

July 27, 2009

The Honourable Jason Kenney, P.C., M.P.
Citizenship and Immigration Canada
Ottawa, Ontario
K1A 1L1

Dear Mr. Kenney

The Mennonite New Life Centre is gravely concerned by recent announcements regarding new visa requirements for travelers from Mexico and the Czech Republic, as well as policy changes affecting individuals from moratorium countries. These new measures severely restrict access to the refugee determination system in Canada.

Since 1983, the Mennonite New Life Centre and our supporting churches have offered welcome and support to thousands of refugees seeking safety and a new life in Canada. In turn, these refugees have taught us a new appreciation for life and liberty, a new commitment to justice and solidarity, and a renewed vision for Canada as a place where newcomers can find safety and opportunity, contributing their skills and their voices to make us a better nation.

We believe that Canada has both a moral and a legal obligation to consider the claims of those who come to us fleeing persecution. A strong and properly resourced refugee determination system is needed to ensure that fair decisions are made and protection offered to those who need it. Preventing asylum seekers from reaching our shores is not the answer.

We are deeply disappointed by your decision to close the door on nationals of moratoria countries at the US-Canada border, by eliminating the rule exempting them from the Safe Third Country Agreement. The history of this agreement tells us that significant numbers of refugees will be denied the protection they need because of serious shortcomings in the US asylum system. This new measure, combined with your recent decision to impose visas on Mexicans and Czechs, drastically reduces the number of refugees who can seek asylum in Canada. Of refugee claims made in 2008, more than 40% would have been excluded by these measures.

Canada included the safe third country concept in its 1988 immigration law, but the provision was never implemented. Decision makers of the day understood that the United States, for political reasons, was not a safe country for thousands of Central Americans fleeing the cruelty of repression and civil war. Canada chose to take an independent stance and the Mennonite New Life Centre participated in welcoming what is now a strong and vibrant Central American community in Toronto.

We understand the challenge of assessing large numbers of refugee claims and support giving priority to those most in need of protection. However, we submit that identifying those in need of protection is not an easy task, and short cuts endanger genuine refugees. The recent tone of policy discussions about “bogus” claims originating in “democratic” countries undermines a tradition of careful consideration of claims for protection, regardless of the politics of the source country, or our political allies.

We urge you to get back to priorities – namely, ensuring that the Immigration and Refugee Board has the necessary resources and support to accurately and efficiently identify and grant protection to refugees.

Sincerely,

Tanya Chute Molina
Executive Director