

A clear case for compassion

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Body

It was a poignant moment at Pearson International Airport this week when Saadia Hetaj was finally reunited with her husband, Suad.

Eleven weeks had passed since Canadian immigration officials broke up the family and forced her to return to her native Morocco. It was a time she says she spent living in fear of being killed by a father she had offended by refusing his arranged marriage.

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And while she was not harmed and the story for the Hamilton couple appears to have reached a happy ending, it does not excuse the government red tape that unnecessarily caused so much heartache.

Immigration Minister Joe Volpe now says foreign spouses of Canadians or permanent residents would no longer be forced to leave the country in order to apply to stay here. If he had made this policy change sooner, Saadia never would have been deported.

Her application to remain in this country could have been processed while she stayed in Canada. She would not have had to fulfill the imperative of applying to stay here from outside the country's borders.

Saadia first applied as a refugee. But that claim was rejected. So she then applied to stay on compassionate grounds, but that application was overwhelmed by a tsunami of paperwork within the immigration department.

The right documents didn't reach the right desks in time and she found herself being deported Jan. 29. Volpe had been asked to halt the expulsion, but wouldn't. She tearfully boarded the plane to Morocco with the couple's two-year-old son.

Eventually though, Volpe did intervene. He suggested he would look favourably on her application to return and instructed officials to speed up her case.

Eventually, it came down to her getting a Moroccan passport and exit visa -- which subjected her to even more bureaucratic grief. But finally she was successful and her appeal was approved by Canadian authorities, pending a medical examination and security check.

What we learn from this case is that Canada -- in large part a nation of immigrants -- can still be a daunting fortress for our newest arrivals. And clearly the Hetajs' troubles would have been far less if they had the financial means to hire a good lawyer to help them through the system.

If her application to stay in Canada on compassionate grounds had been submitted and processed sooner, she probably never would have been deported. A little good legal advice at key junctures could have made all the

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difference. But surely -- in such **cases** where people fall through the cracks -- immigration officials can show greater flexibility and **compassion**.

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