

Adjournment Debate

refers about 30 cases every week to our embassy. Our three immigration officers can process a larger number of cases, but right now there is only moderate interest for Canada among refugees. It seems refugees would rather establish locally in a more compatible cultural environment.

I would repeat what Mr. Cullen already indicated to me, namely that a special mission is not required for the time being. We respond as quickly as possible to refugee applications. The applications cannot be processed any faster, in view especially of the screening which is absolutely essential to Canadian security. Unless refugees showed sudden interest for Canada, a special mission would in no way facilitate the entry of those Argentine refugees.

[English]

IMMIGRATION—REQUEST FOR EXPLANATION OF TREATMENT
OF REFUGEES IN ARGENTINA—ACTIONS OF UNITED NATIONS
COMMISSION

Mr. David MacDonald (Egmont): Mr. Speaker, before I deal with other parts of the subject under debate tonight I want to deal directly with the answer the parliamentary secretary has just given my colleague, the hon. member for Montmorency (Mr. Duclos). Perhaps this shows the virtue of having this kind of a debate on one single issue, something in which the three of us are obviously vitally interested.

It is unfortunate, and I feel very sorry for the parliamentary secretary, that he has had to provide an answer to this House which could be so incomplete and, in some cases, so factually inaccurate. In discussions we held earlier today with Mr. Cram, referred to by my colleague, the hon. member for Greenwood (Mr. Brewin), we again reviewed the situation in respect of the length of time it takes to process refugee applications. We could find no basis whatsoever for the affirmation that has been made again this evening by the parliamentary secretary that the average waiting period is from two to four months, unless in fact he is referring to the period after the application has finally been approved, which means, of course, considerable time prior to that when a number of interviews, security checks and medical examinations are made.

Even more important, the assertion by the parliamentary secretary that there is no waiting list is absolutely inconceivable to the three of us who have had the opportunity of talking directly with refugees who are in an emergency situation, of which, by UNHCR reckoning, there are some 2,500. Each of us could speak very personally and feelingly about standing in a hostel containing more than 100 refugees who are absolutely desperate to get out of Argentina. From the moment we arrived and were pointed out to be parliamentarians from Canada, I can tell you that each of us had a number of animated conversations with people who would do anything to come to Canada, but in a number of instances have had their applications turned down. Some were encouraged through our conversations to reapply, and their process has perhaps now been completed.

[Mr. Portelance.]

When the parliamentary secretary suggests there is only moderate interest in Canada, it may be the situation of the chicken and the egg. It may be that the fact is that far too many refugees have experienced the reality that Canada has not seemed very willing to process their applications, and that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has recently reasserted with Canadian officials in Buenos Aires that there must be a better understanding of the refugee process than the one that is presently in process.

My colleague, the hon. member for Montmorency, in the latter part of his remarks suggested that indeed the time had come for there to be some cutting of the enormous amount of red tape, and of misinformation that has been conveyed on the subject from the minister's office and from the parliamentary secretary here this evening.

It is interesting to note when we reflect on the situation in Chile, following the coup that occurred there in 1973, that significant action did not occur on the refugee problem until the special delegation in 1974 of Geoffrey Pearson and Mr. Danby had the opportunity to give an objective stating of the situation as it existed at that time in Chile.

The problem we are faced with this evening, and it is a very real problem of modern day bureaucracy, is that the minister, and I am here in no way criticizing him in himself, suggested to us in response to answers yesterday that he does want to take a humanitarian approach to this problem, but he is relying, as my colleague the hon. member for Greenwood has said, on very junior officers who do not have an over-all and objective picture of the situation. They are in a day-to-day process of dealing with people who are coming in as refugee applicants. They have not had a clear directive in terms of their mandate. They are functioning, I think, in a very difficult manner, using forms that are regular immigration forms.

We heard some horror stories about people who came to apply, desperate as refugees, and who were being asked to indicate whether they had a valid job offer before their refugee status could be regularized. Surely to goodness we are not talking about a normal immigration program. The minister and his predecessor made it very clear that this is a special refugee program because of the very urgent, serious and dangerous situation for people living in the southern cone of Latin America.

Unfortunately the parliamentary secretary has been in the position again of providing information that obviously has been filed by junior officers, and which is simply not adequate nor accurate. What we are calling for here this evening is an opportunity to clarify that situation as it presently exists in Argentina. I would urge the parliamentary secretary to relay to his minister and senior officers of the department that the time has come to get some objective and accurate information.

• (2220)

I would hope that as a result of this particular exercise this evening of reflecting on questions which we raise about the perceptions that have been expressed by the minister in his memo to the three of us, he will in fact take the same action