie, R. (2008)., The Canadian Mortgage and Housing Corporation (2006).

8. PRAIDA had previously guaranteed a minimum per diem subsidy to Project Refuge – Maison Haidar, meaning that each month, the residence would be guaranteed a minimum amount of money per day, per bed, for a total of 6 beds. This represents 30% of the occupancy rate.

**Ben Finkelberg, Community Worker, Nicole Oliver, McGill Social Work Student Intern & Sylvain Thibault, Coordinator, Project Refuge – Maison Haidar**

# PATHWAYS TO GENDER JUSTICE HANDBOOK: A PRACTICAL TOOL FOR WORKING WITH NEWCOMERS

BY MEISSOON AZZARIA

How does gender affect newcomers' experience of migration and settlement? What does gender mean? Are only women affected by gender issues? If you work or volunteer in an organization serving newcomers, you may want to deepen your understanding of gender and how it affects the experience of newcomers, in order to better adapt your services to the different realities of immigrant and refugee women and men.

The Canadian Council for Refugee launched a new tool, the Pathways to Gender Justice Handbook that aims at enhancing the capacity of organizations to use a gender-based approach in their work with newcomers. The Handbook is a practical guide that can be used in different areas of an organization, such as governance, management and direct services.

Significant attention has been paid to gender in recent decades, but there is still a need within the immigrant and refugee serving sector to better understand gender issues and to effectively apply a gender-based analysis within the service delivery framework. A gender-based approach ensures that policies and services are designed, analyzed, implemented and monitored, with an appreciation for gender differences.

Gender roles often change after a person or family arrives in Canada and these changes affect relationships between women and men, as well as girls and boys. Changes in gender roles can empower some family members, with various possible repercussions for family relationships. Looking at the process of migration and settlement with a "gender lens" may help improve programs, services and policies. However, in order to succeed, a gender-based approach to settlement work

needs to involve everyone, including men. The Handbook was developed with an understanding that different forms of oppression intersect and create different experiences of the migration and settlement process. Power in relationships also plays a special role in shaping newcomer experiences. For example, when a service user enters a settlement agency for the first time, the following factors should be considered by staff, as

they affect the settlement process: family dynamics, domestic violence, mental health before/after migration, race, status in Canada, surviving rape, torture and crimes against humanity, among others.

The Handbook is a flexible tool that offers a variety of entry points and encourages organizations to make the process their own. It includes a suggestion of self-evaluation, action plans, references and examples, and can be adapted to different sizes and types of organizations across Canada. The Handbook's approach is to use open questions that can help organiza-

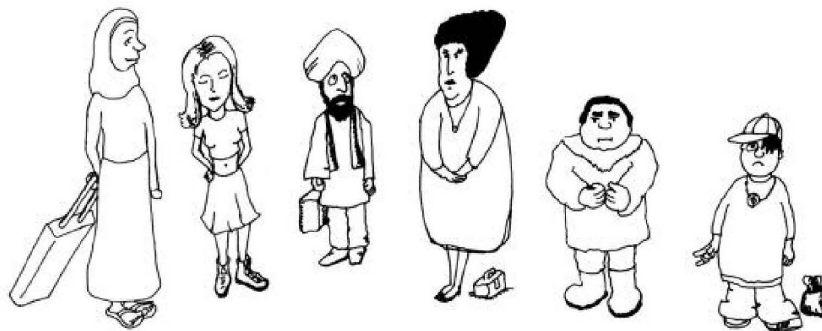
tions find their own pathway to gender justice. The project was overseen by an active Advisory Committee, who contributed their time, energy, experience and creativity. Members of the Advisory Committee are people active in the immigrant and refugee serving sector – most of them have immigrant or refugee background. To make sure it is as concrete as possible, the Handbook was also piloted by 7 organizations across Canada. The pilot was done with the input and participation of refugee and immigrant women clients of the organizations.

The Handbook is available at:

<http://www.ccrweb.ca/Genderhandbook.pdf>

## PATHWAYS TO GENDER JUSTICE HANDBOOK

APPLYING A GENDER LENS  
IN WORKING WITH NEWCOMERS





# I AM JUST THE INTERPRETER...

MARIAM MOUSSAVIAN

No matter how many times I push the off button, the ringing won't stop.

I open one eye, trying to intimidate the stubborn alarm clock. It quickly proves itself innocent and gives me the time: 38 minutes past midnight.

I rush to the phone...

My father in the hospital, my mother and her fragile health, my two sons still in good health, they all cross my mind as I grasp the receiver.

- Hello...?

- Oh! I'm sorry to wake you ... Is that Mariam Mo..?

I spare her the arduous task of pronouncing my last name.

- Yes, speaking -

- This is officer... I'm calling from ... Airport in ...

I tell her that I am actually an early sleeper, but quickly assure her that I am now completely awake and ready to interpret. She thanks me in her jovial voice and says that she will call me back in 5 minutes, once she brings in the refugee claimant who has just arrived at the airport.

I prepare my notepad and my glass of water. I sit in front of my computer. My browser is on the calendar converter site, in case this newly arrived refugee claimant comes from there. From home. Our beloved Iran, now a snake den; the hub of a reptilian regime that has once again started an episode of venomously targeting the people, particularly women and youth, after being rejected in the contentious presidential election, not long ago.

Following the officer's instructions, I introduce myself and hear the young voice of an exhausted man responding to my "Salaam" on the other end. He confirms that he does indeed hear and understand me, which then prompts the officer to begin her line of questioning.

- First name, last name, date of birth, place of birth...

*His first name, like that of so many others, embodies the mythical history of Iran.*

*His last name, a village in the south and a grove of pomegranate trees -*

*Even before converting his date of birth to the language of Western time, I know that he is three years younger than my younger son and that he was born in spring.*



- In Shiraz...

*Shiraz must have been covered with roses then, its traditional distilleries filling the air with the unmistakable perfume of orange flowers.*

The head of the professional, experienced and impartial interpreter that I am does its job conscientiously.

*Her heart though, is impregnated with the majesty of cypress trees that adorn this garden of Eden where Sa'adi and Hafez, the everlasting guarantors of the spiritual dignity of my people, lay resting.*

*Shiraz, the city of poetry and wine.*

- Last address?

- University of Tehran students' residence.

*The University of Tehran. Its tree-bordered walkways and its Faculty of Literature; the armed guards stationed at the gates to control us, the students, under the Shah's regime.*

*The University of Tehran, home to so many democratic outbursts repressed in blood, targeted by the military yolk of the Shah's military dictatorship. Then, nearly synchronous with the beat of revolutionary songs, it became home to the aspirations of a whole nation that brought to life the 1979 Iranian Revolution. A revolution for democracy that became a springboard for despotic theocracy.*

*But twenty years later, in 1999, the University of Tehran unraveled into the birthplace of a re-awakening, this one borne by children of the 1979 Revolution, who refused to confine themselves to the bitterness of an*

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*acknowledgment of failure. These children would rise against a power that had come to devolve into the mirror image of its own once enemy, the military uniform herein replaced by the turban, and the old tools of repression evolved into an even more sophisticated system of terror.*

*This power would become one to devour its own children with unprecedented cruelty; much like it has probably done to this youth, Tehran University student, who has now come to request Canada's protection.*

- Parents' names, dates of birth, addresses...

My hand does the conversions. My head translates English into Persian and vice versa.

*I do my job... but my heart turns to that house in Shiraz, in that alley, beside the bakery. It enters that house, where the place of this child has remained empty.*

The officer briefly steps out, and we are left there, the two of us alone.

- Excuse me, madam?

- Yes?

*And I want to say: "Tell me what I can do for you. I am too far away, but maybe I can ask my Shirazi friends who live there to go find you, and maybe that sweet round Shirazi accent that stretches so graciously will do the rest."*

But I explain to him that he can only talk to me when the officer is present, with all the professional gentleness I can find in myself; and I apologize.

- Yes, I understand. I just want to ask permission to call my mother in Iran, just to tell her that I'm here. That I'm alive...

*In what state would I be if my child were somewhere in the world, faraway, at the mercy of smugglers and other unknown people who could do with him whatever they want? If only I could tell the officer how vital this phone call is.*

- Ask the officer and I will be happy to interpret your question.

- Okay.

The officer is back and calls me to order, repeating what I just explained to the claimant. And I interpret, like a machine, as a lanky, yellowish lawyer had once said, to define my role.

- Yes, I understand, but my mother -

- Your mother what? What does your mother have to do with this?

And I can just interpret.

*His mother is out of her mind with anguish, in that house on that alley, beside the bakery. It is now past one in the afternoon there. They may have had lunch already, but how can she eat if she doesn't even know whether her child is alive? What might she have gone through while her child...*

- Yes, okay. After we finish this, you can call your family.

- It's just my mother -

- Yes, your mother.

*His mother, Zahra. "Khanom Zahra\*, na khasteh!\*\* You needed courage to give birth to this child, but it's true that all the pain is forgotten once you see and hear the result. You have loved him so dearly; every day of his life, every moment. You have adored every centimeter of his stature and you have even forgotten his adolescent anger. You have prided yourself on his admission to the prestigious University of Tehran.*

*Then came the last presidential election campaign. Thanks to your tremendously courageous hearts, voices and peaceful walks at home, we all became so united, Iranians everywhere, young and less young, with the green ribbons adorning our heads, arms, wrists and necks; that green wave of hope for democracy that blew from Iran and expanded to the world. We were alive, once again, energized after so many years. We too embraced that hope, here in Canada; but our children were free to walk beside us, safe from those barbarians conspiring to shed their precious blood in the most abominable ways.*

*We owe so much to you, sublime Iranian mothers.*

*Be patient Khanom Zahra, a few more minutes and you will hear his voice that will resurrect you and rescue you from darkness.*

*Patience, perseverance, heroism of the Iranian mother.*

*I see the beautiful face of my friend I have not seen in over 26 years. The other day, she was telling me on the phone that she finally succeeded in seeing her imprisoned son. He was being held in the notorious ward 209 of the horrendous Evin prison, reserved for political prisoners. She saw him after more than a month of incarceration without charges. She told me that, during the visit, she had reprimanded another mother who was crying. "We have a duty to boost our children's courage," she had told her.*

*Continued on page 11*



**Kahrizak detention center in southern Tehran**

- Why are you afraid of returning to Iran?

- I was in Kahrizak...

I spell K-A-H-R-I-Z-A-K. *And I feel something collapsing within; my heart skipping a beat.*

- Did you understand the question? I was not asking you where you were. I was asking you why you are afraid of returning to Iran. Please listen carefully to the question and answer it.

- I... I was in Kahrizak.

I hear him choking back sobs.

- You continue repeating this. What is Ka-ri-zak? Or rather, where is Ka-ri-zak?

- [Addressing the interpreter] Madam, you know about Kahrizak, don't you?

- But I am asking YOU the question. What is – where is – Ka-ri-zak?

*What I would have given to convert myself to a Google page that is not bound by my limitations as an interpreter; where there are tens of thousands of entries related to this word, the mere pronunciation of which puts me in a cold sweat. The same friend I had spoken with earlier was saying: "We have gotten to the point of feeling relieved about our kids being held in Evin. Compared to what these butchers do in Kahrizak, Evin is a hotel."*

*Kahrizak. This child was there, in Kahrizak. I want to hold him in my arms and cradle him. I want to call his mother at home and tell her that he has arrived to safety, that I had the privilege of hearing his voice; his sobs that break my heart.*

But I am not there. I am here, thousands of kilometers away, and I do my job.

- What can I say... Kahrizak...

*My heart screams: Kahrizak is the denial of human dignity!*

But my head continues doing its job, and I wholeheartedly hope for the light to turn on in the officer's head, so that this knife stops tearing into the open wound that is still bleeding.

Bits of sentences painfully articulated; a heavy sadness, an exhaustion that makes me fear the worst, and an anger that chokes to allow an exasperated breath.

And I am doing my job. I am nobody. I am nothing but the interpreter.

Nothing but the voice of everyone else; facilitating the flow of communication.

Everything that I have learned, everything that I have done, according to the interpreters' professional Code of Ethics, for so many years.

*This kid – his violated youth, his early sorrowful maturity – he is struggling painfully*

*to provide the answers required by the seemingly young officer who, in her ingenuous ignorance, is trying to understand why. Why this is so painful.*

*Kahrizak, near Tehran, is the most notorious of all the cursed locations in which the Islamic Republic has broken its own record of barbarity, pushing its limits a little more every day.*

- So, Karizak is a detention centre. I see. You were detained there and presumably tortured. I don't need the details. You will provide the details later.

*What a relief. What a respite.*

*But not so fast.*

- Is there any other reason for you to fear returning to Iran?

- [Addressing the interpreter] Excuse me, madam Mariam, but I... I am gay.

- You are gay. Is this a bad thing in Iran?

*Am I hearing this right? Does this young officer have the slightest idea what the Islamic Republic of Iran is?*

- Did you understand the question?

- Yes...

- And your answer...?

- It's... What can I say? It's bad. It's very, very bad. Excuse me, madam Mariam.

- Why are you apologizing to the interpreter? You should instead be answering my question.

*He is apologizing to me because he is ashamed of me; a woman from his country who should, like the major-*

*Continued on page 12*



*Continued from page 11*

*ity of his compatriots, think that homosexuality is a deviation and an abominable sexual game, prohibited by the religious code of good behaviour and the code of honour. How can he imagine that the honour of interpreting for queer refugee claimants, and above all, the suffering of my own son – born homosexual as all others – allowed me to educate myself; to feel even more proud of my gay son, gifted with two spirits, according to the wisdom of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada. To become the strong, compassionate, intelligent, and empathic social worker he is, he needed his two spirits.*

*As to the attitude of the Islamic Republic on homosexuality, it is one of horror and abomination. With or without the Code of Ethics, I now have to do something.*

- If the interpreter may -
- Yes madam interpreter, can you help us with this?
- I will try. In Iran, homosexuals are executed.
- Oh! Okay, I see.
- And they knew it, in Kahrizak. I don't know how...

*Oh mon deux, as my Quebecer friend says, Oh mon deux. I don't even dare think about what they may have done to you. I hold my breath.*

- Ok, I don't need to know more on that. The interview is done, and now we will...

*Thank you. I can breathe.*

*I would like to thank the officer who, I believe, matured during this interview and will see her future interviews with refugee claimants in a different light.*

*What is left of you, child of my homeland? Child of that mother who is counting the seconds to find out*

*whether you are alive, to hear your voice with as much urgency as the air that she breathes?*

*I say goodbye to you using convenient words as prescribed. But this formality has not prevented me from doing my job carrying you in my heart, all along the interview. Take care of yourself and see the past through the courage that brought you so far; see the future through the dreams you will nurture in freedom. I hope you will find a real, competent and compassionate lawyer like the one I have the privilege of working with, to guide you through the refugee process. I hope the Immigration and Refugee Board Member will have the competence, the integrity, and the strength of spirit to see the merits of your claim before anything else. I hope that, in the end, you will be welcomed on this land whose rightful children were colonized with cruelty, but whose occupants also produced the Charter of Rights and Freedoms; the Charter that one day will bring full justice to the bruised children and will stay, while the dubious politicians will go. This is the Canada that welcomes you tonight; the Canada that motivates me to fight for values that have made its reputation in the world and the Canada that will emerge out of darkness. And you will contribute to it, I am sure, like many others who did it before you. I already hear your mother who is bathing and blessing your innocence with her tears of joy.*

December 2010

\*Khanom: Madam, used more commonly after the first name, but in Shirazi dialect, it is used before the first name.

\*\* Na khasteh: Well done! in Shirazi dialect. Literally: "I hope you are not tired"

**(after a tiring task)**

## REFUGEE UPDATE

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