

Migrant family's asylum claim denied just days before fatal attempt to cross Canada-US border

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A family of four Roma asylum seekers who attempted to cross from Canada to the United States on March 30 only to drown in the St. Lawrence River did so out of desperation. Just days before, Canada's immigration department had rejected their latest asylum claim, despite their well-founded fears of discrimination and persecution in their native Romania and told them to prepare for their imminent deportation.

Their deaths, along with those of a family of four from India who accompanied them, occurred in the immediate aftermath of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and American President Joseph Biden announcing the "modernization" of the reactionary, anti-refugee Safe Third Country Agreement (STCA).

The eight deaths, including two children who were Canadian citizens, are a damning indictment of the trade-union and NDP-backed Trudeau Liberal government. Although Trudeau postures as leading a "pro-refugee" government, his Liberals have pursued a ruthless "Fortress North America" policy aimed at keeping the vast majority of refugees out of Canada. The STCA was amended in late March, during Biden's trip to Ottawa, closing a so-called "loophole" that permitted migrants crossing the border from the US outside of official checkpoints to remain in Canada and file a refugee claim. In addition to extending the STCA to cover the entire more than 9,000-kilometre-long Canada-US border, Biden and Trudeau used the US president's two-day visit to intensify their war preparations against Russia and China.

In response to the March 30 migrant deaths, Trudeau cynically proclaimed his sympathy for the victims and their families before rejecting any responsibility. At an April 3 press conference in Quebec, Trudeau called the deaths a "tragedy" but then preached, "When people take risks to cross our borders in an irregular fashion or if they pay criminals to get them across the border, this isn't a system we can have confidence in." It apparently never occurred to Trudeau that it is precisely his government's vicious anti-immigrant policies—policies that have even won praise from the fascistic former US President Donald Trump—that are the reason why desperate asylum seekers pay large sums to individuals willing to smuggle them

across the border.

According to the UN, over 89 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide as of the end of 2021, more than the entire population of Germany. These tens of millions have been displaced chiefly by imperialist wars of aggression in which Canada has played an important role. IMF and World Bank promoted capitalist "structural adjustment" programs and climate-change related environmental devastation are also significant factors in the record numbers of displaced worldwide.

Only a trickle of refugees have made it to Canada, with little more than 100,000 crossing the Canada-US border irregularly between 2017 and 2022.

Even before its recent "modernization," the STCA openly flouted both countries' obligations under international law. Implemented by the former Liberal government of Paul Martin and the administration of George W. Bush in 2004, the STCA was conceived of as a punitive measure to curb the number of refugee claimants entering Canada. However, a loophole allowed migrants crossing into Canada outside of official checkpoints to seek refuge in Canada and remain in the country while their refugee claims were adjudicated.

Immediately after concluding the agreement to amend the STCA, the Liberal government moved to shut down the Roxham Road crossing between Quebec and New York, the main route migrants have used to enter Canada "irregularly." Since March 25, migrants attempting the crossing are being immediately remanded to US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), which is riddled with fascists and notorious for brutalizing migrants. The net result will be an increase in crossings at more dangerous locations, which will inevitably lead to a surge in deaths.

For those like the Iordache and Chaudhari families that drowned in the St. Lawrence, no Roxham Road equivalent ever existed to cross from Canada into the US. This has long forced undocumented migrants to attempt crossings on lakes, rivers, and in the unnamed wilds along the Canada-US border. In January 2022, another family of four from India, also including two young children, was found frozen to death while

attempting to cross into the US from rural Manitoba.

Florin and Monalisa Iordache had twice before attempted to claim asylum but were denied by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC), with the latest rejection coming just two days before they attempted to cross into the US.

The couple were ethnic Roma from Romania and fled to Canada to escape the anti-Roma persecution that is promoted by the Romanian political establishment. They hoped to eventually join Florin's siblings in San Francisco, California. Their children, two-year-old Evelyn and one-and-a-half-year-old Eylon, were born in Canada and were Canadian citizens.

This did not deter IRCC from kicking the family out of Canada. Four plane tickets were purchased by the IRCC for the family, amounting to a marching order to clear out, despite important pending medical appointments for the children.

Florin first tried to claim asylum in Canada in 2018, was denied, and was subsequently arrested near Blaine, Washington at the Canada-US border while attempting an unofficial crossing. The couple attempted another crossing into Washington in 2021 but were again detained.

Every brutal aspect of the Canadian and American immigration systems' treatment of refugees is laid bare when reviewing Florin Iordache's unsuccessful struggle to obtain asylum for his family in either country.

According to Florin's lawyer Peter Ivanyi, he was "stressed to the max." Ivanyi recalled that Florin had exclaimed in exasperation, "Peter, please, I have Canadian kids and they need to stay here because I can't take them home," alluding to the persecution of the Roma in his native Romania. Throughout Europe, the Roma population has long suffered vicious persecution, including as part of the Nazi Holocaust, and faces systematic discrimination to this day.

When Florin and Monalisa attempted their penultimate crossing into the US in 2021, they were brought before a Canadian tribunal whose adjudicator scolded them for putting their family in an "outrageous situation" due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which was raging because of policies at every level of government that, putting profits before lives, promoted the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

The other family of four who perished when their boat capsized were the Chaudharis, originally from the Indian state of Gujarat. Pravinbhai, his wife Dakshaben, and their two adult children, Vidhi and Meet, were in Canada on tourist visas and living in Toronto before making the perilous voyage. A relative told CTV News that Pravinbhai was a successful farmer who sold a transportation business he owned six months before the family traveled to Canada. The relative found the family's cause of death shocking because Pravinbhai was deathly afraid of boats and water.

Casey Oakes, a man from the nearby Akwesasne Mohawk Nation, is thought to have ferried all eight victims. He is now missing and presumed dead. The Akwesasne Mohawk Nation, off whose shores these nine individuals drowned, straddles the

Ontario, Quebec, and New York borders. Though situated on the St. Lawrence River, a major waterway and economic artery, the predominantly indigenous population of the community has a median household income of only \$32,384, with a 23.2 percent unemployment rate and a 50.6 percent labour force participation rate.

Oakes was a resident of Akwesasne, and according to relatives would have likely taken a job transporting migrants across the river out of economic desperation. He had a history of substance abuse, but relatives say he was desperate to break the cycle of addiction.

Akwesasne's Grand Chief Abram Benedict bluntly explained to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) that economic pressure drives members of the community to engage in activities like Oakes did, at the same time turning the small community into a hub for unofficial border crossings.

"We need to take a moment, pause and think about how desperate these folks were that they would put their family's lives at risk... to choose illegal routes to enter into another country," Benedict said on CBC's Ottawa Morning show.

Destitution pushes residents of Akwesasne, as well as First Nations communities and reserves across the country, into illicit and illegal activity. Between January and October 2022, thirteen female victims of human trafficking contacted a local help centre for aid. All were being sold in Akwesasne or the nearby city of Cornwall. Government statistics show that 50 percent of human trafficking victims in Canada are indigenous women, despite making up less than 5 percent of the total population.

Recent reports indicate that Akwesasne residents made multiple calls to the police as the migrants drowned, saying they heard frantic cries for help around 10 pm. The police arrived and carried out two cursory searches before leaving.

Even though the area has for years been known as an illicit border crossing, the police ridiculed the residents as hearing voices or mistaking partying teenagers for the last gasps of the drowning families. One of the callers responded by saying, "All I know is when I called the police to report screaming for help coming from the river it was no joke... Why would I call if I heard kids playing?"



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