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Canada Prepares for a New Wave of Refugees as Haitians Flee Trump's America

This week the Trump administration removed more than 50,000 Haitians from TPS, a program that allows them to live and work in the United States.

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November 22 2017, 11:19 a.m.

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A Haitian boy holds onto his father as they approach an illegal crossing point, staffed by Royal Canadian Mounted Police officers, from Champlain, N.Y., to Saint-Bernard-de-Lacolle, Quebec, on Aug. 7, 2017. Photo: Charles Krupa/AP

NEAR THE TOWN of Lacolle, Quebec, just across the border in upstate New York, a cluster of blue-trimmed beige trailers has just **arrived** to provide temporary shelter for the unending wave of refugees, many of them from Haiti, who walk up on foot from Trump's America. Inside the new heated trailers are beds and showers, ready to warm up frozen hands and feet, while processing and security checks take place.

Last winter, after Donald Trump's inauguration, there was a sharp increase in "irregular border crossings" all across the Canada-U.S. border: people sidestepping official ports of entry and trying to reach safety by walking through the woods, across clearings, or over ditches. Since January 2017, Canadian authorities **intercepted** nearly 17,000 migrants from the U.S. (and others crossed without detection). The applications for asylum begin once migrants are safely in Canada, rather than at border crossings, where they would likely be turned back under a controversial cross-border agreement between the two countries.

The risks of the irregular crossings are especially great in winter, and this one looks to be a cold one. Last year, during the coldest months, there were wrenching reports of frostbitten toes and fingers having to be amputated on arrival in Canada. Two men from Ghana lost all their fingers after they walked across to Manitoba – one **told** reporters he felt lucky that he had managed to keep one of his thumbs.

Despite these hazards, there is every reason to believe the flow of migrants making their way to those trailers near Lacolle will continue even as the temperature drops. Indeed, the luggage-laden foot traffic may well speed up in the coming weeks and months.

That's because on Monday, November 20, the Trump administration **made good on its threats** to remove more than 50,000 Haitians from a program that currently allows them to live and work legally in the United States. In 20 months, they will be stripped of all protection and subjected to deportation. The administration has already **announced** it will be kicking Nicaraguans out of the same program and has **suggested** it may do the same to Hondurans next year. In September, Sudanese people got word that they're **getting the boot** as well. Salvadorans are expected to be next.

The program, called Temporary Protected Status, gives special legal status to people from select countries that have been hard-hit by wars and natural disasters while their homelands recover (they need to be in the United States when the disaster strikes). After its devastating 2010 earthquake, the Obama administration **added** Haiti to the TPS list.

In the years since, thousands of Haitians gained status under the program, allowing them the freedom to build lives in the U.S. – to go to college, work in health care, construction and hotels, pay taxes, and have children who are U.S. citizens. A total of more than **300,000 people** – from Sudan, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Somalia, and more – are similarly covered by TPS. The program was originally designed as a way of “throwing a bone to a country that has had a disaster until that country is back on its feet,” as Sarah Pierce at the **Migration Policy Institute** puts it. Yet in some cases, as with war-torn Somalia, the designation has been renewed so many times that it has been in place for 26 years, turning it into a kind of unstable, de facto

refugee program (albeit one that is no help to Somalis fleeing current violence or persecution, only those who have been in the United States for decades).

During his presidential campaign, Trump dropped strong hints that he supported the program, at least when it came to Haitians. Courting the vote in Miami's Little Haiti, he **told a crowd** that, "Whether you vote for me or don't vote for me, I really want to be your greatest champion, and I will be your champion."

All that changed quickly. As part of its broader anti-immigrant crusade, the Trump administration soon began casting TPS as a scam, a backdoor way for foreigners to stay in the U.S. indefinitely (never mind that many of the countries covered remain ravaged by war and disaster and rely heavily on money sent home by workers covered by TPS for whatever slow reconstruction is underway).

It started just a few months into the Trump administration. First, James McCament, then-acting director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, **urged** that Haiti's inclusion under the program be "terminated." Then a **memo** from the Department of Homeland Security suggested that Haitians "prepare for and arrange their departure from the United States." And in May, John Kelly, then-DHS secretary, **said** Haitian TPS recipients "need to start thinking about returning" to Haiti.

Overnight, tens of thousands of people were forced to choose from an array of high-risk options: Stay and hope for the best? Join the underground economy? Return to Haiti, where life is far from safe, and the **cholera** epidemic still claims hundreds of lives each year? Or walk across the border to Canada, where the country's young prime minister had been making bold proclamations about welcoming refugees?

Since June, that last option is the one a great many Haitians have chosen, as many as **250 of them a day** during the summer months. They packed what they could carry, boarded a plane or a bus to Plattsburgh, New York, transferred to a taxi for the 30-minute ride to the end of Roxham Road, near Lacolle, then got out and walked across the ditch that divides Trump's America and Justin Trudeau's Canada.



A bus of Haitian asylum seekers from the United States arrives at the Olympic Stadium in Montreal, Quebec on Aug. 3, 2017. Photo: Catherine Legault/AFP/Getty Images

Breathing Different Air

“The minute I arrived here, I felt as if was breathing different air. I used to have this sharp pain in my shoulder and suddenly it was

gone. I asked myself ‘What happened?’ I realized that it was a product of the stress.”

Agathe St. Preux, a middle-aged woman wearing a modest, shin-length skirt and a black blazer, tells me how it felt to finally arrive in Canada after 12 years of trying and failing to get permanent legal status in the United States.

It was mid-October and we were gathered in a packed room in Montreal’s Maison d’Haïti, a hub for the city’s deep-rooted Haitian community. Dozens of people who made “irregular” border crossings since the anti-TPS threats began had agreed to come and share their migration stories.

The experiences were hugely varied, and several people asked to remain anonymous. There was a mother of three who had been working legally at JFK Airport and decided that her family could only stay intact if she left it all and walked across the border at Lacolle.

There was a man who ran a successful campaign for mayor of a small Haitian city but was “attacked by three thugs” from a rival political faction. “It was a miracle that he survived,” observed a woman who herself had spent three years working in the U.S. but fled when she heard news of friends – fellow Haitians – already being deported under Trump.

A man in his late 20s told the room that he had been in the U.S. for 15 years, went to college, then worked for seven years. “I was part of the economy. I paid taxes.” But with Trump, “the stress was enough to kill me. So I flew to Plattsburgh, took a cab, and walked across.”

Here too was a mother of six who lived for eight years in Miami, studied to become a nurse while working night shifts, and slept at bus stops until the sun rose – all so that she could finally get a job

caring for sick Americans and pay taxes to the U.S. government. “We work like animals,” Manie Yanica Quetant told me, through a Creole interpreter. “And then he says, ‘Get out.’”

“He,” of course, is Trump – or “Chomp,” as his name is consistently pronounced here.

For the vast majority of Haitians gathered at the Maison, the route they took to the United States was not the relatively direct one from Haiti to Florida by boat, a passage that has been heavily patrolled for decades by the U.S. Coast Guard. Seeking jobs and more welcoming immigration policies, their journeys were far more circuitous: from Haiti to other Caribbean islands, then to Brazil, where jobs were promised in the lead-up to the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics. Then, as those opportunities fizzled, travels continued up through South and Central America until finally reaching California.

Several people in the room had crossed 10 or 11 countries before reaching their destination. Years spent running and hiding, hunted by authorities, preyed upon by thieves.

Rosemen François, a young woman with spiral curls streaked with purple, told me that what happened in Panama still haunts her. “I was crossing a river and I fell three times in the water, and at one point I couldn’t feel my feet because the skin was coming off. That feeling has marked me.”

Responding to François’s testimony, a man who had been quiet up until then put his hand up. “When we were in Panama, we had to sleep in the forests. ... We saw people die. We saw women get raped. We spent six days in the forest in Panama without eating, sleeping outside, in the rain.” With harrowing echoes of the Underground Railroad, he said they heard sounds and “thought there were wild

animals and we ran, we lost our belongings, our luggage, everything.”≡

“But we still had faith and we still had the United States in our minds. We thought that when we arrived, there would be paradise for us.” After all, ever since the earthquake, there had been a special program in place – TPS – that recognized their country’s suffering and allowed them to live and work out of the shadows.

But for many, it didn’t work out that way. As François recalled: “When I arrived in California [three years ago], I thought that would be the end of my journey. Instead I got arrested and put in a detention center, and I couldn’t see daylight or make out the difference between days and night. I was there for seven days. No shower. The food was not edible.” Convinced she had been forgotten in a black hole, “I started screaming ... and that’s how I got out.”

For a few years, things started to normalize. She got a work permit. She studied. But then last summer, “my friends got deported and sent back to Haiti, and that’s when I decided to come to Canada.”

Asked why this was happening, her answer is simple: “It was Mr. Trump. Chomp ... Chomp took my dream and turned it upside down.”

Quetant, the nurse from Miami, describes her shock at the news that Haitians, who had come to feel a measure of security thanks to TPS, were suddenly being hunted once again. “You turn on the radio and the news is ‘Hey, they are catching the Haitians.’” And so “you have to start running, and you are out of breath, and where are you going to run to?”

The stress, she said, was unbearable. “You don’t know why they are coming to catch you and when you look around, you don’t know how people are seeing you or what to do. You want to stop running.”

Trump Refugees



For those who arrived in the U.S. after Trump was elected, the experience was even more extreme. Dieuliphète Derphin, a young man who made the journey up through Brazil, arrived just before inauguration. “I was astonished to get arrested and spend six days in a detention center. I was asking myself, ‘How come they’re treating black people in an inhuman way? How come you’re not giving me a toothbrush? How come I don’t have access to water? Why are they doing this to us? Is it because we are black?’”

“After that, I didn’t want to stay in the States. Not even for a second. That’s why I got the idea of coming to Canada.” He crossed the border in August, after just eight months in the U.S.

Many in the room echoed Agathe St. Preux’s description of “breathing different air” upon arrival in Quebec. The room broke out in applause when Quetant said of Trump, “I hope he never comes here because the Canadian land is a blessed land.”

And yet it soon became clear that despite a brief surge of relief that came with escaping Trump’s crackdown, the search for safety and stability is far from over. Many Haitians came to Canada because they heard that Justin Trudeau’s government would welcome them with open arms. They knew about Trudeau’s famous [tweet](#), sent on the same day protests against Trump’s first Muslim travel ban kicked off across the country. “To those fleeing persecution, terror & war, Canadians will welcome you, regardless of your faith. Diversity is our strength [#WelcomeToCanada](#).”

One man spoke of that and similar messages broadcasting from the north as “a divine sign that God was showing the way, saying, ‘Come

to Canada.’”



What they discovered, however, is that the situation was far more complex. In recent months, Canadian officials have been frantically **discouraging** immigrants in the U.S., Haitians in particular, from attempting the crossing, pointing out that warm-and-fuzzy tweets notwithstanding, Canada’s immigration policies are restrictive, and hundreds of Haitians have been deported since January. Marjorie Villefranche, director of the Maison d’Haïti, says that about 60 Haitians are still crossing the border every day; she estimates that 50 percent will get refugee status and another quarter will get some other kind of status. The others may well be deported.

Moreover, Canada and the U.S. are part of the Safe Third Country agreement, which states that asylum-seekers “are required to request refugee protection in the first safe country they arrive in.” Since the United States is classified as “safe” under the accord, if Haitians currently based in the States go to a Canadian border crossing and say they want to make a refugee claim, they will most likely be turned back.

If, however, they magically appear in Canada, their claims can be processed. This is the primary reason that Haitians, as well as thousands of other immigrants fleeing rising anti-immigrant sentiment and policies in the U.S., have crossed the border by foot, which carries both physical risks and legal ones. As Quetant put it, to have a chance of getting legal status in Canada, “you have to break the law. You don’t want to do it, it’s not your first choice, but you have to.”

Only one woman in the room was willing to say that before crossing on foot, she attempted to enter Canada at an official port of entry. She was officially denied, a fact that is now on her record. This puts

her in the weakest legal position of the group. “I can’t get a working permit because I was deported,” she says. Another woman shakes her head. “This is what everyone here is trying to avoid.”

Canada has not exactly been an antiracist utopia for this wave of black migrants either. White supremacists have held rallies at the Lacolle border crossings and unfurled an anti-immigrant banner outside Montreal’s Olympic Stadium, which has been converted into a temporary shelter for Trump refugees. And so far, Haitians have not been greeted with the same flood of grassroots generosity as Syrian refugees to Canada famously experienced.

But many Montrealers have been moved to help the Haitian arrivals, and there have been expressions of incredible warmth. “We want it to feel like home,” Villefranche said of the building where we were gathered, the Maison d’Haïti. The center first opened in 1972, amid an earlier surge of Haitian immigration during the brutal years of the Duvalier dictatorships. Last year, after decades at the heart of the city’s Haitian life, they celebrated a move to a modern, sun-filled new building in Montreal’s Saint-Michel neighbourhood. Floor-to-ceiling windows face the street, community members chat in a cafe, and vibrant Haitian art hangs on every available patch of wall.

The new space arrived just in time to cope with Hurricane Trump. As with the immediate aftermath of the 2010 earthquake, teams of volunteers now help the new arrivals fill out forms for temporary work permits. Staff members work to make sure children register for school, setting them up with uniforms and cheerful notebooks. There are French classes for adults and ongoing drives to collect clothing, furniture, and other supplies.

Most importantly, there are other Haitians, many who have been in Montreal for decades and have built stable and thriving lives. “They

tell us, ‘Don’t be afraid. Just as the sun is shining on us today, it will be shining on you one day in the future,’” explained one recent Trump refugee. Philogene Gerda, a young mother of three who spent 15 days at the Olympic Stadium, said that the Maison “felt like home, especially the women’s space every Friday night, when you can bring your kids.”

There is also political work being done within the broader immigrant rights movement to push the Trudeau government to live up to its pro-refugee marketing. Heated trailers on the border help, but they are not enough. Thousands of Canadians have written letters calling for an end to the Safe Third Country Agreement with the United States. Other campaigns are calling for significant new resources to speed up the processing of asylum claims, so migrants aren’t left in legal limbo for years.

At the Maison d’Haïti, the overwhelming feeling is one of resolve. Having traversed the length of the Americas to arrive at this pocket of calm, there is, quite literally, nowhere left to run, no further north to flee. As Derphin put it to me, “This is it, the end of the road. ... Our life should be here. And to be protected here. That’s it. I don’t want to go through all this turmoil again.”

For Villefranche, this is all the more crucial in light of the DHS announcement that 50,000 Haitians in the U.S. are now living on borrowed time. “We are expecting a lot of people to come,” she told me this week. But she hopes that anyone planning to attempt a foot crossing will take advantage of the 20-month delay to avoid the winter, with all of its risks. “Crossing in winter is not a good idea. It’s very hard, but we are ready to welcome them. The trailers are there. And at the Maison d’Haïti, we are here.”

Of course, not all the Haitians facing the loss of their protected status

will choose the Canadian option. There had been fears that this week's announcement would cut people off as soon as January, as Kelly had **threatened** in May. By adding 18 months to that, hopes have been raised that before the clock runs out, one of the **efforts** to win permanent legal residency could gain traction, including proposed bipartisan **legislation** that would provide TPS recipients who have been in the country for five years or more with a path to permanent residency.

The most likely outcome, however, is that tens of thousands of Haitians currently living and working legally in the U.S. will stay put and slip through the cracks. As Patricia ?Elizée, a Miami lawyer with Haitian clients, **points out**, Haitians “will not all get on a boat and go home. They will go on the black market.” Many will still be able to work – but now, if they complain about mistreatment, they will face deportation and incarceration, a business opportunity for private immigration prisons with parent companies rejoiced at Trump's election.

For many, going back to Haiti seems the hardest option of all. It's true, as DHS officials point out, that the earthquake in Haiti was seven years ago, and TPS is supposed to be temporary. But the earthquake was hardly the end (or the beginning) of the country's overlapping crises. Corrupt and inept foreign-sponsored reconstruction from the quake set the stage for the **cholera outbreak**, and Haiti was **pounded** by Hurricane Matthew last year. When Hurricane Irma looked poised to douse the island with heavy rains this year (it did), some islanders expressed a kind of disaster fatigue that may well become the norm in a near future when shocks and crises are so frequent they take on a kind of macabre normalcy.

“I guess we are worried,” one Port-au-Prince resident pointedly **told** a journalist, “but we are already living in another hurricane, Hurricane

Misery. ... So, they say I should board up my house? With what? Wood? Who's going to pay? With what money will I buy it? Ha! I don't even have a tin roof. If the winds come, I can't do anything but hope to live.”



An RCMP officer talks with a group of people who claimed to be from Haiti in Champlain, New York as they prepare to cross the border into Canada illegally on August 4, 2017. Photo: Geoff Robins/AFP/Getty Images

The Climate Connection

On one level, Trump's attacks on TPS are politically baffling. There was no great outcry demanding the deportation of Haitians and Central Americans. And many employers are frustrated to lose reliable workers (according to the union Unite Here, Disney World

alone employs approximately 500 Haitian TPS workers).



Moreover, for Republicans, all of this carries significant political risks: Haitian TPS recipients can't vote, but many of their friends and family members can. And given that many live in Florida, a swing state that is also experiencing an influx of Puerto Ricans who are not at all pleased with how they have been treated by Republicans (and who *can* vote once they establish residency), this latest anti-immigrant move could well backfire at the ballot box.

But perhaps there is a bigger picture to be seen here, one that has less to do with Haiti or Honduras and more to do with our warming world. Because TPS – which singles out “environmental disaster” as one of the key reasons a country would receive this designation – is currently the most significant policy tool available to the U.S. government to bring a modicum of relief to the countless people worldwide who are already being displaced as a result of climate change-related crises, with many more on the way. Little wonder, then, that Trump officials are rushing to slam this policy door shut.

Of the 10 countries currently covered by TPS, environmental disasters are cited as the primary reason or a major contributing factor in seven of them.

The program was not created as a response to climate change – it began as a way to respond to displacement from civil war. And yet as the world has warmed, it has evolved into a primary means by which the United States has granted limited rights to many thousands of people when their countries are hit by natural disasters. Indeed, one of the only things governments can currently do when a superstorm or drought devastates their country is lobby to get their citizens in the U.S. covered under TPS (or equivalent programs in other wealthy nations).

Jane McAdam, director of the Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law at University of New South Wales, told me that problematic as it is, “TPS is the strongest, or even the only, existing mechanism” for climate change migrants under U.S. law. “It does at least provide some kind of temporary protection.” Which is why several scholars have suggested that TPS’s importance will grow as climate change accelerates.

Of course, not all the disasters that have triggered a TPS designation have been linked to climate change (the earthquakes in Haiti and Nepal are unconnected). But other disasters that have been cited in TPS designations – hurricanes, mega-floods, droughts – are precisely the kind of extreme weather events that are becoming more frequent and severe as the world warms.

Honduras and Nicaragua, both targeted by the Trump administration, first received TPS coverage after Hurricane Mitch. Somalia was originally included under TPS because of armed conflict, but when its status was extended under Obama, one of the reasons given was “extensive flooding and severe drought” impacting food and water security. Yemen, similarly, was originally designated for armed conflict, but its most recent renewal adds cyclones and heavy rains that “caused loss of life; injuries; flooding; mudslides; damage to infrastructure; and shortages of food, water, medical supplies, and fuel.”

Granting the right to live and work in the United States to some migrants from these countries has been an acknowledgement that people in lands rocked by sudden environmental crises have the human right to seek safety.

As a humanitarian tool able to cope with our era of serial disasters, TPS is terribly limited. Even for the relatively small number of people

who meet its stringent requirements, it's still only a recipe for perpetual insecurity. Beneficiaries need to renew their status every six to 18 months, paying approximately \$500 each time, and TPS is temporary by definition. ≡

It's also arbitrary: Many countries hit by mega-disasters have been denied the designation. Perhaps most important, the program is only designed to deal with sudden, large-scale disaster events; slow-motion climate impacts like desertification, sea-level rise, and land erosion are a more awkward fit. And there's another hitch: As Koko Warner, an expert on environmental migration at United Nations University, put it, with TPS, "It is always assumed that people will be able to return to their place of origin" once the disaster passes. That's a distinctly unrealistic assumption in our age of drowning island nations and vanishing coastlines.

The reason Trump's attacks on TPS are still relevant despite all these caveats is simple: Besides discretionary measures, for climate change migrants stranded in the U.S., there is nothing else. The 1951 [U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees](#) does not include environmental disasters or climate change as grounds on which to grant refugee status. There has to be the risk of persecution.

This gaping hole in international law comes up every time governments gather to tackle the intersecting challenges of climate disruption, most recently at the U.N. climate summit in Bonn, Germany, that ended last week. Many have argued that the convention should be amended, but the solution may not be that simple. At a moment when the governments of so many wealthy nations are fortressing their borders, opening up the refugee convention to try to include climate migrants could not only fail, it could result in markedly weaker agreement than we have currently.

So TPS is what is left. Which is why the Trump administration's rapid-fire round of attacks on the program – for Central Americans, Haitians, Sudanese, and maybe more – means that even this weak tool is in jeopardy as well. It's a move that should be seen in the context of a pattern of actions that is simultaneously deepening the climate crisis (by granting the fossil fuel industry its wildest wish list), while eliminating programs designed to cope with the impacts of warming.

In short, this isn't only about Trump's antipathy toward non-white immigrants (though it's about that too); we may also be witnessing a particularly brutal form of climate change adaptation.

The logic is simple enough: Trump officials know that in the years to come, there are going to be many more people with a powerful claim to protection under TPS – just look at this summer of record-breaking disasters, from flooding in [Southeast Asia](#) and [Nigeria](#), to Barbuda's [total evacuation](#), to the [exodus](#) from Puerto Rico. Whether they publicly deny the science or not, the generals surrounding Trump are well aware that the future is going to see many more people on the move. If compassion is extended for one natural disaster (like Haiti's monster earthquake or the hurricanes that followed), why not another? And another? From the Trump administration's "America First" perspective, TPS is simply too dangerous a precedent.

As the only U.S. immigration program that grants legal rights to migrants in response to environmental disasters, the fate of the program should be seen as a de facto test case for how the world's wealthiest country, and its largest historical emitter of greenhouse gases, is going to treat the coming waves of climate refugees.

So far, the message is clear: Go back to a hell of our making.

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