

Quebec Road Still Ground Zero For Asylum Seekers

By Sidhartha Banerjee

The flow of asylum seekers using Roxham Road has slowed slightly, but locals like Susan Heller who live near the country's busiest illegal crossing know that can change in a hurry.

Heller's farm in southwestern Quebec is not far from the ditch at the U.S. border that has drawn international attention with thousands of crossings in the past two years. She volunteers as part of Bridges Not Borders, a group of locals who've been calling attention to the migrants' plight.

Every Sunday, a few members of the group head to the American side of the border in Champlain, N.Y. to hand out water in the summer and warm clothes in the winter to the dozen or so asylum seekers crossing on foot. They greet the taxis and shuttle buses dropping the migrants off before they cross the border and disappear into a temporary building the RCMP built this year on the Canadian side. An American counterpart covers the other six days of the week.

"We have, let's say, half a minute to say 'Welcome!' " said Heller, who has lived on Roxham Road for 51 years, about a kilometre from the border. "They are very stressed because this is the last hurdle before they get to Canada, so they're really not listening to you We mostly say to them, they're going to be okay."

Heller's once-quiet stretch of rural road has become ground zero for an intensifying debate on immigration, in the province and in the country.

Coalition Avenir Quebec Leader Francois Legault, who was elected Premier Oct. 1, complained in 2017 that the border was becoming a "sieve." Last April, Jean-Francois Lisee, then leader of the Parti Quebecois,



A Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer informs a migrant couple of the location of a legal border station, shortly before they illegally crossed from Champlain, N.Y., to Saint-Bernard-de-Lacolle, Quebec, using Roxham Road. Authorities say more than 80 percent of the 4,000 migrants who crossed into Quebec recently are from Haiti, and the rest include people from India, Mexico, Colombia and Turkey. (AP Photo/Charles Krupa, File)

proposed a fence blocking off the crossing. The Coalition's winning election platform included a promise to reduce all immigration into Quebec _ including refugees _ by 20 per cent. And since Legault's election, he has demanded that Ottawa pay \$300-million to cover the costs of health, education and other services provided to the migrants.

Paul Clarke, executive director of Action Refugies Montreal, an advocacy group that works with refugees, said the rhetoric surrounding newcomers to the country is likely to get more heated with a federal election around the corner.

"I think there's going to be a lot of things said by a lot of people, and the more extreme views sometimes get the most publicity," Clarke said. "It's important that we keep the context in terms of human rights and recalling that we're talking about _ people who are leaving difficult situations wherever they are."

The flow of irregular border

crossers over the last two years has led to a backlog of refugee claims at the Immigration and Refugee Board, with wait times of close to two years before claims are heard. Clarke called for added resources from the federal government to accelerate the process. "The quicker they can get resources into the IRB so people have their hearing and they can know what's happening, the better it is for all concerned," Clarke said.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has pledged \$173 million to improve border security and decrease the time it takes to process asylum seekers claims. And last week the federal government announced compensation of between \$2,500 and \$25,000 for residents dealing with increased commotion near the Roxham crossing.

In 2017, more than 90 per cent of the 20,593 irregular crossers into Canada came through Roxham Road. So far in 2018, it is more than 95 per cent.

The latest figures reveal a drop in the number entering in November _ 1,019 apprehended across Canada by the RCMP, the lowest figure since June 2017. In November 2017, the number was 1,623.

Francine Dupuis, a spokesperson for PRAIDA, an organization in Quebec that offers medical and social services to asylum seekers, said the numbers crossing in recent months have stabilized. The majority end up working, their kids go to school and her group never hears from them again, she said.

She saw a spike in Haitian arrivals in the summer of 2017. This year Nigerians accounted for the bulk of people her organization helped, but their numbers have recently levelled off. People from other African countries facing strife are over-represented among the irregular arrivals, she said, as are South Americans.

But those trends can shift quickly, and Dupuis said they're ready for whatever happens next.

"I'd say we're dealing with the usual crowds of people coming from countries where horrors or wars are happening," she said.

At first, many asylum seekers remained in Quebec, but now, those who don't speak French or don't want to learn tend to head to Ontario, which has had its own problems dealing with the crush and is also seeking federal compensation.

Dupuis notes that Ontario didn't have the same infrastructure in place as Quebec and will have to develop services. "If you don't receive them well, you're going to have problems after, because they integrate much better if you ease their entrance into the country," she said.

Francois Dore, a retired police officer who lives just a few kilometres from the border, said before the dramatic increase in 2017, residents would routinely find asylum seekers roaming the street, heading north, looking to be picked up by authorities so they could begin the refugee claim process.

He said he has no issues with desperate people looking for a better life. "If they can make it, and if they can be an asset to Canada _ if they can do well _ then all the better," Dore said.

Dore recalled the story of one man, a Yemeni asylum seeker who arrived at Roxham Road two years before the 2017 crush. Dore met the man, a lawyer, as he returned to the border in 2017 with a television crew to see the crossing point again, a pilgrimage that came just a few days before he was to be reunited with his family.

"I remember asking the guy, 'Was it the right choice you made when you crossed the border that way?' " Dore said. "He told me, tears in his eyes, 'It was the only way.'" - The Canadian Press

Liberals' Stand On Border Crossers Dangerous: Scheer

OTTAWA: Conservative Leader Andrew Scheer says Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is the most divisive prime minister in the history of Canada.

Scheer is lashing out at Trudeau and the Liberal party for dismissing anyone who disagrees with them, particularly anyone who has questions about Canada's immigration system.

"I actually think Justin Trudeau's approach to label people who have legitimate concerns with his issues as being un-Canadian and intolerant, that is very dangerous," said Scheer.

His comments come several days after Trudeau told The Canadian Press that Scheer and the Conservatives were playing a dangerous game themselves by lying to Canadians to drum up fear over immigration.

Both leaders are issuing similar accusations at the same time as they are promising to run positive, upbeat campaigns for the 2019 election.

Following their 2015 election loss the Conservatives acknowledged they had taken on a more negative tone and pledged to brighten up by the next campaign. In an interview in front of a roaring fire in the living room of his official residence in Ottawa, Scheer said he is confident the party has learned from that mistake.

If any of his MPs resort to name-calling _ Calgary MP Michelle Rempel earlier this week called Immigration Minister Ahmed Hussen a "chicken" on Twitter, for example _ Scheer insists it is in reaction to the Liberals and doesn't apologize for it. "When we're the victims of insulting language and attacks it's obviously going to evoke a response," he said.

But he said the general message the Conservatives will put to Canadians "will have a positive aspirational aspect to it."

It is on Trudeau's watch, Scheer said, that the country is facing regional divisions and jurisdictional battles over oil pipelines. And it is on Trudeau's watch, he went on, that what the Conservatives call "illegal border crossers" have become a major problem. Over 38,000 irregular migrants who originate from places like Haiti, Somalia and El Salvador have arrived in Canada since the beginning of 2017.

Scheer said he and his party are not anti-immigration, they are anti-cheaters. "The Conservative party believes Canada is stronger for being able to welcome people from all over the world. We are proud of being in a country that has the ability to welcome people who are facing persecution and fleeing civil war and genocide. But in order to be able to continue to have that type of a system we have to maintain the confidence of Canadians in it. We have to make sure people come to Canada the right way," he said.



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