

## LOCAL

## Refugees keen on crossing into Manitoba

### 430 ASYLUM SEEKERS CAME HERE 'IRREGULARLY' IN THE LAST NINE MONTHS

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Bashir Khan

Manitoba has become a hot spot for refugees crossing into Canada, partly because of the province's geography and access to free legal aid, immigration experts say.

Winnipeg immigration lawyer Bashir Khan, who is currently representing 17 asylum seekers, said Manitoba's geography makes sneaking across the border easier because it is mostly farm fields. Saskatchewan's geography is similar to Manitoba, but it doesn't provide legal aid to refugee claimants, so few want to go there.

Ontario offers legal aid to refugees, but most of its border with the U.S. is either water or dense forest, making crossings more challenging.

Abdi Ahmed, co-ordinator of Immigration Partnership Winnipeg, said the numbers in Emerson are also increasing because of word of mouth from Somalis already here. Minneapolis has the largest population of Somalis in America, and those who have been rejected by the U.S. — or fear they will be — are heading north.

Manitoba is closest.

"Word travels around the community (that) it's the easiest way to save your life," said Ahmed, himself a Somali refugee.

An estimated 2,000 people arrived in Canada "irregularly" — meaning not via a border office — in the last nine months, including 430 in Manitoba. In the 2015-16 fiscal year, 340 arrived in Manitoba irregularly.

Quebec tallied the highest number of irregular crossings this fiscal year, with 1,280. British Columbia and the Yukon have had 652 this year. Not all the people involved end up applying for refugee status. It's currently unknown how many did.

Khan said as long as Canada maintains its Safe Third Country Agreement with the United States, refugees will continue to risk their lives to sneak into the country.

Khan said had any of these refugees stopped at the Emerson border crossing to seek asylum, the agreement Canada signed in 2004 means border guards would have returned them to the U.S. Many have already been turned down by the immigration system there and are expecting to be deported to Africa.

"The agreement only applies at the land border," said Khan.

The only exception is if the refugee already has a blood relative in Canada.

In the last five years Khan has represented at least 125 of the asylum seekers who made their way into Manitoba without stopping at the border crossing.

The Canadian Association of Refugee Lawyers asked Canada to suspend the agreement, saying it was signed under the assumption both Canada and the U.S. were safe havens for refugees, but with U.S. President Donald Trump's policies that can no longer be assumed.

Immigration Minister Ahmed Hussen says Trump's "travel ban" executive order — later suspended by a federal judge — is not affecting the asylum agreement.

"We sympathize with those who seek sanctuary in our country," Hussen said on his way into question period Tuesday. "But like I said, the Safe Third Country Agreement is an agreement that is there to allow both countries to better handle the asylum system. It's supported by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees to prevent asylum shopping. And the U.S. asylum system is intact. It hasn't been affected by the executive order."

Khan said the agreement was implemented by an order of cabinet and was never debated by Parliament, nor has it been reviewed. He said Parliament needs to take a closer look at it.

Provencher MP Ted Falk said several of his constituents in Emerson and the RM of Franklin have called him to ask for help because the local governments don't have the resources to manage the influx of refugee seekers.

Falk would like to see Canada return the asylum seekers to the U.S. to discourage more from landing on Emerson's doorsteps.

"You can circumvent the system by coming across farm fields," said Falk. "They're endangering their lives and the lives of young children. They're coming from what we acknowledge and perceive as a safe country. They're already in a safe country. They don't need to be risking their lives to do this."

Falk said fear of Trump's policies might be driving the increase in recent weeks, but he said this has been happening for years, not just since the U.S. presidential election. Falk raised the issue with Public Safety Minister Ralph Goodale and Hussen and expects to hear back by the end of the week.

Goodale, who is responsible for the Canadian Border Services Agency, said the government is looking at what it can and should do about people putting their lives at risk to cross the border, as well as the impact on Canada's border security. He said there are some government programs available to help local governments and agencies in Manitoba who are reeling from the sudden influx of asylum-seekers — more than 30 in the last two weeks alone.

"We have a very well-established border procedure and an immigration procedure, a procedure to deal with asylum-seekers and to deal with refugees, and we are very anxious to maintain the integrity of that system, while Canadians are also anxious to be a very compassionate and generous people in dealing with human beings who are facing physical distress and circumstances," said Goodale.

Greg Janzen, reeve of the Municipality of Emerson, has called an emergency meeting of town personnel for Thursday afternoon to deal with handling the surge of refugee claimants. That will include council members, local EMO officials, the fire department and paramedics.

Janzen is hopeful that representatives of the CBSA and RCMP will also attend.

"We've never had to do something like we had to do (last) weekend, which was to house non-processed people," Janzen said. "That's the key to my concern. How are we going to deal with this? Up until they're processed they're illegal border jumpers.

"It's not that we don't want to help. We can open up the hall, but I would like to have security there instead of just our volunteers."

The reeve wants, at the very least, to have RCMP or CBSA officers to provide security in the hall where refugees are being held.

"Let's be prepared and have our ducks in a row so everybody is comfortable," he added.

— with files from Carol Sanders and Randy Turner

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