

Press Release

International Refugee Day: 900 days inside a church

Montreal, 20 June 2008 -- "Nine hundred - it's a very big number," said Abdelkader Belaouni on the eve of International Refugee Day. Mr. Belaouni, known as Kader to his friends, has spent nine hundred days inside the confines of St. Gabriel's Church in the Point St. Charles neighbourhood of Montreal.

Kader's journey to the church was a long and difficult one which began when he fled Algeria's brutal civil war almost twelve years ago. As a blind man, he was particularly vulnerable to the violence which took the lives of hundreds of thousands of people and forced many more to find refuge in more stable countries. Ultimately refused as a refugee by Canada, Kader applied for humanitarian status, but was told that the fact that he was not married and had no job made it impossible for Canada to accept him. Never mind that he had a strong network of friends, that he had established roots in Point St. Charles, that he faced significant barriers to finding paid employment, that he contributed to the community through volunteer work, that he hadn't lived in Algeria for ten years: he was to be deported "back home".

Kader's decision to publicly refuse the unjust deportation order quickly won strong support from individuals and organizations in Montreal, throughout Quebec, across Canada and even internationally. Kader's stand became a symbol for the struggle of migrants to be treated with dignity and respect in Canada rather than as commodities, whose market value alone would determine their worth.

An impressive network has grown up around Kader, with friends and community members coming daily to bring food and spend time with him. Nor has Kader been passive: he has taken the discriminatory attitude of Immigration Canada as a personal challenge and has risen to it with remarkable strength.

Learning to use a computer, playing piano, guitar and recorder, releasing an album with a local hip-hop artist (see link from Kader's website), and hosting a monthly radio show live from the church are only some of his accomplishments since he entered the church. He has also become a kind of informal therapist, offering moral support and a sympathetic ear to many.

Still, nine hundred days of imprisonment has taken its toll.

"His resilience is impressive," said David Woodbury, a member of the Intervention network for persons who have been subjected to organised violence (RIVO), a Montreal-based group. "But he often suffers depression and is becoming increasingly fragile. I'd say that he is reacting normally to a very abnormal, very difficult situation." Woodbury, a psychotherapist who has known Kader for two years, warned that, despite Kader's strength and "positive energy", the kind of stress that he is being subject to has a cumulative effect, and will have a long-term impact on Kader's health if the situation does not change soon.

Woodbury stressed that he expected Kader to "rebound" easily if he is granted status and leaves the church soon, but that this will become increasingly difficult as time goes on.

Kader's medical doctor, Marie Munoz, shares Woodbury's concern. "It's a humanitarian emergency," she said. Munoz is worried about the long-term impact of the situation on Kader's diabetes, a disease she says is difficult to treat properly while he remains in the church.

In a letter sent to the Minister of Immigration, made public yesterday, Munoz describes two medical emergencies that Kader has suffered in the church, one necessitating the emergency removal of a plastic tube protruding from his eye. The operation took place on a couch in the church presbytery, in conditions that Munoz calls, "very suboptimal."

The letter, signed by four healthcare workers, concludes, "Mr. Belaouni's state of health has deteriorated during the more than two years he has been in sanctuary and, for both medical and humanitarian reasons, this untenable

situation must cease. He has not yet completely lost hope, but his current circumstances are causing him excessive suffering, suffering that the authorities are in a position to remedy."

"Nine hundred days! I tried to count the number of hours yesterday ... I don't want to stay here another 100 days, I feel it is too much," said Kader. "What have I done to be treated like this? If the Minister of Immigration Diane Finley were in my position, I wouldn't do this to her for ten days! Why can't she do something good for me and grant me status? All I'm asking her now is just to read my file herself, open it and read it herself."

-End-

To set up interviews: 514 222 0205

CBC's The Current update on Kader:

www.cbc.ca/thecurrent/2008/200806/20080619.html (near end of second segment).

CBC News at Six update on Kader:

www.cbc.ca/newsatsixmontreal/newsarchive.html (19 June 2008, fourth story)

Background information: www.soutienpourkader.net.

Source:

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