

The war on terrorism has forced more political asylum seekers to seek help from human smugglers in bid for sanctuary in Canada, the United States and elsewhere, say international experts who have written a new book on refugees.

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OTTAWA - Tighter border controls stemming from the war on terrorism are forcing more political asylum seekers to engage human smugglers for help in reaching sanctuary in Canada, the United States and elsewhere, say international experts who contributed to a new book on refugees.

They also say the situation will get worse once a new Canada-U.S. border deal goes into effect, allowing either country to turn back refugee claimants who arrive at their border if they have travelled through the other country first.

No implementation date has been set, but about one-third of the estimated 34,000 refugee claims in Canada in 2001 were made by people arriving from the United States.

The so-called "safe third country" deal is part of a 30-point smart border deal between Canada and the U.S. signed after the 9/11 airplane attacks. It is based on the understanding that asylum seekers should claim refugee status in the first safe country they reach.

As it stands now, refugee claimants can arrive in Canada from anywhere in the U.S. and make their claim without fear of being turned back and told to apply in the U.S., where the treatment of refugee claimants is widely viewed as less generous.

Once the new deal is implemented, those wanting to seek asylum in Canada will have to get inside Canada without leaving a trace of having been through the U.S.

"People are going to have to use smugglers for at least that part of the journey to get them through the U.S. and into Canada," said Joanne van Selm, co-editor of the book *Refugees and Forced Displacement*.

Researcher Khalid Koser, who wrote a chapter on human smuggling, described its rapid rise as an unintended consequence of restrictive asylum policies. For many, hiring smugglers and securing illegal identity documentation at sky-high prices is the only remaining route to asylum, he argued.

"A lot of my research shows that smuggling exposes asylum seekers to real insecurity and real vulnerability and it should be stopped," said Koser, an analyst at University College London.

He maintains that as long as there is a demand for smugglers, and people are willing to pay tens of thousands of dollars to escape their lives, attempts by Canada and other countries to crack down on the practice with stiff fines and prison sentences will fail.

Van Selm, an analyst with the Migration Policy Institute in Washington DC, credited Canada with being a leader in resettling refugees off of camps.

Still, Canadian refugee advocates say a "very high percentage" of the estimated 34,000 people who sought refugee status in Canada last year would have used smugglers and other illegal measures, such as false identity papers, to get to Canada.

Janet Dench, executive director of the Canadian Council for Refugees, said an unfortunate side effect of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks on the United States is that refugees are somehow associated with terrorism.

"Actually refugees are people who are fleeing terrorism," she said "but they become portrayed, implicitly, as potential terrorists."

She agreed the new Canada-U.S. refugee deal will be a goldmine for smugglers.

"People who are desperate will take the disorderly route," she said. "And you can be sure there will be smugglers who will leap up to offer that opportunity to people."

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