Cuts to refugee health care endanger patients’ lives
By JOHN BONNAR
Toronto – Across the street from the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada’s offices in downtown Toronto, Metta Street, sits the newly built IKEA. This IKEA is one of many across the city that provide basic needs for families of almost 400 health care professionals and their families. These families are part of the wave of physicians, nurses, and mental health professionals that have fled their home countries, mostly because of political persecution. This includes the 160 who have been granted refugee status in Canada under the Federal Health (IFH) program that came into effect two months later. The previous IFH program provided access to medical care, diagnostic services and laboratory services, including those provided by provincial health plans. It also provided access to medical services, including primary care, for survival and vision care similar to what is available to people on provincial social assistance plans.

One of the few refugees (excluding government-assisted refugees) lost access to medication coverage, vision and dental care. The program was originally signed by the Minister for Health and the Minister of Social Security. In February, the federal government announced a series of sweeping changes to the Federal Health (IFH) program that came into effect two months later.

About 400 health care professionals railed for refugee health care in Toronto on June 15. Photo by John Bonnar.

Now an obstetrician, Dr. Tatiana Freire-Lizama arrived in Canada as one of the first 160 refugees. In 2007, she was a 31-year-old doctor in the Democratic Republic of Congo. While living in a camp for internally displaced people, she was raped and tortured. In 2008, a group of Congolese and Ugandan women decided to present their case to the United Nations. They were successful. Congolese and Ugandan women were granted refugee status in Canada.

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