

# Stakeholders concerned about immigration bill

By ADAM BOWIE

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A local consultation session coordinated by the Canadian Council for Refugees grew heated at times Thursday as some stakeholders and advocates questioned federal representatives about controversial new immigration Bill C-31.

About 200 people attended a session — dubbed Government Perspectives — at the Crowne Plaza Hotel on Thursday morning, which gave spokespersons from Citizenship and Immigration Canada, the Canadian Border Services Agency, and the Immigration and Refugee Board an opportunity to discuss the goals of the proposed immigration bill.

They explained how the bill will deviate from the system and answered questions from the floor.

Due to time constraints, only about 10 participants were able to ask questions before the end of the session, though they were able to hone in on some troubling aspects of the controversial legislation.

Bill C-31 is supposed to give the government the ability to quickly deport refugees without clear claims to this country, to battle human smuggling operations and to require in-depth biometric data from newcomers granted special visas.

It has sparked fierce debate across the country since the government tabled the proposed bill in February.

The legislation is called an Act to Protect Canada's Refugee Determination System, though critics often refer to it as the refugee exclusion act.

Jason Kenney, Canada's minister of Immigration, Citizenship and Multiculturalism, has already amended sections of the proposed act after a wave of criticism.

It hasn't quelled concerns about:

- what some see as unacceptably short time frames for refugees to prepare for immigration hearings;
- inappropriate accommodations for claimants who may be suffering the ill effects of torture, sexual assault or traumas they encountered while escaping their countries of origin;
- inadequate time to access mental-health services before going through the procedural process;
- and a variety of other perceived holes in the legislation.

Rivka Auginfeld, an immigration advocate who worked with newcomers to Canada for many years in Montreal, expressed frustration with a clause in the refugee application system that could limit a new arrival's access to the refugee appeal division process if he or she had landed as a refugee in the United States before coming to Canada.

Peter Hill, director-general of post-border programs for the Canadian Border Services Agency, said he understands some people are frustrated with aspects of Bill C-31, though he

believes it performs an important function: it helps the government speed up the deportation process for people who aren't required

"Bill C-31 proposes a number of fairly significant measures to strengthen enforcement efforts, including legislative reform, regulatory reform, and the addition of some program tools, all of which are designed to expedite the removal of those who are found inadmissible to Canada or who are found not to be in need of Canada's protection," he said.

Many refugees who don't meet the requirements often remain in Canada for more than a year before they're processed and deported, he said.

Rick Goldman, a spokesman for the Canadian Council for Refugees' committee to aid refugees, said he's concerned about how the federal agencies will be able to process a massive backlog of more than 38,000 cases while implementing a new system.

It'll require refugees to file immigration appeals and set up hearings only days after arriving in the country.

"Some hearings will be as soon as 30 days after the person's arrival in Canada, making preparations — in terms of the proper preparations for the case, access to council, etc. — very challenging for all," he said. "There'll only be 15 working days allowed for filing what's called perfecting, or completion, of the appeal. By comparison, 45 days are now allowed for a federal court judicial review."

Goldman said Thursday's consultation session allowed stakeholders and advocates from across the Maritimes to hear what federal decision-makers have to say about the bill.

The Montreal-based refugee advocate said Thursday's session helped the council gather new details about how the bill will affect Canadians, though a lot of questions remain unanswered.

"I think it was at least very healthy for us to vent our enormous frustrations with the changes and to have them be directly confronted with these (concerns)," he said.

Simon Coakeley, executive director of the Immigration and Refugee Board, said the climate of fiscal restraint in Ottawa will make some of these transitions difficult, but the federal agencies most affected are developing plans that should sort these issues out before they come into effect.

"Like other government departments we were subject to, in our case, a 10 per cent reduction in our budget," he told the room.

"So a significant chunk of our reductions have come... by not hiring interviewers and we will not have as many (refugee appeal division) members and, as it works out, not as many support staff for the (appeal division) as we originally expected."

He said they've also had to cut back on transcription services for refugee hearings.