

More pressure to set up refugee-appeal process

OTTAWA (CCN) — Christian groups, including a Catholic pastor from Montreal, pressed the government to reform Canada's immigration process at a series of hearings on Parliament Hill last month.

At press time, Nov. 28, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCCB) presented a brief and recommendations to the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, highlighting the need to implement measures to welcome and to integrate migrants, refugees and their families.

Archbishop Roger Ébache of Gatineau and Archbishop Brendan O'Brien of St. John's presented on behalf of the CCCC's Social Affairs Commission.

Four weeks earlier, a Montreal priest joined other Christian activists in Ottawa Nov. 2 in urging the federal government to implement an appeal process for failed refugee claimants.

Currently, eight Christian churches throughout Canada are providing sanctuary to people ordered deported by immigration officials.

The activists stated an appeal process for failed refugee claimants is required by the 2002 Immigration Act but it has never been implemented. Without this process, the decision about whether a refugee will be granted residency or be deported rests solely and unjustly upon the opinion of one immigration official, they underlined.

"We're not looking for compassion, we are looking for justice," said Toronto-based refugee activist Mary Jo Leddy at a news conference after the hearing.

Leddy, founder and director of Romero House in Toronto, represented the Ontario Sanctuary Coalition before the standing committee. She said the current fragmented forms of appeal are "ineffectual, inefficient and not just."

Leddy saw little difference in how the Liberal Chrétien and Martin governments and the Conservative Harper government have handled the problem. She noted that the immigration minister can exercise discretion in situations that "don't fall into a neat little box" and grant residency, but that doesn't address the larger issue.

Fr. Jim McDonald, pastor at St. Gabriel's

in Montreal, has offered sanctuary to Algerian Abdelkader Belaoui since January 2006. Belaoui's plight is compounded by the fact that he is blind. McDonald told the press conference that Belaoui has widespread support, and that several individuals have agreed to sponsor him financially in Canada. McDonald was accompanied by members of his parish staff.

United Church representative Heather MacDonald recognized that providing sanctuary is an "act of civil disobedience."

"Sanctuary is not a solution," she said, noting that her role has been to inform churches of the difficulties of providing this kind of help and urging them to be cautious.

MacDonald spoke about the Raza family of Pakistan, who are in sanctuary at Crescent Fort Rouge United Church in Winnipeg since August. The six Raza children are being home-schooled. The groups

pushed for a meeting with Immigration Minister Monte Solberg regarding the appeal process.

The Christian activists also shared their growing concerns about an increase in clampdowns. For example, two people in sanctuary were seized by authorities when they left church property temporarily.

Other cases of church sanctuary in Canada include:

- Iranian Amir Kazemian at St. Michael's Anglican Church in Vancouver since June 2004.
- Alexi Kolosovs of Russia/Latvia at West End Baptist Church in St. John's, Nfld., since May 2005.
- A Costa Rican family at St. Philip Neri Catholic Parish in Toronto since September 2005.
- The Portnoy family of Israel at Sacred Heart Catholic Parish in Marystown, Nfld., since November 2005.
- Ethiopian Moti Nano at All Saints Lutheran Church in Ottawa since January.
- Ali Reza Monemi of Iran at St. John Evangelist Anglican Church in North Vancouver since May.

— Deborah Gyapong, with Mt. files



Mary Jo Leddy

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