

Manitoba town to receive help in handling refugee influx

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Civic officials from a southern Manitoba town inundated with asylum seekers say they've been given assurances they'll get some help from other levels of government as they struggle to ensure their small community remains safe and welcoming.

Politicians in Emerson, Man., met with the RCMP, representatives from the federal and provincial governments, and the Canada Border Services Agency on Thursday to address concerns after 22 refugee claimants walked over from the United States on the weekend.

"My initial concerns have gone away for now with reassurances," Emerson Reeve Greg Janzen said at a news conference after the meeting.

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"If there is an influx of bigger groups, [we've been] assured they will have the manpower to handle the influx of refugees."

Brenda Piett, an Emerson emergency co-ordinator volunteer, received a call early last Saturday morning from border officials who had been overwhelmed by a group of 19 claimants. Ms. Piett opened the town hall to the refugees to provide them with makeshift beds and food. Officials, however, did not stay to monitor the asylum-seekers.

"The protocol now will be that [officials] will rent our complex and watch the people," said Mr. Janzen, who added that his safety concerns had been eased by hearing the lengths to which the RCMP and CBSA go to vet and screen any border-crossers.

Canada is signatory to the United Nations Convention on Refugees, which prohibits criminalizing entry to a country for those seeking asylum. So while the refugee claimants are indeed illegal, they are not being criminalized by the RCMP with charges.

“When we encounter those individuals, we do a search, we screen, we identify, [we fingerprint] ... these are not unknown people we are housing,” RCMP spokeswoman Tara Seel said.

The number of refugee claimants illegally crossing into Manitoba so far in the 2016-17 fiscal year is at 403, up from 68 in 2013-14, according to CBSA numbers. Most were from African countries, especially Somalia.

The RCMP are responsible for patrolling the border outside of official ports. The force said Thursday that it’s increasing resources in the Emerson area to intercept border-jumpers and take them to officials should they make a refugee claim.

Ms. Seel said officers have no power to turn such people back, only apprehend them after they cross.

An increasing number of refugee claimants, mostly from African countries such as Somalia and Ghana, have been risking freezing temperatures and walking through farmers’ fields to get over the border and into Emerson in the past few months.

Wayne Pfiel works six days a week as a bartender at the Emerson Hotel, the first stop for many refugee claimants after they get over the border.

He said of the 40 or so refugees he’s greeted in the hotel’s front lobby since starting the job three years ago, 25 to 30 have come in the months after the Nov. 8 U.S. election.

“They’re cold. They’re wearing their winter boots and their winter gear, but they’re cold,” he said, adding many come suffering from frostbite.

“They end up taking their boots and socks off right in the lobby, or else I’ll let them in the bar and offer them a coffee and something to eat.

“I feel sad for them. They’re walking through the fields and they’re walking in the cold.”

Rita Chahal is executive director of Manitoba Interfaith Immigration Council (MIIC). She took part in the Emerson meeting, and brought blankets and first-aid supplies to equip the town to aid future border-crossers.

Ms. Chahal’s organization runs three provincially funded welcome centres in Winnipeg where new refugee claimants can find accommodation until they are processed. But those centres are maxed out, a situation Ms. Chahal has called “critical.”

“Once they get to Winnipeg, that’s where the challenge is, the housing side is not there,” said Abdi Ahmed of the Immigration Partnership Winnipeg, who has been working with three of the 22 recent Emerson asylum seekers.

Mr. Ahmed and other immigration advocates want the federal government to temporarily suspend the Safe Third Country Agreement, which requires refugee claimants to request protection in the first safe country they arrive in, unless they qualify for an exception. This agreement is one reason why would-be refugees are crossing the border without making refugee claims through the normal avenues, advocates say.

Officials in Emerson are expecting the influx to continue or increase, particularly in the wake of U.S. President Donald Trump's executive order on immigration and refugees.

Thursday, a federal appeals court declined to reinstate Mr. Trump's immigration ban, which was welcome news to Mr. Ahmed.

"It's great news ... a lot of refugees in the U.S., they're living in fear because they can be rounded up and deported back to Somalia at any time, this gives people some breathing room."

With reports from The Canadian Press

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