

Illegal Immigrants Chase False Hope to Canada

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WINDSOR, Ontario, Sept. 20 — Fleeing stepped-up sweeps by the American authorities, illegal immigrants to the United States, mostly Mexican, are arriving in growing numbers at the foot of the bridge in this Canadian border town seeking refugee status.

Still more immigrants, mostly Mexicans living illegally in Florida, have begun trying to make their way past America's northern border at other locations, the majority of them flying into the airport in Toronto, Canadian officials said Thursday.

The arrivals here began suddenly three weeks ago, just a family or two at first, fueled by the notion — largely unfounded, the authorities here say — that Canada would grant them asylum.

The journey, some of the immigrants said, was first suggested by an organization in Naples, Fla., which charged a fee for assisting with the paperwork. Now the idea has spread on the Internet and through social networks.

By Thursday, at least 200 people had turned up here, across the border from Detroit, with as much of their lives as they could shove into suitcases, boxes and garbage bags in their cars. Thousands more, refugee advocates and Canadian officials say, may be on their way.

Advocates for immigrants issued urgent warnings to Mexicans pondering similar journeys, and expressed fury at groups that were encouraging them. In truth, refugee status for Mexican citizens is relatively unusual in Canada. Only 28 percent of such claims by Mexicans were approved in Canada last year, compared with 47 percent of claims from all nationalities.

“It's an outrage that money is being taken to provide false information and dangerous information to these people,” said Rivka Augenfeld of the Canadian Council for Refugees, a nonprofit umbrella organization focused on the rights and protections of refugees. “This idea is just out there and growing.”

Windsor officials, who scrambled to arrange a meeting Thursday in a community center for some of the new arrivals so they could apply for social services, said they were overwhelmed by the sudden onslaught and deeply worried about the days ahead.

Already, they have filled a shelter with 30 single men and are now paying four motels to house families, said Maj. Wilfred Harbin, administrator for the Salvation Army here. Meals were being delivered to the families by taxi cab.

“We have no idea what we are going to do,” said Major Harbin, who said he had heard that as many as 7,000 Mexicans might be seeking refugee status in the coming weeks.

Eddie Francis, the mayor of Windsor, faxed a letter Wednesday to Canadian federal authorities seeking financial help.

“I empathize with the challenges but we don’t have the ability to manage this,” Mr. Francis said. “We have never seen anything like this.”

Many of the families who drove here said they had learned about the possibility of fleeing to Canada from a Naples, Fla., organization, the Jerusalem Haitian Community Center, which promoted “Information required for Canadian Refugee Status Application” on its Web site. The group, some refugees said, collected \$400 for adults and \$100 for children and assured them that there would be jobs and shelter.

“I don’t know if what I was told about coming here was correct or not, but what am I going to do about it now?” said Pedro Palafox Marin, who said he paid \$800 to the organization before driving through the night to Windsor with his wife and children.

“In Florida,” Mr. Marin said, “every job I got, everywhere I went, we were getting a lot of pressure from immigration. Being illegal was always on my mind. Now, I can relax.”

Illegal immigrants have been especially frightened of deportation in recent months, people in Naples and surrounding Collier County said. The community has been filled with tales of immigrants’ being caught and deported and the sending of government letters to employers warning them not to employ illegal immigrants.

The Collier County Sheriff’s Office recently became the first local law enforcement agency in Florida to send its deputies for Immigrations and Custom Enforcement training, which gives them the authority to detain suspected illegal immigrants.

In Naples on Thursday, Jacques Sinjuste, the general director of the Jerusalem Haitian Community Center, denied that he had urged undocumented immigrants to seek asylum in Canada or told them jobs would be waiting there. Mr. Sinjuste said he and a small group of volunteers at the center had merely helped immigrants fill out applications for asylum, he said.

“We fill it out for them and that’s the end of our job,” he said. “Many people are taking the name of my organization with them when they go to Canada and saying I sent them. But I don’t know anything about that.”

Mr. Sinjuste, a Haitian immigrant who founded the center in 2000, said he had first heard about the possibility of seeking asylum in Canada from a client who brought one of the applications to his office two years ago. Since then, he said, the center has helped about 300 undocumented immigrants fill out Canadian asylum applications, charging \$400 per person.

Mr. Sinjuste said he had recently fired a lawyer who worked for the center for describing the charge as a “fee” on the center’s Web site.

“It’s not a fee; it’s a donation,” he said. “Mostly it goes to pay the volunteers who help us do the job and to buy ink and paper.”

In some cases, he added, money collected from the immigrants helped finance their travel to the Canadian border.

“Right now we do not have anything left,” Mr. Sinjuste said. The center’s bank account, he said, contains about \$1,900.

“We don’t want to make money off people,” he said. “My position is to defend minorities, not to rip them off.”

He said the center, a nonprofit charity, mostly helped Haitian immigrants but had recently seen an influx of Hispanics seeking services.

Haitians have long migrated to Canada, and particularly to Montreal, the largest French language city in North America. But immigration lawyers say Haitians are far more likely to be allowed to stay here as refugees than Mexicans are.

To win refugee status from the Refugee and Immigration Board of Canada, immigrants must show “a well founded fear of persecution” linked to their race, religion, nationality or political background, said Charles Hawkins a spokesman for the board. Last year, 53 percent of Haitians who applied as refugees were admitted here. But even those who are rejected will not be returned to Haiti: the government has put a temporary freeze on deportations there, given Haiti’s turmoil.

No such moratorium exists for Mexico. Although Mexicans who have lived in the United States are permitted to seek asylum in Canada, they will be deported to Mexico if they are turned down.

Several lawyers said they were pessimistic about these immigrants’ odds of being granted asylum, a process that can take 6 months to 2 years. Even so, most of the Mexicans here said they were hopeful. They spent Thursday looking for apartments to move into, cleaning out cars, filling out paperwork.

“Maybe they’ll have compassion for us,” Manuel Gonzalez, 46, said of his request for asylum. “All we want to do is live and follow the rules and work hard.” Referring to the

help Canadian authorities have already given them, Mr. Gonzalez, who traveled from Naples, said, “What we didn’t have in the United States we had here in a second.”

Carina Gonzalez, who drove her red Suburban from Naples a few weeks ago, said she had lived in the United States for 10 years. When she reached a customs agent as she crossed into Canada, she recalled, she felt deeply nervous but also relieved.

Ms. Gonzalez said that she had worked in a grocery store in the United States but that her employers had been asking more and more questions about her documents and her legal status.

“I could smell the freedom when I crossed over,” said Ms. Gonzalez, 25. “I don’t know what’s going to happen next, but the pressure of worrying about getting caught never let you sleep well.”

Monica Davey reported from Windsor, and Abby Goodnough from Naples. Additional reporting was contributed by Julia Preston, Ian Austen and Lynn Waddell.