

# Blind refugee fights deportation to Algeria

BY CHERYL CORNACCHIA

**MONTREAL** • A blind Algerian Muslim who has been living in Montreal for almost three years has been granted sanctuary in a Montreal church to try to avoid deportation to Algeria as early as tomorrow.

Abdelkader Belaoui, 38, who fled his homeland in 1996, yesterday asked Immigration Minister Joe Volpe to intervene so he may remain in Canada.

Mr. Belaoui pleaded for compassion from the federal government, citing his blindness, diabetes and related health problems. He added he will face persecution if he is sent back to Algeria.

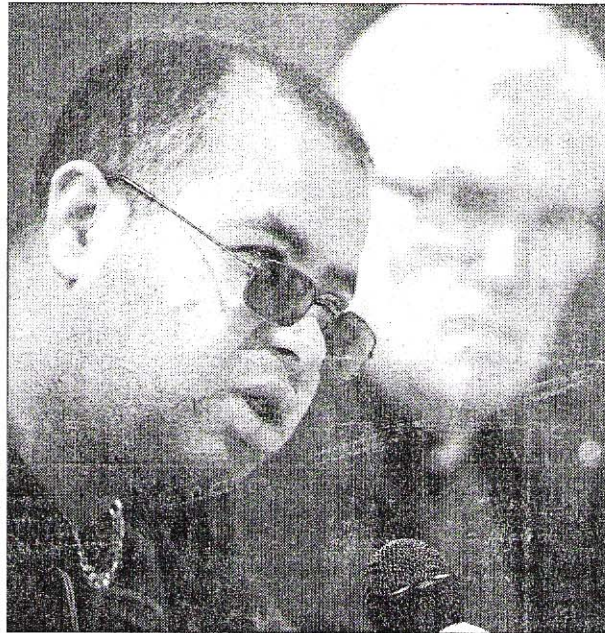
He was denied refugee status by Citizenship and Immigration Canada last October on grounds that he was unemployed and has no family in Canada. The department would not comment yesterday on the man's case.

Mr. Belaoui argued that his family are the friends he has made in Montreal and that he's involved in several community organizations. He said he rents an apartment for \$350 a month, and has learned how to get around the city despite his blindness.

"I am not hidden away, but in a church demanding justice," said Mr. Belaoui. "It's been three years I have been in Canada."

He and his supporters said he was threatened by rebel soldiers during Algeria's civil war and fled in 1996. In the U.S., where he first went after leaving Africa, Mr. Belaoui built a new life and managed to buy a house for his mother in Algeria with money he made selling phone cards in New York City.

In 2000, he won the "Green



PIERRE OBENDRAUF, THE MONTREAL GAZETTE

**Abdelkader Belaoui, left, with Rev. Jim MacDonald of Montreal's Saint Gabriel's church at a press conference yesterday. Mr. Belaoui, who is blind, has sought refuge at the church to try to avoid deportation to Algeria.**

Card lottery" and was on his way to becoming a U.S. citizen. But that new life was derailed in the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks and the anti-Muslim sentiment that arose. He felt threatened, he said, and left the U.S. for Canada in March 2003.

"If given the chance, he will be an asset to Canada," said neighbour and friend, Marc Champagne.

Nazila Bettache, an official with refugee support group Solidarity Across Borders, said Canada has failed to protect Mr. Belaoui, a doubly-disadvantaged refugee.

If deported, Ms. Bettache said, Mr. Belaoui would likely be sent first to the U.S. where

he could face long-term detention, which could jeopardize his health.

Mr. Belaoui joins a half dozen Canadian refugee claimants using churches to avoid deportation, including a family in Newfoundland, a woman in Ottawa and others in Toronto and Vancouver.

Canadian Council for Refugees spokeswoman Judy Dench said many refugees have no choice because the federal government has failed to follow up on 2002's Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, which was to create an appeals process for refugees.

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