

Bill C-31: The threat of “safe” countries.

On June 28th, Bill C-31, which reforms the refugee protection system, took effect. The Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre urges the government to apply these new reforms with extreme caution, given the resurgence of racist and antisemitic threats in certain European countries.

Among the law's new measures, of gravest concern is the establishment of a list of designated “safe” countries of origin. This list will allow the government to identify countries deemed unlikely to produce refugees, in part because of their democratically elected governments. Asylum-seekers from these designated countries will be given a shorter period of time for the preparation and judgment of their claims, and will not be entitled to an appeal process. The new two-tiered system leaves these individuals without the same rights and protections available to other refugee claimants.

The government has justified the introduction of this measure by the arrival of numerous asylum seekers from Eastern European countries, especially Hungary. By invoking the democratic nature of their countries of origin, the government delegitimizes their claims and presents them as “bogus refugees” and abusers, without any consideration of individual situations.

The Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre is concerned that the creation of a list of designated countries does not take into account the countries' human rights record. We cannot and must not assume that the existence of a democratically elected government ensures that the rights of all citizens are respected. On the contrary, the resurgence of extreme-right movements in many parts of Europe has been accompanied by hate speech and violence directed at certain minority communities such as Jews and the Roma.

It is important to note that recently, several Holocaust memorial sites have been vandalized in Hungary, including a memorial statue of Raoul Wallenberg, an honorary Canadian citizen who saved thousands of Hungarian Jews during the Holocaust. Elie Wiesel, Nobel peace prize laureate and Holocaust survivor, recently returned a medal received from the Hungarian government, citing government honours bestowed on a prominent former Nazi. Furthermore, as we speak, the Roma are the target of violent and sometimes fatal attacks in several Eastern European countries. These actions are undertaken by extremist groups who are largely undisturbed by government. The Roma have also recently been the victims of such shocking and discriminatory practices as mid-winter evictions or forced sterilization¹. In September, 2010, a Hungarian elected official even suggested the creation of internment camps for the Roma, whom he considers a menace to public security.

¹ For further information on forced sterilizations: Commissioner for Human Rights, Council of Europe, *Human Rights of Roma and Travellers in Europe*, Strasbourg, Council of Europe Publishing, 2012, p. 93-100.

Before and during World War II, Canada closed its doors to Jews who attempted to flee from the Nazi horrors. Amongst other government actions at the time, do we need to remind Canadians that Canada refused asylum to some 900 Jewish-German passengers travelling aboard the MS St. Louis?

In January 2011, at the inauguration of a monument recalling this incident, Mr. Jason Kenney, Minister of Citizenship, Immigration and Multiculturalism, justly described these events as “a dark period in our nation’s history”. He committed himself to recognizing the experience of communities who faced the sometimes tragic consequences of Canadian immigration policies.

When it implements Bill C-31 and in particular the articles related to the creation of a list of designated countries, we urge the Government of Canada to honour this commitment as well as the Canadian tradition of openness and solidarity towards all refugees.

History must serve as a reminder of the dangers of closing our doors to refugees. The Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre, given its mandate of Holocaust education and commemoration as well as the promotion of respect for diversity, is compelled to communicate these concerns.

We therefore appeal to the Government to acknowledge not only our history, but also particularly the situation of a number of groups who, still today, are threatened by violence and human rights violations.

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