

REFUGEE WAVE CREATES A CRISIS IN BORDER CITY

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Body

At 4 A.M. today, as her Greyhound bus drove up Interstate 87 past snow-covered apple orchards and fields to arrive at the Canadian **border**, Rosa Funes was as far away as she had ever been from the home she had left in Sonsonate, El Salvador.

By 11 A.M., she had been turned away by the Canadian authorities and was told to return in five weeks for an immigration hearing.

Ms. Funes, her husband and her brother walked away from the "bonjour" sign welcoming visitors to Canada to join nearly 100 other **refugees** in this small **city**, as well as thousands elsewhere along the Canada-United States **border**.

They have been stopped while trying to enter Canada to avoid deportation under the new United States immigration law.

New York as Transit Point

As with Ms. Funes, most of those caught in the bind are from Central America. They recently flew from such **cities** as Los Angeles, Houston and Dallas to New York, where they went to the Port Authority Bus Terminal in midtown Manhattan and boarded buses for Montreal.

But when they arrived here, they discovered that they would have to wait up to a month to enter Canada - a month in American communities where the foreign language is French, the spiciest food is Italian, and the weather colder than most had imagined possible.

The rush to Canada started last November, when the new United States immigration law went into effect. **Refugees** awaiting entry to Canada are beginning to gather in such **border** areas as Plattsburgh, Buffalo and Detroit, according to United States immigration officials.

There are no firm numbers, but United States officials said Canada had turned back several thousand **refugees** to await hearing dates. The hearings are generally set for a month after arrival at the **border**. Under the new immigration law, all illegal aliens who cannot prove that they have continuously lived in the United States since January 1982 are subject to deportation, and employees who hire them can be penalized.

Generally, United States **border** agents issue deportation orders with delayed dates.

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For Plattsburgh, known largely for its Air Force base and a string of discount shopping centers that attract Canadian tourists, the flood of refugees has been the biggest crisis in years, according to officials.

"We're kind of a rural town that has ended up with an urban problem," the Clinton County Social Services Commissioner, Rose M. Pandozy, said.

Last Friday, the problems for the refugees worsened. Until then, the Canadian Government had granted immediate entry to refugees from 18 countries, including El Salvador. Now, these refugees, along with the others, must wait for hearing dates.

Canadian officials said their new policy was intended to achieve a more orderly flow of people into the country.

Surge in Numbers

"Through November, we started to get one, two or three refugees a week," the executive director of the Plattsburgh Community Crisis Center, Brian M. Smith, said. "Then we got up to 12 a week, and then the Canadians changed their policy on Friday. And we filled up two motels with people."

In October, a month before the new immigration law was signed, the Canadian border station near here processed 300 refugees, according to an agent at the border, Bernadette Blain. In November, the number climbed to 400, 1,200 in December, 1,300 last month and 50 a day this month.

The number has slowed since Friday, Ms. Blain said. However, she acknowledged, it could pick up when the aliens realize that the waiting period is one month.

Most of the refugees said it was worth waiting for a hearing. Despite the delay, Ms. Blain said, the Canadians have not denied anyone here a hearing.

In Salvation Army Building

Local officials have not decided whether to ask Governor Cuomo to declare their town a disaster area, according to Ms. Pandozy. The officials, she added, are uncertain whether the refugees could be considered a disaster problem and whether such a designation would create bureaucratic problems.

Up to now, the officials - from government, social agencies and church groups - are caught up in a series of meetings and seem to be containing the crisis.

The crisis center, at 29 Protection Avenue, is more accustomed to handling suicide-prevention calls than refugees. Nonetheless, as early as November, Mr. Smith, together with the Red Cross and the county's social services bureau, began to plan for the influx.

At the beginning of last week, Mr. Smith and others moved the refugees from the motels to a Salvation Army building. In the one-story brick building, the travelers sleep on cots and eat in the kitchen; they shuttle by bus to a Y.M.C.A. for showers.

Offers of Work

As the numbers increased, Mr. Smith was anticipating having to send people back to the two motels, on Route 9. "We're desperately seeking more space," he said.

Church groups have invited the refugees for meals, and donations of clothing, toys and money have gone "from trickling in to flowing," according to Mr. Smith.

Mr. Smith said some nearby employers had called to offer jobs. But, he pointed out, immigration laws prohibit the refugees from working.

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So far, the refugees have not ventured far from their shelter, and most townspeople have yet to encounter their temporary guests.

At the Salvation Army, the chapel looks more like a park these days, with men in shirt-sleeves reading their newspapers on the benches, children playing on the expanse of blue carpet, and women trying to sort clothes from suitcases stuffed to capacity.

'We Need Work'

Capt. Jack Holcomb, who runs the shelter, said the only problem had been with the heat. "Basically, they turn the heat up, and I turn it back down," he said.

Most of the refugees are from Central America, and they said they believed that their lives would be in danger if they returned to their homelands. Ms. Funes had been working in Los Angeles as a live-in housekeeper for three years and decided to leave for Canada after her husband and brother had lost their jobs.

"We need to work and send money to my family," Ms. Funes said. She added that recently, a cousin, Noel Mendez, had disappeared in El Salvador.

Roger Narvaez, a 33-year-old mathematics teacher from Nicaragua, arrived here with his wife and two children three weeks ago and is scheduled to have his Canadian immigration hearing March 10.

He said he has been in the United States a year and has always wanted to live in Canada, where his children will live in a culture "that is American, but also European."

'It Means No Future'

He said he saw no hope in Nicaragua. "You live there and see a future that is difficult and not going to change for a long time," he said. "Our Government is doing what all Governments would do if there were a military problem in their country. But for us it means no future."

At the building's main door, a group of Salvadorans who had missed immediate entry into Canada by 24 hours last Saturday sat on the floor playing a card game called perro, or dog.

Manuel Navarretete, 25, and Antonio Umanzor lived in Houston three years, working at restaurants. With the new immigration law, they feared immigration agents would send them back to El Salvador, so they picked up and headed for Canada.

Although they had become good friends in Houston, Mr. Umanzor said, they are willing to split up and "go anywhere" the Canadian Government sends them.

Graphic

Photos of refugees awaiting immigration hearings in Canada passing time in a Salvation Army chapel in Plattsburgh, N.Y. (NYT/Nancie Battaglia); Photo of Capt. Jack Holcomb talking with a group of refugees in a Salvation Army chapel in Plattsburgh, N.Y. (NYT/Nancie Battaglia) (Page 34)

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