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## CTV Toronto

🕒 Wed. Jul. 31 2002 9:10 AM ET

### **Cubans stand good chance at asylum bid: lawyer**

CTV News Staff

A lawyer for 24 Cubans seeking political asylum following World Youth Day says their chances of being allowed to stay are quite good.

Many of the refugee seekers are hiding out in private homes in Toronto and Montreal with help from the Cuban community in those cities.

Their applications for political asylum could take months to process, but immigration lawyer Pamila Bharwaj is optimistic Ottawa will allow them to stay for good.

"Generally speaking, Cuba is a refugee producing country and most Cuban refugee seekers are pretty successful in Canada," Bharwaj told CTV's Canada AM on Wednesday.

Bharwaj, who's law firm has been retained by the group to assist with the claim process, said all of the refugee seekers are concerned about their families back in Cuba, fearing the Castro government will seek reprisals against relatives.

"I think it's their primary concern other than their own safety and being deported from Canada because the Cuban government will seek reprisals against family members," Bharwaj said.

The Cuban defectors, described as professionals and students in their 20s, were part of a 200-person Cuban delegation attending last week's World Youth Day. They managed to sneak away from Cuban security officials during the papal mass on Sunday.

An unidentified Cuban defector told CTV News in an exclusive interview that the basis for their claims is that they will be persecuted for their religious and political beliefs if they return home.

"We want to live our own lives, and to think freely in our own way," the defector told CTV through an interpreter. "We can't do that in Cuba."

The federal government has not commented on the applications, except to say that all claimants will be given a fair hearing. Each time Canada hosts an international event, Citizenship and Immigration officials anticipate some will try to seek refugee status. Reports said Ottawa had been expecting at least 10 refugees stemming from World Youth Day.

In order to prevent large numbers from applying for refugee status, the federal government screened visa applicants carefully, eventually rejecting about 20 per cent.

While the plight of the Cuban defectors tops Canadian news headlines, back in Cuba no word of the defections has penetrated local media, much of it government-controlled.

"The Cuban government is not going to allow their citizens to know what has happened," Bhardwaj said.

Reports said the defectors eluded Cuban officials in Toronto with help from local members of the Cuban community. The pilgrims sent word through middlemen last week that they didn't want to return to Cuba.

The defectors were told to wear a particular symbol to allow them to be identified within the massive crowd. They waited on the sidelines of Sunday's mass to be collected by local residents.

A Cuban-American Congressman has reportedly sent Prime Minister Jean Chretien a letter appealing to Canada to grant the group refugee status, but a spokesperson for Chretien would not comment on the matter.

The Cuban government said people want to leave because of economic hardship blamed on a 40-year-old U.S. economic embargo, while dissidents said they are stifled by the island's one-party political system that has been ruled by President Fidel Castro since 1959.

Three years ago, a coach and 11 Cuban athletes defected to Canada during the Pan American Games in Winnipeg. They were denounced in Havana as having "gone over to the enemy."

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According to estimates, between 25,000 and 30,000 people flee Cuba annually, through legal and other channels. If they defect, Cubans are not allowed to return back to the communist-ruled island, but they can usually return for visits.

Aside from the Cubans, nine Angolans are hiding out and also hoping to apply for refugee status. They apparently slipped out of the church they were staying during World Youth Day late Sunday or early Monday and went to stay with family or friends.

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