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Asylum seekers fleeing US for Canada brave snow, extreme cold

AFP

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It was a record no of arrivals for a single weekend in the small border town of Emerson and Canadian officials said they are expecting more.



📷 US President Donald Trump's controversial ban on refugees and nationals from seven Muslim-majority nations has prompted many who had hoped for a new life in the US to flee north. (Photo: Representational Image/AFP)

Emerson: Farhan Ahmed hoped to find refuge in the United States after fleeing death threats in Somalia, but fear over a US crackdown on immigration sent him on another perilous journey to Canada.

The 36-year-old was among nearly two dozen asylum seekers who braved bone-chilling cold on a February weekend to walk across the border, trudging through snow-covered prairies in the dead of night to make a claim in this country.

It was a record number bracing for more.



Thursday they are

US President Donald Trump accepted many who had hoped for a new life in the US to flee north.

While the ban is currently on hold due to two successive defeats in federal court, Trump has warned he is weighing a new immigration order.

Among the first wave of immigrants to Canada in the wake of Trump's measure was a two-year-old boy who reportedly begged his mother to let him to die in the snow because he could walk no further.

Two others lost their fingers to frostbite in -20 degrees Celsius (-4 Fahrenheit) temperatures when they made the same trip in December.

Wayne Pfiel works at the Emerson hotel steps from the boundary. Asylum seekers, he said, often stop here for a moment of respite after walking up to 12 kilometers (7.5 miles) from the United States, coming in to ask if they have reached Canada.

Others have called police for help, and are taken to the closest border outpost, where they can file an asylum claim.

"They usually call us if they're cold or lost, and we find them on the side of the highway," said RCMP Corporal Paul Manaigre.

Risky desperation

An agreement with the US prevents asylum seekers from lodging claims in Canada if they first landed stateside, but it only applies to arrivals at border checkpoints, airports and train stations.

Rita Chahal, executive director of the Manitoba Interfaith Immigration Council, described a "big surge coming across the border."

According to Canada's Border Services Agency, numbers have roughly doubled in each of the last four years to 321 cases in fiscal 2015-2016. Since April, there have been 403 cases.

People often come from Djibouti, Ghana, Nigeria and Somalia, said Chahal, whose agency works out of a building designed by a top Canadian architect who was once himself a refugee.

The numbers are high, but the risky routes asylum seekers take are also alarming.

"They're crossing through farmers' fields. Many of them are getting lost," Chahal said.

The recent arrivals, she said, tell a common story: "We're afraid of what's happening in the United States, we're not sure what's going to happen if I get sent back to my country."

Samatar Adam, 30, from Djibouti, arrived last month. Asked why he did not file a refugee claim in the US, he replied: "Donald Trump."

He left soon after the inauguration.

"It saddens me to see refugees flee not only their country but also a safe, democratic country like the United States," said the Immigration Partnership Winnipeg's Hani Al-Ubeady, himself an Iraqi refugee who now helps resettle others.

"They have to take another risky journey to make it to another safe place, Canada."

Walk north

Last weekend, Brenda Pielt, an Emerson volunteer emergency coordinator who also publishes the local newspaper, received a call from border agents asking for help with the overflow of asylum seekers.

Pielt said she arranged to feed and house the cold, exhausted group members many wearing wet socks overnight at the Emerson curling rink.

The next day, they took a taxi an hour north to Winnipeg, where aid agencies helped them find shelter and legal counsel.

Ahmed of Somalia said it was a much warmer welcome than the one he received in Texas in 2014.

In the lobby of a gloomy downtown hotel where he now shares a small room with three others, he described being handcuffed and detained until his US asylum bid was heard.

New arrivals received date for his hearing.



Expected to be given a

Ahmed told the American would be next.

dearest son, he feared he

He left behind his wife and three children, the youngest born only months earlier and traveled through nine countries before reaching the US.

A US panel rejected his claim, but he was released under supervision and allowed to work as a truck driver until his deportation could be arranged.

After Trump announced his ban, which includes Somali nationals, Ahmed said he feared imminent deportation.

"I decided to try my luck in Canada to ask for protection, because if I were deported to Somalia I would surely be killed," he said.

Ahmed took a bus to Minneapolis, where he met a man who dropped him off at the border with instructions to "walk north."

Ahmed said he had seen snow in the United States, "but not like this."

"That night it was very, very cold," he recalled. "My hands were frozen. I couldn't feel my feet."

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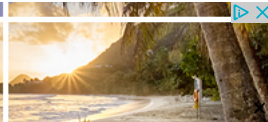
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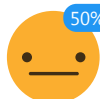
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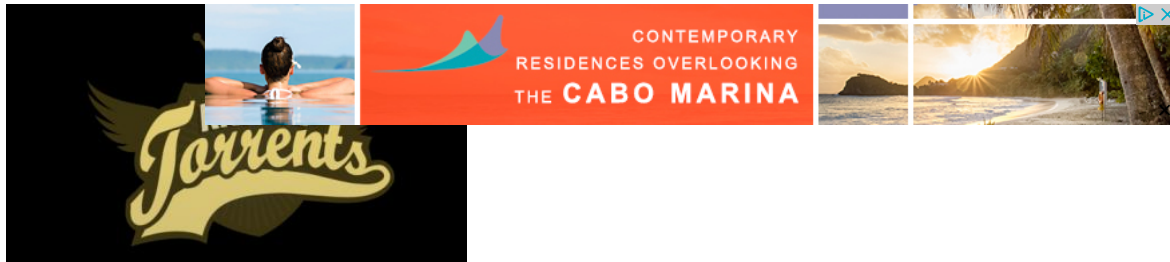
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