

DO WE “WELCOME THE STRANGER” IN CANADA?

Anne-Marie Gorman

Refugees, Immigration and Citizenship
Sub-committee Chairperson for Community Life



Beginning with the earliest explorers, Canada has always been a country of immigrants. Immigration helps maintain the population and “fire our economic furnace,” while increasing Canada’s multicultural richness in the process.

Pakistani physicians, Abdul Malik and his wife, and their two children, came to Montreal on visitors’ visas. Members of the Ahmadi community of Muslims, they had been subject to widespread discrimination and persecution, having been declared non-Muslim. Gaining refugee status, Dr. Malik resigned himself to the real possibility of working in a factory for the rest of his life to support his family. While awaiting a hearing, the children were registered in a private school, which quickly exhausted their savings. Two judges heard his application and, following confirmation of his background, he was given permission to stay.

Because work eluded him in Montreal, the family moved to Mississauga, where he worked as a security guard and interpreter for refugee hearings. At the same time, he began the arduous process of writing national medical exams, and attempting to secure a medical residency in the second “match,” where 3,000 to 4,000 medical professionals compete for 50 to 60 placements Canada-wide. Dr. Malik says that luck played a major role in his journey. His application for an education license led to a lengthy interview process and five-month wait while his credentials were corroborated. After the wait, he was hired through the University of Toronto and given a position in a hospital. Because this was a temporary position, he applied for permanent positions across Canada, finally settling in Fredericton, where he belongs to a family practice in a small rural community.

After three years, his wife was accepted into a residency program and is now a practicing physician, also. Their story, by all accounts, is a happy one; however, luck should not be a factor in the success of the immigration process in Canada.

Canada has been meeting its target range of immigrants who fall into three main categories: economic (skilled workers, business immigrants, provincial/territorial nominees, live-in caregivers); family (spouses, partners, children, parents, grandparents); and protected persons (government-assisted refugees, privately sponsored refugees, protected persons landed

in Canada, dependants of protected persons). A much smaller group falls into the category of humanitarian and compassionate.

The Canadian Council for Refugees cites many discouraging cases. For example, a well-educated, multilingual woman from India, whose case is pending, was reunited with her husband in Canada, only to leave him after being assaulted. She may have a better chance to gain status on economic rather than humanitarian and compassionate grounds, because the percentage of economic applicants’ acceptance is higher.

The Hon. Monte Solberg, Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, will focus initially on the priorities outlined in the Conservative Party of Canada’s campaign platform to: cut the landing fee of \$975.00 in half; introduce new legislation to ease foreign adoptions; and, create a new federal agency to assist newcomers. Dr. Malik pointed out that with 50 rupees equaling one Canadian dollar, the landing fee for someone from Pakistan would be reduced from nearly 50,000 to about 25,000 rupees, a huge sum.

The number of refugees not permanently settled, worldwide, is greater than 15 million. Beyond that, there are an estimated 50 million who have been uprooted from their homes. Only two “rich countries” make it to the list of top 10 for refugee-hosting: Germany, with 980,000, and the US, with 485,000.

Canada’s immigration target for 2006 is 225,000 to 255,000. The number of immigrants demonstrates a constant increase in potentially new citizens who would fill the many needs of our country, and provide new homes for our global neighbours. Currently, however, it takes three to five years before a privately-sponsored refugee actually arrives in Canada; it is difficult to keep sponsoring groups focused for that long.

The challenges regarding immigration are complex, but federal, provincial, territorial and municipal initiatives must find effective, compassionate ways to fill the burgeoning gaps in skilled labour, aid victims of crime living illegally in Canada, and shorten the time waited for acceptance of immigrants. While our elected officials try to fathom the myriad infrastructure concerns to help meet the needs of Canadian citizens, time is running out for citizens of the world whose most basic needs are not being met. †