

Opinion piece: Syrian Refugee Crisis

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Last week an image of a boy's tiny body on a beach brought home to Canadians the tragic and urgent plight of millions of refugees. People being driven from their homelands is not new, but there is no question that today we face a crisis as a tide of refugees from Syria and elsewhere overwhelm neighbouring countries.

To look at the people filling streets and parks in Europe, is to see the faces of families not so unlike our own. We cannot fathom the desperate choices they have made, to leave behind their homes and seek asylum and an uncertain future.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has stated her country's intention to accept hundreds of thousands of refugees a year, and she has called upon her fellow European Union countries to determine a quota system appropriate to the crisis at hand.

This is a decisive response in the face of a staggeringly difficult issue, one that calls upon each of us to ask, "What should we do; what can I do?"

On Tuesday, Halifax Regional Council unanimously endorsed a motion to determine the municipal response to settling refugee newcomers and letting the other orders of government know that we stand ready to help. For its part, the Province has made a \$50,000 donation to the UN High Commission on Refugees and said Nova Scotia is open to taking Syrian refugees.

The Immigrant Settlement Association of Nova Scotia (ISANS), moved quickly to position its lean operation to process more refugee sponsorships. On Cape Breton, more than 200 people gathered this week to determine how they can work together to sponsor and welcome more refugees to an island, and a province, that unquestionably needs their numbers and their skills.

But, now, we wait.

We wait for Canadian policy to catch up with the grim reality that fills our television screens and has mobilized Canadians to offer help. We anticipate any sign that our country will undertake the significant efforts needed to address the screening of refugees for entrance into our country.

Canada has a tradition of welcoming the world, those who come with great resources and those who come with little other than the desire to build a better life. How many people in our

communities trace their families back hardship, to countries torn apart by civil war or held in the grip of a totalitarian regime?

Canada was there for Kosovo refugees, for the Sikhs who came ashore in Shelburne, and the Vietnamese boat people. We have found homes for Lost Boys from Sudan, and so many others who risked their lives to run long and far from the place of their birth.

Our country has offered a new start, new freedoms and opportunities. And, yet, as of yesterday only nine Syrian families have made it to Ottawa's approved list for private sponsorship.

It is time to show the world what it means to be Canadian.