

Canadian for a grand

Refugees forced to cough up coin to live in Canada

BY JESSIE CLARKE

TORONTO (CUP) — Canada is warm and welcoming to refugees.

Many of us would agree with this statement, even in light of the negative public response to the recent influx of Chinese migrants on the West Coast. It is a statement our government would also like Canadians to believe.

Relative to many countries, Canada has an open and progressive refugee policy.

Some critics argue that Canada's refugee policy may even violate the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Convention on Refugees.

The source of this harsh criticism is a little-known fee charged to all refugees and immigrants seeking landed immigrant status in Canada. The Right of Landing Fee is \$975, and it must be paid by every person over 19 seeking landed immigrant status.

Canada is the only country in the world which charges these fees to refugees as well as immigrants.

Since this fee was first charged in 1995, revenues from newly arriving Canadians, both immigrants and refugees, have increased from \$134.4 million to \$363.2 million.

Newcomers arriving in Canada in 1993 paid \$460 on average, only one third of the \$1526 fee faced by today's new arrivals.

The shameful secret behind the immigration system's rising revenues is inspiring political action from a wide range of individual Canadians.

Stephanie Connolly, president of the Victoria University Students' Administrative Council, and Rebecca Dolgoy, a student commissioner at the University of Toronto, are two such individuals who are taking an interest in the rights of immigrants and refugees.

The two student leaders have been inspired by the plight

of their friend Charles Conteh, a World University Service Canada (WUSC) sponsored refugee student at Victoria College.

Conteh, like all WUSC refugee students, automatically received a Canadian government loan of over \$2000 to cover his landing fee and transportation costs.

Conteh described how he believed he would be given extra time to repay the loan, since he was a student.

"I was shocked when I had a conversation with one of the immigration officers," explained Conteh. "I thought they would postpone repayment until we're done university, but he told me that we are supposed to begin repaying right away."

Soon after settling in Canada, finding a place to live, and registering for classes, Conteh began to receive notices of repayment.

"They sent me some forms and indicated that I was supposed to return them with a cheque," Conteh said. "I don't know the consequences of not paying, but it's illegal — the message is clear."

The message was also very clear for Connolly and the rest of the WUSC Committee who were supporting Charles.

"I found out that [Canada was] the only country that charges this kind of cover to get in," says Connolly. "I think it's ridiculous."

Dolgoy was equally disappointed when she learned of the fee.

"It's scary [that this fee] is not a more widely publicized thing," Dolgoy said, "because Canadians don't know. They think we're such a welcoming place."

Connolly and Dolgoy have quickly turned their frustration into action, coordinating a cross-Canada letter-writing campaign, and seeking a meeting with Citizenship and Immigration Minister, Elinor Caplan.

Connolly and Dolgoy have already found support from many of U of T's college councils and

from other universities in Canada.

They are hopeful that they will receive support from U of T administration and perhaps eventually from Minister Caplan herself.

"We have issues with the tax in general," explained Dolgoy, "but we started with refugee students specifically because it directly relates to us."

Francisco Rico-Martinez, President of the Canadian Council of Refugees, has many issues with the Right of Landing Fee.

"We've proven that people who come to Canada as immigrants and refugees quickly start producing and paying taxes," said Rico-Martinez. "But this \$975 charge prevents them from becoming productive citizens."

Rico-Martinez says the requirement to pay the fee has forced many newly arrived people onto welfare. He dismisses the government's argument that the loan program makes the system more flexible and accessible.

"In order to get a loan you have to prove that you can pay it back," he said. "This discriminates against women especially because single mothers are seen as a bad risk by loan officers."

He recounts the story of a Rwandan woman who sought help from the Canadian Council.

"She is a single mother with two daughters whose husband and older son are missing after the civil war," said Rico-Martinez.

The woman and her daughters recently had their refugee claim accepted. When Rico-Martinez heard the news, he was happy for the mother and her daughters, but he felt the need to warn her of what was ahead.

"I told her to start to save all the money she could," he said. "The positive decision [for refugee claimants] is a double edged one. They tell you 'Congratulations . . . now pay us 975 dollars!'"

In addition to the Right of Landing Fee (R.L.F.), newly arrived immigrants and refugees must also pay a processing fee of

\$500 per adult and \$100 dollars per child.

Rico-Martinez's Rwandan friend was able to scrape together the initial \$700 needed in processing fees, but only through cutting back in other areas.

"It was food banks all the way for her. Before having to pay the fee, she and her family had gone to food banks rarely," explained Rico-Martinez.

"But now she had to go to 15 food banks in one month in order to survive. Now she's worried what will happen if she doesn't get a loan to cover the R.L.F."

It's a worry shared by many newly arrived refugees.

Rico-Martinez and other refugee advocates believe it's a worry that should not be added to the already stressful situation of re-starting life in a new country.

"Why are we imposing this head tax on the poorest of the poor?"

Rico-Martinez believes the Canadian government is in total violation of the Geneva Convention.

"It specifically disallows charging fees," he said, referring to the 1951 United Nations Convention on Refugees. "This fee was imposed in 1995 because of the deficit, but now we have a surplus, so why can't it be abolished?"

When this question is posed to Citizenship & Immigration spokesperson Peter Lamey, he has little to offer in response.

"The R.L.F. remains a policy of this government. You may need to ask someone else about that. I'm not sure if I can answer this," Lamey said. "When the R.L.F. came into being in 1995, it was to recover costs for settlement programs, and those costs are still there."

Lamey says he views the rate of loan repayment as a gauge of the program's success.

"Anecdotally, this program seems to be working," he said. "If whether or not repayment has occurred is one indication, then it

seems to be working, because these loans are being repaid."

When Lamey is further queried about the difficult circumstances many refugees face and how more flexibility in the program would be welcomed, he suggests that the loan system is the answer.

"I think this is addressed through the loan," Lamey said. "The loan itself is a demonstration of flexibility in terms of not having to pay it up front."

Lamey is quick to defend Canada's record with regards to the UN Convention.

"Granting permission to become landed is a bit different than safe asylum," he argued. "Landing permission is permanent residence rather than temporary protection."

Lamey explains how Canada's refugee and immigration system is actually uniquely generous.

"Canada is distinct," he said, "in that it quickly gives refugees the same status as immigrants."

Unfortunately for many refugees, equal status also means equal obligation to pay Right of Landing Fees.

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