

Visa restrictions spark backlash

Ottawa says high cost of asylum claims from Mexico, Czech Republic makes move necessary

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OTTAWA – The financial cost of handling the flood of asylum claims led directly to the controversial imposition of a visa requirement on Czech and Mexican travellers, Immigration Minister Jason Kenney says. But the impact of the visa decision on the Conservative government's foreign policy agenda could be just as costly, threatening a proposed free trade deal with the European Union and marring a strategy of closer engagement with Latin America, observers said yesterday.

Czech officials reacted fiercely to the move, calling ambassador Karel Zbrakovsky home from Ottawa for consultations, and seeking support from the European Union.

EU diplomats said that the 27-nation bloc could retaliate by forcing any Canadians visiting the continent to get a visa, though that is considered unlikely.

EU spokesperson Michele Cercone said the European Commission plans no immediate action but "regrets" Ottawa's decision and was seeking consultations with Canadian officials, Associated Press reports.

"We expect the measures introduced by Canada to be temporary, and we hope that full visa-free travel between the EU and Canada is re-established soon," Cercone said.

Kenney said EU officials made no threats at a meeting Monday.

"There was no intimation whatsoever of any kind of retaliation," he said. The immigration minister insisted that visa regulations are the norm for travel to a foreign country, a standard that is only circumvented by special agreements.

Insisting on visas from Czech and Mexican travellers is "absolutely necessary," he said.

It costs Canada about \$29,000 to shelter and care for a single asylum seeker. More than 12,000 Czech and Mexican refugee claimants have arrived in Canada since late 2007 and the vast majority of the files have been ruled to be illegitimate, making the financial toll untenable, Kenney said.

But putting visa restrictions on the millions of legitimate tourists and business travellers that enter Canada from the two countries is like using a blunt instrument for a precision job, critics say.

"What's troubling is that they made the announcement without thinking about the consequences," said Carlo Dade, executive director of the Canadian Foundation for the Americas, an Ottawa-based think-tank.

The fact the move comes in the middle of a worldwide recession will magnify the impacts.

"This will hurt our diplomatic relations, tourism and the close ties we have built over the years with these two partners," said Liberal foreign affairs critic Bob Rae. "It's not clear to me that the Harper government fully understands what a setback this will be."

Canada is beginning free trade negotiations with the EU, and there are some concerns the visa hassle, coupled with irritants like Europe's recent decision to ban the trade of Canadian seal products, could strain the opening rounds of talks.

"We'd be upset if this were to really imperil negotiations for a simple reason. It's a cost-benefit thing. The overall value of the agreement is worth more than the loss of value on a single issue," said Jason Langrish, executive director of the Canada Europe Roundtable for Business.

The message Canada sends by forcing Mexicans to obtain a visa could be more damaging because it will reverberate all the way south to the tip of Argentina, Dade said.

"We send a signal to folks in the Americas that our most important relationship, the one with which we have the most trade (in the region), the most commerce, tourists coming to Canada, that we don't care about any of this, so you kind of wonder what's important for Canada," said Dade.

He also predicted that restricting visitors from Mexico to deal with an

overloaded list of asylum claims will only shift the incoming claims to another country, a trend he said happened when Ottawa put visa rules in place for visitors from countries like Chile and Costa Rica in past years.

Claimants from the Czech Republic in Canada have largely been from the Roma minority – often referred to by the derogatory term "gypsies" – who human rights groups say face discrimination.

The new rules were announced Monday and took effect yesterday.