

TIMES COLONIST

Editorial: Refugees are welcome here

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The difference between Canada and the United States was rarely more clear than in statements over the past few days from the leaders of the two countries.

On Friday, U.S. President Donald Trump signed an executive order closing the country's borders to refugees for 120 days and to Syrian refugees indefinitely.

On Saturday afternoon, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau tweeted: "To those fleeing persecution, terror & war, Canadians will welcome you, regardless of your faith. Diversity is our strength #WelcomeToCanada."

Trump's order also put a 90-day ban on citizens of seven Muslim-majority countries — Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Somalia, Syria, Yemen and Libya — from entering the U.S. The move created chaos at airports across the U.S. over the weekend as confusion spread over who was affected by the ban and to what extent.

The confusion extended to Canada, where senior government officials spent a nightmarish weekend on the phones, trying to get more information from the Americans about how the rules applied to Canadians.

Eventually, the U.S. assured Ottawa that Canadians with dual citizenship and permanent residents with a valid residency card and a passport from their home country would not be turned back at the American border.

While the ban on travel from those seven countries seems unfair (why not include Saudi Arabia, where most of the 9/11 hijackers came from?) and based on little more than prejudice, it is the ban on refugees that is most worrisome.

These are not wild-eyed terrorists; they are ordinary people who are trying to escape death or oppression. Today, many are Syrians, fleeing the civil war that has turned their country into a charnel house.

About 4.8 million Syrians have fled to neighbouring countries. One million have asked for asylum in Europe.

Since Trudeau took office, Canada has welcomed more than 40,000 Syrian refugees. Even under former president Barack Obama, the United States accepted fewer than 15,000 since the Syrian crisis began — and that was ended by Trump’s order. The contrast is stark.

Canada sees itself as a place of refuge and new beginnings for those who, like many of our own forebears, sought a home safe from want and fear. The United States, which has long proclaimed: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” has pulled up the drawbridge.

“Our country needs strong borders and extreme vetting, NOW. Look what is happening all over Europe and, indeed, the world — a horrible mess!” Trump tweeted.

In an interview with ABC News, he said: “I’m going to be the president of a safe country.” Leaving aside the impossibility of keeping such a promise, it makes the “home of the brave” seem afraid of its own shadow.

Such fear is unworthy of a country that has a long history of opening its doors to refugees — more than 3.3 million since 1975, and more than 80,000 last year alone. Those millions have not become a threat to the country.

A study by the Cato Institute said the chance of being killed by a refugee terrorist in the United States is one in 3.64 billion.

Trudeau says he will try to change Trump’s mind the next time they talk. The prime minister’s office said he was “looking forward to discussing the success of Canada’s immigration and refugee policies.”

Although changing Trump’s mind seems to be a difficult task, Trudeau can rightly point to the many benefits Canada has reaped from welcoming refugees. But Trump doesn’t need to look across the border to see the strength that comes from immigrants and refugees — his country is built on it.