

Frightened refugees continue their vigil at boarder crossings. (1989, January 2). The Ottawa Citizen.

# Frightened refugees continue their vigil at border crossings

By Mohammed Adam

Citizen staff writer

PLATTSBURGH, N.Y. — Fear that Canada is hardening its heart against refugees has darkened the dawn of a new year for Suppiah Sivapragasam.

Sivapragasam, 51, is one of more than 160 refugee claimants from 39 countries who have taken up temporary refuge in this American border city near Montreal while they wait for permission to enter Canada.

"We are all frightened about the future because we don't know exactly how the new law will affect us," says Sivapragasam, a Tamil who arrived here in September with his wife and two children.

"Everybody here is desperate."

Immigration Minister Barbara McDougall announced Wednesday a new procedure for clearing the backlog of 85,000 refugee claimants who want to live in Canada.

Under the new rules, claimants will be given a hearing by a two-member panel, and permitted to stay in Canada only if at least one member of the panel finds the claim credible.

Meanwhile, they live on borrowed time.

They fear that if the hearing takes too long, U.S. authorities may lose their patience and de-

port them.

The refugees all have horror tales to tell — imprisonment, torture, beatings, long treks across inhospitable terrain to reach safety and even death threats.

Sivapragasam, a former civil engineer in the Sri Lankan capital of Colombo, says he left his homeland because the violence against Tamils reached a stage where he feared he would lose his life.

He was dismissed from his job, the family house was burned down and his 83-year-old mother suffered severe burns.

"I was born and bred in Colombo and had nowhere else to go."

So he headed for Canada to start a new life and to give his 18-year-old son, Aravindhana, and 15-year-old daughter, Ahalya, a chance for better life.

Now he says his world is falling apart.

His immigration hearing is scheduled for February but he doesn't know what will happen, especially with the new law in place.

He is also running out of money.

About two-thirds of the waiting claimants in Plattsburgh live in apartments or hostels, while the rest are staying with local families and members of refugee support groups.