

US anti-immigrant witch-hunt leads asylum seekers to make perilous trek to Canada

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Since Donald Trump's election as US president last November and particularly since the beginning of the year, increasing numbers of refugees are fleeing the US for Canada. To do so, many are making perilous journeys through snow-laden fields, in frigid temperatures.

The Trump administration and its anti-immigrant witch-hunt are responsible for the refugees' plight. So too is Justin Trudeau's Liberal government. If refugee claimants are being forced to cross into Canada using fields and seldom-traveled back roads, it is because the Trudeau government has instructed the Canada Border Services Agency to continue to enforce the reactionary Canada-US "Safe Third Country Agreement" and deny them entry if they try to enter Canada at a border crossing.

The number of asylum seekers crossing from the US states of New York, Vermont and Maine into Quebec in January was up more than ten-fold from two years ago. While only 42 made the crossing in January 2015, last month the figure was 452.

A network of smugglers has sprung up, charging up to \$1,000 per head to take families from New York and other cities to the Canadian border.

Since January, hundreds, often in groups of a dozen or more, have trekked along frozen rivers and fields to reach Manitoba from Minnesota and North Dakota. Many have made the trip without winter clothing and in temperatures of -20 degrees Celsius (minus 4 degrees Fahrenheit). Some have lost fingers due to frostbite.

Most of the refugees entering Canada from the US fled war, poverty and persecution in their native Africa. But the asylum seekers also include people from Latin America and other impoverished parts of the world.

The Trump administration launched a brutal witch-hunt against refugees and immigrants, with Muslims a special target, almost from the day it took office. The President has vowed to deport up to 3 million immigrants and already authorized mass deportation raids and vastly

expanded the grounds on which people can be deported. He is also preparing a new executive order to re-impose the ban on refugees, immigrants and visitors traveling to the US from seven Muslim-majority countries.

Yesterday, in a further indication of the draconian character of the assault his administration is mounting on undocumented immigrants, Trump referred to it as a "military operation."

The Canadian government's response to the spike in asylum seekers has been a combination of callous indifference and outright hostility. New arrivals are being forced to rely on private charity to obtain the basic necessities of life, with many organizations reporting that they are already running short of supplies.

Under conditions where the US is openly violating its obligations to refugees and refugee-claimants under international law and asylum seekers are putting their lives at risk to reach Canada, the Liberal government has said it will not raise Canada's pitifully low refugee quota for 2017.

More significant still is the Liberals' staunch defence of the 2002 "Safe Third Country Agreement" with the United States. Under this agreement, any asylum seeker who enters Canada from the US at a border checkpoint is denied entry and the right to make a claim for refugee status in Canada and immediately returned to the US.

It is this that is causing people fleeing the US for Canada to choose high-risk routes to enter the country. Those who cross the border at an unauthorized point and subsequently file asylum claims are not automatically returned to the US. Canadian authorities can, however, later argue against granting them asylum on the grounds that they should have applied for refugee status in the US.

More than 200 legal scholars and refugee advocacy groups have called on the government to scrap, or at the very least suspend, the "Safe Third Country Agreement," citing Trump's anti-immigrant measures. But the

government, with Immigration Minister Ahmed Hussen, who came to Canada as a 16-year-old Somali refugee serving as its frontman, has callously refused to do so.

When asked in parliament earlier this month about his government's response to the spike in asylum seekers, Trudeau made clear that the plight of the refugees is the last of his concerns.

"We need," declared Trudeau, "to make sure that we are protecting the integrity of the Canadian border, the strength of our immigration and refugee system, and demonstrating that we are there for the security of communities and individuals."

The Trudeau government's refusal to assist those desperately seeking to escape Trump's deportation dragnet underscores the hypocritical and fraudulent character of the Liberals' posturing as "refugee-friendly." In the 2015 election, Trudeau sought to appeal to popular anger against the Harper Conservative government by making calibrated attacks on its whipping up of Islamophobia and its depiction of Syrian refugees as a grave threat to Canadian security.

Trudeau has since been promoted by the likes of the *New York Times* and the British *Guardian* as something of a poster boy for international liberalism because his government accepted 25,000 Syrian refugees into Canada in its first months in office. Not only is this a drop in the bucket given the millions displaced by the war in Syria, but Ottawa refused to accept any single men and worked with the US Department of Homeland Security to screen those it did allow in. Moreover, the majority were privately sponsored by churches and other charities, meaning that the government provided no support for them.

Last but not least, the Liberals used their "pro-refugee" stance as political cover for increasing Canada's role in the US-led Mideast War. Yet it is the wars Washington has mounted over the past quarter-century, with Canadian imperialism's support and participation, in the Middle East, Afghanistan and the Balkans, that have laid waste to entire societies, producing the greatest refugee crisis since the Second World War.

There are two reasons the Liberals are so adamant about upholding the "Safe Third Country Agreement." First, Trudeau's cynical tweets about Canada being "open" notwithstanding, they do not want to encourage asylum seekers to seek refuge in Canada. All the more so under conditions where Trump's brutal measures could cause many to look to Canada for refuge.

Second and even more importantly, Trudeau and his

government are determined to forge a close working relationship with the Trump administration and, therefore, don't want to cause it any embarrassment or be seen to criticize it.

Earlier this month, Trudeau visited Trump at the White House and reaffirmed the longstanding Canada-US military-strategic partnership. Their joint statement pledged Canada to collaborate even more closely in US-led imperialist interventions around the globe and to forge a protectionist trade bloc under Washington's leadership aimed at offloading the capitalist crisis onto Washington and Ottawa's economic and geopolitical rivals.

During his Washington trip, Trudeau studiously avoided making any direct comment about Trump's ruthless crackdown on immigrants. When, at their joint press conference, the US president launched into a full-throated defence of his 120-day suspension of all refugee claims and his discriminatory ban on persons from seven Muslim countries entering the US, Trudeau remained silent.

Canada's Conservatives and other right-wing forces are seeking to exploit the refugee issue to foment reaction. Predictably, the Conservatives have launched a xenophobic campaign, denouncing asylum seekers for entering Canada "illegally" and demanding that the government do more to "defend" Canada's borders.

Such claims deliberately seek to scapegoat refugees for problems that have been created by Canada's brutal refugee policies. If asylum seekers are being forced to enter the country "illegally," it is precisely because of the draconian anti-immigrant measures imposed by the former Conservative government and upheld by the Liberals, including the Trudeau government's refusal to cancel the "Safe Third Country Agreement."



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