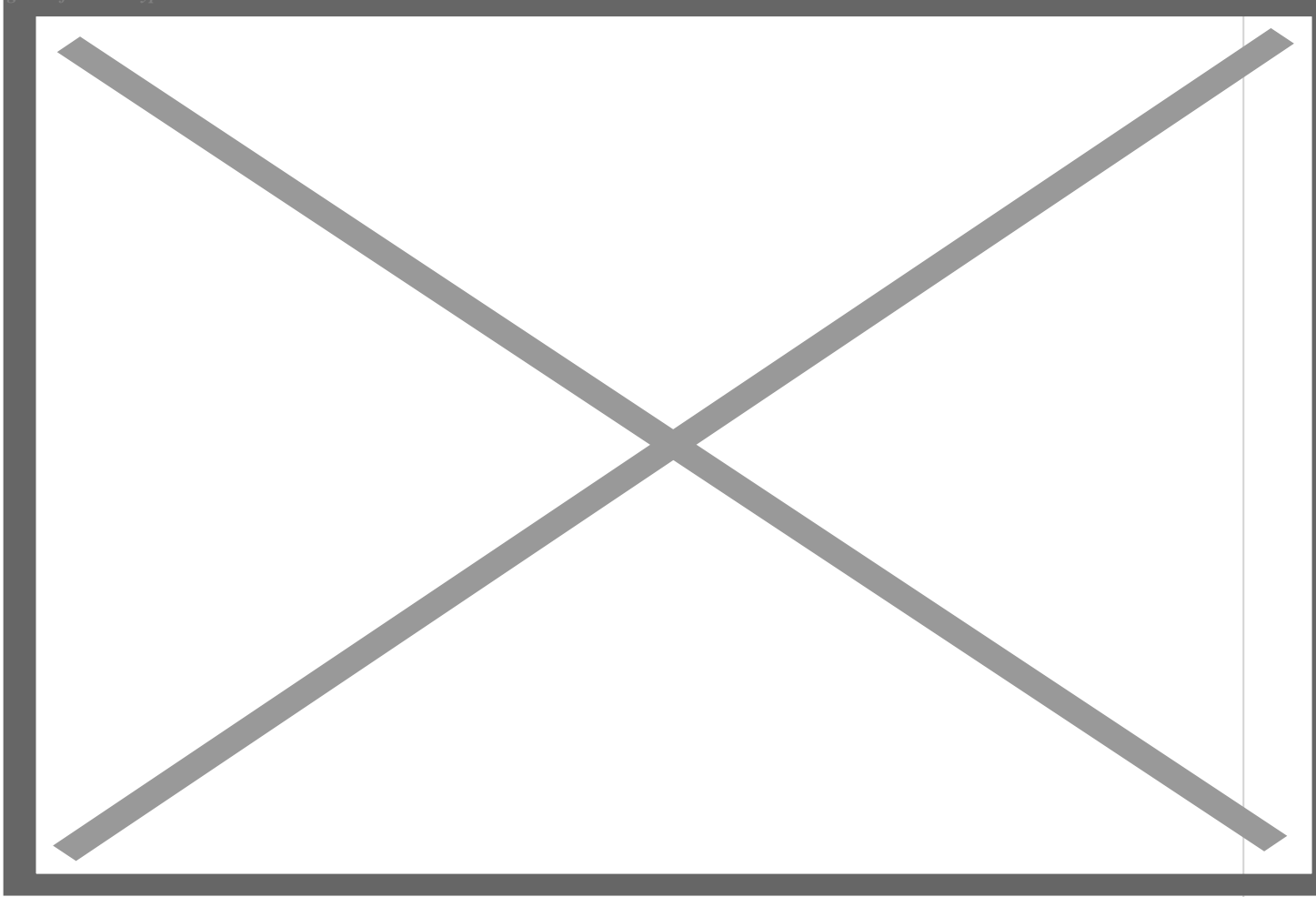


Palestinian Canadians condemn betrayal of faltering Gaza visa scheme

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Protesters hold Palestinian flags during a rally to call for a Gaza ceasefire on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Canada [Ismail Shakil/Reuters]

Ottawa, November 20 (RHC)-- Palestinian Canadians have renewed their calls for Canada to take concrete action to get their loved ones out of the Gaza Strip amid Israel's unrelenting bombardment, slamming a temporary Gaza visa scheme launched earlier this year as a failure.

Omar Omar, a representative of the advocacy group Gazan Families, said on Tuesday that he has been trying to get his relatives out of Gaza for months.

"It's been over a year now, and I'm still asking that my family – stranded in Gaza, under the continuous threat of losing their lives at any moment – be treated with the same urgency, the same humanity, that Canada extended to others," he said during a news conference in Ottawa.

"This long fight, this exhausting advocacy, has drained our resources and everything we have. We have lost so much back in Gaza, and here in Canada, this struggle is tearing apart the lives we have tried to build."

The Canadian government launched the special Gaza visa programme earlier this year to allow Canadian citizens and permanent residents to apply to bring extended family members from Gaza to the country.

But from the start, the families and immigration lawyers said the process was confusing and included invasive questions that went beyond what is typically required, including detailed work histories and any scars or injuries that required medical attention.

They also accused the government of imposing stricter requirements on Palestinians than on other people who have sought temporary visas in recent years, such as Ukrainians.

Canada approved more than 960,000 visas for Ukrainians fleeing Russia's invasion of their country — an 81 percent approval rate — and nearly 300,000 people have arrived over a two-year span. In contrast, the Gaza visa program was capped at 5,000 visas.

Canada's immigration department told Al Jazeera last month that, as of October 5, only 733 applications from Palestinians "who exited Gaza on their own" — without help from the government — had been approved.

By that same date, only 334 Palestinians had arrived in the country, the department said, without specifying why the others had not yet landed in Canada.

"When I saw Canada welcoming thousands of Ukrainian refugees fleeing war, I felt hopeful. I believed that the same compassion would extend to my family," Omar said during Tuesday's news conference. "But it hasn't. The betrayal — the cold refusal — has left me questioning if there is any heart left in this government, if there is any compassion left for people like us."

Israel and Egypt control the enclave's southern Rafah border crossing, and it has been closed for months amid the Israeli military's offensive, which has killed at least 43,972 Palestinians across Gaza since October 2023.

"The primary challenge continues to be the ability for people to exit, as movement out of Gaza remains extremely difficult or impossible due to various factors that remain outside of Canada's control," a spokesman for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada told Al Jazeera in an email in October.

"Canada will continue working closely with local authorities — at every level — to facilitate the exit of extended family members and to advocate for their safety."

But rights advocates have said the Canadian government should apply more pressure on Israel to allow Palestinians approved to come to Canada under the visa programme to leave the bombarded coastal territory.

“If this government was serious about saving Palestinians, Israel would face serious consequences for preventing their exit from Gaza,” Alex Paterson of the advocacy group Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East said during Tuesday’s news conference.

Ultimately, the success of the Ukrainian visa programme “shows what is possible”, said David Matsinhe, director of research, policy and advocacy at Amnesty International Canada. “This demonstrates very clearly the government’s capacity to act with urgency and resolve during humanitarian crises,” he told reporters in Ottawa.

Matsinhe issued a list of demands for Canada to bolster the Gaza visa scheme, including removing the cap on the number of applicants and increasing diplomatic pressure on Israel and Egypt to facilitate the exit of Palestinians. “This delay, even as relentless bombardment continues, is a tragedy and prompts a chilling question,” he said. “Was this program deliberately designed to fail?”

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