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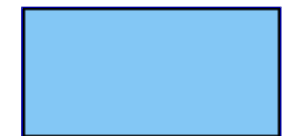
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Refugees jam border fearing new policy

Legislation taking effect today generates concern that Canada plans to shut its doors

By INGRID PERITZ AND CAMPBELL CLARK Friday, June 28, 2002 – Print Edition, Page A8

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SAINT-BERNARD-de-LACOLLE, QUE. and OTTAWA -- On a grassy enclosure near the Canada-U.S. border, while mammoth 18-wheelers rumbled down the highway, two men from Pakistan kneeled on the ground facing Mecca yesterday and began to pray.

Nearby, a group of women from the Congo slept on brightly printed wraps on a Canadian immigration-office floor. An 11-year-old Peruvian girl wearily clutched a teddy bear, decorated with Canadian-flag pins.

They belonged to a wave of more than 1,000 asylum seekers from around the world who have surged toward this border crossing in recent weeks because of a common fear: the belief that Canada, their promised land, was shutting down its border.

While few of the refugees massing at the border yesterday could say exactly what the act or the border plan would mean, the mere rumour that Canada's gatekeepers were changing the entry rules was enough to send them rushing to reach their hoped-for haven.

"I knew that after June 28, the border is closing," said Ahmar Sajad, a 24-year-old student in jeans and a T-shirt who arrived this week from Pakistan.

He said he read about Canada's immigration changes on the Internet in Islamabad.

"In Canada, there are no killings and no terrorism," he said as he waited in the muggy heat to have his refugee claim processed.

"I can live a better life here."

Canada's new Immigration and Refugee Protection Act goes into effect today, the same day that Deputy Prime Minister John Manley and U.S. Homeland Security Director Tom Ridge meet in Niagara Falls to announce progress on a 30-point border plan.

Government sources said that today's announcement in Niagara Falls will not include the final, formal signing of a completed agreement, so any changes will

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not take effect immediately.

Border lineups at Lacolle usually consist of Canadian motorists returning home from southern holidays. But these travellers arrive by bus from New York, then by a taxi that drops them off less than a kilometre from the border post.

Then they enter Canada on foot, trudging along the highway, luggage bulging with their life's belongings.

Last year, 5,000 people filed refugee claims at this border crossing, one of the nation's busiest.

This year, authorities expect 1,200 claims in June alone.

Claimants have been arriving at the rate of as many as 80 per day.

Immigration officials say any change to Canadian immigration rules, which are considered liberal by international standards, sparks similar peaks in refugee traffic.

"There is always a fear of change," said Ronald Blanchet, director of the Canada Immigration Centre at Lacolle, about 60 kilometres south of Montreal.

"Rumours don't have to be founded to circulate. People are just afraid of missing the boat."

The main cause of concern is a proposed change that means refugee claimants arriving from the United States would be turned back and required to file claims in the United States. The change would be part of a U.S.-Canada border plan in which Canada would recognize the United States as a so-called safe third country.

That would be a radical departure from Canada's practice of providing a refugee hearing to anyone who claims protection.

The United States would have to give returned asylum-seekers access to a determination process, but their system has a lower acceptance rate and claimants are more routinely detained.

Officials refused to say yesterday whether the two countries have hammered out a common draft for the safe-third-country agreement.

Refugee advocates in both countries said they have been promised that they will be consulted on any draft agreement before it is put into effect.

The sudden influx at the Lacolle border crossing has created pressure on immigration officials, who have extended their shifts. Authorities set up a trailer near the border's duty-free shop, which acts as a makeshift refuge.

A local caterer has set up shop, selling claimants chicken-salad sandwiches for \$2.50, pizza for \$2 a piece, and a banana for 50 cents.

On Wednesday night, 121 refugee claimants were camped out at the crossing, trying to sleep in chairs, on the floor, or outside. Garbage cans overflowed, and toilets were overused.

"It's not a hotel," Mr. Blanchet acknowledged. "The conditions are difficult."

The claimants offered different reasons for trying to reach Canada. Faraz Khan, a Pakistani native who has lived in New York for a year and a half, said

What's the difference between a good house guest and a politician? The good house guest knows when it's time to leave. -- Raymond St. Arnaud, Victoria, B.C.

life after Sept. 11 has been more difficult in the United States.

He has received visits from FBI agents asking to see his papers.

"Friends told me that Canada is a good country and they will give you charity, and you can reside there very easily," he said.


More than 50 per cent of asylum seekers at the border arrive without papers, immigration officials said.


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