



## Lost kids from afar dumped at Pearson

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An 8-year-old girl arrives unaccompanied at Pearson airport on a flight from China and is met by an "uncle," who turns out not to be a relative and subsequently disappears.

A 15-year-old girl lands from an unnamed African country and tells immigration officials her parents were killed in front of her eyes. She doesn't know the whereabouts of her siblings.

A 15-year-old boy arrives from India in 2005, saying his gravely ill mother had put him on a plane after his father was threatened for being affiliated with the wrong organization.

These are but three of the stories of unaccompanied children who have landed at Pearson airport in recent years. With no one to receive or take care of them, they become wards of the Peel Children's Aid Society.

Some are simply lost but many others are part of a global phenomenon that resulted in about 12,800 applications for asylum by unaccompanied children in industrialized nations in 2003, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

At London's Heathrow airport, considered the world's busiest, the numbers are staggering. Some 1,130 children found wandering there are now under the care of a local council. Amsterdam's Schiphol airport is another big destination for such asylum seekers.

Pearson's numbers are more modest. Five children arrived last year, 15 the year before, 18 the year before that and 23 in 2003. All were under the age of 16, young enough for them to be transferred into the care of the state.

There are no official numbers available for Canada, according to refugee and child welfare organizations, because of the way in which Immigration Canada and the Immigration and Refugee Board track such claims.

"Canada still has not been able to come up with a systematic registration system that would capture that information," said Nanda Na Champassak, the UNHCR's spokesperson in Ottawa.

Each story tugs at the heartstrings of Rav Bains, the Peel Children's Aid Society's service director, who has long crusaded for more co-ordination between government and child welfare agencies to handle kids who are sent away or separated from their parents, sometimes in search of a better life, other times for child trafficking purposes.

"These children, they are psychologically pretty traumatized. ... When you are in a desperate situation in some of these countries, parents will pay for their children ... to get a better life for themselves in a country like this."

Bains said some are fleeing war, with wealthy parents able to send them off in the hope all will work out well. In other cases, it could be more calculated – a chance to escape poverty and allow for other family members to join them later. They come mainly from China, South Asia, Africa and the Caribbean.

In the case of the young girl from China, Bains suspected child trafficking after she was found to have been physically abused. The girl was flown back home to her family after it was determined she would be safe with them.

In the case of the young girl from Africa, the agency helped her get a lawyer and make a successful claim. She has recently dropped out of college to work full-time to make money after she discovered some of her siblings were alive.

When Peel officials contacted the mother of the boy from India, she said she was grateful her son was okay but was unwilling to take him back "because of the situation." Distant relatives in Canada then came forward and after a record check and home study was done, he was transferred to their care while he pursued a refugee claim.

Melissa Anderson, a spokesperson for the Immigration and Refugee Board, confirmed the agency does not have statistics for unaccompanied minors who make asylum claims. "We're hoping one day we will be able to fix the problem. We don't have a way of accurately getting the information."

Bains and others say it's high time the government tracks such information, if only to get a better handle on what's going on so kids who need help can get it.

One of the biggest problems is the patchwork of laws and jurisdictions that decide how a minor claiming refugee status is dealt with.

In Ontario, the law states that anyone under age 16 becomes a ward of the state. Just across the border in Quebec that age jumps to 18. "There's a huge number of under-18 kids who we never come into contact with," said Bains.

With files from Reuters

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