



# CANADA'S PERIODICAL ON REFUGEES

# REFUGE

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## CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON REFUGEES

### Introduction

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As refugees occupy a more central and visible place in the landscapes of everyday affairs throughout the globe, they are increasingly seen as sources as well as agents of change and transformation in local and global politics. For example, at times they are seen as sources of instability and security threats worldwide. At other times, refugees are represented as economic threats undermining the economies of the host countries. As J. Bhabha and S. Shutter<sup>1</sup> stated, it is nearly as if the very word "refugee" has become an accusation against the refugee—a development that intimates a profound crisis in the inter-governmental refugee protection regime anchored in the modern state-system.

Reflecting this crisis in the material conditions of refugee lives throughout the world, but particularly in "rich" western countries, increasingly, governments are denying people the right to asylum. In its 1995 annual report on the state of the world's refugees, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) observes this phenomenon: "states are increasingly taking steps to obstruct the arrival of

asylum seekers, to contain displaced people within their homeland, and to return refugees to their country of origin."<sup>2</sup> In 1997, Dennis McNamara, UNHCR's international protection director, echoes the same observation but with a blunter language: "Today," he states, "refugee protection and the institution of asylum are probably facing the greatest global challenge in their history, with governments systematically,

intentionally, and openly attacking the international system created to protect refugees."<sup>3</sup>

Possibilities for obtaining international protection continue to be diminished as refugees and asylum seekers face border closures, armed violence, interdiction at sea, expulsions, and legal restrictions as well as premature return to an insecure environment.<sup>4</sup>

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