

Terrifying deadlines

continued from page 1

"My case is different because I speak the language, know my rights and stick up for them," H. says.

"Treatment of other people that I have known, especially people of colour and people who have trouble with English, is, by and large, less than human. Even in my case, my freedom of movement is restricted. I have wasted six years while waiting for a decision on my claim. The uncertainty of not knowing whether or not I will be deported is very traumatic."

S. used to be an immigrant screening officer in Somalia, so it is ironic that he found himself on the opposite side of the table as a refugee in Canada. He spoke to me at the Centre for Refugee Studies in

York Lanes, where he is working until January.

"It is not easy to reach Canada from Africa," he tells me understatedly. "I came to Canada because I speak English and you have a democratic and humanitarian history. I am a political science graduate and I worked with international organizations." This is how S. came to be in danger in Somalia. "When there was still a government, they suspected anyone who was educated and spoke out on behalf of human rights."

As the government disintegrated into warring factions, S. "walked trails to Kenya," leaving his wife and children in a less immediately perilous refugee camp in Ethiopia.

S. becomes very agitated as he remem-

bers Somalia. "When you are scared, you take many risks. I lost everything, even the calendar. The trauma affected even my memory. For a long time I could not remember the smallest detail. Now that my wife has been able to join me and my refugee status has been accepted, I am starting to recover."

Suffering from not knowing

I visited an adult ESL (English As A Second Language) class in a local high school to speak to refugees. At first many of students were reluctant to talk to me. One of the fears of many not-yet-accepted immigrants that making any kind of trouble will lead to immediate rejection of their case, or deportation — which, in the case of most refugees, means incalculable danger.

When I stressed that confidentiality would be strictly ensured, I was suddenly overwhelmed by their impassioned offers

to tell their stories and voice their frustrations.

I pull two chairs into the hallway and face the first person who has agreed to speak to me, a quiet Sri Lankan woman, who, nervously fingering her dress, asks me: "Will I be deported? I am really suffering from not knowing."

After having paid \$12,000 to a dubious "agency" in Sri Lanka in order to come here, she met a lawyer who wanted to convince her that legal aid would not accept her and that he required \$2,000 for his services. After legal aid did, in fact, take up her case, she is worried that her lawyer is "not interested in my case."

She arrived illegally in Canada in 1987, having journeyed through Malaysia, Hong Kong, San Francisco and Chicago, accompanied by a member of the "agency" that had provided her with documents. She was finally left in Buffalo, where her documents were taken back to Sri Lanka to be used for another customer.

"I am happy to have someone to listen," she tells me, "Everybody is strangers." She spends her time playing cards with other immigrants in her apartment building and making sari blouses on a sewing machine bought with the help of social services.

M. came from Turkey in 1986. He tells a familiar story of bureaucratic delays (five years to attain landed immigrant status) and unscrupulous lawyers (\$1,000 lost) in his effort to become settled in Canada. He is dressed in a fashionable business suit and looks you straight in the eye as he tells you how it is. He grew up as a street kid: determined to make it but stay out of trouble. He brings the same determination to Canada. "Nobody invited me here to get a job. I'm hard working." But he also tells of racism and wanting to stay out of trouble.

M. recounts some of his experiences: he got laughed at in bars because he couldn't pronounce the word "beer" properly. His bank tried to convince him that he could not close his bank account. He had a toothache and dentists would not pull his tooth, even for cash, because he did not have his social insurance number. An apartment building would not take his application, even though the sign clearly said there were vacancies. He got into an accident when a car in front of him braked too suddenly. When he tried to convince the police officer that it was not his fault, she said to him, "You immigrants — I know you people. You just want to make trouble." M. couldn't complain, because he didn't want to make trouble before getting status. During the entire five years, he thought he could be arrested and deported at any time.

Stuck without husband

R. wears a traditional black and beaded head covering and faces me intent to make me understand. "This is my first chance that a person like you asks me what I have to say. I'm talking not just for myself but for [all those fleeing] political disaster and having the same problems: not knowing what to tell immigration, making yourself understood, getting information about government offices, understanding the new culture, loneliness."

It has been two years and she has not yet attained landed immigrant status, so there is nothing either she or Immigration can do to bring her husband to Canada. "It is very hard here without my husband. We have been married for 20 years. I miss him and I can't help him. I have five children. I get a cheque from Family Benefits, but it is not enough. If I had my husband here to help it would be easier. I don't like to be on welfare. It is very hard to find a job here when you are not experienced. I try my best. I take ESL, but I have trouble helping my children with their education. If my husband were here, we could support each other."



• graphic by Carsten Knox

New law makes Canada nastier

by Christina Varga

The federal government is debating Bill C-86, an overhaul of existing immigration and refugee legislation. The government says the bill is designed to make the system more efficient and less expensive — but refugee advocates say it will cause an even greater number of people to be sent back to imprisonment, torture or execution.

Everyone agrees that costly bureaucratic delays need to be cut out. As well as creating unnecessary hardship for refugees, they cost taxpayers money. "We need to make sure that immigration can be managed in the most cost-effective and efficient manner possible," says a government report on immigration in the 1990s.

But many groups interpret the government's concern with efficiency to mean making rejection and deportation of

refugees easier.

They say the realities of dealing with refugees are, firstly, that mistakes are inevitably made by immigration authorities and, secondly, that refugees don't always follow clear regulations. For instance, refugees often have to resort to paying criminal organizations to get to Canada, and then are left at the border without documents or any idea how the Canadian system work. They fear the new legislation will work more on the basis of inflexible regulations and less on humanitarian and compassionate grounds.

The bill is expected to be debated in parliament in early November, and Immigration Minister Bernard Valcourt is pushing for it to become law by the new year. The original Immigration act of 1978 took two years to become law. Refugee advocates say C-86 was thrown together in a hurry and that the government is trying to

pass it too quickly, without leaving time for enough consultation with people who have direct experience with immigrants and refugees.

At this time, C-86 has been studied by a semi-independent senate committee. The committee itself has recommended several changes to the bill on the basis of consultation with refugee advocates. Both governmental and non-governmental critics are worried that the new legislation is full of obstacles to trip up refugees.

Tortured man mocked

"The real danger in the bill is that we will cut access to the system dramatically and unfairly," writes York professor Howard Adelman, editor of *Refuge* magazine.

continued on page 10