



The situation for asylum seekers in Canada today

Since the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, it is much more difficult to immigrate or receive asylum in North America. As a result of new measures, the number of overall refugee claims in Canada fell from a record high of 44,063 in 2001 to less than half that number in 2003. Immigration numbers also failed to reach government targets.

Over the years the nationalities of asylum seekers arriving at the YMCA's Residence has changed, reflecting the world situation...refugees from wars, conflicts, famines, discrimination. In the last number of years the Residence was receiving mostly Haitians and Mexicans coming through the US.

The tightening of the border and Canada's new policy of only accepting asylum seekers entering from their country of origin, greatly reduced the number of asylum seekers entering through Montreal. The recent policy change of the Canadian government requiring all Mexicans to have a visa to enter Canada has contributed to the great reduction in number of asylum seekers received by the Residence this year. Between January 1 and May 31, 2009 there were 1819 people staying at the Residence, in the same time span in 2010 the number dropped to 146!

The visa requirement was the Canadian government's response to refugee claims from Mexico almost tripling since 2005. The recent situation with lawlessness and unprecedented violence, particularly on the Mexican-US border, has resulted in great hardship and despair for countless Mexican peasants. Desperate attempts to escape by crossing the border at great risk to themselves

continue. Enforcing more restrictions only forces greater desperation and hardship. Where is the humanity in that? How can we, as a compassionate nation, turn our back on people in the situation they are in? There has to be a better way of dealing with the problem.

Canada has in the past been regarded as one of the best countries in terms of compassion to those in need of asylum. This seems to be changing. These are complex issues and cannot be resolved with a few drastic measures. A holistic and fair minded approach is needed.



The border wall from the Mexican side.

Both the government and the people of Canada recognize there are problems with the Refugee and Immigration system in Canada. The time taken to process claimants is far too long, allow-



The YMCA Residence in Montreal



A part of the long border wall between Mexico and the US



The YMCA Casa in Juarez, Mexico

ing many people to be in the country long enough to settle in only to be told down the line they have to leave. There has also been debate about how fairly decisions on who is accepted and who are turned away are made.

Are changes to the system needed? Definitely, but the changes made in recent years are simply like putting a Band-Aid on a serious wound....gives the appearance that something is being done, but achieves nothing in understanding and treating the real problems.

The events of 9/11 left North America feeling vulnerable and the resulting tightening of the borders was a quick response to make the population feel more secure. A number of incidents since then have proven there are flaws in the new security systems and maybe we all have to accept the fact that building more barriers will not necessarily bring safety. Maybe our only true route to security is attacking the root causes of violence, be it terrorism, organized crime or poverty. Punishing the majority for the crimes of a minority does not build security; it only feeds the anger and desperation that is the fuel for violence.

There are no simplistic quick solutions, but unless we all work towards real solutions, this cycle will only continue.

Mano a Mano sin Fronteras

Mano a Mano sin Fronteras is a trilateral youth exchange program of the YMCAs of Canada, the United States and Mexico. Since 1991, over 450 youth from Mexico, Canada, the United States, South and Central America have participated in the program.

The Mano a Mano program focuses on global issues effecting youth and will emphasize civic engagement and community development. The Program empowers youth to be agents of change, creating fellowship and networks among youth leaders in the Americas.

The program consists of workshops, an open forum for participants to share their experiences, a tour of the Mexican -US border to give a realistic view of the struggle that many Latin American youth, particularly Mexican youth, face in their search of the "American" dream, and placement in one of the four migrant homes border (Casas YMCA) which assist youth detained or deported by the US government.

Three Canadian youth are selected by YMCA Canada to represent Canada in this program. This year, **Chrystel Jacob**, a young worker with the YMCA Alternative Suspension Program was one of the youth from Canada chosen. She will be flying to join the other participants in Tijuana for July 19 and returning July 31.

