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# MONTREAL

*"If I can't find justice and compassion in Canada, I won't find it anywhere."*

## ABDELKADER BELAOUNI'S world has shrunk to the size of a parish church Blind Algerian strikes a chord

ANN CARROLL THE GAZETTE

Musician Robert O'Callaghan was thinking of teaching piano to prison inmates.

That was before he met Abdelkader Belaouni, a blind Algerian holed up in a Montreal church to escape deportation.

"It's like he's in jail, though a reasonably comfortable jail," said O'Callaghan, a volunteer recruited to give Belaouni weekly music lessons on an old piano at St. Gabriel's Church rectory in Point St. Charles.

"It's important for people under stress to have something to put themselves into that takes them to another dimension," said O'Callaghan, a flautist with L'Ensemble du Carré St. Louis.

It has now been more than two months since Belaouni, a Muslim, took refuge at the Roman Catholic church on Centre St.

"The days are long, and it's hard to sleep at night," said Belaouni, 38, who has diabetes-related health problems.

"Imagine you have an apartment and the freedom to come and go, and suddenly that's taken away," he said. "The people of this parish have been very good to me. But this is not my home, and I am always aware of that."

The failed refugee claimant has appealed to Citizenship and Immigration Minister Monte Solberg to be allowed to remain in Canada on compassionate grounds.

His supporters include local community organizations – St. Columba House volunteers bring lunch every weekday – and human rights groups.

"We think it's almost cruel to return him to his country in his condition," said Michel Frenette, director of the Quebec wing of Amnesty International.

"He has a support network in the community, and he poses no threat," Frenette said.

Belaouni, who went blind at the age of 25 after suffering a head-butt in a soccer game, said he fled Algeria for the United



ALLEN McINNIS THE GAZETTE

Abdelkader Belaouni takes piano lessons from Robert O'Callaghan to pass the time.

States in 1996 to escape civil unrest and threats of violence.

He lived in the U.S. for several years without legal status, selling phone cards to get by, before coming to the attention of immigration authorities. As U.S. authorities prepared to send him back to Algeria in 2003, Belaouni crossed the border into Canada.

Canada Border Services Agency, the federal agency that enforces deportation orders, says he has overstayed his welcome here as well.

The agency issued an arrest warrant Jan. 5 after Belaouni failed to show for deportation to the U.S.

The arrest warrant is still outstanding, agency spokesperson Amélie Morin said last week.

"We have never gone into a church to arrest anyone," she said. "But that doesn't mean we don't have the right to go in or that we tolerate people hiding in churches to avoid deportation."

Belaouni lost his bid for refugee status and was refused permission to stay in Canada on humanitarian grounds, Morin said. "We are counting on him to turn himself in for removal."

Not a chance, Belaouni said.

Canada is the only country where he feels at home and has a network of friends to help him, he said.

"If I can't find justice and compassion in Canada, I won't find it anywhere."