

Private Members' Business

the \$975 immigration fee required for each application, or because they cannot obtain official identity papers from their country of origin. In the meantime, they receive help from Quebec social services.

The cost of the various public services provided to refugee claimants by the Government of Quebec is over \$200 million just for this current year.

I believe that Ottawa ought to reimburse that amount to Quebec, indeed all costs relating to those seeking asylum, since it is the federal government that controls this process. This is a necessary measure if Quebec is to continue its humanitarian tradition of welcoming refugees.

I add that, in the medium and long term, immigrants and refugees contribute much more than they receive at the start.

I would like to say a few words about the draft agreement on asylum seekers initialled November 27, 1995 by representatives of the American and Canadian governments. The document is causing a lot of controversy among NGOs involved with refugees. It fails to properly protect the rights of those seeking asylum. The United States interprets the definition of refugee more narrowly than does Canada.

I have tabled a motion whereby the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration would hear witnesses and prepare a report on this agreement.

• (1820)

I therefore ask the Government of Canada to delay the final signing of this agreement, planned for February, to enable the committee to conclude its hearings. In any case, the agreement is not supposed to come into effect until the end of 1996.

The Bloc Québécois opposes the abolition of the IRB. Despite its shortcomings, which we have criticized on a number of occasions, it has an important job to do in connection with the international obligations provided in the Geneva convention on refugees, of which Canada is a signatory. It is the highest administrative tribunal in the country deciding on applications for asylum in Canada.

For all these reasons, we will vote against Motion No. 389.

Finally, I would like to wish a merry Christmas and a happy New Year to all my colleagues in this House and to all members of staff.

Mrs. Eleni Bakopanos (Saint-Denis, Lib.): Madam Speaker, during the past 50 years, Canada has welcomed more than 200,000 refugees.

[English]

Mr. Thompson: Madam Speaker, are we not going in rotation?

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Maheu): We are doing what the list dictates and it is government, opposition, government, opposition.

Mr. Thompson: When it is our motion? Is that correct?

The Acting Speaker (Mrs. Maheu): Returning to debate, the hon. member for Saint-Denis.

[Translation]

Mrs. Bakopanos: I am sure we are all proud of that. There are people in this House today who have experienced the privation and dangers to which claimants of refugee status testify they have been exposed. I am referring to persecution, sorrow and fear.

There are places in this world where the mere fact of saying what you think can land you directly in prison, without due process, or even worse.

There are places where the colour of a person's skin or the ethnic origin of his parents may sign his death warrant. Today we live in an age where the terms ethnic cleansing and genocide have unfortunately become part of our vocabulary.

Every day, regional conflicts and political and social confrontations continue to force whole communities to flee their country. The challenges created on a world scale by the increase in massive migrations are still with us, and there will be further challenges.

[English]

I am proud to say that in Canada we have chosen to confront these issues head on. It has long been recognized both here and abroad that Canadians care and take their responsibilities as good citizens of the world very seriously. That is why we accept the international obligations we took on when we signed the 1951 Geneva convention relating to the status of refugees and the 1967 protocol.

By signing those agreements we promised to protect those in need, to open our arms and hearts to victims of oppression and misery. A key element of our strategy to deal with refugees was the creation of the immigration refugee board in 1989.

The IRB on behalf of Canadians reflects our commitment to promote a peaceful and humanitarian response to global issues of conflict, mass migration and human rights violations. The board's goals and challenges have remained constant: to identify those in need of Canada's protection and to adjudicate fairly and efficiently all immigration appeals, inquiries and detention reviews. I am happy to say that over the last six years the IRB has been up to the challenge it has undertaken.

Yes, there have been problems. There have been times when the judgment of the IRB has been questioned. There have been times when the integrity of the system has been placed in doubt. But does that mean we should scrap the whole thing and start again with something new and untested? No. That is the key word these days. No.