

Czech Republic recalls ambassador over new visa requirements



Minister says ballooning refugee claims were creating significant delays, but critics see move as shameful and unnecessary

Immigration Minister Jason Kenney Minister delivers a speech during a ceremony in Beaumont-Hamel, France, on July 1, 2009, commemorating the 93rd anniversary of the Battle of the Somme.

Michael Valpy - From Tuesday's Globe and Mail Last updated on Tuesday, Jul. 14, 2009 06:50PM EDT

Canada's decision to impose visa requirements on Mexican and Czech citizens as a way of curbing dubious refugee claimants was roundly criticized Monday by their governments and business and civil rights groups as unnecessary, shameful and an unwelcome irritant.

Jason Kenney, the minister of citizenship, immigration and multiculturalism, said the ballooning numbers of refugee claims from the two countries – Mexico alone accounted for about 25 per cent of the total – were “creating significant delays and spiralling new costs in our refugee program.”

In addition, he said, “the sheer volume of these claims is undermining our ability to help people fleeing real persecution.”

The Czech government made the strongest objections, calling the Canadian government's action one-sided and inadequate as well as “unfriendly in the context of long-term good relations between...two democratic countries.” On Tuesday, it said it will recall its ambassador from Canada and impose visa requirements on Canadian diplomats and Canadians visiting the Czech Republic on business.

The Czech Republic could also give Canada problems by pressuring fellow European Community members to retaliate by imposing visa restrictions on Canadians.

The Mexican government said it “regrets” the decision by Ottawa, and announced it would “closely monitor” implementation of the visa requirement to ensure that the rights of Mexicans are respected. About 250,000 Mexicans visited Canada last year, a government spokesperson said.

The Mexican government said most illegitimate refugee claims resulted from the operations of questionable “intermediary groups and organizations” in Mexico trying to take advantage of Canada's slow-moving refugee hearing machinery. It said it had been working with some success to curb the operations of these organizations.

Virtually all Czech refugee claimants are members of the minority Roma community who have a long history of facing discrimination and persecution.

Since the visa requirement for Czech nationals was lifted in 2007, nearly 3,000 refugee claims have been filed. In 2006, there were five.

Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) acknowledges there has been about an 85 per cent acceptance rate for claims that have been heard, but it argues that half the total claims – in relation to the number of cases heard – are withdrawn or abandoned before they get to a hearing.

Toronto immigration lawyer Max Berger, who has acted for 400 Roma claimants over the past two years and said he was retained last week by a Roma woman who had two swastikas carved into her back by neo-Nazis, said the minister was taking Canada back to the days when it closed the door to Jewish migrants trying to flee Nazi Europe. He called it shameful.

“The visa requirement will prevent Roma refugees like her [his client] from reaching Canada to seek protection,” Mr. Berger said. “It shuts the door on genuine refugees and tarnishes Canada's refugee program and reputation in the eyes of the international community.”

Since 2005, the number of Mexican refugee claimants has tripled: from about 3,400 to 9,400 in 2008. This year to date there have been 5,500 claims received up to June 30, compared with 3,700 in the same period last year. The acceptance rate has been running at 11 per cent, well below the national average of 40 per cent.

What the impact of the visa requirement will be on Mexican and Czech tourist and business travel is unknown.

The Czech government said Ottawa's decision will affect thousands of Czech tourists – about 15,000 visited Canada last year – who already have planned and booked their holidays. It said the fact that there is no consular section in the Prague embassy and visa requests will be processed in the embassy in Vienna “is not acceptable.”

Toronto resident Lenka Daley's two children, aged 5 and 7, are currently in the Czech Republic visiting Ms. Daley's parents. They were due to fly back to Canada on Thursday morning, accompanied by Ms. Daley's sister, who is a Czech national, but that plan is up in the air because of the rules unveiled Monday.

As of 6 a.m. local time on Thursday, all Czech nationals coming to Canada will need a visa. The only way Ms. Daley's sister can get one is by travelling to the nearest Canadian embassy with consular services, which is in Vienna. She would have to get the visa and return to Prague by Thursday morning in time for the flight, which Ms. Daley said she isn't sure her sister can do.

“The deadline doesn't make any sense if the country doesn't have an office that can handle the visa,” Ms. Daley said Monday night.

Ms. Daley says she isn't sure when her children – both Canadian citizens but too young to fly alone – will be able to get home if her sister can't get a visa by Thursday.

“I shouldn't be caught in the crossfire with my two little kids in Europe.”

German Villarreal, president of the Vancouver-based Mexico Business Association of Canada, expressed concern whether Canada would have enough consular capacity to handle visa requests.

Jason Kenney's office said CIC is working to increase “processing capacity in Mexico City. Nevertheless, the imposition of the visa will mean short-term delays in travel...”

With a report from Jennifer MacMillan and Associated Press

REFUGEE REFERRALS

The top 10 source countries for Canadian refugee referrals, for the first three months of 2009:

Mexico 3,648

Haiti 688

Colombia 656

Czech Republic 653

China 446

Sri Lanka 224

Nigeria 218

Hungary 166

United States 158

St. Vincent 151

Source: Citizenship and Immigration Canada