

In addition, it is quite clear that we could not meet a sustained surge in the number of claims. The time required to process claims is still too long and that is not fair to claimants.

The speed with which we can remove rejected claimants remains slow and that erodes the effectiveness of the system. The consequence of this delay is the need for costly support programs, and that is certainly not fair to taxpayers.

It is our intention to further improve the decision-making process at the Immigration and Refugee Board. We will eliminate the first level hearing. This step will accelerate the processing times, cut administrative costs, and allow the IRB to direct its resources where they are needed most.

This is a change recommended by the Auditor General and the Law Reform Commission, and supported by the chairman of the Immigration and Refugee Board.

Genuine refugees should be able to get on with their lives as quickly as possible. The sooner decisions are made on the status of a claimant, the sooner a refugee can get off social support programs and become a fully contributing member of the community.

New procedures will allow convention refugees to be landed more quickly and take up employment sooner. The proposals will permit the spouse and dependent children of the applicant to be processed at the same time as the claimant. We expect to cut the waiting period for landed status after the IRB decision to six months.

It is worth noting that the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has lent its support to the changes we are proposing.

In a recent press release the UNHCR said:

We expect that the new legislation will continue to work in the best interest of all those asylum seekers needing protection—UNHCR supports the fine-tuning of the legislation, insofar as it concerns asylum seekers in Canada.

It is an important endorsement because it lends perspective to the debate we are having and to the course of action we are following. This comment is particularly helpful because it may allow us to have a more reasoned debate devoid of the predictable hysteria of some of the government's more vehement critics.

Government Orders

We have also proposed a series of additional measures to help achieve better control over access to the refugee determination system. For example, in straightforward cases senior immigration officers will be given the authority to decide whether an individual is eligible to claim refugee status.

The dramatic increase in the number of people now claiming refugee status throughout the world has made it clear that ultimately the management and resolution of refugee issues require international co-operation.

European countries have perhaps been the first to understand this, and as a result they have recently signed agreements to share responsibility for examining refugee claims. The purpose of these agreements is to eliminate asylum shopping while ensuring that refugee claimants receive a full hearing in one of the states that is a signatory to these conventions.

Last year about one-third of all refugee claimants came to Canada through the United States and a further one-tenth through Europe.

It is important that the government has the legislative authority to enter into agreements with other refugee receiving countries similar to those that have been reached in Europe. This will help ensure that we can provide better and faster protection for those who choose Canada as their first country of refuge.

Without the ability to enter into these agreements Canada may be receiving large numbers of claimants from countries that, while party to the Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees, would prefer to see another state provide the protection offered by the convention.

• (1610)

We are currently negotiating such an agreement with the United States in order to better share the responsibilities for the determination of refugee status between our two countries. We are also talking to the Europeans.

A fair and effective determination system must include the authority to remove people whose claims have been rejected. International authorities, including the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, clearly recognize that fact. As a result we will also be taking