

Candidates back asylum-seeker: Blind Algerian holed up in church; Bloc, NDP hopefuls call for full review for would-be refugee facing deportation

by Ann Carroll

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MONTREAL- Bloc Quebecois and NDP candidates in Jeanne-Le Ber yesterday joined forces with supporters of Abdelkader Belaouni, a failed Algerian refugee claimant who has taken sanctuary in a neighbourhood church rather than be deported to the United States.

"It's puzzling that in an increasingly globalized world, where we encourage commerce across borders, there are more restrictions than ever on where people can take up residence," NDP candidate Matthew McLaughlin said, at a news conference in Point St. Charles.

Belaouni fled Algeria in 1996, claiming persecution and fear of extortion. He lived in the United States for about seven years, but his status there was never regularized. Faced with being sent back to Algeria in 2003, Belaouni came to Montreal.

His supporters say he has since made a life for himself here, volunteering once a week at a north-end community organization for the handicapped.

"It's really sad," said Luciana Soave, director of the Association multi-ethnique pour l'integration des personnes handicapees. "He's not dangerous - he's just a quiet man who wants to integrate here."

The Canada Border Services Agency issued a warrant for Belaouni's arrest after he failed to report to the agency on Jan. 5 for deportation.

Liza Frulla, Liberal MP for Jeanne-Le Ber has expressed support for Belaouni, one of her constituents. But Bloc candidate Thierry St-Cyr says the Liberal government should share the blame for Belaouni's predicament. The government has failed to set up a new federal appeals court created by law in 2002 to review rejected refugee claims, St-Cyr said. The existing appeals process considers only legal and technical issues, and does not allow a complete review of a claimant's case, he noted. "We should let Mr. Belaouni have his appeal, and give him the right to work in the meantime."

Community activists say Belaouni, who is blind and has diabetes, should remain permanently in Canada on humanitarian grounds. "He is one of us," said Jean Lalande, of the Point St. Charles welfare rights committee. "He made friends, and makes a positive contribution to society as a volunteer. If we gave him a chance, he could find a job."

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