

Canada opens Montreal's Olympic Stadium to Haitian refugees fleeing US

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Thousands of asylum-seeking immigrants are fleeing the United States to Canada amid increasing deportation fears. So many people have crossed the border in recent weeks that Canadian immigration agencies have been compelled to open the Olympic Stadium in Montreal to temporarily house the refugees.

The makeshift shelter at the stadium can hold up to 300 migrants who sleep on cots set up in the concessions area. Quebec, overwhelmed by the recent spike in asylum seekers, has also begun to use student dormitories, shuttered nursing homes and hotels to house the influx of immigrants.

In the first six months of the year, 6,500 asylum seekers arrived in Quebec, accounting for 35 percent of those seeking asylum in Canada so far this year. Immigration Minister Kathleen Weil reported last week that between July 1 and 19, Quebec was receiving roughly 50 asylum requests per day. That number has surged to 150 claims per day, sometimes more. PRAIDA, a government-funded immigrant-support program in Quebec, said it received 1,200 new requests from refugees in July alone—four times the normal monthly total.

Media and government sources are reporting that anywhere from 70 to 90 percent of the asylum seekers they are receiving are Haitian.

Under an agreement with Washington, migrants arriving at official Canadian border points who have already made a refugee claim in the United States are automatically turned away. But if the migrants cross “irregularly,” usually by foot outside official ports of entry, they can still seek asylum in Canada.

The wave of asylum-seeking Haitians started to swell in late May when the Trump administration recommended ending the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) designation for the more than 50,000 Haitians

living in the US. The Haitian refugees were subsequently given a six-month extension, but they were warned that it may be their last.

Retired Marine Corps General John F. Kelly, then serving as US Secretary of Homeland Security, now the White House Chief of Staff, said in a statement in May, “The Department of Homeland Security urges Haitian TPS recipients who do not have another immigration status to use the time before Jan. 22, 2018, to prepare for and arrange their departure from the United States.”

“It’s unheard of,” PRAIDA leader Francine Dupuis told the *Montreal Gazette*. “In 30 years, I’ve never seen this kind of volume or intensity.”

The majority of these immigrants share the same devastating story. Most of the Haitian refugees came to the US in the aftermath of Haiti’s savage 2010 earthquake that killed more than 200,000 people, injured another 300,000, displaced almost 100,000, and destroyed much of the infrastructure in the tiny, poverty-stricken Caribbean nation. It should be noted that the immense scale of destruction caused by the historic earthquake was largely the product of desperate poverty created by centuries of colonial and imperialist oppression.

Fleeing the devastation and a massive cholera outbreak, thousands of residents scrounged up what they could and moved their families to Brazil. There many were forced to accept poverty wages and horrendous working conditions, often finding employment in construction projects for the 2014 World Cup. When the Brazilian economy began to decline, the Haitian immigrants were again forced to flee, this time 7,000 miles north, to the San Diego, Tijuana border. The long, infamous voyage is incredibly dangerous.

It will likely never be known how many Haitians fell

victim to drug cartels, the sex trade, corrupt police officers, abusive border agents, starvation, dehydration, or any other of the many life-threatening obstacles which riddle the journey.

The difficulties encountered by these immigrants, specifically on the route from Guatemala to the San Diego, California border, were exacerbated by policies supported by the Obama administration. The program implemented by the Mexican government, but undoubtedly orchestrated by the US, called *Frontera Sur*, relocated over 300 immigration agents to its southern border with Guatemala. The aim of the plan was to apprehend migrants before they reach the US border, bypassing the need to deal with any constitutional “hassles” that come with processing immigrants on American soil.

The program included setting up mobile checkpoints and conducting regular raids on trains and migrant hostels. The Obama administration directly supported this campaign with training, technology and intelligence. A year after its implementation in July 2014, apprehensions by the Mexican government increased by 71 percent over the same period the previous year. This program was headed by none other than John Kelly, who continues to make threats against the Haitian refugees and other immigrant workers.

If the migrants completed the journey successfully, the US government afforded them a temporary status, updated every 18 months. While the Trump administration has certainly escalated the attack on immigrants and massive deportations, plans to deport Haitians living in the United States started before the Trump administration came to office. In September of last year US Department of Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson announced that deportations of Haitian immigrant would resume, a policy change which was made unilaterally by the Obama administration.

Having lived through the trauma of a natural disaster, crossing half a continent, often on foot, enduring the horrors of the US immigration process, many settled into life in the United States. However, the threat of deportation has never ceased. As this possibility becomes a reality under the Trump administration, many see Canada as their last resort for a safe and stable life.

And yet, Haitians who came to Canada, rather than

the US, following the 2010 earthquake have already been subject to deportation for almost three years. Canada’s moratorium on deporting Haitian refugees was lifted December 1, 2014 with a few special measures included for those eligible to file an application on humanitarian and compassionate grounds.

While anyone can try to claim asylum in Canada, there is no guarantee they will be accepted. Despite the spikes in this particular type of asylum claimant, the government of Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has been silent on whether it will adjust its capacity for 2017.

A spokesperson for Immigration Minister Ahmed Hussen told *Global News* the minister is now in consultations for the 2018 levels, which have to be made public by November 1 of this year. The spokesperson did not provide an answer when asked whether the 2017 numbers would be adjusted.



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