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Syrian Refugees Greeted by Justin Trudeau in Canada

By IAN AUSTEN | December 11, 2015

OTTAWA — Prime Minister Justin Trudeau greeted a planeload of weary Syrian refugees landing in Toronto early Friday, telling the first to disembark that “you’re safe at home now” as he handed them winter coats.

“Tonight they step off the plane as refugees, but they walk out of this terminal as permanent residents of Canada,” Mr. Trudeau told government employees gathered at the airport.

“This is a wonderful night where we get to show not just a planeload of new Canadians what Canada is all about, but we get to show the world how to open our hearts and welcome people who are fleeing extraordinarily difficult straits,” the prime minister said.

The Canadian public’s widespread embrace of a plan to accept thousands of Syrians stands in stark contrast to the controversy over the issue in the United States, where many politicians have called for restrictions or outright bans on the refugees.

Opposition parties in Canada, including the recently defeated Conservatives, have quibbled over timing and details, but there is no significant opposition in the country to the overall aim of accepting at least 25,000 Syrian refugees by the end of February.

The first wave of 163 Syrians who arrived late Thursday night have been sponsored by individuals or groups who agreed to arrange their housing, education and other resettlement needs. Sponsors have had to raise just over 28,000 Canadian dollars, about \$20,400, for each family.

Few parts of the country seem to be without some kind of sponsorship group. In the Muskoka district of Ontario, a popular vacation destination north of Toronto that re-elected a Conservative to Parliament in October, Jody White, a local resident, said that she was connected with other people considering sponsorship after she telephoned the Huntsville, Ontario, congregation of the United Church of Canada.

From a core of 16 people, Syrian Refugee Sponsors Huntsville now has about 300 volunteers. "Not in my wildest dreams did I think that would happen," she said. "It was so positive."

The group, which had factored bake sales into its fund-raising plans, also fulfilled its initial target almost immediately when Robert and Jacquie Nunn, who live in the adjacent community of Lake of Bays, donated 28,000 Canadian dollars.

Mr. Nunn, 65 and recently retired, said he was looking for "an indulgence" to mark the event. In Huntsville, an ad on a bulletin board for a motorboat caught his eye. Along with the boat ad, he also took a flyer from a refugee group.

After reading both on a flight to Florida, Mr. Nunn decided to make the donation rather than purchase the boat — even though it "looked pretty cool," he said.

"A fancy trip, a car or boat, kind of diminish and memories fade," said Mr. Nunn, who had never supported any refugee group. "This refugee effort will have effects that go on for generations. Where is the best value, where is the best return? I threw away the boat ad."

Donations have also started coming from businesses. Landlords in many communities have offered refugees discounted rents and the Canadian National Railway said Friday that it would distribute 5 million Canadian dollars to communities to help fund refugee resettlement.

Victoria Esses, a professor of psychology at the University of Western Ontario and the director of its Center for Research on Migration and Ethnic Relations, said that while Canadians' support for the admission of refugees sometimes wanes, earlier waves of refugees have built a positive reputation.

"Many of them have become very successful people," she said. "And they have been very successful in giving back to the country."

Professor Esses started a sponsorship fund at the university that has raised about 48,000 Canadian dollars, including small donations from students and about \$2,000 collected in donation boxes set up by cafeteria cashiers.

"Some people say it's kind of like the Canada we remember," she said. "The Canada I remember was more generous and welcoming of diversity. It's kind of nice to feel we're welcoming."

Refugee advocates agree that the widespread publication in September of a photograph of Aylan Kurdi, a 3-year-old Syrian boy who drowned with his brother and mother off Turkey, prompted large numbers of Canadians to become private sponsors or join sponsorship groups.

The boy's aunt, who lives near Vancouver, British Columbia, had been trying to bring the family to Canada.

"It was the photograph of the little boy that really made people act," said Debra Fieguth, a longtime refugee advocate in Kingston, Ontario, who is affiliated with the

Anglican Church of Canada and is now working with 13 sponsorship groups. "There's been a huge increase, especially since September."

The arrival of the first government flight carrying refugees was highly anticipated. To avoid a crush that might overwhelm the refugees, the government asked the public not to come to the airport to greet the flight.

Those who ignored the request were not able to get close to the flight in any case: The military plane that had flown the refugees from Beirut taxied to a terminal building in a section of the airport with no public access; it is normally used only for visiting foreign dignitaries.

The building has been converted into a special processing center, where arriving Syrians will not only go through the usual customs, immigration and health screenings, but will also be given all of the other paperwork necessary for their new lives, including public health insurance cards. They will also be given winter clothing, and children will receive toys.

The same has been done with a section of the Montreal airport, where the second refugee flight is due on Saturday.

Many of the passengers landing in Toronto said they were happy to be there.

"We suffered a lot," said Kevork Jamkossian, who arrived with his wife, Georgina Zires, and their 16-month-old daughter, Madeleine. "Now, we feel as if we got out of hell and we came to paradise."

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