



23 December 2020

The Honourable Bill Blair  
Minister of Public Safety  
269 Laurier Avenue West  
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P8

Dear Minister,

I am writing on behalf of the Canadian Council for Refugees to express our opposition to the recent decision by the Canada Border Services Agency to resume removals.

We call on the government to reinstate the suspension of removals in light of the pandemic, and to announce the suspension publicly on the CBSA website.

The suspension of removals was instituted due to the pandemic. Now is certainly not the time to restart removals, given that the pandemic is still very much with us – the situation is in fact worse both in Canada and in many other countries than when removals were suspended. There are widespread lockdowns, record rates of infection and high rates of community transmission.

International travel at this time is unsafe. Your government has issued an “Official Global Travel Advisory” urging against non-essential travel outside Canada.

Public health considerations clearly do not support removals. We are all being urged to isolate, even within Canada, in order to restrict the spread of the virus. Canada has a travel ban and a border ban in order to restrict travel from abroad to a minimum – neither of these bans have been lifted. Many other countries have similar restrictions. Resuming removals goes directly counter to the public health goal of limiting all non-essential travel.

Conducting removals is unfair to other countries, since those removed could be bringing in the virus, especially given high infection rates in many parts of Canada.

It also creates risks for the health of those people removed – they may be at increased risk of contracting the virus if they are sent to a country with a high infection rate. This is particularly the case for people who have little money and would thus be unable to isolate themselves safely in the country of destination.

Apart from the direct health effects, the pandemic has had a huge impact on the economic situation in most countries. Even before the pandemic, many people who were removed from Canada returned to situations of economic hardship and insecurity – those situations can only be worse in the pandemic context. Many people in Canada have suffered financially due to the pandemic and would therefore return with little or no money to help them re-establish themselves in the country of destination.

The CBSA cited the emergence of vaccines as a reason for resuming removals. While this is certainly good news, it does not change the current reality – as the Prime Minister is repeatedly reminding us. It is therefore wildly premature to resume removals on this basis.

We are particularly concerned about the impact of the decision to resume removals on affected people. The news is creating great anxiety. Even if in practice the numbers of removals CBSA conducts may be small, the decision causes immense fear and distress. The effects are felt not just by those who are themselves facing removal, but by all family members, such as their spouse and children, who are often Canadian citizens. Many others are also negatively affected: employers, colleagues, friends and neighbours who share in the fear of a new disruption, at a time when we all already face so many disruptions.

We want to highlight that the best interests of the child are at stake in many removals. The effects of the pandemic make children more vulnerable to the harsh consequences of the removal of a parent, other family member or even of themselves.

The CBSA has given us assurances that people will not be removed if they are eligible for the new pandemic healthcare workers pathway – but the government has provided no public written assurances. Similarly, although there are a number of countries to which people are not generally removed (due to a Temporary Suspension of Removals or an Administrative Deferral of Removals), this is not necessarily well-known, either by the people affected or by various levels of government. The result is great anxiety and insecurity.

There are also important practical impacts of the policy change for people awaiting removal. When removal is not formally suspended, people may no longer have access to a work permit or to many governmental services. As a result, even if few people are actually removed in the coming months, this policy change will place many thousands of people in a much more precarious situation.

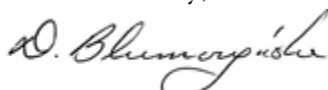
For people who are called in for removal, they can in principle make a deferral request, presenting arguments related to their personal situation, including best interests of the child factors. However, the pandemic context makes it much more difficult for people to prepare such requests and gather relevant documentation (NGOs and lawyers are unable to give in-person services; health professionals that might normally provide letters on health status are fully occupied responding to the pandemic).

For those leaving Canada, preparing for a dignified departure is difficult or impossible in a lockdown situation – closing up an apartment, selling belongings, saying goodbye to family, friends and colleagues are all immeasurably more difficult.

In light of all the factors mentioned above, we believe that the decision to resume removals is wrong at this time and we urge that the decision be reversed.

We would welcome an opportunity to discuss our concerns with you.

Yours sincerely,



Dorota Blumczynska  
President