

Illegal migrants lured to Canada
Fraudulent sales pitch touts an open-door policy

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A sudden outpouring of illegal foreign migrants from the United States is crossing into Canada because of bogus claims by unscrupulous immigration consultants, a scam that has blossomed into an urban myth so pervasive the influx is clogging refugee services in some cities.

A fraudulent sales pitch touting an open-door policy and "economic refugee" program in Canada, aimed largely at Mexican and Haitian migrants living illegally in the United States, is proving remarkably attractive to migrants already facing crackdowns in some U.S. states.

While several hundred are said to have paid for useless immigration services, many more have heard the message and are heading north on their own.

The Canadian Council for Refugees, a non-profit umbrella organization working to protect refugees, issued a warning this week of the scams and the burgeoning myth and asked the federal government to intervene.

For some, it is already too late.

In Windsor, local refugee aid organizations have been told to brace for 4,000 to 8,000 refugee claimants entering Canada through Windsor and other border points.

"We are being inundated with them," said Wilfred Harbin, administrator for the Salvation Army Windsor Community and Rehabilitation Centre.

"What are we going to do with them? We're running out of beds," he said.

The Salvation Army has put up 50 families, some with up to nine children, at four city hotels. The bills, including those for meals, are being sent to the city's social services department. Another 30 single men are staying at a Salvation Army shelter.

In Montreal, hundreds of Haitian asylum seekers have been victimized by consultants, usually in the guise of community or religious groups who charged \$400 to \$500 for false promises of guaranteed refugee status, said Rivka Augenfeld, with the Canadian Council for Refugees.

"There have been hundreds and hundreds. They come up expecting things that are just not possible," Ms. Augenfeld said.

In the Niagara region, there has been a marked increase in Haitian refugee claimants in the last few weeks, said Jean D'Amelio Swyer, a CBSA spokeswoman.

And in Toronto, immigration lawyers are being flooded with questions about the non-existent special programs.

"I have received numerous calls in recent weeks from Mexicans living illegally in the United States who claim that several 'consultants' have set up telephone numbers in the Florida area, then advertise them heavily on television," said Sergio Karas, a Toronto immigration lawyer and chairman of the Ontario Bar Association's Citizenship and Immigration Section. "It appears that the problem is widespread."

The number of refugee claimants from Haiti has jumped dramatically, with almost as many Haitians seeking refugee status in Canada in the first half of this year than in the previous two years combined, according to numbers from the Immigration and Refugee Board.

There were 1,008 refugee claimants from Haiti from January to June, 2007, compared with 769 in all of 2006.

In the first half of 2007, there were 3,043 claimants from Mexico, making it the top source country. There were 4,958 in all of 2006.

The figures do not reflect the recent surge from both countries that seems to have started in earnest this summer.

The claims of an open-door refugee policy fly in the face of statistics. Only 13% of Mexicans who claimed refugee status in the first half of the year were accepted. For Haitians, the acceptance rate was 66%.

Aid workers fear the influx will overwhelm the IRB.

"It would take some time for a large influx of refugee claims to be referred to the IRB," said Charles Hawkins, a board spokesman. "If it occurs, the IRB would take steps to deal with them in an appropriate manner."

The sales pitch is particularly attractive to Haitian and Mexican migrants because of their unique positions when they reach Canada. Canada has a moratorium on deportations to Haiti, so they will be able to remain in Canada until conditions in their homeland improve.

Canada does not require Mexican visitors to have visas, so they too are allowed into Canada to make their claims despite having previously lived in the United States. If turned down, however, they face removal to Mexico.

The "Safe Third Country Agreement" between Canada and the United States, in force since 2004, requires most refugee claimants to seek protection in the first country they reach. That has left refugee seekers other than Mexicans and Haitian who arrive because of the false promises in

dire straits: They have been turned over to U.S. border authorities, often leading to detention and likely deportation to their homeland.

The sales pitches started this spring in Florida, preying on unease over state crackdowns on non-status workers. One outfit based in Naples, Fla., told clients they could swap a U.S. deportation order for refugee status in Canada for a \$400 fee. Some said Canada offers an "economic refugee program" for Mexicans.

A pastor in Boston was charging clients \$500 for relocation to Canada under false pretenses. Other illegal migrants, including those living in New Jersey and North Carolina, heard that if they headed north, they could resettle immediately in Canada.

"It is one of those things that started in one place and now we don't even know who is pushing it. Unfortunately, it has really taken off," said Ms. Augenfeld.

"Some are out-and-out criminal in what they are doing; others are very naively repeating what they have heard. They are targeting desperate people, they are targeting people who are looking for a way to improve their lives, people who tend to believe these stories, and making a lot of money in the process.

"I'm supposed to be the bleeding-heart [non-governmental organization], but I have no mercy for these people who exploit their own and put them in danger," said Ms. Augenfeld.