

Assisting Refugees

Assisting refugees is a special part of the Canadian concern to relieve the suffering of those whose basic rights have been violated.

Canada has an honourable tradition of providing such assistance. This country has received refugees fleeing civil strife in many parts of the world and has assisted those who have had to leave their homes temporarily. The generous response of the Canadian public was illustrated perhaps most dramatically between 1975 and 1980, when more than 60,000 Indo-Chinese boat people were welcomed to Canada. Over 34,000 of them were resettled with private support from some 7,000 sponsoring groups.

The goals of our refugee policies are consistent with our larger foreign policy objectives—namely, humanitarian assistance to disadvantaged peoples and our interest in a stable and just international order. Canada has the capacity to play a major international role in promoting these goals. Geography insulates us from the immediate problem of refugees. We are also one of the few countries in the world with the economic and social capacity to resettle substantial numbers of refugees, and we will continue to do so. As George Cram of the Anglican Church of Canada described it,

Canada has a unique ability and critically important role to play in the family of nations, to set some standards and be, in some ways, the standard setter for refugee policy areas. (56:19)

The committee considers it especially important to affirm that refugee and immigration policy, though related to one another, are quite distinct. Many refugees have proven to be capable and hard working citizens and have sometimes established themselves more readily here than other immigrants. But refugee policy is not guided by these considerations. It is an aspect of the overall Canadian policy of extending humanitarian assistance to others, while immigration policy is governed to a much greater extent by Canada's economic and social self-interest. It is therefore important that economic cycles, which play a major role in determining immigration flows, not be allowed to dry up the humanitarian impulse that lies behind the welcome Canada extends to refugees.

The danger of confusing refugee and immigration policy is greatly exacerbated by the enormous increase in people claiming refugee status. Refugees are normally defined as people seeking asylum outside their country of origin because of a well founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality or political opinion. Also included are those who cross borders when fleeing from external aggression or the breakdown of public order. Numbers in the latter categories grew alarmingly in the early 1980s, principally as the result of such events as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the turmoil in Central America. It is estimated that the worldwide population of such refugees is now in excess of 10 million. More recently, deteriorating economic conditions in many developing countries have swelled the number of people seeking refugee status as an escape route from hardship. There has been intense international debate about whether any such people should qualify as refugees.

Worldwide refugee pressures have contributed in turn to a tremendous backlog of refugee claimants in Canada. This problem stems from attempts to differentiate 'legitimate' refugees from those who should be considered part of the normal immigration process. It is clear that the refugee determination process needs reform. The objective should be to establish a system that, first and foremost, embodies our international commitment as a signatory of the United Nations Declaration on Refugees while providing an effective and timely method of identifying legitimate refugees.