Case: They Keep Coming—Chinese Immigrants in Canada

“The Canadian Coast Guard intercepted a listing cargo ship crammed with about 90 Asians off the coast of Vancouver Island, yesterday ...” began a page-1 story in Canada’s national newspaper, the Globe and Mail, on July 21, 1999 (Armstrong, 1999).

On the following day, the New York Times wrote, “A ship with no name carrying more than 100 Chinese immigrants without identification papers has been taken into custody by Canadian authorities off the coast of Vancouver Island in what is believed to be the largest interception of immigrant smuggling on Canada’s West Coast.”

This was the beginning of a crisis for Canadian immigration authorities and a serious problem and perhaps a prodrome of an impending crisis for U.S. immigration authorities. It was expected that most of the Chinese immigrants were ultimately headed for the United States. They entered through Canada because its immigration rules were thought to be less rigorous than those of the United States. U.S. agents are known for occasionally intercepting immigrants’ ships in international waters. Once on board, the agents determine whether the immigrants have credible claims; if they do not, the agents order the ship to turn around. If a ship arrives on a U.S. shore, the immigrants are treated according to the United Nations (UN) Status of Refugees and given the opportunity to file claims (as is also done in Canada).

However, many Canadians complain that Canada interprets the UN convention too broadly. Furthermore, under Canada’s refugee policy—the Charter of Rights and Freedoms—an individual without Canadian citizenship or permanent residence status may ask for refugee status on his or her arrival in Canada. A person can claim refugee status if he or she fears persecution in the home country because of his or her race, religion, political opinion, social group, or nationality. Smugglers teach their clients how to file a claim, what to say, what not to say, and
so forth. For example, Chinese women refugee-claimants can claim gender persecution because of China’s one-child rule, and homosexuals can claim persecution due to sexual orientation. Once the claim is made, the refugee-claimant can receive free medical care and apply for work or social assistance while awaiting a process that can take months or years to complete. “Nearly half of the 1,494 claims made [in 1998] by Chinese nationals were abandoned after they disappeared, likely into the United States. They go out the front door and into the U.S.,” said Don Gracey, a Toronto immigration consultant (as cited in Fennell, 1999, p. 16).

Why do the immigrant smugglers target North America? In 1979, when emigration laws were relaxed by Beijing, an estimated 1 million Chinese fled to seek their fortunes in North America, Europe, and Australia. Today, some do flee the one-child rule in China and homosexual and religious persecution. However, most take legal routes; many refugees (an estimated 100,000 per year) who do not meet the immigration requirements pay smugglers, called snakeheads, about US$57,000 for each passage.

The passengers on that ship on July 20 told Canadian authorities they had each paid up to US$38,000 for the passage. All 123 passengers (both the New York Times and the Globe and Mail estimated the number of passengers on the first day of coverage) paid a total of about US$4.5 million.

Although the cargo ship was equipped with state-of-the-art radar and navigation equipment, the passengers suffered their way through the 38-day journey. Their lodging was in the fish hold of the vessel, where there was no ventilation, no light, and no privacy for the passengers, who included 18 women. The hold was covered in human excrement when the boat arrived in Canada because there were no toilets. The drinking water was contaminated; many passengers were dehydrated. They caught and cooked fish and ate it in shifts on the deck laden with garbage.

Later, other boats arrived after 56 days at sea. Within a few months, four other boats from China had arrived off Vancouver Island. After the required
immigration health examinations, including medical and identity processes, the migrants were held in detention centers, some in a small community that was a 7- or 8-hour drive from Vancouver. Canada’s detention policy states that persons may be detained for three reasons: insufficient identity, danger to the public, and unlikely to appear for an immigration process.

After 2 weeks, about 90 of the original 123 passengers were released with reporting terms and conditions attached to their release or, in the case of children, were handed over to the provincial government’s Ministry for Children and Families. Some of these migrants who had been released later failed to meet the terms and conditions of their release, and arrest warrants were issued for them. The remaining 33 passengers were kept in detention, based on one or more of the three criteria. Some of the detainees were suspected of participating in the human smuggling operation. Persons may remain in detention for an indefinite period. An adjudicator (a type of judge), who hears arguments for and against, regularly makes the decision regarding detention or release.

Lois Reimer, manager of regional communications at Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC), was part of the chain of command reporting to the minister of the CIC. Between Reimer and the minister were the following positions: CIC regional director general for British Columbia and the Yukon region (one of five regions in the country); CIC assistant deputy minister of operations (responsible for all five regions); and CIC deputy minister.

Reimer noted that the arrival of the boat people in 1999 was not a surprise. There had been prodromes: Boats carrying migrants had previously arrived off the coast of California, and in Australia they had been arriving for at least 7 years. “Because of our international partners, the United States and Australia,” Reimer said, “we were very much aware of human smuggling and that it was entirely possible that Canada could receive arrivals of this nature. We knew we had to plan.”

The crisis management plan, entitled Communications Strategy: Boat Arrivals of Migrants to British Columbia (1999), involved the CIC as well as “partner”
agencies (according to Reimer) that shared responsibility in responding to boat arrivals of migrants in Canada. These partner agencies included the Department of National Defence Coast Guard (DNDcg), Fisheries and Oceans Canada; Canada Customs and Revenue Agency (CCRA); and Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). Reimer also considered the United States and Australia part of the partnership, because the smuggling of people across borders is a global crisis affecting many countries.

**Responsibilities of Partners in the Crisis Management Plan**

The CIC was the lead organization in the crisis planning strategy. According to the crisis management plan, its mission was to ensure a sound immigration and refugee system that was not subject to abuse. At the same time, CIC worked to ensure that persons seeking entry into Canada were dealt with under the provisions of the country’s Immigration Act, respecting Canadian laws. According to the plan, the CIC also took on the role of media spokesperson and was responsible for ensuring that the partner departments and agencies responded to issues within their jurisdiction.

The crisis management plan mandated that the DND (also known as the Canadian Forces) was to “protect Canada, contribute to world peace, and protect Canadian interests abroad. The Canadian Forces defined Canada by protecting its territory and areas of jurisdiction, helping civil authorities protect and sustain national interests, and assisting in national emergencies” (Communications Strategy, 1999, p. 3). The DND thus played a leading role in the event of a marine arrival of migrants, because it was responsible for detecting and then reporting to the CIC any suspicious vessels meeting the profile of a migrant smuggling vessel in or near Canadian waters.

Coast Guard, Fisheries and Oceans Canada was mandated to “ensure the safe and environmentally responsible use of Canada’s waters, support understanding and management of the ocean’s resources, facilitate the use of our waters for shipping, recreation and fishing, and provide marine expertise in support of
Canada’s domestic and international interests” (Communications Strategy, 1999, p. 3). In the event of a marine arrival of migrants, the Coast Guard, like the DND, had the responsibility of identifying suspicious vessels. But the Coast Guard had the additional responsibility of leading the search-and-rescue operations at sea.

The CCRA was responsible for ensuring that Canadians were provided with the highest possible degree of protection from the smuggling of drugs and other dangerous goods. In the event of a vessel carrying illegal migrants, the CCRA had a variety of tasks designed to target and identify vessels and containers of drugs (Communications Strategy, 1999, p. 4).

“Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP)/Immigration & Passport (I & P) was mandated to combat human smuggling and other criminal violations of the Immigration Act by working with CIC and other organizations in investigating and identifying criminal organizations involved in smuggling illegal migrants into Canada” (Communications Strategy, 1999, p. 4). In the event of a boat arrival of illegal migrants, the RCMP played a leading role in the initial response, once a vessel or container had been secured and was in the control of Canadian authorities. The RCMP was also responsible for leading the criminal investigation of the smuggling operation (e.g., determining how the migrants got to Canada, identifying the smugglers and whether Canadians were involved, etc.).

**Strategic Considerations**

All partner agencies took responsibility for media relations when their respective agency or service was at issue. The following were fundamental questions for which the public and the media wanted answers:

1. How did these people get to Canadian shores?
2. Why didn’t the government stop the ship before it got into Canadian territory?
3. Why wasn’t Canada ready for the arrival of this ship—are there not early warning systems in place?
4. Why didn’t Canada just push the ship away from Canadian shores? Why not just let the container go on to the United States where it is destined?
5. What rights do these migrants have once they are in Canada?
6. What responsibility is there on the part of the shipping company bringing containers of stowaways to Canada?
7. Is there enough vigilance of commercial vessels at Canadian ports?
8. How many containers of migrants are you not finding?
9. How much is all this costing Canadian taxpayers?
10. Is Canada being compassionate enough? Is Canada being too compassionate?

There were these additional communications considerations:

1. The need to keep a multitude of stakeholders appropriately informed, with a view toward making them communications allies, or at least preventing them from becoming critics and possibly using erroneous information.
2. The media’s demands for extensive background information on issues related to the crisis.
3. The media’s demands for visuals, regardless of the operational circumstances.
4. The difficulty of communicating regular updates.
5. Commentary by critics who themselves may be poles apart on the issue and who may create a tension in which operational communications must be carried out—keeping a balanced message on enforcement and facilitation is difficult.
6. Limited CIC communications resources to provide support on site and to ensure that the necessarily limited number of spokespersons throughout the department have consistent messaging.

**Communications Objectives**

The communications objectives of the partner agencies were as follows:
1. To ensure the public knows that the government has the situation under control and is managing it effectively within the scope of Canadian law and the changing circumstances.

2. To ensure the public knows that Canada is working in partnership with other governments and, internally, that its own departments and agencies (CIC, RCMP, DND, Coast Guard, Canada Customs) are working together to combat human smuggling.

3. To respect the privacy of individuals as per Canada’s Privacy Act and to respect the confidentiality of ongoing police investigations, while at the same time honoring the communications principles of open and transparent government.

4. To provide the public with information about the challenges faced by the governments of other countries with respect to maintaining open borders, on the one hand, and controlling illegal migration and human smuggling, on the other.

5. To ensure that government communications are carried out in an effective, coordinated manner.

**Key Publics**

**Internal Publics:**
Concerned federal ministers  
Members of Parliament  
The CIC and partner agencies  
Affected provincial government ministries

**External Publics:**
Other levels of government, including the Province of British Columbia and affected municipalities  
The legal community and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)  
The news media  
The public at large

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Foreign governments and international partner agencies

Regarding key publics, Reimer noted that, “Canadian officials regularly discuss the challenges that this activity (the smuggling of people) presents with officials from other concerned countries. To this end, Canada participated in the 20th International Asian Organized Crime Conference that was held in Toronto.”

“We were part of the overall plan,” said Reimer. “Security was a major part of the crisis plan because no one knew whether we would be dealing with people who were armed and dangerous.” In the crisis communications section of the CMP, Reimer, the lead spokesperson, advised, “You should know, in advance, what your key messages are. What should we say about the health and safety of these people? What should be our first priority as a government agency? This we planned before the first boat arrived, although it was revised several times as more boats arrived.”

Reimer remembers the arrival of the first boat: “We had an operational plan that we would activate once a suspicious boat was confirmed. I was planning my usual one-month vacation with my kids. I was thinking, ‘I’ll just finish this and this and then I’ll be on my way.’ Then, the alert came in over my e-mail. My first reaction was, ‘This is a joke.’ But, it was not a joke. There was a boat arrival. We saw the plan become real.”

She said the arrival of the Chinese immigrants was big news. Parliament was not “sitting” (not in session), so there were no other major government issues to keep the news media occupied. “We saw unprecedented media interest of this issue. We are used to a fair amount of attention—drug trafficking and other high-profile cases, but the reaction to this issue was unprecedented.”

The public reaction was mixed, according to Reimer. Some Canadians responded with humanitarian support saying, “This is a tragic situation and these people should be allowed to stay and more of them should be allowed to come. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees urged Canada to keep its doors
open. Anybody who sets foot on Canadian soil has the right to be defended by
counsel, has the right to Canadian processes.” Others objected, arguing that,
“Canada doesn’t need this. It’s time to toughen the law.” People who lived near
the area where the migrants were detained complained as well: “Not In My Back
Yard [NIMBY] because traditionally immigrants and refugees were not kept
there.”

Reimer said, “We saw the positioning of special websites. We saw surveys come
about. There were town hall meetings. Public opinion polls were everywhere. We
saw media editorials, forums, and debates of this one issue. Everyone was asking,
‘What do you think? Should they come? Should they go? Should we send the boat
back? Should we allow them in?’”

The public demand for information was also extensive. Canadian citizens were
looking for statistics and background data. They wanted to know how the refugee
program worked; how many refugee claims were made across the country; how
many were made at the airport, in Quebec, and in Ontario. They asked, “Why do
we detain?” and “When do we detain?” They wanted backgrounders.

Reimer was part of a two-person communications branch, although she had the
additional assistance of a co-op student during the summer (see Fig. 7.5). The
branch was required to research and come up with answers to questions and
develop a wide range of communication tools, including media advisories,
backgrounders, and letters to the various publics, and information to the media.

Reimer commented on the in-depth media coverage:

We saw media go to other countries to compare the situation in Canada with the
situation in these other countries. Our radio and television stations sent staff
members to Beijing, Australia, New York. From July to October, less than 3
months, British Columbia television news had 980 minutes devoted to this issue.
A news story is usually 1.5 minutes long, so you can see this was quite
phenomenal. The two of us took 1,200 media calls at our regional headquarters
alone, and each required some significant work and organizing interviews and press conferences. We had 100 front-page stories during that period and 50 editorial cartoons [see Figs. 7.6–7.8].

Then we had calls from the public, and the majority of those went to one of three centralized call centers across the country. About 96 percent of the public was against us allowing the boats in. They were against our processing the migrants. So, we got nasty calls like, “Why am I paying your pension? You can’t manage the program!” Many others went to the Regional Director General’s office or the minister’s office [Minister of Citizenship and Immigration] and there were letters.

Like many other optimistic crisis communicators, Reimer viewed the crisis as an opportunity—in this case to explain the government’s immigration/refugee program and services. However, the crisis communicator must be careful to respond accurately and appropriately to questions. For example, if the crisis involved people who got sick after eating E. coli-tainted food and a reporter asked the restaurant owner, “How could the disease have been contracted?” the crisis communicator would not talk about the restaurant’s use of low-fat oil for cooking French fries. Reimer, however, was in a situation in which the responses the media wanted were actual descriptions of the work of the CIC.
FIG. 7.5. Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC). In the top photograph, Lois Reimer (center), manager of communications, discusses strategies with Janis Fergusson (left), communications adviser, and Denny Falls, executive assistant to the regional director general. In the bottom photograph, Reimer consults with Dan Grant, planning section chief, Incident Command. CIC offices are located in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.
FIG. 7.6. Fifty political cartoons published in Canadian newspapers in 1999–2000 reflected the attitudes of Canadians about the arrival of boatloads of Chinese immigrants. The cartoons also reflected questions spokespersons from Citizenship and Immigration Canada had to answer. This cartoon, published in the Globe and Mail on September 14, 1999, commented on the complaint that immigrants found it easier to enter North America through Canada than through the United States. Reprinted with permission from the Globe and Mail.

Reimer said, “A quarter-page ad costs $7,000 in the Vancouver Sun. This was an opportunity for free advertising. It came down to getting a better understanding of the government program. And our immigration act is very, very technical, very difficult to understand.” She had to explain the act in detail to reporters, and they had to listen because they had to understand it to write their stories.

**International Issues**

In addition to the Canadian news media, there was interest from the international news media—CNN, the New York Times, and the Seattle Times, among others. The proximity of Canada played a great part in this media interest. Even

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though Australia had been receiving migrant boats for 7 years when the first Chinese boat reached Canada’s shores in 1999, the Australian stories went largely unreported, because the issue did not affect life in North America.

In January 2000, when some containers of Chinese immigrants arrived in Seattle and two arrived in Canada, it came to light that the two latter boats were destined for Seattle but had run off course. The primary question asked of Reimer was, “If they were destined for the United States, why did you even open the containers? Why not just let them go there?” Reimer’s response was, “First of all, Canada is a humanitarian nation. If we are aware of people inside a closed container, our first
concern is the well-being of those people. Secondly, why would we just push the problem to the United States?”

“We saw a lot of comparisons to the United States and Australia,” said Reimer, “because we have like systems. One reporter did an in-depth article in which he compared both the American and Canadian systems, and what was reported was that, unlike a lot of myth out there, the American system has a 50 percent acceptance rate of refugees and the Canadian system accepts 54 percent. A lot of Canadians, including the media, were saying that Americans are a lot tougher; they do things a lot quicker. This was a real myth-buster.”

China claimed that, if Canada didn’t have such a generous refugee determination program, its people would not try to make the trip. “This was not an issue we want to debate in the news media,” said Reimer. “It’s a very complex issue, and senior officials from both countries meet regularly to discuss concerns such as
human smuggling and returning Chinese citizens who are found not to be refugees.”

**Politics**

Political debates developed between the current Canadian government and the opposition party. Reimer’s position as representative of a government agency was to support current Canadian law, not to debate its merits. Furthermore, the government’s Communications Policy required that public servants so restrict themselves.

“We must be very cognizant of the politics around an issue,” said Reimer, “but my job as departmental communications manager is to speak to the laws of the land and not to get into conjecture around whether the laws are good or bad; it’s not my position to do that. My job is one of explaining how Canada’s immigration and refugee legislation works.”

**Integrity Issues**

Reimer said the challenge to the integrity of her program was dealing with a discretionary program that at times appeared to be interpreted inconsistently: “While the perception might have been that [the] CIC was treating this group of clients differently from others, the reality is that no two cases are alike and there were significant differences in case facts.”

**Risk Issues**

A risk communications strategy was necessary to cope with the Chinese migrant crisis. Canadians were concerned that the refugee-claimants might be carrying such diseases as tuberculosis and hepatitis B. They wanted to know, “Will my kids get sick? Will I get a disease? Are these people criminals? How do I know I’m safe from them?”

One of the important components of the communications strategy was informing the various audiences of the medical and criminal screening that took place immediately after the migrants were brought to Canadian shores.

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Costs to Taxpayers

Like U.S. citizens, Canadians are concerned about where their tax dollars are going and often complain about supporting people they perceive as taking advantage of the government’s generosity. The arrival of the boat people added fuel to that argument: “Why don’t we pay for Canadians first? If the Royal Canadian Mounted Police are guarding these migrants, then who is guarding my community? I’m paying taxes to guard them and I am unguarded. I don’t have a lawyer, yet these people get lawyers.” Canadians also questioned whether Canada could afford to be so generous. The provincial government expressed to the federal government the pressures it had to deal with on the refugee issue.

Canada’s Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees that “anyone who steps foot on Canadian territory” automatically has basic human rights, such as the right to legal representation and the right to have due process under Canadian laws. During the crisis, it was important that Canadians understood that such rights extended to the Chinese migrants.

Reimer agreed that the detention of the migrants was costly: “We spent about $2.8 million each month to detain about 420 migrants. Citizens want to know what if we get 2,000 or 3,000 immigrants?”

There was an effort made to feed the detained Chinese migrants a diet that was sensitive to their culture. Rumor was that the migrants said their food wasn’t hot enough.

Reimer noted:

There was a negative public reaction when it turned out that the restaurant providing the food was reported to be one of the best in Victoria. We didn’t seek the best in town but it turned out that way. An editorial cartoon illustrating the issue of the day was published showing the migrants as demanding and ordering officials around.
Short of a crystal ball, we don’t know if more people are coming from China like in 1999. People seem to think that the government knows and ask, “How many are we going to get?” People don’t announce their arrivals to us. We may know about twelve hours before they touch down on our shore, but people think we were expecting the boat all along. We are planning for more because we see what’s going on in Australia and the United States. I would think that we will get more in the spring, but may get none.

Lessons Learned
Listing her own lessons, Reimer said the following:

We [Office of Immigration] own the crisis. The RCMP and the Coast Guard are involved, but it’s our department’s job to communicate. Maybe because the word “immigration” is in our name. We must live with that.

We must anticipate and plan accordingly. For example, we’re going to have removals of individuals who are found not to be refugees, so we should plan our communications in advance.

We must consult and compromise with partners. We have no line of authority with the RCMP, for example. There was criticism that the RCMP used police dogs in [its] security work. Was that appropriate for the migrants? So, the RCMP planned to introduce the community to the dogs. There was also a day in which community members could walk through the detention center to see how the migrants are treated.

Successful Outcomes
Reimer felt that what made the communications work well was that she was “inside the room where the decisions were made, part of the decision making, not an add-on. We were part of the decision from start to finish. That may mean working at 2 a.m. when they’re opening those containers, so you have a real accurate feeling of what’s going on. You need to understand the environment.
You can’t speak from your ivory tower; people won’t believe you know or are part of what’s going on.”

Another successful outcome was feeding the needs of the media and the public. This included preparing tools and strategies, information, and flowcharts.

A third success factor was thinking ahead to be prepared for what might come up. Also, Reimer was able to hire another person so that they could plan for what had not yet happened and develop tools. They planned to prepare communications tools for migrants in their language. They also realized they were fortunate that the first four boats did not have tragic outcomes, such as dead bodies, as the containers arriving in Seattle had. No Canadian personnel, boat passengers, or boat crew members were harmed. These possibilities must be a part of crisis planning.

Finally, Reimer said that, “keeping a sense of humor [was a] key.” One night, while waiting for a boat to come in, Reimer said the boat was expected to arrive “in the next hour,” but it didn’t come in until 8 hours later. She ended up leaving for home at 11:30 p.m., stopping along the way to get gas for her government vehicle. When the gas station attendant saw her Government of Canada Citizenship and Immigration gas card, he remarked, “You know there’s a radio contest going on right now. Anybody can guess how many migrants are on the current ship.” Reimer said she tried to keep her composure. Then the attendant said, “If I win, I get a T-shirt that says ‘Not tonight, Honey, I have a migrant.’” Reimer laughed to herself, asked for a receipt, and left.

Reimer won the Don Rennie Memorial Award for excellence in government communications for her work on the Chinese immigrants crisis. The award was presented by the Public Relations Society of Canada.

Reimer reported that no new cases became known to her through 2005. The events of 9/11 have heightened awareness of the presence of undocumented immigrants crossing the borders from Canada to the United States, and
surveillance has been so intensified that it is possible that the smuggling of people has probably ceased, at least temporarily.