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## Visas won't stop flood of phoney refugee claimants

**According to the UN Refugee Agency, a refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group, the agency explains.**

By The Vancouver Sun July 17, 2009

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How many of the 5,500 Mexican asylum seekers -- many of them doctors, lawyers and business people -- who swamped Canada's immigration system in the first six months of 2009 would fit this internationally accepted definition of refugee?

Canada's Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) apparently puts the figure at 10.7 per cent, based on the 5,654 claims reviewed last year, of which 606 were accepted. The total number of claims from Mexico tripled in 2008 to 9,400 from 3,400 in 2005 and the pace has accelerated this year, while the acceptance rate has declined even further.

Many of these professionals claiming refugee status are concerned they'll be identified as high-net-worth individuals and targeted for extortion, kidnapping, torture or worse by warring drug cartels.

They say they are fleeing their country for their own safety and that of their families.

Certainly, crime is a problem in Mexico. The murder rate is nearly double that of the United States. However, there are many countries with higher rates, including its neighbours El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, failed states such as Sierra Leone, Somalia and Liberia, and a few others, including Russia, South Africa and Jamaica. In fact, until recently, Mexico's murder rate had been declining.

Equally instructive is the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development 2009 Factbook that ranks victimization rates. Unlike crime statistics based on police records, victimization rates are based on surveys that assess people's experience with crime. Of all populations surveyed, roughly 16 per cent reported that they had been victims of conventional crime. The percentage in Mexico is higher than the OECD average, but not by much (18.7 per cent), and ranks between those of Switzerland and Denmark. While it's true that you're more likely to be robbed in Mexico than most other places, you're twice as likely to be a victim of a sexual assault in Sweden than in Mexico. It goes without saying that Mexico tops the charts when it comes to corruption.

Given that Mexicans account for a quarter of all refugee claimants to Canada and that 90 per cent of them are bogus, the federal government has taken a reasonable step in requiring Mexicans wanting to visit Canada to have a visa. It must stop the flow of phony refugees who have overwhelmed the IRB, already contending with 50,000 unprocessed refugee claims and 10,000 appeals according to the 2009 status report of the office of the auditor general.

Imposing the same requirement on the Roma fleeing persecution in the Czech Republic is a different story and Canada would be on moral high ground to lay the blame squarely on the Czech government's state-sanctioned discrimination and ignore Prague's hypocritical huffing and puffing.

All that being said, the visa barrier, while necessary, is not a good thing for Canada. Not only does it create diplomatic tensions, which could become severe if the European Union throws its weight behind Czech rhetoric, but it may reduce the volume of Mexican tourists, who represent the sixth largest national group to visit Canada, with 271,000 arriving last year alone. Vancouver welcomed about 85,000 Mexican tourists last year and tourism officials, who had urged the government to delay implementation of the visa requirement until November, fear those numbers will shrink and millions of dollars in potential revenue will be lost.

The tourism industry should take heart that the visa requirement is only a finger in the dike to hold back a flood of phoney refugee claimants until Canada's immigration laws can be rewritten to resolve this problem once and for all.

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