

PRESS RELEASE

**ONE YEAR IN SANCTUARY: ABDELKADER BELAOUNI STILL
WAITING FOR MINISTER'S RESPONSE**

Church becomes prison as migrant's appeal for status is ignored

Montreal, 4 January 2007 - One year after entering church sanctuary, Abdelkader Belaouni is again appealing to the Federal Minister of Immigration, Monte Solberg, for Permanent Resident status in Canada. The Minister has the discretionary power to grant status at any time.

On 1 January 2006, Mr. Belaouni entered into church sanctuary in his own neighbourhood of Point St. Charles after his request to remain in Canada on humanitarian grounds was refused by Immigration Canada. The Ligue des droits et libertés (Quebec Civil Liberties Union) studied the refusal and concluded that its failure to consider the structural barriers that Mr. Belaouni, who is blind, faces in finding employment and accessing training programmes is discriminatory and a violation of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The Committee to Aid Refugees, which coordinates refugee protection work for the Table de Concertation des organismes au service des personnes réfugiées et immigrantes (TCRI), concluded that Mr. Belaouni, "would suffer 'unusual and excessive' hardship if obliged to leave Canada."

Mr. Belaouni has won considerable support. A group of five people are prepared to sponsor him. He has the active support of many organizations and individuals in his neighbourhood, including the Table de concertation Action Gardien (a coalition of community organizations), the community health clinic, the legal aid clinic of Point St. Charles and Little Burgundy, Saint Columba House, and his Member of Parliament, Mr. Thierry St-Cyr. He also has the support of human rights organisations such as Amnesty International, the Committee to Aid Refugees, the Confederation of Organisations of Handicapped People in Quebec (COPHAN), and the Ligue des droits et libertés, as well as the Canadian Arab Federation (CAF). Several Members of Parliament, including the Chair of the Immigration Standing Committee, Mr. Norman Doyle (a Conservative member), and the Bloc and NDP immigration critics, have also lent their support. In all, over sixty organisations and hundreds of individuals have intervened with the Minister of Immigration in support of Mr. Belaouni's claim: signing petitions; sending postcards; writing letters; participating in meetings with Parliamentarians, delegations to Ottawa, press conferences, and pickets; and organizing a community march.

The Minister has not responded. Instead, Mr. Belaouni received a second refusal from Immigration Canada, in another flawed decision involving several procedural irregularities. This has led some refugee rights groups and sanctuary advocates to fear that the current government is closing the door on sanctuary as a last resort for those seeking basic security, dignity and opportunity in Canada. Angela Portnoy and her family of 5, who have been in sanctuary in Newfoundland for over a year, also had their humanitarian application rejected in August 2006. Another man, who had been in sanctuary in Toronto since 2004, was arrested outside church grounds in October 2006 and summarily deported.

Although Mr. Belaouni has taken up a programme of action in the church, including broadcasting his own monthly radio show live from the church, giving Arabic lessons, taking piano lessons, learning massage therapy, and beginning to use a blind-assisted computer, the days remain very long and he is eager for the freedom to return to full participation in his community.