

December 10, 2013

This Human Rights Day Canada must renew its role as a leader for refugee rights

December 10th celebrates international human rights and the inherent dignity and equal rights of all members of the human family. Refugees are part of the human family and entitled to the same rights.

These rights include the rights to asylum, to liberty, to protection from torture, to an adequate standard of living, to healthcare, to be reunited with family and to the protection of the best interests of children.

Sadly, respect for the rights of refugees is waning. At a time when serious human rights abuses are taking place in every region of the world and displacing millions of people, countries are building administrative walls, closing doors, denying protection.

Canada is failing to respect refugees' human rights too. Once a world leader in refugee protection, Canada is closing its doors. Fewer refugees are being resettled to Canada. The federal government recently made dramatic cuts to basic healthcare for refugees. Refugee claimants race an unbeatable clock to gather evidence. Some refugees now face mandatory detention and a five-year bar on being reunited with their family in Canada. Others have even less time to present their cases and are denied the right to an appeal because their countries of origin have been arbitrarily deemed "safe". We live in a climate of fear and negative rhetoric. Canada is now a less welcoming country.

Canada can and must do better. As Canadians we are at our best when we treat refugees fairly and with respect and compassion. We must return to the better parts of our tradition of welcoming refugees. Our country has been strengthened by the contributions of the many refugees who have come here from around the world – by boat, by plane and on foot. We have learned to appreciate the beauty and values of different cultures. We have been inspired by the ideals of brave men, women and children escaping brutal dictatorships and injustices. In return for safety and a warm welcome, refugees have become active members of our communities. They have helped sensitize Canadians about the countries from which they have fled. All of these gifts have made us richer.

As Canadians we are proud of our history of welcoming strangers. We are proud to keep our doors open to those fleeing grave human rights abuses, and we pledge that we will strive to keep those doors open now and into the future. As we celebrate universal human rights on December 10th, we call on Canada to renew its role as a leader for refugee rights. Canada must be fair to refugees, respect their basic rights and open doors that have closed.

Signed,

Warren Allmand, Former Solicitor General

Sara Angel, visual arts journalist

Lloyd Axworthy, President, University of Winnipeg, former Foreign Affairs Minister

Dr. Philip Berger, Chief, Department of Family & Community Medicine, St. Michael's Hospital, Toronto

Rabbi Arthur Bielfeld, Founder and Board Member of Jewish Refugee Action Network (JRAN)

Jean-Marc Biron, SJ, Jesuits in French Canada Provincial Superior

Peter Bisson, SJ, Jesuits in English Canada Provincial Superior

Hélène-Andrée Bizier, historian and essayist

Alan Broadbent, Chairman and Founder of the Maytree Foundation

Iona V. Campagnolo, former Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia

Jim Cuddy, musician

Bernie Farber, former CEO Canadian Jewish Congress, human rights advocate, Senior VP Gemini Power Corp

Charles Foran, author and Past President PEN Canada

Zsuzsi Gartner, author

Julius H. Grey, lawyer and human rights advocate

John Greyson, filmmaker, associate professor York University

Rawi Hage, novelist

Lawrence Hill, author

Miranda Hill, author

The Most Rev. Fred Hiltz, Primate, Anglican Church of Canada

The Rev. Susan C. Johnson, National Bishop, Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada

Peter Krausz, artist

Michele Landsberg, journalist and author

Peter Leuprecht, former Special Representative of the Secretary-General of the UN for human rights in Cambodia

Dr. Tarek Loubani, refugee and emergency physician

Annabel Lyon, author

Guy Maddin, Distinguished Filmmaker in Residence, University of Manitoba

Dow Marmur, Rabbi Emeritus, Holy Blossom Temple, Toronto

Dr. Ryan Meili, Director, Upstream: Institute for a Healthy Society

Susan Musgrave, poet and novelist

Alex Neve, Secretary General, Amnesty International Canada

Maya Ombasic, author

Ratna Omidvar, President of the Maytree Foundation

The Right Rev. Gary Paterson, Moderator, United Church of Canada

Sarah Polley, actress and film director

Anna Porter, author and publisher

Vivienne Poy, retired Senator & Chancellor Emerita of the University of Toronto

Bill Richardson, author, broadcaster, librettist

Andreas Schroeder, author and broadcaster

The Rev. Dr. David Sutherland, Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Canada

Linda Svendsen, author and producer

Timothy Taylor, novelist and journalist

Madeleine Thien, novelist, Simon Fraser University writer-in-residence

Béatrice Vaugrante, Secretary General, Amnesty International Canada - francophone section

Wesli (Wesley Louissaint), musician

The Very Rev. the Hon. Lois M. Wilson, former Moderator of the United Church of Canada,
former President of the World Council of Churches

Hassan Yussuff, Secretary-Treasurer of the Canadian Labour Congress