

## 'This Is The Second Summer We're Going Into Potential Refugee Crisis'

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debate in the Commons, thanks to an Opposition day motion from the Conservatives calling for a plan to be tabled by May 11 to stop the flow of border crossers coming into Canada at unofficial entry points in Quebec and Ontario.

Conservative immigration critic Michelle Rempel accused the government of simply throwing money at the problem of irregular migration rather than coming up with a demonstrable plan to make it stop. "This is the second summer that we're going into a potential immigration crisis without a plan, and certainly we expect the government to do better."

Last year, RCMP intercepted a total of 20,493 people who crossed the border illegally. So far this year, 6,373 irregular migrants have arrived in Canada this way — more than double the 2,784 irregular migrants who arrived in Canada between January and April 2017.

This influx has caused a "clearly unsustainable" backlog of files at the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB), according to documents obtained by The Canadian Press through access-to-information legislation.

The documents show the arms-length body responsible for adjudicating asylum claims has been



Quebec Immigration, Diversity and Inclusiveness Minister David Heurtel responds to Opposition questions on illegal immigrants crossing the border, during question period at the legislature in Quebec City. The Canadian Press/Jacques Boissinot

struggling to deal with the massive influx of files. A response team was initiated last year to cope with the increased workload and long wait times. But without additional resources, the IRB's streaming processes and improvements were swallowed by the increase in cases.

The number of claims reached record levels in 2017 and the IRB's backlog tripled from fewer than 15,000 cases in 2015 to over 50,000 by the end of 2017.

The government has said it is working to ease pressures caused by the surge in asylum claims, including dedicating \$74 million this year to help reduce back-

logs at the IRB. New spending has also been allocated for the agencies that deal with irregular migrants at the border, including \$72 million over two years for the Canada Border Services Agency, \$10 million over one year for the RCMP and \$2 million over one year to the Canadian Security Intelligence Service.

But Rempel said none of these financial measures appear to be stopping asylum seekers from continuing to stream into Canada. She said she's concerned the public's support for immigration and newcomers could turn if nothing is done to stop the flow of illegal border crossings.

## MP Wants Entire Canadian Border As 'Port Of Entry'

OTTAWA: The entire Canada-U.S. border should be designated as an official port of entry to help stop the flow of illegal migrants into Canada, says Conservative immigration critic Michelle Rempel.

Making such a change would give the RCMP and Canada Border Services Agency more tools to deal with an ongoing influx of asylum seekers crossing the border at unofficial entry points in Quebec and Ontario, Rempel said in an interview Thursday.

"I just really feel that unless we address this issue this is going to be unending and it's unsustainable," she said. Immigration advocates have been calling on the government to suspend the Canada-U.S. Safe Third Country Agreement, which has been cited as a major factor in the spike of irregular border crossings.

The agreement prevents asylum seekers from asking for refugee protection when they present themselves at an official port of entry. They can only claim refugee status from inside Canada, which is why thousands have been crossing on foot.

If Ottawa doesn't close that loophole, turning the entire border an official port of entry could offer an alternative solution, Rempel said. But Public Safety



A Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer frisks a woman as she is processed before being turned over to the Canada Border Services Agency at a tent in Saint-Bernard-de-Lacolle, Quebec at an unofficial border station (AP File Photo/Charles Krupa)

Minister Ralph Goodale's office was quick to shut down the idea, saying it would create even greater problems and dangers along the 9,000-kilometre border.

"It would incentivize people to cross at more remote locations and to evade detection by Canadian law enforcement so they can get to an inland immigration office and make a claim there," said Goodale's press secretary, Scott Bardsley. "That would increase the risk to Canadians and asylum seekers alike."

Some officials are projecting a further 400 people a day could cross the border into Quebec through forest paths this summer to claim asylum in Canada — a situation Rempel warned will only

exacerbate ongoing backlogs in the processing of refugee claims.

Ottawa has said it is working to ease pressures caused by the surge in asylum claims, including dedicating \$74 million this year to help reduce the processing backlogs at the Immigration and Refugee Board.

But the IRB is warning concentrated surges in refugee claims and appeals could negate any gains it makes in reducing backlogs. Last year, a 20 per cent improvement in processing was swallowed by a 40 per cent increase in cases. In 2017-18, the board finalized 49,000 cases but intake over the same period increased by twice that amount, from 50,700 to 70,000 cases.

## Most Illegal Migrants This Year From Nigeria, Pakistan, Columbia, US

OTTAWA: The number of illegal border crossings is up significantly this year compared with the same period last year, so federal and law enforcement officials have been preparing for possibility of another spike as the weather warms up.

Departmental, RCMP and border officials provided a technical briefing this week on the plans they have developed as a result of lessons learned from pressures and concerns arising from last year's spike in irregular migrants coming across the Canada-U.S. border.

Here's what was learned:

1. The numbers are trending upward. Last year, RCMP intercepted a total of 20,493 people who crossed the border illegally. That means they did not present at an official port-of-entry and instead came across the border through unofficial paths to make a refugee claim in Canada. So far this year, 6,373 irregular migrants have arrived in Canada this way. That's an increase of 128 per cent over the number who arrived in Canada between January and April 2017, which was 2,784.

2. Quebec is the hotspot. Of the 6,373 border crossers that have arrived so far in 2018, the majority — 5,609 — have done so in Quebec. However, about 40 per cent of say they are planning to settle elsewhere in Canada, mainly in Ontario. That's why Quebec and the federal government are working on a plan to try to encourage asylum seekers away from highly saturated areas like Montreal and Toronto, in the hopes they might instead settle in outlying regions of the two provinces where labour shortages exist and migrants could find more employment opportunities.

3. Housing remains a question mark. Quebec has told the feds

it will only open four temporary shelters for refugee claimants this year, with a total of 1,850 spaces. The province says it will not open Olympic Stadium or the nine other temporary shelters it operated last year for migrants because these were spaces not intended for accommodations, such as school gymnasiums. That's why Ottawa is now working with Quebec and Ontario on processes that could be used to triage asylum seekers from the unofficial entry point in Lacolle to other shelters in those provinces.

4. Countries of origin are shifting. Last year, the majority of irregular migrants who arrived in Canada were Haitian, which is largely attributed to the Trump administration's decision to lift the temporary protected status for immigrants from Haiti living the U.S. This year, the majority of illegal migrants in Canada are Nigerians with U.S. travel visas. Other countries of origin this year include: Columbia, Pakistan and the United States.

5. Lessons have been learned. After last summer's unexpected influx caused some major headaches, a national strategic plan has been put in place to respond to any future spikes. It was described by a senior official as "collaborative, flexible, scalable and phased." It allows for increased resources to be brought into an area quickly, as needed.

"It is designed to move asylum seekers through the system in a timely manner while also ensuring all of Canada's rules for refugee claimants are properly followed. That being said, Ottawa continues to try to get the message out that entering Canada between ports of entry is "not a free ticket" into Canada.

## Ontario Budget Deficit

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to unilaterally access the assets, so they should not appear on the balance sheets. She repeated that message Wednesday, adding that if the government could produce a letter proving it could access the funds she would change her assessment.

Premier Kathleen Wynne, whose Liberals have been trailing in recent polls ahead of the spring election, downplayed the discrepancy, calling it a long-standing "accounting dispute" between her government and the auditor general. "Those are old discussions and they are ongoing," Wynne said.

Finance Minister Charles Sousa acknowledged that the govern-

ment and the auditor general's office have been at odds over the issue for years.

Progressive Conservative parliamentary leader Vic Fedeli said the Tories accept the Auditor General's numbers but could not say how they will impact the Tories' as yet unreleased platform.

Fedeli also said the Liberals were trying to make their books look better ahead of the spring election. "We the MPPs have been deliberately misled and so have the people of Ontario," he said. "They have purposely deceived the people."

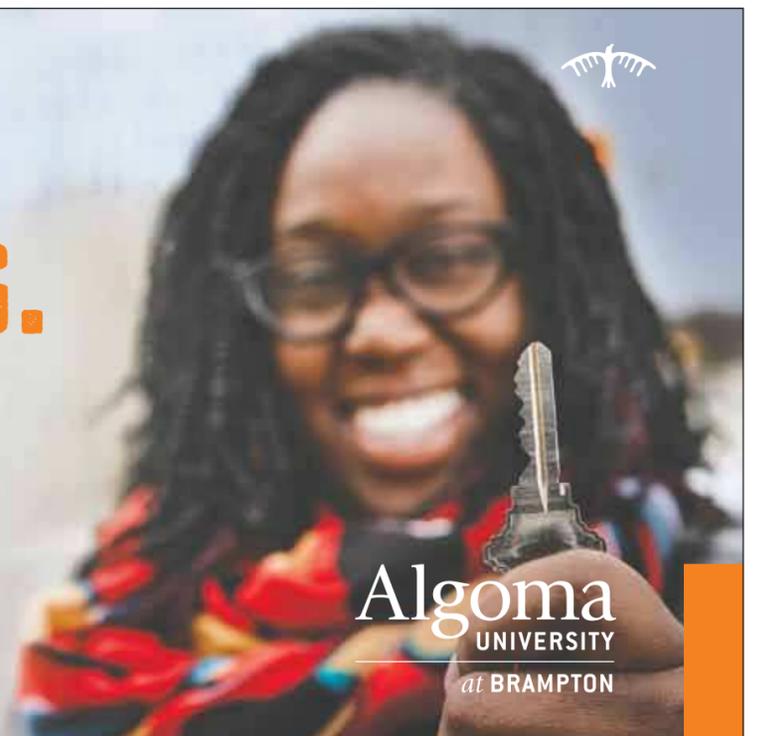
NDP finance critic John Vanthof said the auditor general has pointed out what should be basic accounting principles.

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