

The use of documentation in refugee determination in Canada

Can we do better?

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of research on religious freedom to assist in adjudicating religion-based claims within the Canadian refugee determination system. The Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board compiles National Documentation Packages for countries from which refugee claimants have come. These include a section on religion. This paper assesses the types of reports included in the National Documentation Packages and identifies reports that could be included to enhance them.

Keywords refugees, Canadian refugee system, religion-based refugee claims.

1. Introduction

The last two decades have seen a significant increase in systematic reporting of incidents and trends of religious persecution around the globe (Årsheim 2018:86). More reports are being produced, and their reliability has improved as well. But who is using these reports and for what purposes? This paper examines one very specific use of religious freedom reports in Canada, where the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) compiles National Documentation Packages on most countries with respect to their records on human rights protection. One section of each such package focuses on religion. The tribunal uses this documentation in making decisions on refugee claims. It is therefore critical that this information be current and accurate, as lives may be at stake.

The National Documentation Packages are not uniform. They are updated by staff at the IRB and are thus dependent on the staff's awareness of various sources and their reliability. The section on human rights usually includes reports from the United Nations Human Rights Council, relevant United Nations Special Rapporteurs, the U.S. State Department, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International. Under

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the religious freedom heading (section 12), U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) reports are included, as well as reports from Human Rights Watch and occasionally other human rights organizations such as Freedom House. Furthermore, the IRB itself produces reports on specific topics that are included in the Packages, and academic articles are also occasionally included.

I will first review the Canadian refugee determination system, to understand how the National Documentation Packages are compiled and used. I will then analyze the different types of reports referenced in the National Documentation Packages to assess their reliability, using China as a primary example. Finally, I will consider what types of reports could be included but are not currently referenced.

2. The Canadian refugee determination system

In Canada, the IRB's Refugee Protection Division (RPD) is the tribunal responsible for determining if claimants are refugees under the 1951 Refugee Convention (UN General Assembly 1951). A claimant may initiate a claim upon entry into Canada by speaking to a Canadian Border Services officer or an IRB officer. The claimant then completes a Basis of Claim form. The IRB has a Claimant's Guide that instructs claimants in how to make an application (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2018). It refers to the National Documentation Package, which is publicly available online, and informs claimants that these documents may be used to determine refugee status.

A single RPD member holds a hearing to determine whether a claimant meets the definition of a refugee under the 1951 Refugee Convention. These hearings typically take half a day. Claimants are entitled to have a translator and can introduce documents and witnesses. An appeal process is available, through the Refugee Appeal Division and then to the Federal Court of Canada. All levels of hearing rely heavily on James Hathaway and Michelle Foster, *The Law of Refugee Status*, 2nd edition, in interpreting the 1951 Refugee Convention. The section on religion covers a mere six pages, so it is far from comprehensive (Hathaway 2014:399-405).

The IRB regularly recruits new RPD members. Some of these hold government appointments for a limited time period, but others are civil servants. They are not required to have legal training or experience with refugees, although these qualifications are preferred. Members receive training in how to hold fair hearings, how to write decisions, and how to determine if a claimant is entitled to refugee status. The IRB has approximately 1,000 staff (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2019). The RPD is the largest of the four tribunals under the IRB. Overall, the IRB has a chronic backlog of cases due to inadequate staff resources (Vineberg 2018).

At the hearing, the RPD member reviews the Basis of Claim and any other evidence that the claimant brings forward. The member may ask the claimant ques-

tions, both to determine the facts and to assess the claimant's credibility. A case from the Refugee Appeal Division, *Re X* (2017), provides a good example of how National Documentation Packages can be used in this process, although this example is from an appeal. The claimant stated that he would be persecuted in Iran, his country of origin, because he had converted to Christianity from Islam. The RPD questioned his conversion to Christianity because he could not provide proof of baptism. In paragraph 77, the appeal tribunal referred to a document that explains why Christian converts in Iran are often not baptized. In paragraph 78, the appeal tribunal referred to a document stating that apostasy from Islam is punishable by death in Iran. On the basis of these two observations, the appeal tribunal overturned the RPD decision and found the claimant to be a refugee.

The 1951 Refugee Convention lists religion as one of five grounds for persecution that may qualify a person for refugee status. However, there is little guidance on what constitutes religion or "persecution on the basis of religion" in the Convention itself (Musalo 2004:170). In 2004, the UN High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) issued *Guidelines on International Protection* specifically related to religion-based refugee claims. These guidelines reference the plethora of human rights law on which those determining refugee status can draw. Nevertheless, religion-based claims remain complex. The Guidelines identify three elements that religion-based claims may rely on:

1. Religion as belief (including non-belief);
2. Religion as identity;
3. Religion as a way of life. (UNHCR 2004)

Religious persecution can come from the state or from non-state actors (Masalo 2004:168) In addition, claims can be grounded in either inter- or intra-religious conflict. It would be difficult for anyone making refugee determinations to be well versed in all types of religion-based claims. Therefore, it is very important for the people making such determinations to have accurate and current information on which to base their decisions. The National Documentation Package could literally mean life or death for claimants who may otherwise have a difficult time proving that they would face death or imprisonment for their religion if returned to their country of origin (see Badoeva 2000).

3. Reports included in the National Documentation Packages

3.1 United Nations reports

The National Documentation Packages rely on reports and documents produced by UN agencies. The UN has had a long history of engagement on both human rights and refugee issues. There is widespread agreement that the UN is impartial and that the information in its reports has been appropriately verified.

3.1.1 UN High Commissioner for Refugees

The United Nations established the Office of the UNHCR in 1950 and adopted the Refugee Convention in 1951 (UN General Assembly 1951). The UNHCR currently works in 134 countries to ensure that the Refugee Convention is observed (UNHCR n.d.), assisting both refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). Any data or reports from the UNHCR are treated as credible. National Documentation Packages include UNHCR reports on countries with a high number of refugees and/or IDPs; for example, the one for Syria contains a 2017 report from the UNHCR (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2020b).

3.1.2 UN Human Rights Council

The United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) is entrusted with addressing human rights in countries around the world. It has received criticism because countries known to be human rights abusers have frequently been elected as members: including Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, Somalia, Eritrea, China, and Bahrain. The HRC was created in 2006 by UN General Secretary Kofi Annan to replace the Human Rights Commission, which had been criticized on the same basis (Cox 2010:87). It is unfortunate that the HRC has been unable to avoid this problem.

One aspect of the HRC's work that is very useful for refugee determination is its Universal Periodic Reviews (UPRs). Every UN member state is reviewed in rotation, once every three years, on its human rights record. The HRC solicits stakeholder submissions and holds hearings in Geneva to receive reports from interested parties. Although member states can circumvent and politicize the UPR process, it is an important venue for human rights organizations to highlight concerns (Cox 2010:115-117). The IRB includes both stakeholder submissions and the final report of the UPR in its National Documentation Packages.

The HRC can appoint special rapporteurs, which are "independent human rights experts with mandates to report and advise on human rights from a thematic or country-specific perspective" (UNHCR n.d.), by resolution. The HRC has used this authority to appoint both thematic and country-specific rapporteurs. For the purposes of this paper, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief (FoRB) is the most important. Other issues can also intersect with religion, including cultural rights, disabilities, education, food, freedom of association, freedom of opinion and expression, health, housing, human rights defenders, women and girls, and minorities. The Special Rapporteur on FoRB often issues joint reports with other special rapporteurs to address intersectional human rights issues related to FoRB. The Special Rapporteur on FoRB's annual and thematic reports are frequently included in the National Documentation Packages.

As of the end of 2019, there were 12 country-specific UN Special Rapporteurs (UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights n.d.). Annual reports from any of these special rapporteurs would be included in the National Documentation Packages. These reports typically present documentation of violations of religious freedom if this is a problem in the particular country.

3.2 Government reports on religious freedom

Several countries and regions have established government bodies that issue regular reports on religious freedom, including the United States and United Kingdom. Since these reports are compiled by bureaucrats with input from embassies, they are presumed to have a high level of accuracy and are usually included in the National Documentation Packages.

3.2.1 United States

Every country's National Documentation Package includes, near the beginning, links to the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) World Factbook (Central Intelligence Agency n.d.). This virtual almanac includes a wide variety of information about every country in the world, including religious demographics, under the "People and Culture" tab. Legal restrictions on religious freedom are also noted.

The U.S. Congress passed the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) in 1998. The IRFA established a bipartisan Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) that operates outside the U.S. State Department (Shea 2008:29). The USCIRF produces an annual report by May 1 each year that identifies "countries of particular concern," or CPCs (United States of America n.d.).

The IRFA also established an Office of Religious Freedom within the State Department. It is headed by an Ambassador for Religious Freedom, who advises both the President and the Secretary of State. The Ambassador delivers a Report on International Religious Freedom to Congress, prepared from information gathered by U.S. embassies "based on information from government officials, religious groups, nongovernmental organizations, journalists, human rights monitors, academics, media, and others" (U.S. Department of State 2018). This report addresses the religious freedom situation in every foreign country, unlike the USCIRF report, which deals with only the most egregious violators (U.S. Department of State 2018). Thomas Farr, who served as director of the office from 1999 to 2003, argues that placing the Ambassador within the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor hampered the position's effectiveness (Farr 2012:269).

Laura Bryant Hanford, who was a key proponent of the IRFA, has described one important success of the legislation: "The Annual Reports have become the gold standard for religious freedom reporting. In addition to the solidarity conveyed to

embattled victims around the world, they serve as a springboard for negotiations with host governments and as evidence in refugee or asylum adjudications” (Hanford 2008:37).

3.2.2 United Kingdom

The British Home Office produces country-of-origin reports for use in determining asylum and humanitarian protection claims (United Kingdom Home Office n.d.a). The Home Office compiles these reports from external sources. In 2009, the UK established the Independent Advisory Group on Country Information (IAGCI) to advise the Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI) about the content and quality of the information relied upon in the reports (United Kingdom Home Office n.d.b). The reports themselves invite feedback to the Country Policy and Information Team and to the IAGCI on the veracity of the information. These reports are well documented and include links to other reliable sources. The National Documentation Packages frequently include links to UK Home Office country-of-origin reports.

3.2.3 Other Countries

The National Documentation Packages occasionally reference reports produced by the Australian Refugee Tribunal. For example, an Australian report issued in 2013 on Protestant Christians in China was referenced in section 12, the section on religion, on the China National Documentation Package. Similarly, reports from the European Asylum Support Office and the Office français de protection des réfugiés et apatrides are sometimes referenced.

3.3 Non-governmental Organization Reports

The primary non-governmental organization reports included in both the general human rights section and section 12 come from Amnesty International, Freedom House and Human Rights Watch. In the case of China, additional resources include reports from ChinaAid and Falun Gong.

3.3.1 Amnesty International

Founded in 1961 as a grassroots movement to seek the release of political prisoners, Amnesty International now advocates for a broad array of human rights. It was founded in London, England, but now works in over 70 countries (Amnesty International n.d.). One of its major emphases has been to make human rights abuses public:

Amnesty International shines a light on human rights by making its research findings public. We publish 1000s of reports, press releases, and public statements

and produce videos and other materials. We hold press conferences, do media interviews, and share the information in our publications, through our digital channels, and through our supporter networks. We present our research findings directly to government officials, and regional and international bodies. We engage in public awareness and education work to make sure that no human rights violations are hidden in the darkness. (Amnesty International Canada n.d.)

The organization has built a reputation for thoroughly documenting human rights abuses. It is non-partisan and not allied with any government. Amnesty International has a Canadian office that advocates on human rights issues to the Canadian government. Amnesty International reports are usually referenced in National Documentation Packages.

3.3.2 Freedom House

Freedom House, established in 1941, has a venerable history as the first U.S. organization founded to promote democracy internationally. It was formed by prominent journalists and included Eleanor Roosevelt as one of its founding honorary chairs. Its website states, “Freedom House is founded on the core conviction that freedom flourishes in democratic nations where governments are accountable to their people” (Freedom House n.d.).

In 1973, Freedom House developed a template for assessing freedom. Since then, it has issued an annual report on the state of freedom around the world; categorizing countries as free, partly free, or not free. This report has become highly respected. Freedom House also uses the template to assess the status of specific freedoms, including media and religion (Freedom House n.d.).

The National Documentation Packages often include Freedom House reports in both the General section and the Religion section. The China National Documentation Package, for example, includes Freedom House reports in the sections on Human Rights, Media, and Religion (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2020a).

3.3.3 Human Rights Watch

Human Rights Watch began in 1978 as “Helsinki Watch” with a particular focus on monitoring Soviet Bloc countries for compliance with the Helsinki Accord (Human Rights Watch n.d.). Its “naming and shaming” approach contributed to the democratic transformation of this region in the late 1980s (Thomas 2001). Throughout the 1980s, Watch Committees were formed in various regions of the world, resulting in the renaming of the organization as Human Rights Watch in 1988. Human Rights Watch gathers information about human rights abuses from citizen groups

and its own on-the-ground investigations. It has developed a strong reputation for accurate information from areas of the world where it is notoriously difficult to obtain evidence:

Human Rights Watch has also begun using statistical research, satellite photography, and bomb-data analysis, among other new methodologies. Combining its traditional on-the-ground fact-finding with new technologies and innovative advocacy keeps Human Rights Watch on the cutting edge of promoting respect for human rights worldwide. (Human Rights Watch n.d.)

With its history and reputation for accurate information gleaned from difficult circumstances, it is not surprising to find reference to Human Rights Watch reports in the National Documentation Packages. These reports are usually found in section 2, the Human Rights section. Occasionally, they are also found in the Religion section, section 12.

3.3.4 Swiss Refugee Council

The Swiss Refugee Council formed in 1936 and has been advocating for the rights of refugees since that time (Swiss Refugee Council n.d.b). Its main focus is to ensure that Switzerland complies with the requirements of the 1951 Refugee Convention. In the process, it produces reports on countries of origin (Swiss Refugee Council n.d.). These reports are referenced in both the General and the Human Rights sections of the National Documentation Packages.

3.3.5 Other organizations

Many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) address issues specific to a particular country or minority group. For instance, Bob Fu founded the NGO ChinaAid in the United States in 2002 to highlight instances of persecution of Christians in China. The organization has since expanded to address religious freedom and the rule of law (ChinaAid n.d.) The National Documentation Package on China includes the ChinaAid 2018 report “Chinese Government Persecution of Churches and Christians in Mainland China” (ChinaAid 2018).

Falun Gong, also known as Falun Dafa, is a religious minority founded in China and persecuted by the Chinese government. The Federal Court of Canada ruled in 2001 that Falun Gong is a religion (Yang 2001). There is a significant Falun Gong population among expatriate Chinese in Canada, so it is not surprising to find several reports on their plight in the National Documentation Package. Of the thirty documents referenced in the Religion section of the China National Documentation Package, eight are from Falun Gong.

3.4 Academic publications

Although academic literature is not commonly referenced in the National Documentation Packages, the one for China, as of 2020, includes an article from the 2008 *Chinese Theological Review*, which describes a particular theological agreement completed in that year (Foundation for Theological Education in South East Asia 2008).

4. What is missing?

This review of materials referenced in National Documentation Packages raises the question of whether important documentation or reports are missing. Practitioners in the field of religious freedom would immediately identify government and NGO reports that are considered credible but are not included.

Documents from the International Panel of Parliamentarians for Freedom of Religion or Belief (IPPFoRB) are conspicuous by their absence. This group of parliamentarians from many countries was formed in 2014 to “combat religious persecution and advance freedom of religion or belief for all” (IPPFoRB n.d.). It has commissioned reports on religious freedom in Asian countries (IPPFoRB n.d.). These reports are well documented and could be a valuable addition to the National Documentation Packages.

In 2019, the Bishop of Truro, UK, the Rt. Rev. Philip Mounstephen, was tasked by the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office to undertake a review of the Office’s support for persecuted Christians. He submitted his report in July 2019 (Bishop of Truro 2019a). Evidence received from persecuted Christians in the course of this review is available on a website with an interactive map (Bishop of Truro 2019b). However, this information has not been referenced in the National Documentation Packages. It could be referenced in the future, either directly or through its inclusion in country-of-origin reports produced by the Home Office.

Several credible NGO reports could be included. There is no reference to Pew-Templeton *The Future of World Religions* reports. The Pew Research Center was established in the United States in 2004 and has been conducting high-quality research on the state of religion in the world since that time.

In 1992, Open Doors started to produce an annual World Watch List of the 50 countries where it is most dangerous to be a Christian (Open Doors n.d.). This report is developed through a comprehensive survey process to get information directly from those living in the countries.

Christian Solidarity Worldwide (CSW) also produces reports documenting violations of the right to FoRB (Christian Solidarity Worldwide n.d.). CSW regularly releases comprehensive reports on the state of religious freedom in particular countries. Although both Open Doors and CSW are Christian organizations, they advocate for religious freedom more generally, not limited to Christians.

It could be helpful for the National Documentation Packages to include content from NGOs; often NGOs have inside information that may not be publicly available. Moreover, the range of groups could be widened. For China, there is considerable information about Falun Gong but nothing from any organization concerned for Uighur Muslims, even though it is well known that Uighur Muslims have been persecuted in China (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada 2020a).

The IRB invites recommendations of documents to be included in its packages (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada n.d.), and its website includes dates when specific country packages are updated. This allows anyone to peruse the National Documentation Package for a country to determine if the content is accurate and up to date. If it is not, anyone can recommend additional or updated documents. Of course, there is no guarantee that the IRB will accept a recommendation, but it is helpful that the IRB discloses the process of submitting one.

5. Conclusions

The Canadian IRB's National Documentation Packages provide an excellent case study of how documentation on religious freedom is used. As the documents referenced provide the primary source of evidence for refugee claims, it is very important that they be accurate and up to date. My general review, with specific reference to the National Documentation Package for China, reveals heavy reliance on other government sources, especially reports from the U.S. State Department and USCIRF. There is information on Protestant Christians, particularly those persecuted in the House Church movement, but the situation in China has been changing rapidly and so this information should be brought up to date. There is no specific information about Uighur Muslims, meaning that decision makers would have to find this information in general reports on religious freedom should they receive a refugee claim from a member of this group.

The IRB website provides opportunities to recommend documents for inclusion in the National Documentation Packages. Canada has several ministries working on behalf of the persecuted church. Open Doors, for example, which produces a comprehensive annual report on religious persecution, has a Canadian office. Drawing on information from these organizations could help to improve the information in the National Documentation Packages with respect to religious persecution around the world, so that legitimate religious refugees could qualify for asylum in Canada.

Refugee claimants basing their claim on religion face many challenges. The Canadian system is severely backlogged. Those making decisions often have little background in or knowledge of religion, let alone country-specific situations of religious discrimination or persecution. Claimants frequently do not have financial resources to obtain legal assistance. Maintaining current and accurate National Documentation Packages can therefore be of great assistance to these claimants.

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