

Group Processing of Refugees

Policy Notes

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CITIZENS *for* PUBLIC JUSTICE



IN 2006, the Canadian government accepted a group of 810 Karen refugees for group processing towards resettlement in Canada. The government is considering whether this is an approach to providing asylum for refugees which it should undertake more often.

Summary

Canada has, on a few occasions in the past, sponsored groups of individuals who either found themselves in extended periods of displacement with little or no chance of repatriation to their own country of domicile, or were exposed to immediate danger and had to be evacuated rapidly to avoid loss of life. This approach is known as group processing – Canada and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) identify entire refugee populations, as opposed to individuals, and agree to resettle these populations in Canada as a community.

Under the normal government-sponsored resettlement program, Citizenship and Immigration (CIC) officers abroad receive referrals of individuals and families identified as refugees by the UNHCR, whom the CIC officers interview to determine their eligibility as government-sponsored refugees. If the individuals and families are eligible, CIC then proceeds with admissibility screening (medicals and security check) before issuing visas to come to Canada. Group processing exempts individuals within the group from being interviewed: the group as a whole is determined to be eligible. Although these interventions have been few, the government is giving serious consideration to expanding and regularizing this form of refugee resettlement. Other refugee accepting countries such as Britain, Australia and the U.S.A. have also, over the past decades, undertaken group sponsorship initiatives.

CPJ's analysis

Citizens for Public Justice believes there is merit in group processing of refugees, but expresses concern that this should not replace any of the existing avenues of refugee resettlement. The following is an analysis of some of the benefits, opportunities, challenges and concerns of Canada's approach to group processing.

Benefits

- **Targets the world's most vulnerable, long term displaced persons:** such as, Sudanese and Somali refugees who arrived in 2004 and the Karen refugees (Burmese refugees living in Thailand) who were processed in 2006. Those living in protracted refugee situations and having no hope of repatriation are particularly vulnerable and devoid of any chances of being permanently settled or integrated into their host countries. Group processing represents a viable long term option for such destitute groups of people.
- **Ability to respond quickly and decisively to rescue those in immediate danger:** (e.g.: Kosovo refugees who were brought to Canada in 1999/2000). Often, the rest of the world has to move quickly to relocate those in danger of becoming casualties of a civil conflict. Group processing has the advantage of deploying resources rapidly to an area of conflict and eliminates the time consuming formalities associated with processing individual refugee claims.
- **Eliminates costly and time consuming individual determination:** Officers in overseas visa posts can save precious time processing people in groups rather than as individuals. With simplified selection and eligibility criteria, the process has the potential to be an efficient and expeditious conduit for providing hope to various groups of otherwise “hopeless” people.
- **Processes families together:** there is great benefit in bringing in and resettling families. Studies in Canada have shown that settlement and integration of refugees who have their families with them occur much faster and with greater effectiveness than for those who do not.
- **Facilitates social integration:** Arriving in Canada and living together in community will have a positive effect in terms of social cohesion and adaptability to new surroundings. This social reality is indicated more by its absence than by its presence. Many refugees who arrive alone continue to experience extreme emotional and mental hardship, mainly due to the absence of strong family and community ties in Canada. Arriving as a family or in a community group gives each person a definite head start over those who make it to Canada by themselves.

Opportunities

- **Relieves the world of a fraction of the millions who are displaced:** Group processing specifically targets those who have spent years in refugee camps. Of all the world's refugees, "more than 7 million have languished in refugee camps or segregated settlements in situations lasting ten years or more, some for generations."¹ Compared to this number, the 25,000 to 30,000 refugees that Canada accepts each year pales. In Sudan alone there are about 4 million internally displaced southern Sudanese and 350,000 living in camps overseas, some of them for over two decades.
- **Relieves poorer nations of some of the burden of hosting long term refugees:** Two thirds of the world's displaced people are hosted by poor countries that have neither the infrastructure nor the resources to integrate such persons into their society. As a result, these displaced persons remain a constant burden to the host country. When wealthier nations take on part of this burden, poorer countries can re-invest scarce resources to build their own infrastructure and social programs.
- **Canada can take leadership in these types of initiatives:** There is an uneven distribution of wealth and an unjust balance of power in the world. Canada, with its vast resources, can show the rest of the "richer" countries what it means to "love your neighbour," and how to do so cost-effectively. Perhaps more countries will take ownership for their contribution to the causes of forced displacement by alleviating the suffering caused by its effects on people. Canada is definitely well positioned to set the pace in the world's response to forced displacement.
- **Opportunity for government/citizen partnership in the resettlement and integration process:** Group sponsorship provides a perfect opportunity for government and civil society to work together. There is a huge latent potential among private groups and community organizations to help refugees via the private sponsorship program. Currently, 12,000 applicants for private sponsorships await processing with a projected backlog of 4-5 years. Sponsoring groups have the resources and motivation to help resettle and integrate newcomers that the public sector finds hard to gather. There is tremendous potential for a meeting of mutual need from either side, in the group processing exercise.

¹ "Warehousing Refugees: A denial of rights, a waste of humanity" by Merrill Smith in *World Refugee Survey 2004*. <http://72.3.131.88/data/wrs/04/pdf/38-56.pdf>

Challenges

- **Spreading of resources too thinly:** Spontaneous response implies little time for planning. This could lead to reallocating resources and disrupting other areas of the overall refugee program. Some group processing initiatives occur as a rapid response to a volatile situation in a country of conflict. Because of fixed departmental budgets, resources to deal with these emergencies are often rushed in from other programs. This could seriously disrupt or hamper regular program goals that are equally important, but may not appear to be as urgent.
- **Background information about refugees may not be easily and quickly obtainable** (security concern): Almost always, it is difficult to find out any background information about long term displaced persons or those caught in sudden conflict type situations. Some individuals within the group could have criminal backgrounds and/or present security concerns.
- **Inconsistent selection standards:** The standard of selection for group processing is inconsistent with that used in the regular resettlement program by a visa officer overseas. This, in turn, is not consistent with the standard used for in-land claimants used by the IRB. If the integrity of the refugee determination process is to be protected, it is important to have consistent standards of selection throughout the whole system.
- **Establishing criteria to select candidates for group processing:** How do we set selection criteria that will determine who needs to be resettled under the group processing scheme and how would we apply those criteria? What rules would Canada use to choose one group over another? Would selection have any political strings attached?
- **Effect on the annual quota:** Canada's annual immigration target is pegged to about 1% of its population. Of this number, 56 % is allocated to skilled economic and business migrants and their families. The balance (44 %) is reserved for family class immigrants, refugees and others. Group processing must not take away the allocation (already choked) for refugees selected by other means.

Concerns

- **Potential to undermine other areas of the refugee program:** As mentioned before, re-allocating resources for group processing must not jeopardize any other part of Canada's refugee initiatives, especially the in-land refugee determination program. It is important to ensure that group processing will not replace in-land processing. Group processing primarily helps those who have no means whatsoever to seek a better life than in a refugee camp or similar place of physical refuge, outside their country of habitual residence. There are other types of refugees, however, who have the opportunity to flee directly to Canada where they seek asylum. Canada needs to have an open door policy to all types of refugees. A displaced person who finds a way to arrive in Canada is no less of a refugee or in need of protection than a person in a refugee camp. Many who arrived in Canada during the post WWII era belonged to this category.
- **May strengthen the case for refugee warehousing:** Group processing may serve to inadvertently strengthen the argument for the "warehousing" of refugees and a policy of "offshore refugee pooling" that some western countries try to promote. Refugee receiving/resettling countries especially are happy to keep refugee claimants from arriving at their doorsteps. They prefer that displaced persons are housed in "refugee centres" in designated countries (all of them developing countries) and that deserving cases be selected from this pool. Fortunately for the world's displaced, proposals such as "*refugee transit centres*" made by the U.K. and "*offshore refugee processing centres*" by the Italian and German governments in 2003/4 to the European Union were summarily dismissed. Canada should vigorously object to these proposals
- **Potential for social dissonance:** A lack of planned social and physical infrastructure could lead to problems for refugees and their new hosting communities alike, in terms of settlement. Improper planning and coordination has the potential to create social imbalance in these communities. Educational, health and social service systems need to be prepared for these new arrivals, who may present different and multiple challenges. Groups needing special attention and assistance place stress on the communities they settle in. This stress has to be managed in a way that benefits both the host and new communities.
- **Responsive not proactive:** Group processing is responsive in nature and does not address the root causes of forced displacement. Justice must be sought. The government of Canada should not let its asylum response be a substitute to also leading the fight to eradicate the causes of forced displacement in the world.

Summary

Group processing of refugees is an effective and efficient way of alleviating the misery of those who spend most of their lives as displaced persons. It serves as a useful complement to the existing system of refugee selection and determination implemented by the Canadian government. However, in spite of its inherent benefits, this paper has raised and explained serious concerns. Citizens for Public Justice submits that all of these concerns be taken into account before the group processing approach is adopted as a regular mechanism for resettling refugees.

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CITIZENS *for* PUBLIC JUSTICE

Our Vision

- CPJ is committed to seek human flourishing and the integrity of creation as our faithful response to God's call for love, justice and stewardship.
- We envision a world in which individuals, communities, societal institutions and governments all contribute to and benefit from the common good.

Our Mission

- CPJ's mission is to promote public justice in Canada by shaping key public policy debates through research and analysis, publishing and public dialogue.
- CPJ encourages citizens, leaders in society, and governments to support policies and practices which reflect God's call for love, justice and stewardship.

Public Justice

- Public Justice is the political dimension of loving one's neighbour, caring for creation and achieving the common good, and is particularly the responsibility of government and citizens.