

that refugee cases were assessed on the basis of human rights considerations. The Refugee Status Advisory Committee operates on two overriding assumptions: first, the applicant is presumed to be telling the truth unless there is clear evidence to the contrary and, second, the benefit of any doubt is resolved in favour of the applicant. Under the present guidelines of the Refugee Status Advisory Committee, a person need not be singled out for persecution to be a convention refugee. Highly visible political activity is not seen as a prerequisite for refugee determination. A person may be a refugee even if there is no evidence of past persecution but there are reasonable grounds to fear future persecution. The possession of a valid passport is not a basis for rejecting a refugee claim. The Refugee Status Advisory Committee now allows five panels to operate weekly. The number of private Members has been increased to ten from seven. Departmental officials who serve on the committee are now freed from all other duties in the Department so they can devote their full time to the work of the committee. The research capability has been upgraded so as to improve the information on conditions in refugee producing countries, and full use is made of information from human rights groups such as Amnesty International and church groups as well as government sources.

● (1640)

In May, 1983, in response to recommendations from various sources, and as part of this ongoing attempt to improve the process, a modified form of oral hearings was introduced. As the Hon. Member for Spadina said, the results are impressive. In my view, this should certainly be extended. At the same time, as we try to improve our refugee determination system, more and more of the world's people have become refugees, either from economic hardship or by virtue of war or persecution. Inevitably, people displaced in this way look to the industrialized nations for help. The channel of last resort is that provided by the asylum structures in developed countries like Canada. Even though people who come to Canada and apply for refugee status may finally be refused, the possibility of being able to work here while their claim is heard must look very attractive to people who are undergoing hardships which we can barely imagine.

The more people who use our system, the greater the backlog, the longer the delays. Since 1980 we have witnessed a very large increase in the number of refugee claimants. Recent refugee claimant arrivals—again I am talking about people who arrive in Canada and make their claim here as distinct from those who have been assessed as refugees overseas and who come to Canada with papers for permanent settlement—now average 500 a month, which is double the number for last year. About 9,500 cases are under review for appeal, yet only about one third of those who claim refugee status have their claim upheld.

It is certainly important to shorten the process, and I agree with the Hon. Member for Spadina that there is evidence that oral hearings have shortened the process. The paper screenings are sometimes cumbersome. It is important to shorten the process, particularly for genuine refugees who are left in

limbo, unable to get on with establishing themselves in their profession, their trade, unable to get on with making their new life while waiting for the final decision. It is also important for those whose claims are not genuine and who may be able to find some other solution for themselves if their hopes for remaining in Canada are not to be met. So in so far as oral hearings would shorten the period of waiting and would result in better decisions, I certainly recommend them, but the entire process needs to be reviewed to ensure that all problems which cause delays are dealt with.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Jean-Guy Dubois (Parliamentary Secretary to Minister of Employment and Immigration): Mr. Speaker, regarding the legislation before the House this afternoon, namely, Bill C-219, I have a few comments to add regarding the clause in the explanatory notes, which says that the purpose of this Bill is to give persons claiming refugee status the right to be heard by the Refugee Status Advisory Committee, before it advises the Minister.

Mr. Speaker, as far as the refugee situation is concerned, I think that in Canada a great deal is being done, and I would like to give a few details. If we consider the circumstances of refugees and Canada's role as a place of refuge for the oppressed and the homeless of this world, we recall the programs set up for the Hungarians, Ugandans, Chileans, Czechoslovakians and Vietnamese, which have given Canada an international reputation. Mr. Speaker, so many people of the nationalities I just mentioned are now living in this country and have been able to tell their former fellow citizens how easy and pleasant it was to live in Canada.

However, this is not the subject of today's debate. The Bill introduced by my hon. colleague, the Member for Spadina (Mr. Heap), namely Bill C-219, is aimed at protecting those who claim refugee status in Canada. It does not concern those who are selected abroad but those who, for whatever reason, entered this country either legally or illegally and are afraid to return to their country of origin because of fear of persecution. Although we do not encourage people to give these reasons for remaining in Canada, as signatories of the 1969 Convention on the Status of Refugees we are obliged to see to it that they are not sent back to their country of origin if their fear of persecution is bona fide. Mr. Speaker, we have had examples, and I am thinking of the world of sports, when two famous hockey players came to Canada in 1980-81, the Stastny brothers, who today are playing in the National Hockey League with the Quebec Nordiques. In their case, the Minister had to make a very quick decision to protect their rights and avoid a situation where they might have had problems in connection with their country of origin.

It is therefore essential that such people be given a fair hearing, while the community must also feel they have been treated fairly. First and foremost, the Government has the obligation to offer persons claiming refugee status in Canada