

Chilean Refugees

● (1110)

Mr. Jake Epp (Provencher): Mr. Speaker, in response to the statement the minister made in the House on November 30 concerning Chilean refugees I stressed at that time that the Progressive Conservative Party had always shown a willingness on the basis of humanitarian grounds and compassionate reasons to accept refugees from other countries who wished to relocate in Canada. We still maintain that position. In his statement on November 30 the minister gave the impression that there were only a couple of hundred people who had expressed a desire to come to Canada. Today his statement indicates there are already 1,400 people who wish to come to Canada.

In my reply to the minister then I expressed the opinion that certain caution should be observed and maintained in respect of Chilean refugees. I raised the question of the nationality of these refugees and whether they were Chileans or in fact people from various Latin American countries who now wanted to come to Canada via Chile. We have not received an answer to that question. We also raised a question and a caution concerning whether or not sufficient security checks were being implemented. At that time we insisted that stringent security checks should be maintained in all cases. The Progressive Conservative Party is not impressed to date with the security practices of the immigration branch. The government has allowed well known criminals and international agitators to come to Canada and find a haven here. This is something the government should look squarely in the eye and take very positive action in regard to it.

The government should also make full disclosure of the specific number of Chilean refugees who have applied to come to Canada, their nationality and what security checks have been maintained. We hold to the position that we are interested in helping genuine international refugees, people who want to come to this country and contribute in a positive way to the social, economic and cultural life of Canada.

The minister also indicated in his statement that the department has accelerated the processing of these applications. I remind the minister that many people who have applied for landed immigrant status from outside Canada and have sponsoring relatives in Canada have waited for years to come to Canada without any positive response from the government. This includes people from the United Kingdom. In the first nine months of this year we had more applications than last year by people wanting to come to this country. I suggest to the government that it should take strong and positive steps in that respect.

Lastly, Mr. Speaker, the entire premise on which the government based its refugee program was the urgency in respect of these people who are political refugees because their well-being and their lives were in danger. Yet today in his statement the minister said that many of these people have indicated they do not wish to come to Canada until spring. Obviously the effect of winter in Canada has already extended to Chile. These people have become aware of it. Where is the urgency if these people can wait until spring? Why do they not come now? I suggest this entire question should be re-examined and a full disclosure made by the minister in charge.

[Mr. Andras.]

Mr. Andrew Brewin (Greenwood): Mr. Speaker, when the minister made his statement on November 30 that the people dislodged by the coup in Chile would be given refuge in Canada and treated as refugees and that their cases would be expedited, we welcomed the announcement. Since that date, and particularly in the last few days, I have been receiving, as no doubt other hon. members have, information from Santiago, from Panama, from Honduras and from Mexico of delays and in some cases destitution amongst those who have applied to come to Canada.

There are three causes mirrored in the minister's statement. The first is the delay in medical checks; second, the delay in background checks and, third, difficulties of transportation. We are told that, out of 1,400 persons who have applied, 184 visas have been issued and up to 215 additional visas can be issued when medical examinations are completed. I would like to ask the minister how many persons have actually come to Canada and how that number compares with the over 700 who have arrived in Sweden and France from Chile.

We all appreciate the necessity of background checks, but I see a striking contrast between background checks, which are said to take four weeks in the case of Chilean nationals and two months for others, and what happened at the time of the flood of Hungarian and Czechoslovakian refugees when background checks took a day or two and those people, out of humanitarian reasons, were allowed to enter this country. I suggest that the process of background checks must be speeded up or a simpler method found. I would like to ask the minister also whether the medical staff is adequate. I am informed it is not, that one of the reasons for the delay is an inadequate medical staff to check on those who have applied, at our invitation, to come to Canada.

The minister said in his statement that "we are endeavouring to ascertain the number of persons who have been delayed by lack of transportation." Why at this stage, months after this situation arose, are we still endeavouring to ascertain whether or not transportation is available? Other countries have provided airlifts. I suggested on November 30 that we could provide airlifts. I ask the minister again: Why have we not had a greater sense of urgency in dealing with the question of transportation rather than endeavouring now, months later, to ascertain the number of people who have been delayed by lack of transportation?

There is another serious problem that has arisen. I understand that, with respect to at least some of these refugees, the military junta in Chile has set a deadline, the end of this year, and while we dilly-dally around the possibility of some of these victims of the coup coming to Canada may be cut off by the junta itself. The minister shakes his head. I would be glad to hear from him at some stage whether in fact that deadline exists. It certainly did exist, but if it has been changed I am delighted to hear it.

We still require the utmost sense of urgency if the minister's good intentions are not to be frustrated and if Canada's reputation in the international field is to be maintained as we hope it will be.