

Manitoba aid agencies bracing for new wave of refugees across U.S. border

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WINNIPEG — Manitoba aid agencies warned Thursday they are becoming overwhelmed by a wave of refugee claimants coming across the U.S. border near the community of Emerson.

Some 169 people have crossed the border on foot in sub-zero temperatures this year — an unprecedented amount for the cold weather months, according to Immigration Partnership Winnipeg, one of 23 agencies that work with The United Way to help newcomers.

"Can you imagine what is going to happen to us when the weather improves?" said Abdi Ahmed, a co-ordinator with the group.

"Now we have (mostly) single people coming across. We will have families and we will have many people coming across when the weather improves."

Refugee claimants must wait 30 days before they can apply for a work permit and some government benefits. Until then, they are given shelter and other help by non-profit agencies. The United Way has set up a web site — <http://www.helprefugees.ca> — to make it easy for people to donate money and help ensure the donations go where they are needed.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, speaking in Esquimalt Thursday, congratulated first responders and community members in Quebec and Manitoba for "demonstrating the kind of welcome, the kind of openness that we know is the very best of Canada."

The government has beefed up resources to help support incoming asylum seekers, he said.

"But we know, at the same time, that we need to make sure the law is being enforced, that we are going through this process in a rigorous way," he said. "We are ensuring that Canada continues to have a strong immigration and refugee system while protecting the integrity of our borders."

Sitti Ali, a 28-year-old refugee claimant from Djibouti, walked across the border at Emerson in November.

She walked seven hours after a taxi dropped her off in North Dakota, still far from the border, she said. After making it to Emerson she and her small group called police and were taken in for questioning.

"That was good, because we were not in a cold place," she said.

"They were welcoming, they started asking questions ... and the next morning, they said 'Okay, you can go to Winnipeg'."

Ali said she expects the number of asylum-seekers to jump because of U.S. President Donald Trump's plans to limit immigration south of the border. Canada's welcoming of refugees has also been noticed by refugee claimants in the U.S., she said.

"They see that two people, three people went to Manitoba and it was good ... so everyone is running here."

Asylum-seekers have been crossing at unauthorized border points because under the Canada-U.S. Safe Third Country agreement they are turned back at official border crossings if they first made a refugee claim in the U.S. The agreement does not apply to those who get onto Canadian soil before being apprehended.

The Manitoba government, the Salvation Army and other groups have opened more beds for refugee claimants to deal with the recent influx. Ahmed said he and others in Winnipeg's Somali community have opened up their homes.

"Every community member has people in their homes," he said.

"I want for all of us to step up, to be able to ... provide this protection and this support."

Steve Lambert, The Canadian Press

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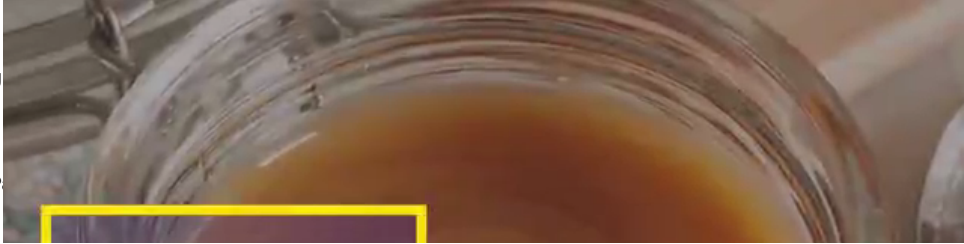
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