

# Refugees to press Ottawa on \$550 landing fee

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GLOBE AND MAIL UPDATE

A procession of refugee children will arrive Wednesday in Ottawa to ask the Immigration Minister to eliminate a \$550 landing fee that refugees must pay within six months if they want to become permanent residents of Canada.

The processing fee is beyond the means of many refugees, according to organizers of the “Drop the Fee” campaign. And, once refugees miss the 180-day deadline, they are forced to apply for landed immigrant status on humanitarian and compassionate grounds. They must explain the delay, and be processed in a different stream, which takes as long as three years.

“This is a huge bureaucratic headache and a disaster for refugees. Many simply do not have \$550 saved up within six months of arriving here,” said Geraldine Sadoway, staff lawyer with Parkdale Community Legal Services in Toronto who will be at Wednesday's “Drop the Fee” rally on Parliament Hill. “We have dozens of clients in this situation.”

Refugees may not begin the process of sponsoring their spouses and children left behind in their homeland until they are permanent residents. So a failure to pay \$550 within six months can result in a delay of several years to re-unite with their loved ones, said Ms. Sadoway. Refugees without permanent residency also cannot vote or travel and it is more difficult to find long-term employment.

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In the case of unaccompanied minors, or women fleeing domestic violence, completing the process within the proscribed time frame is even more of a challenge.

Anaty Martins and her younger brother came to Canada from Angola and were accepted as refugees in 2001 when they were 19 and 14 years old and still in high school. They could not save the \$1,100 needed to apply to become landed immigrants within six months.

“It has been really stressful,” said Ms. Martins, now 24. Finally in 2005, the Children's Aid Society paid the fee. The situation was complicated by the fact that when Ms. Martins left Angola in 1999 at the age of 17, she was pregnant. She and her brother landed first in the U.S., where they stayed for several months until Ms. Martins had her baby. When they arrived in Canada as refugee claimants, her son, as a U.S. citizen, could not be added to their file. That left him in legal limbo with no automatic access to medical coverage or right to attend school.

Ms. Martins' permanent residency application has now been approved in principal, so she will finally be able to sponsor her own son — now six years old — to stay in Canada.

In another case, a Tibetan refugee needed \$1,400 to apply for her, her husband and their two children to become permanent residents (the fee for dependents is \$150). The Parkdale clinic loaned her the money, and she is paying it back at the rate of \$25 a month. The Bloor United Church in Toronto has loaned refugees more than \$10,000 to cover fees.

Magdalena Ramirez, 45, fled an abusive husband in Mexico with her son, and both were granted asylum here three weeks ago. She is contemplating selling her son's gold baptismal bracelet to raise the money she needs to apply for herself, her son, and her daughter, who is still in Mexico, to become permanent residents.

Max Wallace, organizer of the “Drop the Fee” campaign, said the fees are “mean-spirited” and generate little revenue for the government. In 2002-2003, only 1.3 per cent of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC)'s revenue of \$437.7-million was collected from fees paid by refugees.

“It doesn't generate much revenue since there are only about 20,000 refugees accepted a year, but it has a devastating impact on their lives,” said Mr. Wallace, who plans to present a petition with 10,000 signatures to Immigration Minister Monte Mr. Solberg.

Refugees who are sponsored by the Canadian government, or by private organizations, are exempt from paying the \$550 landing fee.

Raymonde Folco, the Liberal immigration critic, will attend Wednesday's rally, as will Olivia Chow, an NDP MP who plans to present a motion in the House of Commons calling on the government to eliminate this fee.

In last spring's budget, the government announced a reduction in the right of permanent residence fee to \$490 from \$975. (All immigrants pay this fee, which is separate from the \$550 refugees are charged.) At the time, Prime Minister Stephen Harper said: "This so-called 'user fee' is really just a tax by another name. My friends, conservative governments, believe in lower and fairer taxes."

Calls to Mr. Solberg's office were re-directed to CIC where spokeswoman Marina Wilson said the \$550 fee should not be onerous for refugees, because by the time their claims have been heard they have usually been in Canada for more than a year and have entered the work force.

Ms. Sadoway noted yesterday that these immigration fees were brought in the early 1990s as a way to generate revenue in a time when the government was carrying a deficit.

"Now that we're no longer in a deficit, the landing fee for a tiny number of refugees should be eliminated," she said. "The immigration system, in the meantime, has not improved in quality but is even worse than it was, with longer wait times."

In other immigration news, Rawad Reda, a 20-year-old Jarvis Collegiate student ordered removed from Canada, has been granted a reprieve. Mr. Solberg issued him a temporary resident permit and extended his study visa after he went public with his case this month. The young man, an honour's student, moved to Montreal from Lebanon with his family in 2000, but came to live with his uncle in Toronto after a falling out with his parents. An immigration officer rejected Mr. Reda's request for an extension of his student visa, saying he didn't believe he was a bonafide student. He told Mr. Reda to return to Lebanon. However, Mr. Reda says this is impossible as his village was destroyed last summer during fighting between Lebanon and Israel. "I would like to thank Mr. Solberg for intervening," said Mr. Reda, who plans a celebration Wednesday in a downtown lounge.

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