

The Global Refugee Crisis

The UNHCR reports another record number of forcibly displaced people for the year 2017, with 68.5 million individuals forced to leave their home as a result of persecution, conflict, violence or human rights violations.ⁱ Since 2012, which marks the beginning of the Syrian conflict, the number of forcibly displaced people continues to reach record highs, year after year. The global refugee population under the UNHCR’s mandate has now reached 25.4 million, which is referred to as “the global refugee crisis”. Developing countries host a disproportionate number of the world’s refugees. In fact, 85% of the world’s refugees are concentrated in developing countries, with one third of them in the world’s least developed countries.

Current Situation in Canada

Canada **is not** currently experiencing a refugee crisis. The levels of asylum claims, although higher than usual, are comparable to 2001 levelsⁱⁱ. Canada’s refugee intake represents a mere 0.2% of the world’s refugee population, and incoming refugees represented just 0.13% of the overall Canadian population last year.

However, the Office of the UNHCR in Canada does report an increased number of asylum seekers crossing **irregularly** the Canada-U.S. border.ⁱⁱⁱ This increase in irregular entries coincides with the elections of the current U.S. President, and is caused principally by the Canada-U.S. Safe Third Country Agreement^{iv}.

Canada’s International Obligations

Canada is a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention, the legal document defining and governing refugee rights as well as legal obligations of States. The Convention’s cornerstone is the principle of non-refoulement (Article 33) which states that (with some exceptions) refugees should not be returned to a country where s/he faces serious threats to her/his life or freedom.

The current global protectionist and militarized approach to borders by developed countries is contributing to increased suffering of displaced populations by making them highly vulnerable to violence, sexual violence, torture, trafficking and exploitation^v. This is in violation of several human rights conventions, including the 1951 Refugee Convention.

Fair and Non-Discriminatory Management of Refugees and Asylum Seekers

Proposed by: CFUW Perth and District

Adopted at the 2018 AGM

RESOLVED, that the Canadian Federation of University Women urgently urges the Federal Government of Canada to provide and expand the resources, training, counselling, and infrastructure to the appropriate municipal, provincial, territorial, and federal entities to ensure an efficient and effective refugee claims system;

RESOLVED, that the Canadian Federation of University Women urges the Federal Government of Canada to protect the world’s most vulnerable by continuing to increase the number of vetted refugees and asylum seekers accepted, settled, and integrated into the country now and onward, after the measures outlined in resolved clause #1 have been initiated;

RESOLVED, that the Canadian Federation of University Women urges the Federal Government of Canada to suspend the Canada/US Safe Third Country Agreement.

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The Canada/US Safe Third Country Agreement

The Canada-U.S. Safe Third Country Agreement imposes that asylum seekers make their refugee claims in the first “safe country” in which they arrive. This means that any asylum seekers arriving in the U.S. and then going to an official entry point at the Canadian border are turned away. But if asylum seekers issue a claim once they are on Canadian soil, their claim has to be processed by the Canadian government, which explains the growth in irregular entries. The increased vulnerability irregular entries generate for individuals and families seeking refuge in Canada was sadly highlighted when Mavis Otuteye, a woman from Ghana, lost her life back in winter 2017 while attempting to make her way to Canada.^{vi}

Since the adoption of the Canada-U.S. Safe Third Country Agreement in 2001, we have seen a securitization of U.S. migration policies and laws that are inconsistent with the 1951 Refugee Convention and several other human rights conventions. In 2015, anti-terrorist laws enabled the United States to massively reject asylum claims mostly from Colombian individuals based on “ties to terrorism”.^{vii} In 2017, newly elected President Trump signed an executive order which denied entry into the U.S. for 90 days, for citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries, for 120 days for refugees, and indefinitely for Syrian refugees. In 2018, the U.S. President issued a number of orders that not only criminalized asylum seekers and migrants, but that has caused the separation and detention of more than 3,000 children from their parents or legal guardian.

The recent blatant violation of human rights in the U.S. reinforces our belief that Canada’s compliance to international human rights conventions should not be dependent on the U.S. and that the Canada- U.S. Safe Third Country

Agreement needs to be suspended immediately.

What can Canada do?

Canada has the legal and moral obligation to do more to solve the global refugee crisis. Canada must continue to show leadership and spark international solidarity towards refugees by a) allocating adequate resources to ensure successful refugee resettlement and integration, b) increasing its own refugee intake, as well as by c) immediately suspending the Canada-U.S. Safe Third Country Agreement.

ⁱ UNHCR. “Global Trends http”, 2017, URL <http://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2017/>

ⁱⁱ Grant, Tavia. “Are asylum seekers crossing into Canada illegally? A look at facts behind controversy”, August 2018, URL <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-asylum-seekers-in-canada-has-become-a-divisive-and-confusing-issue-a/>

ⁱⁱⁱ CARL. “Legal Backgrounder: refugee claimants are not illegal”, June 2018, URL <http://carl-acaadr.ca/sites/default/files/CARL%20-%20refugees%20are%20not%20illegal%20-%20June%202018%20%2800266338xDE1E4%29.pdf>

^{iv} UNHCR. “Irregular arrivals at the border in 2017”, June 2018, URL <https://www.unhcr.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/IRREGULAR-ARRIVALS-AT-THE-BORDER-IN-2017-ENG.pdf>

^v Atak, I., & Crepeau, F. “The Securitization of Asylum and Human Rights in Canada and the European Union”. 2013, In S. Juss & C. Harvey (Eds.), Contemporary Issues in Refugee Law (227-256). Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing.

^{vi} The Canadian Press. “Woman, 57, dies of hypothermia while trying to cross border into Canada from Minnesota”, May 2017, URL <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2017/05/30/woman-57-dies-of-possible-hypothermia-while-heading-to-cross-border-in-canada.html>

^{vii} Migration Policy Institute. “Material Support to Terrorism”, 2008, URL <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/material-support-terrorism-%E2%80%94-consequences-refugees-and-asylum-seekers-united-states>