

Future of Resettlement: Concerns

September 2013

Background

Memos to the Minister recently released through Access to Information show that the government is pursuing a troubling shift in Canada's approach to resettlement of refugees.

The radical reorientation to Canada's resettlement program involves in particular:

- Reducing the numbers of refugees with high needs who are resettled to Canada.
- Moving from a global resettlement program to one where a few specific refugee populations are targeted.

The new orientation is less about responding to the refugees most in need, and more about selecting refugees who are healthy and will integrate easily, and who can be processed most conveniently by Canada, and about using refugee resettlement to support Canada's foreign policy goals. While the changes all make Canada's refugee resettlement program less generous and more self-serving, the memos recommend that the communications strategy should emphasize Canada's generosity.

Key points in Memos

- One memo notes that the Minister "requested a paper on what can be done administratively to admit fewer high needs refugees through the resettlement program."
- Unlike some other resettlement countries, Canada has traditionally resisted selecting refugee populations on the basis of whether they will integrate well. A 12 October 2012 memo provides information about settlement outcomes of refugees from the Horn of Africa "to help inform decision-making on whether Canada should respond to UNHCR's appeals for more resettlement out of the Horn of Africa." Shortly afterwards, the government turned down a recommendation from the UNHCR to resettle Somali refugees.
- The decision to resettle 5,000 refugees out of Ankara is justified in part by the fact that it "complements Canada's efforts to build bilateral relationship with Turkey." (Oct 30, 2012 memo)
- The decision to target selected populations for resettlement went against the advice of the UNHCR. "UNHCR would prefer Canada not move away from its current global approach" (Oct 30, 2012)
- The government wants to resettle fewer refugees with medical needs (including survivors of torture). Various options are proposed to achieve this. It is acknowledged that these options might be seen variously as deliberately working against spirit of excessive demand exemption and objective in Act of saving lives, or as reversal of humanitarian tradition, that they would disproportionately affect vulnerable refugees and that they might be vulnerable to legal challenge as discriminatory. (December 11, 2012 memo)
- A proactive communications plan is recommended "highlighting Canada's continued leadership role in refugee resettlement". (December 11, 2012 memo)

Key question

What has been decided by the government regarding resettlement of refugees with medical needs? The memos released do not say.