

Canadian military to construct refugee camp as hundreds of Haitians flee US

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Canada's armed forces announced Wednesday that soldiers are constructing a camp near the Canada-US border in Saint-Bernard-de-Lacolle, Quebec to house asylum seekers.

Tents to house up to 500 people are being erected in Saint-Bernard-de-Lacolle, close to a border crossing where up to 300 refugee claimants—most of them Haitians—are arriving daily. Although the majority of troops engaged in putting up the shelters will return to their barracks afterward, a CBC report has suggested that an unknown number will remain on-site to help with security.

The influx has been triggered by US President Donald Trump's vicious clampdown on immigrants. In May, he vowed not to renew beyond January 2018 the Temporary Protection Status (TPS) accorded to Haitians following the devastating 2010 earthquake.

Despite the desperate plight faced by the approximately 60,000 Haitians staying in the US on TPS, including the imminent threat of being rounded up in Trump's Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids and unceremoniously deported to conditions of poverty and misery in Haiti, Canada's government has responded with callous indifference. Immigration Minister Ahmed Hussen blandly declared August 4, "We discourage people from conducting irregular crossings of our borders. It's not safe, it's not something that we want people to do. We want people to claim asylum in the first country that they're in, which in this case is the US."

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau struck a similar tone, stating that the refugees should apply for asylum in the proper way and that Canada has to defend the "integrity" of its immigration system.

Such statements are deeply cynical. The hundreds of Haitians and other refugees crossing the border daily are being forced to cross "irregularly" because the Trudeau government continues to enforce the Canada-US Safe Third Country agreement, according to which refugees who make an asylum application at a regular border crossing are automatically turned back to the United States. They can

only make a claim in Canada if they cross the land border independently, often at considerable risk. The refusal to abandon the agreement is bound up with the Trudeau government's determination to deepen Ottawa's strategic partnership with the Trump administration on the basis of stepped up military collaboration and enhanced North American economic protectionism, via a "modernized" North America Free Trade Agreement.

For Quebec Premier Philippe Couillard, the main concern is getting the asylum applications processed as fast as possible so as to limit the provincial government's financial liability. "We give them social assistance, help to find housing. We give them healthcare, even education for the children," he complained. "All that is expensive, and we don't want the delay to be unduly prolonged. We're talking about many millions of dollars."

The right-wing Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ—Coalition for Quebec's Future), meanwhile, is agitating for the refugee claimants to be summarily expelled. "The Liberals," said CAQ leader François Legault, "are sending a very bad signal to illegal migrants by opening arms to them, as if Quebec can welcome all the misery of the world."

Although Canada's government was made aware in briefings as early as March of a potential influx of refugees, it has failed to provide adequate resources, forcing many of those crossing the border having to wait days in makeshift, ramshackle facilities to be processed.

Evidence suggests that the Trudeau Liberal government is already moving towards reaching some kind of an agreement with Haiti's right-wing government to deport the asylum seekers after their applications have been summarily rejected. Two Haitian government ministers visited Montreal Wednesday and met with the city's mayor, Denis Coderre.

A former federal Liberal Immigration minister, Coderre played a major role in the negotiations that led to the reactionary Safe Third Country agreement. Moreover, as Canada's Representative to *La Francophonie* and "special adviser" to Prime Minister Paul Martin on Haiti in 2003-4, Coderre played a major role in fronting and organizing

Canada's participation in the US-led 2004 "regime-change" invasion and occupation of Haiti.

Jean Sebastien Boudreault, head of the Quebec Association of Immigration Lawyers, warned against the Haitian ministers having any contact with the asylum seekers. "We need to make sure, first and foremost, that we are protecting the people we are supposed to be protecting," he told CBC, "which are the people who are seeking a refugee status."

In contrast to the indifference and outright hostility from the authorities, the Haitian refugees have been met with an overwhelmingly positive welcome by residents of Montreal. On Sunday, hundreds of people gathered at the Olympic Stadium, where many of the refugees are being housed, to welcome the new arrivals, carrying signs that read "Refugees welcome" and "Haitians welcome."

Many of the Haitians now fleeing Trump's reactionary anti-immigrant policies were forced out of the impoverished Caribbean nation following the 2010 earthquake, which killed over 200,000 people and displaced half a million more. But Haiti's endemic poverty and related social problems go back much further than that and are bound up with the ruthless exploitation of the country by American and Canadian imperialism.

American Marines first occupied Haiti in 1915, remaining for 20 years and leaving behind a trained Haitian army that for decades formed the backbone of pro-US dictatorial regimes.

In 2004, 500 Canadian troops intervened alongside US military forces to oust the elected president, Jean-Bertrand Aristide, working in tandem with a bloody uprising based on elements drawn from the disbanded Haitian army and death squads active under the Duvalier military dictatorship and successor military regimes.

Canada's determination to support the coup was bound up with its imperialist interests in the Caribbean, which has long been a major destination of Canadian foreign investment. Canada's major banks have been active in the region since the early 20th century.

Following the 2010 earthquake, Canada deployed 2,000 troops and two battleships to the impoverished country in what was one of the largest overseas deployments by the Canadian Armed Forces since World War II. The Conservative government of Stephen Harper ensured that Canada obtained a leading role in the so-called rebuilding of Haiti, which amounted to developing plans to establish the country as a cheap-labour haven and a source of super-profits for big business.

The lack of concern within Canadian ruling circles for the fate of ordinary Haitians is further illustrated by the callous treatment of Haitians who found refuge in Canada following

the 2010 earthquake. Little more than four years after the disaster and under conditions where the country remains an effective ruin, Ottawa canceled its own temporary residency program, forcing Haitians to leave "voluntarily" or be expelled.

The Trudeau government's treatment of those fleeing the Trump administration's anti-immigrant witch hunt underscores the bogus character of its much-publicized "refugee-friendly" stance. In 2015, shortly after coming to power, Trudeau made a great show of welcoming the first group of Syrian refugees flown into Canada as part of a resettlement program. In reality, Canada was extremely restrictive in the number of Syrians it accepted as refugees, allowing just 40,000 to enter the country. Many were only allowed in thanks to private sponsorships by churches, mosques and community groups.

Conditions for refugees in Canada are abysmal. Many are forced to rely on food banks and other charities to make ends meet. In addition, successive Canadian governments, including the Trudeau Liberals, have illegally locked up immigrants and refugees indefinitely if they are deemed to be a flight risk, a danger to the public, or if their identities cannot be confirmed. Reports have denounced the practice, which has led to children being confined to conditions comparable to medium-security prisons. (See: Report documents Canadian government's abuse of immigrant and refugee children)

Trudeau has used his pose as a pro-refugee leader concerned about "humanitarian" problems as political cover for vastly expanding Canada's military deployments around the world, from the sending of additional Special Forces to the Mideast war in Iraq, to leading one of NATO's battalions on Russia's borders in Eastern Europe, and bolstering Canada's naval presence in the Asia-Pacific to help the US threaten China. In June, the Liberals unveiled a 70 percent hike in military spending and declared that "hard power," i.e. war, must be a central part of Canada's foreign policy.



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