

REFUGEE UPDATE

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WILL THE NEW REFUGEE RULES LEAD TO MORE SANCTUARY CASES?

BY RICK GOLDMAN

In October 2009, Abdelkader Belaoui, a visually-impaired Algerian refugee claimant, was finally able to step outside of St. Gabriel's church after nearly four years of being confined in sanctuary. This was the last in a string of at least seven Montreal-area sanctuary cases spanning a period of seven years.

The small Montreal-area sanctuary support movement was encouraged by some impressive (and quick) victories of its early days. An Algerian family's brief stay in sanctuary at Union United Church led to a regularization program for refused Algerian claimants facing deportation due to the lifting of the moratorium on removals to that country. In Québec, the program operated as a joint effort between the federal and provincial immigration departments. More than 90% of applicants were accepted.

When the moratoriums on removals to Rwanda, Burundi and Liberia were lifted in 2009, special measures modeled on the Algerian program were announced as well (this time, without the need for collective hysteria, heated protests and occupation of the minister's office). The acceptance rate has been over 90% for this program as well.

In another early victory, a Zimbabwean woman and her young son also took sanctuary in Union United Church. Within just days, the moratorium on removals to Zimbabwe was announced. It remains in place to this date.

However, these rapid and exciting victories were followed by a wave of several cases which each dragged on for a year or more. The claimants in question were all eventually accepted for permanent residence in Canada following negotiations with the governments of the day, but the cases took an enormous emotional, physical (and sometimes financial) toll on them and the congregations and communities providing support. Then Abdelkader's

case broke the record for duration of a sanctuary case in Québec.

The effect was a chilling of Quebec congregations' willingness to offer sanctuary. (A decision on sanctuary is always made at the level of the individual congregation.)

However, Bill C-31 -- the refugee reform being gradually implemented as we go to press -- may push many into seeking sanctuary or choosing to live underground.

This is because, as explained in the last issue of Refugee Update, although Canada will finally have (after decades of struggle) a Refugee Appeal Division, ironically, many people will have no effective recourse at all following a negative refugee decision.

Indeed, due to the interplay of a number of nasty provisions, notably the exclusion of many claimants from access to the appeal and to a stay of removal if they apply for judicial review, a 12 month bar on humanitarian applications for most claimants and a similar bar on access to a Pre-Removal Risk Assessment, it will now be possible for the government to remove many claimants within days of their negative refugee decisions, with no effective way for the refused claimants to contest or have their cases reviewed.

Desperate times may lead to desperate measures including, perhaps, an increased willingness of churches in Quebec, and elsewhere, to again open their doors (and basements) to sanctuary.

Rick Goldman is Coordinator of the Montreal-based Committee to Aid Refugees and a member of the CCR Executive.

THE SANCTUARY OPTION

BY MICHAEL CREAL

The tradition of sanctuary has a long history going back in the western world to ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome. And in the Hebrew Bible, Moses is instructed to set aside cities of refuge for people who have killed with no intent to kill to save them from blood revenge in their own localities. This was several hundred years before the common era and while there is no record of how it worked in practice, the prescription in itself is significant.

In medieval times there was the canon law of the church in parallel with civil law which made provision for a range of fugitives – including political fugitives and those convicted of offenses on dubious grounds –to take sanctuary in a church. This was also part of English Common Law up until the early seventeenth century when the legal basis for the practice ended in England as the modern nation state system began to take shape. It ended in France with the French Revolution.

So sanctuary today has no status in British or Canadian courts but the practice of giving protection to those seeking escape from various forms of oppression did continue. A Canadian example would be the Underground Railroad during the time of the American Civil War.

The tradition of sanctuary was re-invoked in the American southwest in the 1980's. The full story is told in Hilary Cunningham's *God and Cesar at the Rio Grande*. Central American refugees from El Salvador and Guatemala, refused acceptance by U.S. immigration authorities, were given protection in a program begun at Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson, Arizona, a movement which spread quite widely. Chicago became a centre. The Governor of New Mexico endorsed it. In 1985 representatives from a very large number of Reformed Synagogues gave it their approval. There was a new underground railroad extending as far as Canada. The movement was ecumenical in scope.

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But U.S. government officials infiltrated the movement and eventually charged eleven persons with illegal “people smuggling,” including John Fife, the minister at Southside Presbyterian church. Eight were convicted, including Fife, but he predicted that these convictions would give new life to the movement. While that movement has now taken a different shape in the American southwest (and a new sanctuary movement has recently been born in the U.S.), it has also had an impact in Canada. One of its leaders, Jim Corbett gave a hearty blessing and strong encouragement to the Southern Ontario Sanctuary Coalition in the 1990’s when we were just getting underway.

Apart from its First Nations, Canada is a country of immigrants but for a long time its immigration policies were highly restrictive. A classic example was the rejection of a boat load of Jewish refugees seeking a safe haven from persecution under Hitler, the full account of which is given in Irving Abella and Harold Troper’s *None is Too Many*. But after World War II that picture changed. Many persons displaced in Europe came to Canada. Canada signed onto the Geneva Convention of 1951 which promised asylum for persons with “a well founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion or nationality or membership in a particular group or of a particular opinion.” There were the Hungarian refugees in 1956. A decade later Czechs arrived after Soviet tanks rolled into Prague in 1968. Asian refugees arrived from Uganda when Idi Amin came to power. Americans resisting the draft came during the Vietnam War and later, over 60,000 refugees from Vietnam arrived in the 1970’s. Those were glory days in Canada’s immigration/refugee history. There were those who objected but, by and large, Canada “welcomed the stranger.” And Canadian society was enormously enriched as a result.

By the 1980’s refugees were coming to Canada from many parts of the world and in 1985 the

But offering sanctuary is a last resort. Every legal channel of protection must be pursued first. Living in a church basement is not living in the Ritz Carlton.

Supreme Court of Canada made a landmark decision, the *Singh Decision*, which said, in effect, that anyone on Canadian soil (a refugee as well as a Canadian citizen) was entitled to protection under the Charter. What this meant was that refugee determination required “due process.” A judgement about whether or not a person was a legitimate refugee could not simply be made by an immigration official. Not long after, in the late 80’s, a quasi judicial body, the Immigration and Refugee Board was created to provide for due process. Overall, this new system worked pretty well. Originally, there were two members on each IRB panel and if one voted yes, the refugee claimant was granted status.

But what happened when mistakes were made? There might be faulty translation, poor legal representation, a misreading of country conditions or, a refugee could be so traumatized by her/his experience that she couldn’t give an account that seemed “credible.” What was at stake was life or death.

In various parts of the country through the 1990’s and into the second millennium, church congregations who faced refugees confronted with such a life-threatening dilemma felt compelled to take action, compelled to offer sanctuary when they believed a refugee had been wrongly rejected. The plan was to offer sanctuary until the case could be reviewed, perhaps by the Minister, perhaps on Humanitarian and Compassionate grounds, or perhaps through a new assessment of the risk the refugee(s) faced if forced to return to the country they had fled. Randy Lippert’s book *Sanctuary, Sovereignty and Sacrifice* provided a history of what he referred to as different “incidents” of sanctuary (the earliest being in the 1980’s) in Canada and he and

Sean Rehaag at Osgoode have since followed up with further published studies.

One group concerned with sanctuary, which has continued in existence since the early nineties is the Southern Ontario Sanctuary Coalition. This group, with which I've been associated since its beginnings, has sought to think through the ethical and religious basis of sanctuary. It has held consultations with those offering sanctuary in different parts of the country. It has sought to provide protection – through sanctuary – for numerous refugees (it began by providing protection for some twenty three cases) and it has fought, along with other refugee advocates, for a system that is fair and just because every single refugee claimant is a human being crying out for fair and just treatment.

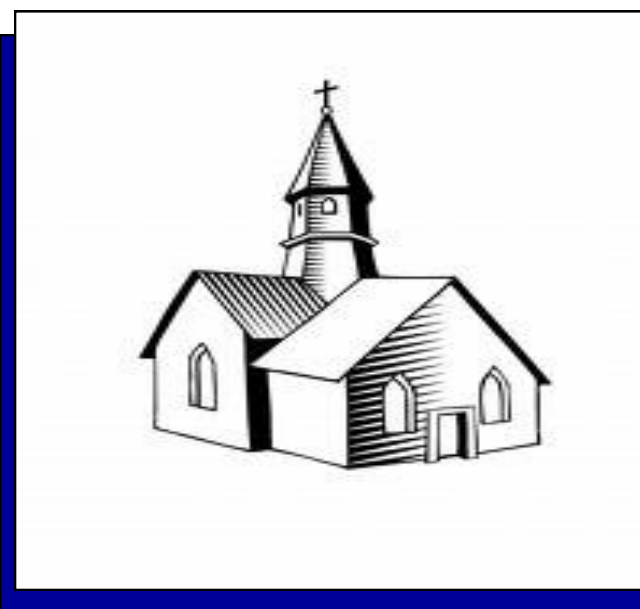
The sanctuary coalition has taken the position that where it seeks to provide sanctuary, it is taking a “civil initiative” to uphold Canada’s commitment to offer protection to those facing danger in their country of origin. This has become more urgent as Canada now appears to be closing its doors, making it more and more difficult for refugees to find a safe haven in Canada. But we believe every single case must be considered on its own particular merits in the best tradition of Canadian justice. One cannot in justice say that just because a particular person comes from a certain country, even a formal “democracy”, that person faces no risk of violent persecution or even, in certain cases, death, if the actual evidence points in that direction.

But offering sanctuary is a last resort. Every legal channel of protection must be pursued first. Living in a church basement is not living in the Ritz Carlton. Both the congregation and the refugee(s) have to confront, realistically, all that being in sanctuary entails. Sanctuary has no legal status. It involves physical and mental hardships for the refugees and enormous patience, sensitivity and commitment on the part

of the congregation. On the other hand, it is certainly the case that the process of offering sanctuary often introduces a new vitality into the life of a congregation - even if that congregation is technically breaching the law. The congregation is putting itself on the line, making an act of witness and justice, giving a fresh and powerful expression of its faith.

In the final analysis, if one is confronted with a person whose life is in peril, how can one, in conscience, say no? And this kind of situation will inevitably be more common as a result of the new legislation – Bill C-31 - that speeds up the refugee determination process in a way that will make an increased number of mistakes inevitable. And if no one intervenes, some of these “mistakes” will mean death for the refugee. It has already happened to more than one person sent back to “safety” in Mexico.

This is why sanctuary must be considered seriously by members of faith communities. It can save a human life as well as give a signal that sending refugees back to situations of risk is a fundamental betrayal of our humanity.



CLAIMING REFUGEE PROTECTION UNDER THE NEW SYSTEM: CATEGORIES AND TIMELINES

BY FCJ REFUGEE CENTRE

As part of the new process, the new refugee claimants will be divided into three categories, which will have different significance at different stages:

Designated Countries of Origin (DCO): The Minister of Citizenship and Immigration can designate countries of origin. The nationals of these countries have reduced rights in the refugee process. Countries can be designated on the basis of quantitative factors (a rejection rate of at least 75% or a withdrawn and abandoned rate of at least 60%), or on the basis of the Minister’s opinion that the country has an independent judiciary, democratic rights, etc.

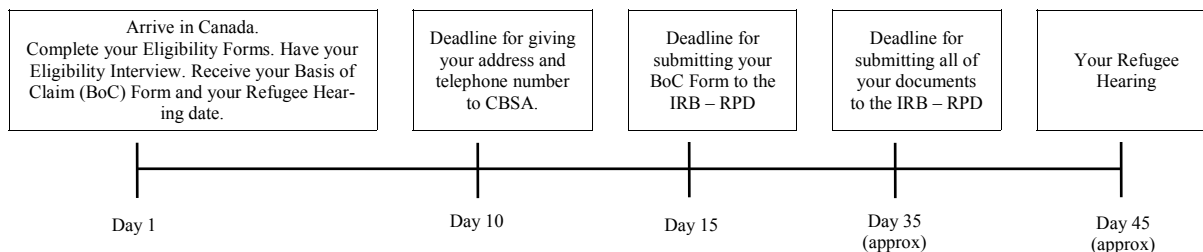
These countries have begun to be designated as of December 14th, 2012. As of the production of this document 35 countries have made the list – 25 countries are in the European Union (EU) as well as Croatia and the US. To see the updated list, please visit www.cic.gc.ca.

Designated Foreign Nationals: The Minister of Public Safety can designate groups of people as “irregular arrivals” in particular circumstances, including if the Minister considers that the group cannot be examined in a timely manner or suspects that the group might have been smuggled for profit. Individuals in the group are subject to many extreme measures, including mandatory detention (for all over 16 years of age) and a bar on applying for permanent residence for five years even if they are accepted as persons in need of protection by the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB). They also face a reduction of their rights and some differences in terms of the refugee claim process.

Regular Refugee Claimants: This category is for any claimant who is not from a Designated Country of Origin (DCO) according to Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), or who is not a Designated Foreign National according to the Minister of Public Safety.

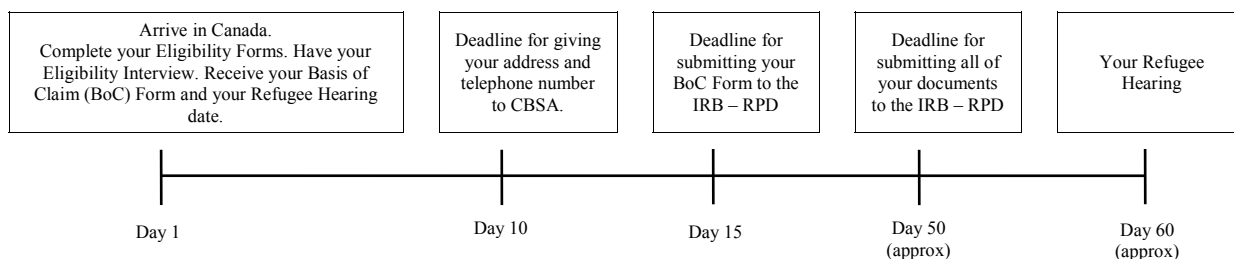
Timeline A (DCO)

I made my refugee claim at a port of entry (airport, seaport, or land border crossing)



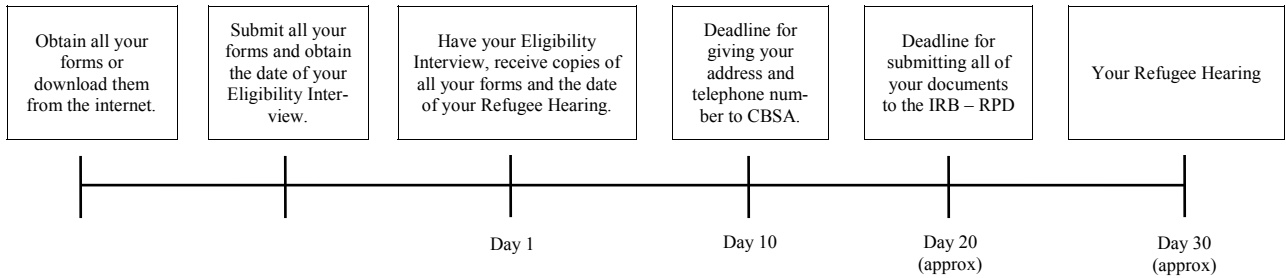
Timeline A (non - DCO)

I made my refugee claim at a port of entry (airport, seaport, or land border crossing)



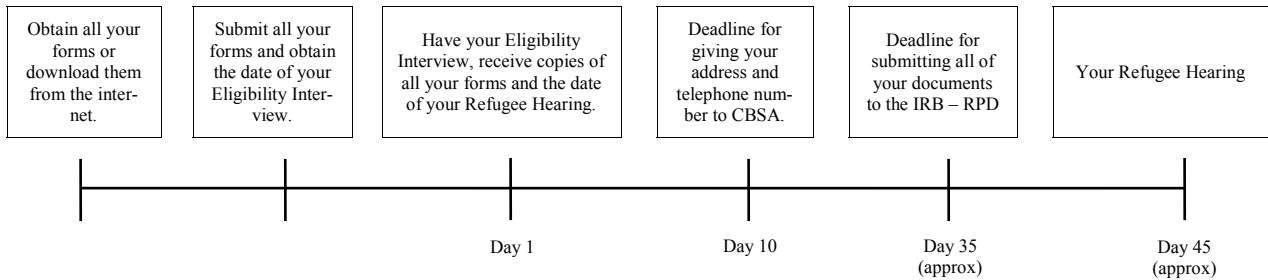
Timeline B (DCO)

I made (or will make) my refugee claim at an immigration office *inside* Canada.



Timeline B (non - DCO)

I made (or will make) my refugee claim at an immigration office *inside* Canada.



The timeline for your claim process will depend on where you make your claim and whether or not you are from a Designated Country of Origin (DCO).

You can make a claim for refugee protection by speaking to an immigration officer inside Canada (“Inland claim”) or at Port of Entry (“POE claim”).

You do NOT have to pay any kind of fee to make a refugee claim.

An ***Inland claim*** is a refugee claim made at a Citizenship and Immigration (CIC office).

Most major cities in Canada have a CIC office where you can make a claim. To find the nearest office you can call the CIC Call Centre at 1-888-242-2100, or email question@cic.gc.ca.

You may also get a list of CIC offices throughout

Canada by visiting: <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/information/offices/help.asp>

A ***POE claim*** is a claim made at Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) upon arrival at a land border crossing, airport or seaport.

Be aware that POE officers are NOT allowed to send you back if you make a refugee claim upon arrival.

If you came to Canada through the USA, you may need to consider the ***Safe Third Country Agreement*** between the U.S. and Canada and how this system works.

A common exception to this agreement is when someone has family residing in Canada, so it’s important to keep in mind that you must have close relatives in Canada if you would like to apply at a US/Canada land border.

Claims made in a Port Of Entry—POE- *(Persons who arrive at airport, land border or seaport)*

The Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA) officer determines eligibility (in some instances you may be asked to return the next day)

You must complete and sign the following forms:

Schedule 12,
Additional Information
Refugee Claimants Inside Canada Generic Application Form (IMM008)
Schedule A
Background Declaration Basis of Claim Form

These forms will be completed with the CBSA officer, who will ask you many questions to determine your eligibility. The CBSA officer is trying to determine if you qualify to have a refugee hearing with the Refugee Protection Division (RPD) at the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB). To determine if your claim is eligible or ineligible they will ask you what specifically you fear about returning to your country. Be sure to answer these questions as truthfully and completely as you can.

You will also be given a Basis of Claim (BoC) form, which is described in detail below. You must submit this form no later than 15 calendar days after the date the claim was sent to the RPD. This form must be submitted to the IRB. The IRB will send the copies of the BoC to CIC and CBSA. You may submit this form in person, by courier, or by email. Do not send the BoC by regular mail. If the BoC is not completed on time, the RPD will hold a special hearing no later than 5 working days after the due date. At this hearing you will have to explain why you did NOT provide the BoC on time, and why the RPD should continue with the claim. If you need more time to complete your BoC, you must apply for an extension at least 3 working days before the BoC is due. Extensions are granted only for reasons of procedural fairness.

The CBSA officer will keep your documents and give you copies of them. If you are found eligible, you will receive a folder of documents.

Inland Claims *(Persons who go to a CIC office once already in Canada)*

The Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) officer determines eligibility. You must obtain all of your forms or download them from the Internet. The forms include the Basis of Claim (BoC) form (explained in detail below), Refugee Intake Form, Generic Application Form and Background Declaration. Submit all of your forms and obtain the date for your Eligibility Interview.

The Eligibility Interview is not a decision about whether or not your claim is valid, but rather an interview with an immigration officer to determine if you qualify to have a refugee hearing with the Refugee Protection Division (RPD) at the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB). Therefore, during the eligibility interview your claim can be found eligible or ineligible. For this interview you should consider the following:

It is extremely important to go to the interview on the date and time set, because it will NOT BE RESCHEDULED if you miss it!

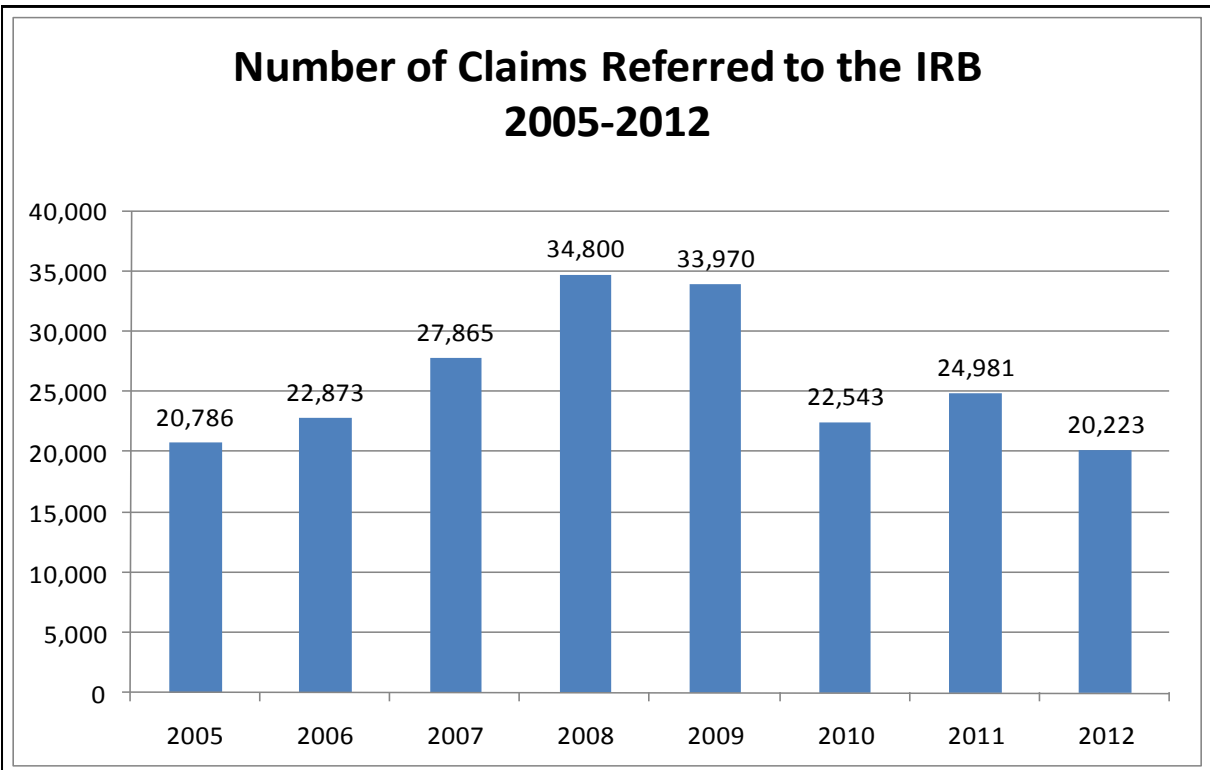
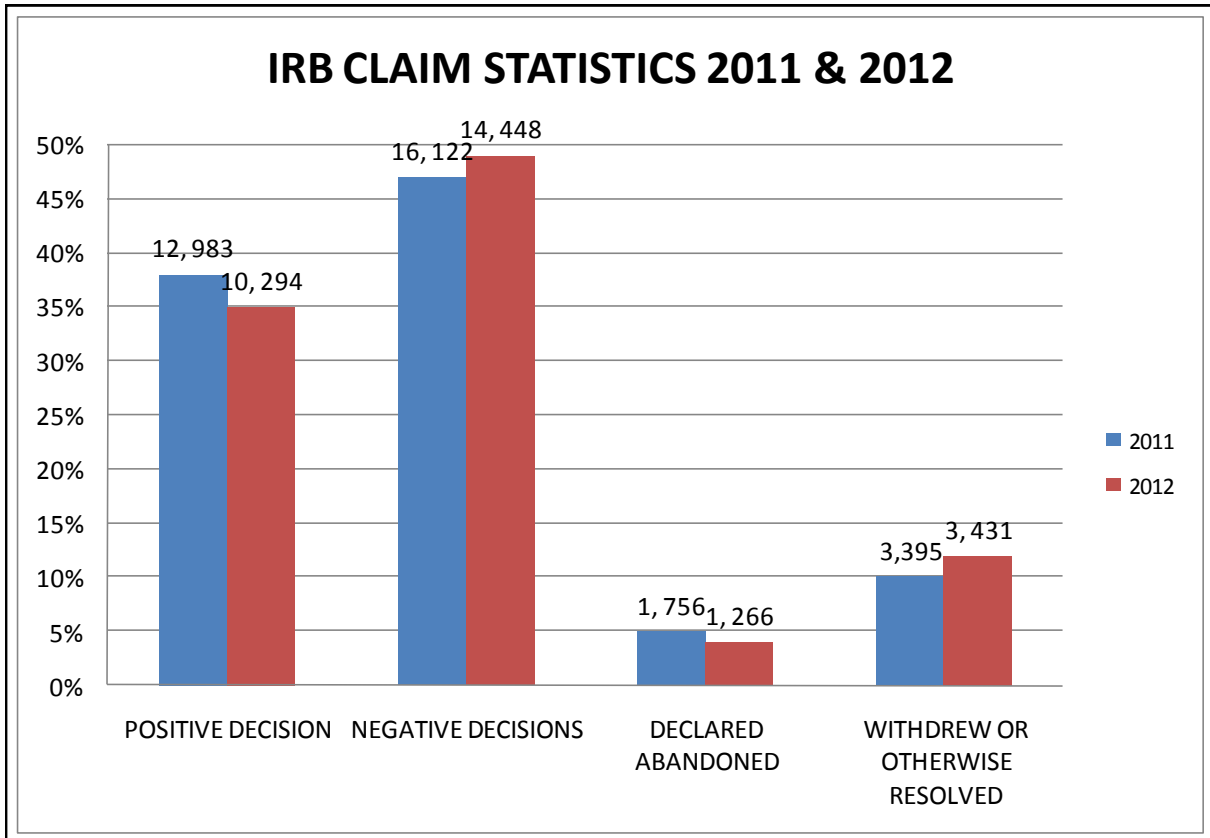
During the interview, the officer will ask questions similar to those on the forms you were given when you made your claim. They will ask you what specifically you fear about returning to your country. Be sure to answer these questions as truthfully and completely as you can.

Make sure to bring your passport or travel document to this meeting. The office will keep these documents and give you copies of them.

On the date of the interview you must provide all of the above completed forms, including the original BoC form, plus an additional copy. If the forms are incomplete you will be sent away and told to return later with the completed forms.

STATISTICS ON REFUGEE CLAIMS

BY IRB



A GIFT TO CANADA

SUDA RAJASINGAM IN CONVERSATION WITH JACINTA GOVEAS

The fight for an independent Tamil state in Sri Lanka, took a nasty turn with the July 1983 pogrom against the Tamils. Sudha lived in Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka. Her husband was working out of the country; she lived with her mother and her younger sister and another young girl. She was expecting twins in four weeks.

All four women were in the house when they started to hear a mob moving down the road, towards their house. Through the window curtains, they could see it was an all male group, with many Buddhist monks in their robes. The mob started banging on their gate, demanding entrance and insisting that the women come out. When their shouts were met with silence, the mob started to move to the back of the house. The women used the opportunity to get out of the house through the front door. They started walking towards a police station which was about a 100 meters up the road.

Later they found out that all over the capital, electoral lists were used to identify Tamil households. They were taken to one of the schools which had been set up as a camp for displaced people.

They remained there until Sudha gave birth to her twins. From there they tried to live in other parts of Sri Lanka but that did not work out. They went to Chennai, South India, where they lived for approximately one year. From there they moved to England, where Sudha's sister lived.

Sudha arrived on a Friday and that Sunday she was speaking at a church to promote the church sponsorship of refugees. She says that she was so grateful to the Church for their help that she readily agreed to do it.

In 2011, Sudha was awarded the Public Health Champion Award for Community Development.

There they heard about the Church sponsorship program in Canada, which sponsored refugee families who were outside of their home countries, without any immigration status. Sudha and her family were sponsored by the Anglican Church of Canada and arrived in Montreal in October 1986.

Sudha arrived on a Friday and that Sunday she was speaking at a church to promote the church sponsorship of refugees. She says that she was so grateful to the Church for their help that she readily agreed to do it. That was the beginning of her involvement in various refugee related support initiatives. She became part of the Refugee Women's Working Group, a part of the Canadian Council for Refugees.

In Montreal, Sudha and another woman were hired to conduct research on settlement issues of Sri Lankan and Somali women. From Montreal they moved to Toronto because it proved difficult to find appropriate employment. In Toronto, while Sudha worked at an entry level position in a real estate company, she volunteered in refugee or newcomer related organizations, such as CCR, PWRDF, advocating for refugee women's rights.

Finally, in 1990, she managed to find meaningful employment in a refugee settlement agency. She continued to volunteer on boards, committees, etc. on issues related to refugees, violence against women and the FGM working group. She also continued to write poetry in Tamil, English and French and publish in various journals.

Sudha also contributed to the Tamil Newspapers by writing articles on issues related to violence against women, mental health and adapting to life in Canada.

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In 2011, Sudha celebrated her 25th year in Canada with a party, celebrating the country that had given her the opportunity to live in peace and freedom. In 2011, Sudha was awarded the Public Health Champion Award for Community Development.

What are some of the things that motivate you in your community involvements?

At first it was almost to keep my sanity. The “leaving” was unplanned causing much emotional distress. As I continued to become more involved, then it made a lot of sense, and gave me a sense of meaningfulness, a sense of purpose.

What helped you to feel ‘Canadian’ i.e. to identify yourself as Canadian?

When I started listening to refugee women from all over the world, I realized that we had many similarities. As part of my work, when I learnt to advocate for the rights of refugees and citizens, I began to feel that I was slowly becoming part of Canada. Swimming against the push to support the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam), blindly, I tried to keep an open and impartial mind. And this was largely facilitated by participating in the struggles for justice and equality, for everyone.

What message would you like to send to the Canadian authorities about Canada’s role in protecting refugees?

Personally, I always thought that the Canadian Immigration was confusing the Immigration Policy – responding to labour-market needs for professionals or trades people and family

“When I started listening to refugee women from all over the world, I realized that we had many similarities. As part of my work, when I learnt to advocate for the rights of refugees and citizens, I began to feel that I was slowly becoming part of Canada”

“I cannot understand how information provided by authoritarian governments from refugee producing countries can be seen as reliable by the Canadian authorities”

reunification with the Refugee Policy – responding to civil war or militarization leading to erosion of people’s fundamental rights for freedom and safety. That’s why I think Refugee Law makers have tended to lean towards refugees who can adapt easily in Canada as opposed to all who seek refuge in Canada.

I cannot understand how information provided by authoritarian governments from refugee producing countries can be seen as reliable by the Canadian authorities. I’d like to see the existing system become more efficient, not more inefficient.

What would you like to say to ordinary Canadians about Canadians who come to Canada as refugees?

When we do not know about something/someone, it is easier to believe the worst. Get to know people who have made Canada their home, because they could not live safely in their own country. I also think that in the future we will have more people movement, for various reasons other than civil war. The global village is being influenced by each one of us by our choices in what we wear, eat, seek to be entertained etc. What I am trying to say is that we Canadians are contributing to refugee producing circumstances.....I also feel that those of us who come to Canada as refugees also have a responsibility. Over the years, I have watched how, under the Multiculturalism Policy, the rights of people are fought for and recognized, but the responsibilities that come with being a Canadian seem to be more and more ignored, especially by those of us who came to Canada seeking refuge. This saddens me and angers me.

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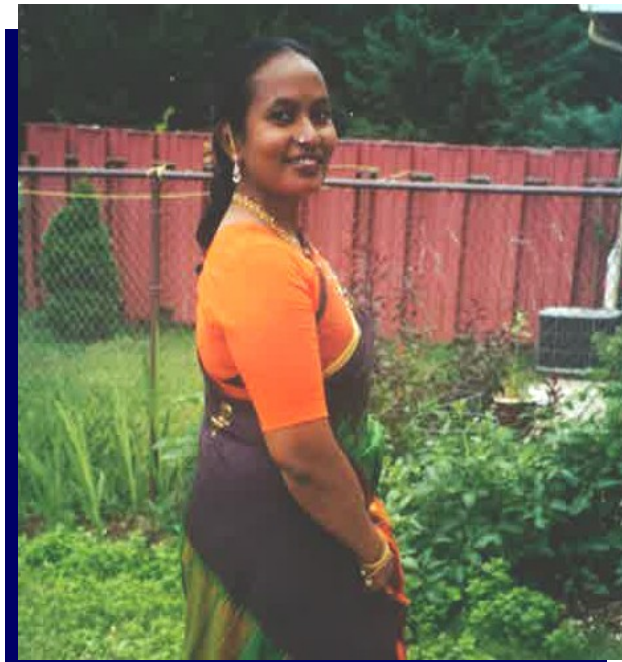
What is the impact of the current policies and practices of the Canadian government that somehow lead to corruption on the part of claimants – such as false claims?

I can mention two things:

(1) Lawyers/Immigration consultants: Refugees are ‘preparing’ their PIF with interpreters and are convinced by them to present in a **particular** way, claiming it will bring success = being deemed to have credible basis for their refugee claim. This practice is fostered by the notion that some stories are credible and some are not. Lawyers rely heavily on interpreters. The complexities of a country’s political situation is very often seen in a simplified way.

(2) Country Profile/Updated information: The sources of information are very often the refugee producing government. We have a recent example of this in the family from Libya: their claim was deemed without credibility based on the country profile provided by the Libyan Government. Now after deportation, torture,

Canadian Immigration has allowed the family to return to Canada on Humanitarian and Compassionate grounds, in January 2013.



Suda Rajasingam

SEAN REHAAG RECEIVES A REFUGEE ADVOCACY AWARD



Osgoode Hall Law School Professor Sean Rehaag has received a Canadian Association of Refugee Lawyers 2012 Advocacy Award for **“outstanding achievement in advocacy on behalf of refugees.”**

The award is in recognition of research that he, along with a dozen Osgoode law student volunteer research assistants (through the Osgoode Public Interest Requirement), did on inconsistencies in Federal Court decision-making relating to refugees.

The research is available here:

http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2027517.

The award was presented September 14, 2012 at the Canadian Association of Refugee Lawyers National Conference and Annual General Meeting.

THANK YOU, CANADA

BY EZAT MOSSALLANEJAD

“I had escaped three times in my life before receiving full protection in Canada, where my wife and I arrived, carrying false passports and applied for asylum at Mirabel Airport in Montreal on the 12th of February, 1985.”

Few things are more enjoyable than escaping death and leading a meaningful life in a safe haven. And I owe this to the Canadian system of refugee protection.

I spent four years in political prisons in Iran and have gone through horrifying torture. The notorious secret police of the Shah of Iran beat on the soles of my feet for hours until the skin was torn and flesh was hanging from them. For 24 hours I passed blood instead of urine; for seven days I could not move and for fifty days I walked with tremendous difficulties.

I had escaped three times in my life before receiving full protection in Canada, where my wife and I arrived, carrying false passports and applied for asylum at Mirabel Airport in Montreal on the 12th of February, 1985. We faced great hardship on the one hand and were recipient of generous grass-root support on the other. We met quite a few compassionate people who went far beyond their ways to help us.

Our refugee hearing took six hours and my wife was exempted from participating in the process due to her physical and psychological condition. The hearing was conducted in a very friendly manner and I was given ample opportunity to share my story. I was impressed by Canada’s just refugee determination system. Fascinated by the love we received in Canada, my wife commented after our hearing ‘It is cold, but people are marvelously warm’.

It was in Montreal that we decided to collect the pieces of our shattered lives and build a new home in Canada. Despite my formal education as a political economist, I devoted my life to serve refugees and survivors of torture like myself. I acted as a founding member of organizations like the Iranian Cultural and Community Center, Institute *Educatif pour les Jeune Irannen* and the Montreal Democratic Forum. Both our children, Dorna and Pedram, were born in Montreal. We praised the Canadian and Quebec health systems and deeply appreciated the all-embracing support we received with the births of our children. I still remember the unconditional affection offered to us from day care workers who served us in Montreal and later in Toronto.

We moved to Toronto in 1990. I was hired as a youth Counsellor at St. Christopher House. I will never forget the day I ran a workshop for 13 newly-arrived youth who belonged to 14 different cultures. I was inspired by Canada’s multiculturalism. Seven months later, I found a new position as a Refugee Policy Analyst at the Jesuit Center for Social Faith and Justice and soon I was representing the Center at the Inter-Church Committee for Refugees (ICCR), a coalition of 10 national churches.

Over the years that followed I represented both agencies at numerous national and international meetings. Nobody asked me about my faith and nobody told me what to say. They extended their absolute trust in my expertise as a refugee worker. I was even more impressed by Canada’s pluralistic attitude. I learned that Canada is not only a multicultural country but also a multi-faith society that views differences amongst people as a vehicle for human progress.

“What impressed me the most about Canada was its humanitarian and compassionate traditions, of which the Canadian Center for Victims of Torture (CCVT) is a vivid manifestation”.

I decided to pay my debts back to Canada, for there are duties that one never forgets, but soon I realized that it was impossible to compensate even partially. I continued to volunteer my time in Toronto, and I was accepted with open arms everywhere I went: the Canadian Center For Victims of Torture, St. Clair West Meals on Wheels, St. Christopher House, Refugees and Immigrant Counseling Services, Refugee Update Editorial Board, the Caroline Coop Board of Directors, Culture Link, Canadian Centre for International Justice (CCIJ), etc. I strongly feel that Canada is amongst the few countries that utilizes the services of dedicated volunteers in a mutually beneficial manner.

As a person who has escaped tyranny, I feel tremendously fortunate in having found a safe haven in a multicultural society and believe that Canada should be commended for its multi-faith and secular traditions as well. What impressed me the most about Canada was its humanitarian and compassionate traditions, of which the Canadian Center for Victims of Torture (CCVT) is a vivid manifestation. Here I have been employed as a Settlement and Trauma Counsellor as well as Policy Analyst and Research since November 6, 1997. I wear two hats, but I have no hair!

It was with the CCVT's full support that I have been able to serve more than 2000 new clients since I joined this distinguished organization. I have written more than 35 articles and have published 10 issues of our *First Light*; the bi-annual journal of the CCVT. It was Canada that enabled me to connect with a wonderful network of students and human rights activists who helped me in writing two books in Canada – *Torture in the Age of Fear* and *Religions and the Cruel Return of Gods*.

I am thankful to Canada that embraced a stranger as I am to feel strong belonging in a place that's not originally my own. When my wife was diagnosed with multiple myeloma

(bone marrow cancer) in February 2010, she was provided with the utmost care by medical personnel at Sunnybrook and Princess Margaret Hospitals. She died on December 7, 2010 while surrounded by dozens of doctors, nurses, friends and community workers. It was a great impetus for all of us to overcome our bereavement and loneliness of exile by benefitting from the Canadian unconditional love. We realized that Canadian love knows no boundaries.

My daughter is a teacher now and my son was recently admitted to medical school at McGill University. We owe all these achievements to Canada. Canada is unique and marvelous, thank you Canada

But, today I worry that the ongoing economic recession would lead to an atmosphere of xenophobia to the extent that everyone would only bother about taking care of his/her own skin. My friends in refugee rights circles warn about manifestations of this new upsetting trend: recent amendments in Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, restrictions in medical coverage of refugee claimants and non-status people, downsizing of service agencies, etc.

I am, however, optimistic. One can find both xenophobic and compassionate trends in the Canadian history of Immigration. I am sure our humanitarian and compassionate tradition will emerge triumphant.

Ezat Mossallanejad is a Settlement and Trauma Counsellor as well as Policy Analyst at the Canadian Centre for the Victims of Torture (CCVT)

“As a person who has escaped tyranny, I feel tremendously fortunate in having found a safe haven in a multicultural society and believe that Canada should be commended for its multi-faith and secular traditions as well.”

RELIGIONS AND THE CRUEL RETURN OF GODS

BY DR. RICHARD HULL

This is a Review of the book written by Ezat Mossallanejad.

This small but encyclopedic work provides an astonishingly thorough introduction to the range of world religions, in their histories, their adherents, and their central doctrines. It is a handy reference work for those who have encountered exotic points of view in travels outside of their own culture and system of beliefs. It also can serve as a resource for those who would debate their own views with others that do not share them.

Were those its only virtues, this book would be a valuable addition to any library. It supports interfaith dialogue, jump-starting those intense exchanges beyond initial declarations of beliefs to examination of their history and implications for internal and external relations between cultures and collections of believers. In a world given to increasing cultural diversity within countries, the student fortunate enough to receive a liberal education will find this work broadening in the way travel is said to broaden.

A closer examination, however, reveals a deeper and more revolutionary motive of the author, himself a victim of torture as detailed in his first work, *Torture in the Age of Fear*. The increase in torture as a political tool is increasing, perhaps exponentially, and Ezat Mossallanejad finds that increase to accompany the powerful draw of religions of nearly every stripe for their adherents to non-humanistic convictions of the certitude that comes from zealous belief in scientifically untested claims about a supposed non-physical dimension of reality.

Given human fear of death, any religion that promises some kind of personal survival for

those who behave in accordance with its precepts finds a ready flock of desperate adherents willing to commit atrocities upon their fellow humans at the behest of leaders who seek the advantages of wielding power.

Mossallanejad's inherent humanism drives him to consider each of the nine major religions in terms of the dynamics of belief: identity, receptivity to claims of revelation and miracles, prescription of codes of conduct that are rooted in the objectifying of others, debasement of humans as demonic or angelic, all driven by doctrines of after-life reward or punishment. The effectiveness of these dynamics is already well understood by science.

Contemporary neuroscience has established that the *amygdala*, a part of the brain that is interactive with higher cortical centers and regulates fundamental emotional responses to others, enlarges in individuals who have experienced sustained trauma, conflict, punishment and torture, with the result that they despair of effective control over their lives and world and are primed for the promise of power and salvation through belief in whatever religion is most immediate in their situations.

This enlargement in turn contributes to xenophobia, or fear of the unfamiliar, selective perception that emphasizes the significance of a small number of violent extremists, and discounting the much wider phenomena of human tolerance and international sisterhood/brotherhood.

Examination of the brains of individuals who have during their lives, been subjected to traumatic stress syndrome shows the *amygdala* to be significantly enlarged, predisposing those individuals to a perpetual attitude of apprehension and aversion to being perceived as "different."

"The cruel return of gods" is Mossallanejad's phrase for the increasing exploitation by religions and nation-states of this cluster of phenomena, and the exposure of the extent to which otherwise kind and reasonable people may be driven either to

Continued on page 15

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commit or to support torture, war, subjugation, practices of rape, genital manipulation, severe punishment for so-called crimes of blasphemy is a deep motive of this work.

I had the pleasure of meeting in Toronto in July of 2011 with this remarkable survivor who has struggled to rise above the neurological alteration of his own brain by his experiences, and dedicated his life to helping other victims of torture who have escaped to a country that seems to have resisted the descent into international and internal conflict better than most.

Walking with him through the streets of Toronto, I was struck by how many people in that very cosmopolitan city greeted him with the kind of warmth reserved for very few wise and very good persons.

Ezat Mossallanejad is beloved by the victims of the toxic religious-political complex that, to use Christopher Hitchens's powerful phrase, "poisons everything."

I do fervently hope that this little book will open the eyes of all of its readers to the dismal effects of religions that so overshadow and overwhelm the good that they do.

Were those its only virtues, this book would be a valuable addition to any library. It supports inter-faith dialogue, jump-starting those intense exchanges beyond initial declarations of beliefs to examination of their history and implications for internal and external relations between cultures and collections of believers.

CONGRATULATIONS TO SR. HELEN

Sr. Helen Petrimoulx, a Holy Names Sister, was the director of the diocese of London Ministry to Refugee Claimants in the Windsor refugee office until she retired in June.

The Windsor advocate against human trafficking, who was a lifeline for hundreds and perhaps thousands of refugees, was recognized with both the Order of Ontario award and Queen's Diamond Jubilee medal.

She helped women from the Congo who had been raped receive both the immigration and psychological care they needed to start their lives in Canada. Psychologists were willing to work pro bono and she established a transition house for refugees. She persevered through years and seemingly endless paperwork to reunite families. About eight years ago she helped start the Windsor Essex County action group against human trafficking in Canada.



Sr. Helen said her passion for the marginalized grew when she was teaching religion at Assumption and Holy Names high schools and added social justice themes to the courses. She went on to train to be an interfaith hospital chaplain but switched to working with refugee claimants when that job opened up more than 15 years ago.

(adapted from the Windsor Star)

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