

Honourable Diane Finley
Minister of Citizenship and Immigration
House of Commons
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A7 Canada

17 May 2007

OPEN LETTER TO DIANE FINLEY, MINISTER OF IMMIGRATION, RE ABDELKADER BELAOUNI, 502 DAYS IN CHURCH SANCTUARY

Dear Minister Finley,

We are community associations, NGOs and other organizations who are active in Quebec. We are involved in a wide variety of work and operate within broadly diverse sectors of Quebec society.

We are approaching you on behalf of Mr. Abdelkader Belaouni who, in January 2006, was forced into church sanctuary in Montreal to avoid deportation. For over a year, we have attempted to draw the attention of Immigration Canada and successive Immigration Ministers to the situation of Abdelkader Belaouni.

In December 2005, the **Committee to Aid Refugees – Montreal** (CAR-Montreal) wrote to Immigration Canada, “Mr. Belaouni is someone who would suffer “unusual and excessive” hardship if obliged to leave Canada and, for this reason, we call upon you to allow him to remain in Canada.” CAR Montreal is a church-based charitable organization which advocates on behalf of refugee claimants in Québec. It coordinates the refugee protection work of the *Table de concertation des organismes au service des personnes réfugiées et immigrantes* (Consultation forum for refugee and immigrant service organizations, TCRI) and is an active member of the Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR).

Also in December 2005, **Welfare Rights** wrote in support of Mr. Belaouni, “Mr. Belaouni is well integrated into the life of our neighbourhood, participating in numerous community activities and having made many friends among the local population. Adbelkader is now ‘one of us’ and that is why so many of us are so worried for his security” (translation). Welfare Rights works in the Pointe Saint-Charles neighbourhood of Montreal, where Abdelkader Belaouni lives. Mr. Belaouni was active in this group before receiving a deportation order.

In January 2006, the **Table de concertation Action Gardien** wrote to then federal Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Minister Solberg, “We are as

astonished as we are angry to learn the Canada has tried to deport Mr. Abdelkader Belaouni since January 5th. Mr. Belaouni is a man who has overcome many obstacles, including visual deficiency, and who was able to establish a life of dignity and stability here, after already being displaced two times. Why is Canada trying to deport, to detention, deportation and insecurity, an individual who has greatly contributed to our community at the same time as living in dignity and autonomy in this country?" (translation). Action Gardien is a coalition of almost 25 community associations in Pointe Saint-Charles.

Also in January 2006, the **Confédération des organismes de personnes handicapées du Québec** (Confederation of organizations of handicapped people in Quebec, COPHAN), wrote to Minister Solberg, "Considering that Mr. Belaouni has shown good will and capacity to integrate into Quebec society, we ask you to stop the deportation warrant against him and grant him residence" (translation). COPHAN is a network of about 45 associations and networks working for the rights of people with disabilities throughout Quebec.

In February 2006, **Amnisite internationale section Canadienne francophone** wrote to Minister Solberg, Mr. Belaouni, "has involved himself in community organizations and the life of his neighbourhood, thus demonstrating his capacity to adapt to Quebec and Canadian society. Moreover, he has already been forced to move twice to seek out a life of security, with more dignity and autonomy. In order to bring an end to this quest for a better life, and in the name of human dignity, Amnesty International calls on you to immediately grant permanent resident status to Mr. Belaouni on humanitarian grounds" (translation).

In March 2006, the **Ligue des droits et libertés** (Québec Civil Liberties Union) reviewed Mr. Belaouni's file and concluded, "Among the reasons given for refusing to grant Mr. Belaouni permanent resident status on 24 October 2005, the fact that he had not found paid work since arriving in Canada was a major factor in the refusal of the application. We consider the analysis of Mr. Belaouni's file in this respect to have entirely overlooked fundamental elements which must be taken into consideration in the file of a blind person. Among the elements which the decision failed to take into account are two particularly significant ones: the structural barriers to work that Mr. Belaouni encountered and the efforts to integrate that he made within this context. It is necessary to take these elements into account. This appears to us to be a question of justice and equality ..." (translation).

In April 2006, the **Alfie Roberts Institute** wrote to Minister Solberg, "His significant contributions and the strong connections he has made are invaluable and demonstrate the active participation esteemed in our community. It is for these reasons we write to express support for Abdelkader Belaouni's demand that the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Canada immediately regularize his status." The Alfie Roberts Institute is a Montreal-based independent

education and research centre to encourage study and research on the history and social development of communities of African and Caribbean descent.

In December 2007, a spokesperson for the **United Church of Canada** wrote in support of Mr. Belaouni to Minister Solberg, "I suggest the emphasis in this case has been wrong; we need to determine how we can help, not hinder, his remaining permanently in Canada. His blindness should not stop us from seeing that he has already contributed and wants to continue contributing to his host community."

In January 2007, the **South Asian Women's Community Centre** (SAWCC) wrote to you, Minister Finley, shortly after you were appointed Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, "SAWCC finds it unacceptable that Mr. Belaouni has lost an entire year of his life. We therefore request that you, in your capacity as Minister of Citizenship and Immigration to immediately grant Permanent Resident status to Mr. Belaouni ..." SAWCC is a Montreal-based organization that has been in existence for more than 25 years, providing services to immigrant and refugee women and their families.

In February 2007, ***l'Association multi-ethnique pour l'intégration des personnes handicapées*** (Multi-ethnic association for the integration of handicapped people, AMEIPH), wrote to you, "It has been 13 months since Mr. Belaouni has been imprisoned in the church. The community is offering him a great deal of support, but it is still a prison, without being able to leave and to do all the activities which a free citizen can do in this country which aspires to be so democratic. We ask you, in your capacity as Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, to act immediately on behalf of Mr. Belaouni and grant him residence on humanitarian grounds." For 26 years, AMEIPH has worked for the equality of people with disabilities from all backgrounds. Mr. Belaouni volunteered as a front desk receptionist for AMEIPH for a year before he was given a deportation order.

This is a very small sampling of the many letters that have been sent to you and previous Ministers of Immigration over the past 15 months, demonstrating the breadth of support for Mr. Belaouni among organizations active in Quebec. We are also aware that members of federal Parliament from all major parties have intervened on behalf of Mr. Belaouni and that individuals in Europe are beginning to communicate with Canadian Embassies in their countries in support of Mr. Belaouni's application for permanent resident status in Canada.

We believe that Mr. Belaouni should remain in Canada. To summarize some of the reasons:

Integration in society. Mr. Belaouni has a very strong network of support in his neighbourhood of Point St. Charles and throughout Montreal, attesting to his integration in Canada. As his member of federal Parliament, Mr. Thierry St. Cyr,

stated in Parliament, “he is well integrated into the Quebec community. He has the support of the entire community of Point St. Charles.” (translation, Hansard, 22 February 2007). Mr. Norman Doyle, the Conservative Chair of the federal Parliamentary Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration concurred, “His application to stay in Canada appears to have widespread legal, moral and financial support from the community at large” (letter to Monte Solberg, June 2006).

Financial sponsorship. Five individuals – Professor Guylaine Racine, Dr. Pierre Dongier, Mr. Ian Ilavsky, Father James McDonald, and Mr. Marc Champagne - have offered to financially sponsor Mr. Belaouni until he is economically self-sufficient, thus ensuring that the state takes no risk in granting him legal status.

Contributions to society. With his volunteer work at organizations such as the AMEIPH and Welfare Rights, Mr. Belaouni has well demonstrated his capacity and determination to contribute to the community in a meaningful way – perhaps much more than many who enjoy citizenship. Even after entering sanctuary, he has found ways of giving back to the community, such as hosting a monthly radio show airing issues of concern to the neighbourhood on CKUT 90.3 FM, broadcast live from the church.

Refusal based on discrimination. Mr. Belaouni was refused permanent residence in October 2005 largely on the grounds of lack of integration in employment. In effect, this decision discriminated against Mr. Belaouni as a blind person. The *Ligue des droits et libertés* found that, “evaluating integration into Quebec society without taking into account the barriers he faced as a blind person and the efforts that he has made to overcome these barriers constitutes discrimination and non-respect for the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms” (translation, *Ligue des droits* study, March 2006). The refusal failed to take into account the fact that he was prevented from accessing training programmes – recognized by the Canadian government as necessary to equalize opportunity for the blind in the job market - because he did not have permanent resident status.

Hardship of displacement. Mr. Belaouni has already been forced to restart his life twice. In 1996, he fled the political instability and violence of Algeria’s civil war, in which hundreds of thousands of civilians were killed and many thousands displaced. In early 2003, he fled the atmosphere of racial tension and policies of racial profiling, such as the “special registration” programme, in post September 11th USA. Dislocation is difficult for everyone. For a blind person in a sighted society, it poses particular stresses and difficulties, as physical surroundings, modes of transport, service networks and relations of reliance and trust must all be re-learned and re-established.

Alienation from Algeria. Mr. Belaouni has not lived in Algeria for nearly eleven years.

Physical security and fear of returning to Algeria. Although we believe the considerations above provide more than enough reason to support Mr. Belaouni's application for permanent resident status on humanitarian grounds, we also note that the situation in Algeria is far from stable. In a recent, highly-mediatised incident, dozens were killed and hundreds wounded when bombs exploded in Algiers on 11 April 2007. Mr. Belaouni recalls all too vividly the special vulnerability of blind people in such violent attacks. Mr. Belaouni's physical security could not be guaranteed should he be forcibly sent to Algeria.

Economic security and autonomy. In Mr. Belaouni's experience and according to communication with individuals within Algeria, government equality programmes for the blind appear, for all practical purposes, to be non-existent in Algeria. Thus Mr. Belaouni's economic security and the same degree of autonomy that he could attain in Quebec could not be guaranteed should he be deported.

Mr. Belaouni is simply seeking to live without fear and in dignity, which is no more than the fundamental right of every human being. **We strongly support Mr. Belaouni's application for permanent resident status on humanitarian grounds.**

Despite numerous letters and telephone calls, in an outpouring of support at every level, from community organizations, individuals, politicians, national organizations, and even foreign nationals, the government does not appear to have yet taken any steps to find a solution. Simple requests for a meeting to discuss options have been ignored or refused.

Some of us know Mr. Belaouni through his involvement in our organizations and in our communities. Some of us work with refugees and immigrants on a daily basis. We are aware of the problems with Canada's immigration system. The fact that Mr. Belaouni has had to try so many different avenues and has still not been given status in Canada is, to us, a particularly striking illustration of those problems. We are convinced that Mr. Belaouni's is a case in which the Minister needs to intervene. By doing so, she will indicate a willingness to address the problems which affect our communities.

Mr. Belaouni's life has remained in limbo for over 500 days. This is taking its toll on every aspect of his well-being.

We therefore ask you to meet with a delegation of our organizations and representatives of Mr. Belaouni before the end of May in order to find a solution without further delay.

Sincerely,

Sylvie Béliveau, President, Accès aux Services et aux Produits Adaptés (ASPA)

Nicole Cloutier, Action Autonomie Montréal

Raoul Lincourt, President, Action des chrétiens pour l'abolition de la torture (ACAT Canada)

Maria Barile, Action des Femmes Handicapées (Montréal)

Samuel J Singer, Coordinateur, Action Santé Travesti(e)s et Transsexuel(le)s du Québec (ASTT(e)Q)

Alexis Musanganya, President, African Rainbow

Amarkai Laryea, Trustee, Alfie Roberts Institute

Jérôme di Giovanni, Director, Alliance des Communautés Culturelles pour l'Égalité dans la santé et les services sociaux (ACCÉSSS)

Luciana Soavé, Coordinator, Association multi-ethnique pour l'intégration des personnes handicapées (AMEIPH)

Le Conseil exécutif de l'Association pour une Solidarité Syndicale Étudiante (ASSÉ)

Aqiyla Lawrence, Black Students' Network of McGill University

Khaled Mouanmar, President, Canadian Arab Federation (CAF)

Mohamed Kamel, V.P. Government Relations, Canadian Muslim Forum

Carrefour d'éducation populaire de Point St-Charles

Jean Isseri, directeur général, Carrefour jeunesse-emploi de Côte-des-Neiges

Nora Butler Burke, Centre 2110

Jean-François Bégin, Centre Afrika Center

Josée Longchamps, Centre d'aide Aqua-R-Elle

Ghislaine Provost, intervenante, Centre des femmes d'ici et d'ailleurs

Jean-Marc Biron, Director, Centre justice et foi

Suzanne Brasseur, Club populaire des consommateurs (Pointe-St-Charles)

Immigration Support Team of the Comité d'éducation aux adultes de la Petite-Bourgogne et de St-Henri (CÉDA)

Denis Prescott, Comité de pastoral social et solidarité Ste-Croix

Nicole Pans, Comité des personnes assistées sociales de Pointe Saint-Charles (CPAS)

Michel Tourigny, Comité des sans emploi de Pointe St-Charles

Christiane Sibillotte, Comité Justice Sociale des Soeurs Auxiliatrices

Richard Goldman, Coordinator, Committee to Aid Refugees – Montreal

Kathy Ramsey, member, Committee to Support Abdelkader Belaoui

Lise Ferland, Director, Community Legal Services of Point St. Charles and Little Burgundy

Chloé Serradori, Executive Director, Confédération des organismes de personnes handicapées du Québec (COPHAN) * *Representing over 40 organizations.*

Suzanne Loiselle, Director, Entraide missionnaire

Nancy Burrows, Coordinator, Fédération des femmes du Québec

Alan Wong, Gay and Lesbian Asians of Montreal (GLAM)

Rémy N., Président, Helem Montréal

Bitia Mary Eslami, Coordinator, Immigrant Workers Center

Sharon Difruscia, Justice and Peace Committee of the Catholic Archdiocese of Montreal

Gabrielle Major, Coordinator, Les Frères et Soeurs d'Émile-Nelligan

Nada Raphaël, Coordinator, LGBTTTQ Ethnocultural Day

Nicole Filion, President, Ligue des droits et libertés
Micheline Crompt, Director, Madame Prend Congé (Centre des femmes de Pointe-St-Charles)
Daniel Harpin, Maison de Partage d'Youville
Shloime Perel, McGill Refugee Research Project
Aruna Krishnakumar, Midnight Kitchen (McGill University)
Salam El Menyawi, President, Muslim Council of Montreal
Piper Huggins, President, NDP Québec Section
Gerry Pascal, Non-violence Resource Centre
Joanne Vasquez, Chairperson, Philippine Women's Centre of Quebec
Isabelle Matte, Executive Coordinator, Point Saint Charles Community Clinic
Anna Kruzynski, member, Pointe libertaire
Tynan Jarrett, Project 10
Nathalie Cohen, Coordinator, Quebec Public Interest Research Group at Concordia (QPIRG Concordia)
Leila Pourtavaf, Quebec Public Interest Research Group at McGill (QPIRG McGill)
Amir Khadir, National Spokesperson and Minerva Gutierrez, mobilisation & solidarity, Québec Solidaire
Patricia Paquette, Quebec Transsexual Association
Marc Tremblay, Regroupement Information Logement (RIL)
John Docherty, Coordinator, Réseau d'intervention auprès des personnes ayant subi la violence organisée (RIVO)
Sofian Benaissa, member, RueBrique
Dr. Viviane Namaste, Acting Principal, Simone de Beauvoir Institute
Brian McDonough, Director, Social Action Office of the Catholic Archdiocese of Montreal
Derek Maccuish, Director, Social Justice Committee of Montreal
Meg Leitold, Graham Latham & Cory Legassic, members of the Comité suivi, Solidarity Across Borders
Sadeqa Siddiqui, South Asian Women's Community Centre (SAWCC)
Patricia Murphy, St. Columba House
Sharon Difruscia, St. Monica's Faith and Justice Committee
Karine Triollet, Coordinator, Table de concertation Action Gardien de Pointe Saint-Charles * *Representing over 20 organizations.*
Stephan Reichhold, Table de concertation des organismes au service des personnes réfugiées et immigrantes (TCRI) * *Representing over 130 organizations.*
Heather Macdonald, Refugee & Migration Program Coordinator, United Church of Canada
Holly Fugler, Union for Gender Empowerment (McGill University)
Guy Delisle, President, Vision-Écoute
Anet Henrikso, Voice of Women Montreal
Jean Lalonde, Coordinator, Welfare Rights Committee