

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, Meb Rashid stood before a crowd of almost 400 health care professionals and their allies on June 16 with a message for Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Chris Alexander and the Prime Minister on behalf of Canadian Doctors for Refugee Care.

“We are not going away,” said Dr. Rashid, co-founder of Canadian Doctors for Refugee Care. “As long as cynical politicians use vulnerable groups such as refugees for sound bites and cheap political points we will continue to demand change.”

On Monday, health care professionals in 17 cities across the country held their third National Day of Action to oppose the cuts to refugee health care imposed by the Conservatives two years ago. In April 2012, the federal government announced a series of sweeping changes to the Interim Federal Health (IFH) program that came into effect two months later.

The previous IFH program provided access to medical care, diagnostic services and laboratory testing very similar to what is provided by provincial health plans. It also provided access to medications, emergency dental care and vision care similar to what is available to people on provincial social assistance plans.

On June 30, all refugees (excluding government assisted refugees) lost access to medication coverage, vision and dental care through IFH. Refugee claimants that originated from countries the Minister felt should not be producing refugees lost access to all health care services except conditions deemed a public health concern or public security risk.

“We are demanding this government reverse the cuts to refugee health insurance,” said Dr. Rashid. “No Mr. Alexander, we are not going away. We’ll continue to speak out for those who have endured horrible atrocities like the woman I saw recently who was incarcerated and gang raped because her husband was involved in politics.”

Because of the cuts to refugee health care, when Dr. Rashid first saw her he couldn’t even conduct essential tests to determine if she had contracted HIV or whether she was pregnant.

“Or the woman who sat crying in front of me because she’d lost everything after fleeing Afghanistan,” said Dr. Rashid. “Her crime is that she was intent on having her young daughter go to school.”

Dr. Rashid recounted other stories of pregnant refugees turned away from care and sick children showing up in emergency departments who would have been treated earlier, if not for the cuts. “We know that the system is so incomprehensible that even those refugees that have valid insurance are being denied care,” he said. “This program makes no sense. It’s costly, inhumane and cruel.”

Almost 40 University of Toronto medical students organized Monday’s actions across the country, including second year student Emily Stewart.

Stewart recounted the story of a 22-year-old who fled to Canada after she was forced into the sex trade. Shortly after arriving in Canada, the woman realized she was pregnant but unable to obtain STI (sexually transmitted infections) testing or prenatal testing until her refugee application paperwork was completed and the Board determined which category of refugee she belonged to. Sadly, her case is not unique. And often these cases aren’t restricted to the health of the individual.

“Some of those are threats to public health,” said Dr. David McKeown, Toronto’s Medical Officer of Health. “Conditions like TB and Hepatitis need to be diagnosed and treated early for all of our sakes.”



About 400 health care professionals rallied for refugee health care in Toronto on June 16. Photo by John Bonnar.

Now an obstetrician, Dr. Tatiana Freire-Lizama arrived in Canada as a refugee when she was a young girl forty-one years ago, after the military coup led by General Augusto Pinochet removed the leftist (and democratically elected) President Salvador Allende. At the time, her mother was working in a public access clinic as a physician. She was forced into hiding with Tatiana and her two other children for several months. Eventually, the family was granted refugee status in Canada. But shortly after they arrived, the eldest daughter woke up one night with a high fever and blood oozing from her ear. Without hesitation, Tatiana’s family was able to get the medical attention and medication she needed to make a full recovery.

“But imagine today without health coverage,” said Dr. Freire-Lizama. “Imagine the same family in a strange country with no English, no resources trying to decide what to do with a sick child in the middle of the night.”

It’s for that reason that Dr. Freire-Lizama was distressed that Canada is “turning its back on some of the neediest people on earth.” Dr. Freire-Lizama acknowledged that what happened in her home country of Chile in 1973 continues to happen today in other countries around the world. “And our country is now taking in fewer refugees than ever,” she said. “We are speaking about them as illegals. As phonies.”

After the Conservatives cut health coverage to refugees, Ontario introduced a new program on January 1 that provided refugee claimants with access to primary care and urgent hospital services as well as medication coverage regardless of their refugee status.

"I've expressed our government's disappointment with the Ontario government's recent decision to reinstate health care benefits to all asylum seekers and even rejected refugee claimants," said Minister Alexander at a January press conference. "Simply arriving on our shores and claiming hardships isn't good enough. This isn't a self-selection bonanza, or a social program buffet."

Dr. Freire-Lizama responded on Monday with a strong message for the Minister. “He ought to be ashamed,” she said. “We will not be convinced that caring for the sick and pregnant women is somehow irresponsible. I question the legitimacy of our federal government when it denies basic human rights and tries to strip us of our basic responsibility.”

Dr. Paul Caulford also had some powerful words for the Minister. “Single handedly with Mr. Kenney and then followed up by Minister Alexander, we are seeing the birth of a new poverty in Canada. We are seeing the birth of health poverty,” said Dr. Caulford.

John Bonnar is an independent journalist covering social justice events in and around Toronto through print, photo, audio, video and slideshows.

Indigenous peoples fight for land, recognition and respect

(continued from page 1) ... this brave display: the cameras quickly cut away. His actions went undiscussed by broadcasters and analysts on the scene. They also met with a series of no comments by FIFA itself as to who made the decision to cut the cameras. Whoever was responsible for censoring Jeguaká Mirim, the end result was that the only politics that FIFA allowed to be on display would be the banality of doves.

There is a similar dynamic happening in Washington, DC, where federal trademark court made legal what was obvious: that the name Washington Redskins is racist as all hell.

For now, the team has no trademark protection because the name, it was ruled, “disparages” an entire group of people. This effort to recognize the moral bankruptcy of the name has been led by powerful Indigenous women such as Suzan Harjo, Jacqueline Keeler, and the person whose name was on the trademark lawsuit, Amanda Blackhorse.

It is a movement that stretches back decades but in recent years, the tribal councils of the Oneida Nation, the Seminole Nation, the Choctaw Nation, and the oldest Native American civil rights organization, the National Congress of American Indians, have all called upon the team to change the name. A commercial funded by the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation that aired during the NBA Finals has been viewed on YouTube more than three million times.

And yet, the response to the victory by DC sports radio host Steve Czaban was that this was really a win for “guilt-ridden white liberal sportswriters.” Czaban said, “Go ahead dance around and do whatever it does that assuages your white liberal guilt but nothing has

changed. Maybe we can get therapy for [them], chip in, get to the core of their guilt and understand what is it that’s nagging you.”

In response to Czaban and his broadcast partner, Chris Cooley, who made similar statements, the NCAI put it perfectly. They said that these comments “represent a sadly typical attempt to dehumanize Native Americans by pretending we do not exist. In this case, Mr. Cooley insultingly pretends that the Native American groups representing hundreds of thousands of Native Americans haven’t been leading the fight to end the Washington team’s use of a racial slur.”

One has to wonder if the Czabans, Cooleys, and Chris “Mad Dog” Russos of the world realize how racist it comes off to just willingly ignore the very existence of those who have been “leading the fight.” This gets to the heart of the connective tissue between Brazil and the United States—two nations who share a conjoined, horrific history in their treatment of Indigenous people—as well as between Jeguaká Mirim and Amanda Blackhorse. The battle by Indigenous groups across the hemisphere is for land, recognition, respect, and most of all their own humanity. It is an unassailable argument. Their opponents increasingly realize that they have lost the debate so they are reduced to pretending their opponents do not exist. But by branding them with invisibility, they have provided the most damning possible evidence of both the persistence of anti-Native racism and the power of a new hemispheric-wide movement for Indigenous rights.

Dave Zirin is the author of the new book, Brazil’s Dance with the Devil: The World Cup, The Olympics, and the Fight for Democracy. This column first appeared in The Nation. Zirin writes columns for The Nation and his own blog, The Edge of Sports.

In Brief

- A group of four **professors** applied for the position of president and vice-chancellor at the University of Alberta. Dalhousie University professor Kathleen Cawsey and three colleagues applied for the job to draw attention to the high salaries earned by the university administration. Writing in their cover letter, the four professors state, “for many of us one-fourth of your proposed minimum salary would double or triple our current wage.”

- The Harper government approved construction of the proposed \$7.9-billion **Enbridge Northern Gateway pipeline** on June 17. Opponents in British Columbia vow to block it. Natural Resources Minister Greg Rickford said the government accepted the advice of a federal review panel, which recommended in December that cabinet approve Enbridge proposed pipeline so long as 209 conditions covering safety, environmental protection and consultations with local communities, including First Nations, were met. Two out of three British Columbians are against the pipeline.

- Desert Wolf, a South African company, has built a **pepper spraying drone** designed to be used on “unruly crowds.” An undisclosed global mining company has ordered 25 of the units. Desert Wolf claims it wants to “prevent another Marikana.” Thirty-four striking mineworkers were shot and killed during clashes with police at a protest in Marikana, South Africa in August 2012. The “Skunk Riot Control Copter” is being condemned by labour activists as “absolutely outrageous.”

- More than 48 percent of some 375,000 young people—nearly 200,000 children—tested by the **Fukushima** Medical University near the smouldering nuclear reactors now suffer from pre-cancerous thyroid abnormalities, primarily nodules and cysts.

- The number of people living as **refugees** from war or persecution exceeded 50 million in 2013, for the first time since World War Two, according to the UN. The overall figure of 51.2 million is six million higher than the year before.

- Seven Guatemalan men filed a civil lawsuit on June 18 in a Vancouver court against **Canadian mining company** Tahoe Resources for injuries they suffered on April 27, 2013 when Tahoe’s security personnel opened fire on them at close range. The men who reside in San Rafael Las Flores, where the company’s Escobal mine is located, allege that Tahoe is legally responsible for the violence they experienced as they peacefully protested the mine. “They shot me in the face from a few metres away and then they shot me two more times, all because I stood with my little brother and my father in front of the mine’s gates. I had multiple surgeries but I still have trouble breathing so I can’t work and I lost the ability to smell,” said plaintiff Luis Fernando García Monroy, who was 18 years old at the time of the shooting. The lawsuit alleges that Tahoe’s Guatemala Security Manager, Alberto Rotoondo, ordered the shooting. Despite fierce opposition in several communities, Tahoe has continued the development of the mine and began commercial silver production in January 2014.



Seven men from San Rafael Las Flores, Guatemala filed a lawsuit against Tahoe Resources in a British Columbian court on June 17. The men were shot while protesting at the gates of Tahoe’s Escobal mine in June 2013. Luis Fernando Garcia and Adolfo Augustin Garcia are pictured here showing their injuries following the shooting. “The abuses for which Tahoe is being sued are just the tip of the iceberg in terms of rampant violations in connection with Canadian mining operations in Guatemala and across the region,” comments Jen Moore for MiningWatch Canada. “This lawsuit should alert Canadians to a much deeper problem with this industry that Canadian authorities are unconditionally promoting abroad.” Photo by Giles Clarke.

Are you a member yet?

Support independent media in New Brunswick and become a member of the NB Media Co-op today. Membership is \$30/year. Sign up by PayPal at nbmediacoop.org or send a cheque made out to the NB Media Co-op to 180 Saint John St., Fredericton, NB E3B 4A9.