



CANADA'S NEWSLETTER ON REFUGEES  
**REFUGEE**

*Baha'is*

*A Model of Private Sponsorship*

From an Interview with Carolyne Dowdell

**Is** private sponsorship obsolete? The statistics suggest it is at least heading that way. There has been a precipitous decline in the private sponsorship of refugees since the peak of 1979-80 when 35,899 Indochinese refugees were privately sponsored to Canada. Since then, only 4,694 privately sponsored refugees have come to Canada. But in the midst of this decline one extraordinary program of private sponsorship stands out: the very original and highly successful effort of the Baha'is in Canada.

**The Unique Baha'i Model**

There are 20,000 Baha'is in Canada, living in 1,500 localities. In 325 of those localities there are enough Baha'is to have a local elected spiritual assembly of nine. These local spiritual assemblies elect a national spiritual assembly. The national spiritual assembly signed an umbrella agreement with Employment and Immigration Canada under which it assumes full responsibility for sponsorships undertaken by its constituent members.

During the Indochinese movement some organizations — most notably the Anglican Church and the Canadian Jewish Congress — did not sign such umbrella agreements. They preferred to leave the initiation of and responsibility for individual sponsorships to local groups, with the central organization acting primarily as a publicist. Other organizations signed umbrella agreements and acted as guarantors of sponsorships by local groups. The

Mennonite Central Committee and the Christian Reformed Church not only signed umbrella agreements to act as guarantors; they very actively encouraged, coordinated and backed up local sponsorship efforts.

The National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is is going a step beyond the direction of the Mennonites and the Christian Reformed Church. The national assembly is itself the sponsor of all the Baha'i refugees coming to Canada. It then assigns a refugee or a group of refugees to a local spiritual assembly, or even to a local group of Baha'is if a locality has too few Baha'is to constitute an assembly. That group agrees to accept immediate responsibility for the settlement of the refugees. Funds for the sponsorship are distributed to the local groups from a centrally located fund for relief. Thus the formal sponsorship is centralized. The fundraising is centralized. The distribution of the funds is centralized to even

out the cost. The human responsibilities are localized. The resultant costs are \$500 - \$1,000 per refugee, significantly less than the \$2,100 per refugee spent on basic living allowances for government-assisted refugees under the Indochinese refugee program.

Another unique feature of the Baha'i model is that the refugees are given these monies as an interest-free loan, the repayment of which is spaced over a long period of time and which, under special circumstances, may be forgiven. The national community model of private sponsorship is uniquely conjoined with placing the ultimate responsibility for cost on the individual refugees. At the same time, the plan permits a great deal of flexibility. A refugee sent to Sudbury who is unable to find a job can be moved rapidly to another area where a support group will be readily available.

So far, 200 Baha'i refugees have arrived

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## REFUGE

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## Letters

### From the Editor:

With this issue I take my leave of the editorship of *Refuge*, and have the pleasure of announcing that the new editor will be Dr. Howard Adelman. Dr. Adelman is Director of the Refugee Documentation Project at York University. *Refuge* will be publicizing the work of the Project and will share support services with it.

I would like to express my thanks to readers and to those who contributed writing, information and other assistance throughout the past year, for their interest and support. I hope that *Refuge* has been interesting and helpful and I am confident that it will become even more so in the future.

Kristin Hanson  
Editor

### To the Editor:

I would like to make the strongest objection to your publication of the piece "Politics and Refugees" in the May/June issue. To quote your own policy, *Refuge* is "dedicated to encouraging assistance to refugees by providing a forum for sharing information and opinion on Canadian and international issues pertaining to refugees." As such, there is no place in your newsletter for such biased, self-serving articles as that of Howard Adelman on Palestinian refugees. There are so many unsubstantiated or unbalanced statements made in this article that it is

possible only to mention a few representative ones here. That anyone would publicly suggest, as he does, that dispersal of refugees in order to lower their political consciousness is a viable option or that Israeli occupation of the West Bank can be rationalized by "full employment" of Arabs there is shocking. To see such things advanced in a government-supported newsletter is unacceptable.

I have found *Refuge* to be a valuable source of news and information on refugee matters. Nevertheless, your newsletter must clarify its editorial position on what qualifies as objective discourse on contentious refugee matters so that situations like this do not occur in the future.

Doreen Indra  
Edmonton  
July 1982

I will reply to two points. Doreen Indra states that I advocated the dispersal of refugees in order to lower their political consciousness. I did no such thing. I did say that a lowered political consciousness is an effect of dispersal of refugees. I provided a descriptive account rather than a prescriptive one.

Secondly, I did not rationalize Israeli occupation of the West Bank because of full employment. I merely said that there was full employment. Though I did not say it in the article published in *Refuge*, I have written elsewhere that I support self-determination for the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, but that political point was not relevant to my article.

It is difficult in areas of sensitive political issues to avoid accusations of bias, but I do hope the article will be re-read more judiciously.

Howard Adelman  
Toronto  
August 1982

### To the Editor:

I want to express to you my delight with your last issue, and in particular with the valuable and scholarly contribution of Dr. Howard Adelman. I do believe he hit the nail on the head in his key statement: "Viable solutions are eliminated because humanitarianism is separated from politics in a way which allows politics to dictate the boundary conditions for humanitarianism."

I sincerely hope that a basis will soon be found for a political solution based on humanitarian principles, and I see Dr. Adelman's analysis as a valuable contribution to a complex problem.

Imre Rosenberg  
Ottawa  
July 1982

REFUGE is a non-profit, independent bi-monthly newsletter about refugees. The annual subscription price is \$10.00 for five issues.

If you would like to introduce REFUGE to your colleagues, please send a stamped envelope addressed to them and we will send them a free sample copy.

We also invite articles, announcements, letters, pictures, etc.

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UNHCR is currently involved in a voluntary repatriation program aimed at providing limited relief and rehabilitation assistance to returnees in Ethiopia. On April 30, 1982 the UNHCR launched an appeal for U.S. \$20 million to finance the program.

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in Canada and 500 more will be coming. This represents an amazing ratio of one sponsored refugee for every 30 Baha'is resident in Canada — a sign of strong dedication and support.

### ***The Non-transferability of the Model***

Unfortunately, there are certain aspects of the Baha'i model that make it unlikely that other groups could copy it directly. Almost all of the refugees speak English. Almost all of them are educated. Almost all of them are in the very employable age group of 20 - 40 years of age. The refugees share the religious affiliation of their sponsors.

Most importantly, the refugees are in serious danger. Recent studies have clearly indicated that potential sponsors respond to the real and perceived needs of refugees. The Baha'is are not designated class refugees but true Convention refugees. They are not suffering under a generally repressive regime: they are being persecuted by that regime.

### ***The Persecution of Baha'is***

The evidence for their persecution in Iran is overwhelming. There are 300,000 — 500,000 Baha'is in Iran. All Baha'i property has been confiscated, including cemeteries. Businesses of wealthy Baha'is have been seized. Baha'i homes have been looted. Baha'i children are not allowed to go to school. Baha'i farmers have had their crops burned and their livestock confiscated. Baha'is employed by the government have been fired. One, who has come to Canada, worked in the Department of Fisheries in Iran for ten years. The persecution has been widespread in all areas of the country and in all sectors of society.

Individual Baha'is have been stoned by mobs and shot by revolutionary firing squads. One entire national governing body of Baha'is was kidnapped and disappeared without a trace. Their successors were also kidnapped; seven of their bodies were found.

The Iranian government, in a submission to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, claimed that the trials which led to the executions of the Baha'is were "in no way because of their faith,

but solely on account of their acts of which they are accused." According to the deposition, Islamic laws and standards governing Iran provide that "no one is to be molested, persecuted or prosecuted on account of his religious beliefs." However, Baha'is are not recognized as a religious group, although they are the largest religious minority in Iran. The Iranian Constitution states: "Zoroastrian, Jewish and Christian Iranians shall be the sole recognized religious minorities." Further, it exempts from human rights protection "those who engage in activities against Islam or the Islamic Republic of Iran." Since the Baha'is are not by definition a recognized religion, the very activity of being a Baha'i is considered an act against Islam, and they are therefore, not entitled to human rights protection. Thus, they are not denied human rights because of their faith, but because of their acts in being Baha'is. As Siyyid Rida Levasani, the judge of the Islamic Revolutionary Court of Kirmanshah, ruled in a directive to the Zamzam Company, "It is hereby announced that if the Baha'i workers and employees repent, and write in their personal files that they adhere to the Islamic Ithna'Ashari creed (Shi'ih) . . . . they will be allowed to continue their work for the company; otherwise they should be dismissed."

So much for the denial of religious persecution. The Baha'is are accused of promoting prostitution (Baha'is believe in the equality of men and women and women do not wear the veil), corrupting the earth, warring against God, cooperating with Zionism (their holy shrine is located in Israel near Haifa), and spying for the Americans (their faith advocates the compatibility of science and religion).

Persecution of the Baha'is is not new to Iran. There was some persecution of them in the 1950s under the Shah. In the revolution of 1906-11, they were accused of being the conspiratorial force behind the constitutional movement by one side, and charged with promoting authoritarianism by the other. Ironically, this came about because their religious principles command them to remain apolitical in the national context and to promote an international world order. In fact, since the Baha'i religion was founded in 1844, Baha'is have endured very serious persecution, killings and pogroms in Iran.

### ***The Canadian Sponsorship Program***

It is not the Baha'is in Iran who are being sponsored. It is very difficult to arrange to assist members of persecuted minorities who are still in their home countries. "Such persons are technically not Convention refugees nor is it advisable to

create a designated class on their behalf because of the difficulties that such a designation could cause them vis-à-vis their home governments," notes a document of the Canada Employment and Immigration Commission.

It is Baha'is who are stranded abroad who are being sponsored. On August 12, 1981, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Iran circulated to its embassies instructions that they should "carefully prepare a list of names of all the Baha'is residing within their jurisdiction" and "refrain from extending the passports of those individuals." Thus, if Iranian Baha'is who are abroad return home, they face persecution within Iran. If they remain abroad until their passports expire, and they are not in countries which grant asylum, then they become stateless.

Canada and Australia are the only two countries with programs for resettling Baha'is stranded in countries which do not provide asylum. Most of the Baha'is sponsored to Canada come from the Far East: mainly the Philippines and India; also from Bangladesh, Thailand and Taiwan. Canada's immigration offices abroad confirm that the applicants are bona-fide Baha'is and that they are not entitled to permanent residence in their host countries. They check on their health and backgrounds, and then admit them to Canada as refugees sponsored by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is in Canada.

The Baha'i sponsorship program is a unique phenomenon combining the dedication and commitment of Canadians of Baha'i faith with commendable initiative on the part of the federal government to help in the resettlement of Baha'is stranded around the world.

### ***Refugee Policy at the CNE***

People who wondered whether Canada's regional priorities in refugee assistance were based on persecution and humanitarian need should have asked Multifax, Multiculturalism Canada's exhibit at the CNE. Multifax says:

Starting in the late fall of 1980, Canada began receiving a larger number of Polish families. These people fled Poland before the imposition of marshal (sic) law to Austria, where they were housed in camps. From there they emigrated to Canada. Their major reason for leaving Poland was to seek a better life for their children. Most of these new immigrants are skilled and highly educated.