

Guide to preparing for the overseas refugee eligibility interview (posted November 27, 2007)

This general guide is for privately sponsored refugees who have been called for their interview with a Canadian visa officer. This guide is provided free of charge. This guide integrates information from several sources which include materials used by sponsoring groups, materials provided by lawyers, and other printed resources about refugees. We hope this guide will help reduce the number of rejections of privately sponsored refugees.

Who will help sponsored refugees prepare for the interview?

There seems to be a lot of misinformation about Canada's refugee program in refugee camps and in asylum communities. It is hard to find reliable information and trust worthy help. Do not be misled. Check your sources of information with your relatives in Canada or with your sponsoring group.

Learn how Canadian visa officers decide who can come to Canada as a refugee.
Provide evidence only as it relates to being accepted by Canada as a refugee.
Say why you fear persecution.

Your relatives in Manitoba, Canada can help you prepare for your interview. Relatives who went through the interview process can talk to you about their interview experience. They can share with you the experiences of those who were accepted to come to Canada as refugees. Depend on your relatives in Canada to assist you.

Get evidence related to your refugee claim from UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) reports, human rights organizations, and other recognized sources. If you do not have access to the Internet, your relatives in Canada do. They can get eligibility information from the website of Manitoba Interfaith Immigration Council (Welcome Place).

Your sponsoring group can explain Canada's process to you. Your sponsoring group can help you feel more relaxed and confident, and can help you decide what is important to say during your interview. Be sure of yourself, and be clear about what you will say.

Your relatives and your sponsoring group in Canada can help you get ready for the interview. They can help you make it clear to the visa officer that you are a refugee, that you need to be protected, and that you need a safe place to resettle.

It is hard to prepare for the interview and to go to the interview. But, with the help of your relatives in Canada and of your sponsoring group, you can make it clear to the visa officer why you need to go to Canada as a refugee.

Declare Your Family Members

On your application (for permanent residence in Canada), declare all members of your family or household. List those back home or in another country, those left behind, those still missing, *de facto* family members, and those you think have died.

You cannot bring to Canada family members you did not declare before going to Canada.

On your application form, be sure to list all the members in your household or family.
If you add a new member to your family, report it to your sponsoring group right away.
If a woman in your family becomes pregnant, report it to your sponsoring group at once.
If someone in your household gets married, report it to your sponsoring group right away.

Family members not listed on your form and not reported to your sponsoring group will be left behind.

When someone in your household gets married, Canada may not accept the marriage. Give proof that the marriage is real and true. (Canada also accepts genuine common law and conjugal partners.)

If someone in your household gets married just before your family goes to Canada, the new spouse will probably not be accepted by Canada. If the new spouse is accepted by Canada, it may take one or two years before the new spouse can go to Canada.

When you add new family members, your sponsoring group may not agree to sponsor them.

If you do not declare family members before your interview or at the interview, do not expect to bring them to Canada. It may cost a lot of money, and it may take a long time to try to bring them to Canada. Trying to bring them to Canada may not work.

If you want to bring family members to join you once you are in Canada, your transportation loan payments will have to be up to date.

Declare ALL family or household members when you apply.
Report ALL newly added family members at once.
Do not expect to bring to Canada family members you did not declare before you came to Canada.

How will the interview be hard for you?

Do you have enough information about Canada's refugee program?
Is it hard for you to understand Canada's overseas refugee determination process?

The Canadian visa post will inform you of the date, time, and place of your interview.
Go to the interview at the time given to you.

Do not miss your interview date.
Be on time.

You will be interviewed by a Canadian visa officer.
Do not be afraid of the visa officer.
Do not be shy or hesitant to state all of the full facts and issues to him/her.
The officer is there only to find out what you are afraid of and why.
Canadian visa officers are trained to ask questions that will help them make fair decisions.
Make it clear why you fear being harmed.
The officer does not have any outside interest in either accepting or refusing you.
Trust the visa officer.

Speak to the Canadian visa officer the way you speak to a person you know and trust.
Be confident.
You know your own story of persecution.
Speak freely from personal experience.
You know your local cultural and history.

Be calm.
Speak naturally.
Be clear.
Talk freely.

If you want to go to Canada as a refugee, tell the Canadian visa officer:
-why you are a refugee;
-how you are personally or seriously affected by the war; or
-that you have suffered massive violation of human rights.

It is up to you make it clear to the visa officer that you:
-fear being harmed,
-need to be protected, and
-need a safe place to resettle.

It may be hard for the Canadian visa officer to be clear and sure that you are a refugee.
Give important information that will help the visa officer make the right decision.

If you are accepted, you will be told; and the Canadian visa officer will offer you a loan for the cost of your travel to Canada and for the cost of your medicals.

If you are refused, you cannot appeal the decision, so prepare carefully.

It may be hard for the visa officer to understand you.
Your fear of being sent back and suffering more harm can make it hard to think clearly.
If you were persecuted by officers back home, you may fear the visa officer interviewing you.
If your education is low, it may be hard for you to understand the questions the visa officer asks.

Past persecution can affect your memory.

If it is hard and painful to tell the Canadian visa officer how you were persecuted, you may want to tell the visa officer how hard and painful it is.

If the persecution you fear makes you sad, you may want to say this to the visa officer.

In what ways will the interview be hard for you?

How will you overcome these hardships?

When the visa officer asks you to describe the persecution you suffered, it may make you tense.

The interview may be too fast for you, and this can make you uneasy.

The fear of being rejected can make you nervous.

Be strong.

Do not let your fears stop you from doing well at the interview.

Serious harm over a long period of time can be hard to describe.

If you were mistreated you may fear being harmed again.

Find someone you trust.

Discuss with them how to deal with the effects of the serious harm you suffered.

At the interview, tell the visa officer how hard it is to talk about the persecution you suffered.

Tell the visa officer everything that happened to you.

The visa officer will listen to you, and will not harm you.

The interview may be hard for you.

Accept what you cannot change.

Be sure of yourself.

Have courage to overcome what is hard for you.

Know that what you say will help the visa officer make a clear and fair decision.

What do you need to know about the interview?

Have you ever talked to a Canadian visa officer?

Have you ever been interviewed by a Canadian visa officer?

How much information do you have about the interview?

The Canadian visa officer asks questions to:

-decide whether you are telling the truth, and

-find out whether it is reasonable for you to fear being harmed in the future.

Give the visa officer strong and clear evidence why you fear being harmed when you go home.

The Canadian visa officer will decide whether or not Canada will accept you as a refugee.

Carefully choose what is important to say at the interview.

The Canadian visa officer who interviews you will ask you specific and general questions.

The questions will be fair.

The questions will be asked to find out about your personal story of persecution.
The Canadian visa officer will give you the chance to tell your own story of persecution.

It is not the visa officer's job to prove your case, or to dig around to get information from you.
You must be clear about everything you are afraid of and why.

If the visa officer says something that is wrong, you must politely correct the officer.

How do you prepare for the interview?
How do you answer the questions of the Canadian visa officer?
Adapt the following general suggestions to your personal experience.

Answer the questions that the officer asks in a clear and plain manner.
Answer directly.
Be brief and to the point.

Some questions call for a yes or no answer.
Add important, related information as needed.

Vague or short answers may make the visa officer ask more questions.
Tell your whole story of being harmed.

If you cannot remember the answer to a question, tell the visa officer.
Say only what you clearly know.
Do not say more than what really happened to you.

Know what the interview is like, and know the aim of the interview.
Knowing how and why questions are asked can help you prepare your answers.
This can help you tell your personal story of persecution more fully and more clearly.
It will help the Canadian visa officer reach a fair decision.

What does persecution and what does protection mean?

When Canada signed the UN (United Nations) Refugee Convention of 1951, the people of Canada promised:

- not to return refugees to where they will face more harm;
- to protect and care for refugees by respecting their rights of employment, education, justice and religious freedom; and
- to use a fair way to decide who needs a safe place to live.

The "UN Refugee Convention of 1951" and the "Universal declaration of human rights" are companion documents. In other words, everyone has the right to look for a place that is safe from harm.

To decide who needs a safe place to live, visa officers are forward looking.
They ask whether there is a real chance you will be harmed again when you go back home?
(You do not need to prove 100% that harm will happen to you again.)

Show that, for you, there is a reasonable chance of future persecution or harm.
Show that, for you, returning home is unsafe.
Show that you need a place where you will be protected, and where you can resettle.

Refugees are people who flee deliberate, serious and repeated harm to look for a safe place.

The UN (United Nations) definition says: “A **refugee** is a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.”

Remember what the word “refugee” means.
It will be used to decide whether or not you are a refugee.
Show how your persecution is connected to race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.

Persecution is done for a reason and often.
It is harm suffered on one of the five grounds listed in the UN definition of a refugee.
Persecution must be serious and real.
It does not have to include torture and death threats.
The suffering and humiliation of persecution can take many forms or a combination of forms.
Persecution can be carried out by a state or by a non-state agent.

Under “social group”, Canada accepts persecution based on gender, sexual orientation, family, unions or professional groups.

If asked, show the visa officer why it is not safe for you to go to another part of your country.

Protection keeps people safe from harm.
Protection must be offered by the police and by the state.
Protection is given to prevent future persecution.
Protection is not given to acknowledge past persecution.
Refugees are entitled to protection.

Canada has the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program (PSRP). It offers protection to refugees, including those who are seriously and/or personally affected by war, or who suffer massive human rights violations.

How will you tell your own personal story of persecution (being harmed)?

Speak the plain truth.
Do not say more than what really happened.

Your story does not have to be perfect.

Before you leave the interview, say everything you need to say about the harm you face.

Sometimes different family members face different dangers

For example, the men in the family may face different dangers than the women.

The children may face different dangers than the adults.

Make sure the dangers facing each member of the family are clearly stated to the visa officer.

Say what is accurate and true.

It can be checked.

False information can make the Canadian visa officer think you are lying, and can reject you.

If you are a woman in an unsafe place without family protection or the protection of local authorities, say how your place is unsafe for you and your children.

The interview is important.

You will have a short time to tell your full personal story of persecution.

Include important events that affected you personally.

Make sure the visa officer understands that you are a refugee.

Tell the visa officer why you had to flee your homeland.

Say why you fear persecution when you go back home.

Say why you cannot settle and stay in the country where you are now.

Tell your very own personal story of persecution.

Include important events related to the persecution you suffered.

The Canadian visa officer will decide whether or not you are telling the truth.

Tell the truth and describe, in basic detail, what made you flee your country.

Describe, in some detail, the place where you were persecuted.

If you can, give the name of the one who harmed you, and when you were harmed.

Give a clear, plain, vivid and strong account of how you were persecuted.

When you answer questions, speak freely.

Give information that helps the visa officer clearly see how you were mistreated.

Your personal story of persecution must match what you wrote in the application you completed.

If they are not the same, the Canadian visa officer may think you are lying.

If you add information which you did not write on the forms you completed when you were sponsored, the Canadian visa officer may decide you cannot be believed.

Bring a copy of your written account to the interview, so you can refer to it, if necessary.

During the interview, tell the Canadian visa officer about important events, related to your persecution, which happened **after** you completed your forms.

Give the visa officer information about the harm you fear when sent back to your home country.

Show how the police and the government in your own country cannot and will not protect you.
Say what you have done to try to get protection.
If it is clearly hopeless to ask for protection, you do not need to show you tried to get protection.

Be ready to answer questions about why you fled your homeland, and why you cannot return.

Say only what is directly related to your claim as a refugee. Anything else will not help, and may hurt your case. For example, if you say:

- I am poor and want a better life;
- I want to join my family in Canada; or
- I want to go to school when I get to Canada,

your refugee claim may be questioned or rejected.

Prepare your answers to the following questions. (Some of the questions may not relate to **your** personal story of persecution.)

Did you flee your country because you feared persecution?
What made you afraid of being harmed?
Why did you flee your country?

Were you persecuted because of your:

- race,
- religion,
- nationality,
- being a member of a particular social group, or
- political opinion?

What makes you think you were persecuted for one or more of these reasons?

How were you and are you **seriously affected** by civil war or armed conflict in your country?
How were you and are you mistreated with threats to your life, torture, enslavement or servitude, and retroactive penalties?
How were you and are you denied freedom of thought, conscience and religion?

How have you been **personally affected** by the ongoing civil or armed conflict in your country?
Were you fired from your job as part of the conflict situation?
How and for what reason did that happen?
What did you do to try to get another job?
Did the government prevent you from getting another job?
How did they do this? Were serious actions taken against your immediate family members?
Describe the actions taken.

Did you suffer **massive violations of human rights**?
Describe the actions repeatedly taken against your group or against your entire population.
Describe how they seriously affected you personally.

Are you unable or unwilling to return home?
What makes you unable or unwilling to return home?
What makes you fear persecution upon being forced to return home?
Describe the persecution you fear?

At your interview, you will have the chance to describe how you were persecuted.
Prepare for your interview.
Plan carefully what you will include in your story of persecution, and what you will leave out.

In your story of persecution, include main events related to how you were mistreated.
Tell your own, personal story.
(A general description will not be enough.)
Give information about the persecution you suffered.

The Canadian visa officer will decide whether or not you are telling the truth.
Make it clear to the visa officer, by what you say, that you are telling the truth.
Describe important events and surroundings in clear, basic detail.
For example, if you can, give the names of people who persecuted you; the day or the month when they persecuted you; and the name of the place where they persecuted you.
Speak clearly.

Before you go to your interview, go over your personal story of persecution.
Be prepared to answer questions about what happened to you.

Focus on telling your very own personal story of persecution.
Give evidence that supports your personal story of persecution.

Giving your opinions will not help, and may hurt your chance of being accepted.
General statements need strong evidence.

Be prepared to tell your very own story of persecution at the interview.
Your story must be the same as what you wrote when you first applied to come to Canada.
What you say must be true, and must be directly related to the persecution you suffered.
Help the Canadian visa officer make a fair decision about your refugee case.

Relax.
Tell your story as well as you can.
Fully describe why you are a refugee, why you need protection, and why resettling in Canada is the only solution for you.

When Canada signed the UN Refugee Convention '51, the people of Canada promised to provide protection to those who fear persecution. Every time sponsored refugees, like you, are accepted to come to Canada, that promise is kept.

How can you give evidence of what happened to you?

Bring to the interview every proof that shows you will be persecuted if you go back home.

As much as possible, give proof that is specific to you.

Bring articles and internet reports about how people, like you, are mistreated in your country.

When you can, give written evidence to:

- support your story of persecution;
- show that the events which forced you to flee really happened;
- prove what happened to you; and
- show how you, as a person, were persecuted.

If possible, give detailed information that can be checked.

This will make it easier for the Canadian visa officer to believe your story of persecution.

Give evidence that you are a refugee, need to be protected, and need a place to resettle.

Evidence can be in different forms.

Give the visa officer important new evidence which you got after you first filled out your forms.

If you know that other people, like you, are being persecuted, tell the visa officer.

Provide articles or cases where the government in your country cannot or will not protect people.

If you can, bring documents such as related newspaper articles, summonses, evidence of bodily harm, and so on. (Provide certified translations as required.)

Country information is available at www.unhcr.org .

Recent reports describing unsafe conditions in your home country are another form of evidence.

For example, Amnesty International or human rights organizations may have reports on their websites. One website that may have helpful information is www.ecoi.net . (When conditions back home improve, such as when a peace accord has been signed, or when there is a plan for people to return home, you may no longer be able to come to Canada as a refugee.)

Give the visa officer newspaper articles that describe the persecution you suffered, and that tell about events which are part of your story of persecution.

Marks of physical harm or torture are another form of evidence. Physical evidence can show that severe persecution took place.

Long term signs of stress can be evidence of severe harm.

Documents related to your story of persecution can help you show the visa officer that you need to be accepted to go to Canada as a refugee.

Written information that supports your fear of future persecution can help the Canadian visa officer make a clear, sure, and fair decision to accept you to come to Canada as a refugee.

You will be accepted if the Canadian visa officer thinks this will prevent you from suffering persecution in the future.

You can help to prevent being rejected by giving full, related and strong evidence.

A full personal account of persecution and good supporting evidence can help the visa officer decide to accept you.

Talking through an interpreter at your interview

Canadian visa officers like to use a visa office worker who speaks your language, who knows about Canada's interview process, and who is good at interpreting. Sometimes the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) can provide an experienced interpreter. The last two options are to use one of your relatives, or to hire someone. If you need to bring an interpreter, you will be told ahead of time.

The Canadian visa officer will ask you whether you need an interpreter.

You can say "yes" even if you think your English is good.

You may want an interpreter in case you need help understanding the visa officer, or making things clear to the visa officer.

It may be hard to speak through an interpreter, so be prepared.

What does an interpreter do?

How will speaking through an interpreter be hard for you?

Practice talking through an interpreter.

Do not be afraid to speak the truth in front of the interpreter, no matter what the interpreter's religion, culture or background may be.

The interpreter will not change the decision of the visa officer.

The interpreter has no power over you.

Use words that mean exactly what you want to say.

Be clear in what you say.

Speak directly to the visa officer, (not to the interpreter).

The visa officer wants to look at you as you talk.

Use plain language and short sentences.

This will help the interpreter pass on your message clearly.

Stop often so it is easier to interpret what you say.

If the interpreter is not sure what you said, she/he may ask you to make your message clear.

If you notice the interpreter make a mistake, correct it right away.

If you do not correct the mistake, it may lead to an incorrect decision.

It is not rude to interrupt.

If you have strong reasons to think the interpreter is doing a bad or unfair job, tell the visa officer right away.

Speaking up about bad interpreting during the interview may be your only chance of getting an interpreter who will do a good job.

Complaining about bad interpreting may delay the process, but it will help ensure a fair decision. (It is too late to wait until after the interview to tell the visa officer why you think the interpreter did a bad job.)

You may find it hard to speak through an interpreter at your interview.

It is important to learn to talk through an interpreter.

This will help you, and the interpreter, do a good job at the interview.

Prepare answers to the following questions that apply to your situation.

Answer these questions **only** when by the Canadian visa officer asks them.

Did you get an offer to resettle in any other country?

If yes, name the country?

Can you settle and stay where you are now?

If not, why not?

Can you find work, and support your family where you are now?

If yes, how are you supporting your family?

Can your children go to school where you are now?

If not, why not?

If you leave the country where you are now, will you be able to return to that country?

If not, why not?

Will you, in a few years, be able to settle and become a citizen where you are now?

If not, why not?

How will you support yourself when you go to Canada?

Show how eager you are to support yourself once you get to Canada?

Describe your training and your work skills.

List the languages you understand, speak, read and write.

What have you done, and what are you doing, to improve your English or French?

Describe what you have learned and done since you became a refugee.

Give examples of how, as a refugee, you are resourceful, motivated, and adaptable.

Say how your relatives in Canada found work and financial success.

Describe the support you expect from relative, friends, and community in Canada.