



The Asmahs, then and now

Refugees and Canadian Christians

By Todd Sloan

Ottawa: It is a brisk late November day and Shahed saw ice this morning – just a little chunk on the sidewalk in her new South Keys home – but ice nonetheless. This is one of many new things that have given Shahed joy since she arrived on Halloween from the El Hol refugee camp in Syria (where ice would have been a miracle in heat that went up to 45C regularly). Shahed is a joyful person. Despite her health issues she greets every new Canadian friend with a wide smile and she laughs. A lot.

Shahed and her sister Eliaf and her cousin Omar are looking forward to snow next. One of the Ottawa sponsoring group suggests they be careful what they wish for! They laugh.

The United Nations defines a refugee as a person who “owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.”

About 10 million identified refugees receive assistance from the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR). Four-fifths of them are being hosted by developing countries —42 per cent by countries with less than \$3,000 per capita GDP. Since the Iraq conflict began in 2003, more than 4.5 million Iraqis have been uprooted from their homes, and over 2 million Iraqi refugees have sought asylum in neighbouring countries. Outside of their homeland, they lack legal status, have limited access to employment and education, and face uncertainty and threats of violence. They live in camps like El Hol, where the Asmahs waited in the desert for re-settlement for more than two years.

Medhat Asmah sits quietly beside his wife, Nesreen, in the living room of the three-bedroom townhouse that a wide range of Ottawa Christian sponsors —Anglicans, United Church, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Presbyterians and Quakers —have provided the family of eight. Medhat is an engineer by profession, but hasn't had an opportunity to work in a long time. There is no practical chance for work in the Syrian camps, Medhat says, even if one has a government certificate. The refugees, all of whom qualify for resettlement under UNHCR rules, just wait. The UNHCR food rations have been halved and the Syrian political situation is affecting the safety of immigration workers. No matter who wins, things could get worse for refugees. The current violence is making the continued presence of UN and CIC officials more and more tenuous.

Medhat has a résumé prepared and it is being circulated with potential employers. He knows his children will get schooling, including Shahed, who never really had the opportunity before, due to her chronic physical condition. Shahed will also get the medical attention she needs.

Medhat and Nesreen's family, at least, is out of the camp.

Private Refugee Sponsorship (PRS) is one way that UNHCR-sanctioned refugees can come to Canada. The principal other routes are by obtaining government sponsorship (where the government assumes the costs and assistance of newcomers) and by making a claim at a Canadian port-of-entry. Major agents of the PRS process are the Sponsorship Agreement Holders (SAHs), incorporated groups that have negotiated agreements with Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) permitting them to sponsor refugees themselves or in concert with other organizations. The Anglican Diocese of Ottawa is one of roughly 90 SAHs in Canada.

The good news is that Canadian private refugee sponsorship has made great strides in recent years – from less than 3,000 in 2000 to a projected 6,500 in 2013.

The bad news is that this figure remains a drop in a very slowly-filling bucket. Canada has accepted 1.6 per cent of the world's refugees and the sponsorship processing can take years in some regions where CIC reviews claims. The queue of sponsored refugees awaiting settlement in Canada (i.e. with agreements already accepted by the government) stands at about 25,000.

The even worse news is that the tap is being tightened. In order to clear the backlog, the government claims it needs to reduce the annual flood of new applications that it will review. CIC has announced that it will cap SAH applications at 1,350 in 2012. This will seriously hamper efforts across Canada.

Christians in the Holy Land are few in number, a fact that seems to escape many of us here in the West. As we struggle to witness Christ in a sea of secularism, our struggles are in a way, similar. We have much to learn from each other, not least of which is how we both find the strength and confidence in the Spirit to focus our skills and energy so that faith in Jesus is nurtured, the poor are fed and cared for, justice is preached and worship remains vital and faithful. Below are a few pictures that show a number of our partner's ministries. More will follow in due course as well as some of the stories that we can tell about their diocese and our developing relationship.

Eliaf sits with her sisters and mother at the welcome reception hosted by the sponsorship group that has put together lodging, food, schooling, transportation and the hundreds of other details of everyday life for the Asmahs. The snakes and scorpions in Syria are a receding memory. Eliaf is clear about her future. She simply will become a doctor. For the present, though, she enjoys some shortbread.

In addition to changes affecting sponsored refugees, the Canadian Government has recently tabled legislation that attempts to speed up the processing of all claims by asylum seekers. On its face the objective of the new legislation appears reasonable— shorten the time the claimants can stay in Canada before being welcomed, or evicted, and combat “human smuggling.” Unfortunately, the new rules will create risks for legitimate claimants that might result in their being returned to highly hostile environments.

The proposed rules set shorter deadlines for the various stages of claims, especially at the outset where the relevant facts leading to claims must be assembled. This will make it very difficult for many to gather the evidence needed to deal with complex situations from which refugee claims arise.

Claims will be rejected not because the claimants are not refugees but rather because they didn't have time to muster the proof needed to make the case.

Moreover, the legal presumptions set out for “special cases” in the Bills have been the focus of considerable concern among refugee advocates and the immigration bar.

Recently, the diocesan Refugee Working Group communicated with the Church on a particularly aggressive measure, Bill C-4, the “Preventing Human Smugglers from Abusing Canada's Immigration System Act.” The Bill would permit the government to impose special sanctions on groups of claimants who arrive by ship, or any other “irregular” circumstances. The Bill targets the smuggled, not the smugglers. Irrespective of the legitimacy of the claim, how the claimant gets here is a determinative aspect.

For the Asmahs, the winter of 2012 will definitely be a new and joyful experience. This is tempered, though, by the thought of their neighbours in Syria who continue to seek Canada's help. Unfortunately, the potential for these and millions of other refugees to move to Canada is becoming cloudier.

(Crosstalk, February, 2012)