



BRIDGES NOT BORDERS: STATEMENT ON THE CLOSURE OF ROXHAM ROAD

Bridges Not Borders, a grassroots group in Hemmingford, Quebec, has been supporting refugees crossing at Roxham since 2017. We are deeply shocked by the abrupt and callous enforcement of the new protocol to Safe Third Country Agreement that extends it across the entire border and exposes asylum seekers to grave risks. Put into effect at midnight on March 24, with 8 hours' notice, there was no time to inform people already en route to seek safety in Canada. Some had traveled weeks and months only to find they had arrived too late and could no longer cross. Their despair is heartbreaking.

Because of Canada's geographic isolation and restrictive visa requirements, most refugees can only arrive here through the land border. Roxham Road was a safe place for them to do so, but this is now blocked. Without other options, some people will try to cross on their own, or rely on traffickers waiting to exploit this situation. Some will die from hypothermia, drown or lose digits to frostbite. 6 people lost their lives at the Canadian border over the last year, and this figure is bound to go up. And worse, having managed to cross clandestinely, refugees must also evade detection for 14 days before being able to claim asylum, a punitive measure that will put them at even greater risk.

When people come to our land border and fail to meet STCA criteria, they can never again seek asylum in Canada. They are returned to US authorities. Yet, in 2007 and 2020 the Canadian federal court found that the US is not a safe country for asylum seekers. Thousands are held in immigration detention, often in inhuman conditions that 'shock the conscience' according to Federal Court Justice McDonald in her 2020 judgment. Most do not have access to legal counsel, making it very difficult to pursue an asylum claim. Some refugees will be deported to their homelands where their lives are in danger, the most serious breach of refugee law. If they have been in the US for more than a year they can no longer apply for asylum, and they may find themselves in limbo, without status, perhaps homeless, struggling to survive and unable to return home.

Roxham Road existed because STCA rules only applied at official Ports of Entry. Had the STCA been abolished, refugee claimants could have crossed safely and been received across the country without straining the resources of just one province, a solution long favored by hundreds of Canadian organizations, churches and lawyers.

Ironically, as the Roxham 'crisis' evolved, the government worked with the provinces to settle over 190,000 Ukrainians in one year, and 426,000 more have so far been accepted. Yet only 40,000 asylum seekers crossed at Roxham in 2022, people fleeing from long standing armed conflicts, persecution, gang violence and even societal collapse. While we welcome the Ukrainian program, where are the special visas for others in the same boat, like the people from Yemen who are in the 9th year of a devastating war with widespread death, famine and displacement? We cannot but wonder about the racism implicit in such unequal treatment.

The new Protocol was enacted without any democratic consultation, nor did the government wait for the imminent Supreme Court Judgment that will rule on whether the STCA is in fact valid. It was signed a year ago, kept in secret and proclaimed with fanfare. Yet it imitates the failed 'solutions' of

other nations who try to seal borders. We receive only a tiny proportion of the world's forcibly displaced people, now at 103 million. Most of these are found in poor countries with very few resources compared to ours. We missed the opportunity to respond creatively to this global crisis and to develop solutions that respect our obligations under the Refugee Convention. Instead, we are building a 'fortress Canada' on a foundation of human tragedy.

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Bridges not Borders

www.bridgesnotborders.ca