



CANADA'S PERIODICAL ON REFUGEES REFUGE

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The Refugee Crisis

Ten million refugees! Sixteen million refugees! But the real crisis is not simply one of numbers or even of the degree of hardship, both physical and emotional, suffered by all those who are homeless. The real crisis is a moral and political one.

Our globe is completely divided up into states. There are virtually no more nomads. The era of unsettled peoples who moved with lightning speed to conquer new pastures or hunting lands ended in Eurasia in the 17th century, in China and India in the 18th century, in the Americas in the 19th century and in Africa in the 20th century. Corresponding to the disappearance of nomadic life has been the disappearance of frontiers, of the conquest and settlement of "virgin" lands whether in Siberia, the Americas, or the continent of Africa. Settlers from diverse areas had to be consolidated into nations. Frontiers had to be converted into secure and recognized borders.

The 20th century has witnessed the evolution of a world-wide nation-state system with the result that any individual today who is not a citizen is, by definition, stateless, and hence, homeless. In this century, to be stateless, and hence, homeless, is to be cast out of humanity. The only way to have a home and thus to avoid being an "outsider" is to belong to a state: citizenship, therefore, has become not simply a duty, but a necessity and a right. It is a prere-

quisite to living in our contemporary world.

If every individual must be a citizen, the corollary is that states must fulfill fundamental obligations to individuals. First, the protection of its individual citizens from domestic strife and foreign enemies must be a priority of a state. Second, each citizen must be treated equally before the law. Third, the state has an obligation to foster conditions which allow citizens to develop and secure their own prosperity, professional achievement and creativity.

Difficulties arise when states fail in their obligations to their citizens. Rather than functioning as protectors, the governors of a state may actually endanger and threaten its own citizens; rather than guaranteeing equality before the law, the rulers may persecute individuals or groups either by legal means or through individuals and groups not subject to rule of law; rather than fostering opportunities for their citizens, dictators or oligarchies may be their chief exploiters.

A moral and political crisis, however, is experienced in those states which take seriously the obligations to their own citizens *and* also assume some obligation to the suffering individuals of other states. The Canadian government has an obligation to protect our security, guarantee equal treatment under the law, and provide opportunities for the self-realization of its individual citizens. The government has also written into domestic law and entered into international obligations for the protection of refugees who flee governments which act contrary to their obligations to their own citizens.

What happens when international obligations threaten or appear to threaten the obligations governments have to their own citizens? What happens when the government fails to ensure opportunities for its own citizens at the same time as the numbers of refugees are increasing? Moral obligations to others who are victims of exploitation by their

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