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Keynote address

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Crocodiles & Human Migration: Fresh Thinking Required

(Getting outside the box and into the heart of the matter)

I guess you probably know that there are no crocodiles in the North Saskatchewan River. None in the Bow or the Elbow for that matter either. There is apparently word out there that we have crocodiles in the Red River in Manitoba. At least that's what Yahya Samatar thought when he waded into the Red south of our border with the US.

Have you heard of Yahya? His story was all over the news this summer. He's the Somali guy who swam into Canada, into Manitoba, in the Red River – and made a refugee claim. The Red, as you may know, is a big river that defies logic and flows up the map, from South to North, from down in the States *up* to Lake Winnipeg. Yahya thought it flowed west-east, and if he entered on the US side and crossed, he'd land in Canada.

The Red is a Prairie river and it meanders and twists like a snake's back. Easy to wonder which way it's going. And besides, it was dark, in the middle of the night; easy to lose one's bearings. Yahya waded in with all his clothes on and quickly discovered he'd never make it in the strong current - dressed like that. So he returned to shore, stripped to his underwear and entered the river again. It took a lot of courage, not just to swim north to Canada in the cold river, but there were those crocodiles too.

Yahya is a really smart guy, but his experience in Africa and then in America taught him to watch out for crocodiles. He had flown from Addis to Rio to begin his trek north across Brazil, through Columbia, then through the countries of Central America to

Mexico and into the US. He did this by bus and on foot, crossing rivers large and small, watching out for crocodiles or alligators. And he finally made it to safety in Canada.

He swam and he walked and he reached a highway. A passerby in his truck found him soaked and shivering by the side of the road, gave him a jacket and took him to the CBSA office at the border. There he was received kindly, fed and clothed, and the initial paperwork done. Then they called me. We rescue refugees. We brought him to Winnipeg and to our reception house; and looked after him until his claim was filed, and heard – and he won.

That's one story; one among millions. You know many of them. Some of you have lived them. What kind of desperation – and courage – does it take to leave your pregnant wife in one country and your three kids in another, and set out on an epic journey in hopes of finding freedom and safety – and a future for all your family?

Of course it's not a new story. Canada has been built by people with such stories. That's a big part of our history. Waves of people have been coming here for a long time. My Indigenous ancestors came at least 12,000 years ago; my European ones 15 generations ago. Each in their own time had to deal with the crocodiles, the threats of the time. Human migration, whether gradual or urgent, has been around forever.

But it's different today, and here's why. Exactly three weeks from today my mother will celebrate her 107th birthday. When she was born in 1908 there were 1.6 billion people on this planet. That's after more than 2 million years of human history, and breeding. Today, in just 107 years, the population has leaped by more than four-and-a-half times, to 7.4 billion. That borders on the unbelievable. Every day there are more than a quarter million babies born. In fact, as many are born in a day as Canada takes in as immigrants – young and old -- in a year. And there are only about 110,000 deaths. We are challenging, we are testing, the sustainability of the planet and of human life itself. My son who is involved with the UN Environmental Program, says we're only four or five years away from the tipping point.

We hear a lot about the crocodiles: global warming, rising oceans, greenhouse gases, declining resources – and the kind of crocodilian thinking that won't see these realities -- but whether in the cause or in the consequence, it is in the vast multiplying of the human family where rests the greatest challenge.

It is worth noting in passing the subject of climate change, that this is already creating refugees. Whether it is growing deserts or drying lakes, or horrendous tropical storms, or rising waters, these developments (and it finally doesn't matter whether they're man-made or natural), they are causing human migration. My correspondent in New Zealand points to the growing number of Pacific islanders resettling there as ocean waters rise and render their low-lying island homes uninhabitable. It's happening. Now!

But we all know that such migration is small potatoes when compared to the politically-caused migrations of Africa and the Middle East. Last year, 2014, saw a *twenty percent* increase in the number of refugees and internally displaced people. The total has now reached 60 million. Sixty million people voting with their feet – because they must. It is beyond choice; it is about survival.

Whether we or others like it or not, *it* is happening. And it is upsetting apple carts. The tidy agreements in Europe, the carefully crafted treaties and protocols among states, the hoped-for measured responses to foreseeable crises are careering to blazes in an out-of-control handcar. The tide of desperate humanity is overwhelming all. And as my New Zealand correspondent, a Roman Catholic nun would say, “Good on them!” Never mind the apple cart – they are shaking the tree.

Europe understands the causes as well as the effects of this vast and unstoppable human tide. We too must begin by understanding them. That *might* lead to more enlightened responses. What we and most countries tend to get right now are proclivities on the one hand to raise the drawbridge and protect our *stuff*, and on the other to see how we can profit from the turmoil (whether it be through oil or coltan or trade in military items, or expanded trade empires).

We know about the effects. We see them represented in the drowned body of little three-year-old Alan Kurdi on a Mediterranean beach, a photo that derailed our election campaigns. (Then the niqab took over and really derailed things). I see it in Yahya whom I now know was a social worker and human rights advocate in Somalia, trying to protect young people from being drafted into the murderous and anarchistic ranks of Al Shabaab until forced to flee for his life. We all see the appalling effects on our television screens or read about them in our press. Four thousand crossed into Slovenia last Saturday. These people could be us, except for the good fortune that has already placed our lives here in Canada.

But what about the causes? Very few people actually *want* to migrate. That's a fact! Well under four percent of the world's population lives outside the borders of the country where they were born. That's all. Not much over three percent in fact. In Canada where twenty percent of us are foreign-born we tend not to recognize this reality. Humans prefer to stay home, to live in the locale of their birth. Nice to travel but even nicer to return home.

What has forced the upheavals, the migrations? Well, usually it is an individual – a Hitler, a Stalin, a Kim, an Afeworki, a Mugabe, an Assad, a Saddam, a Khomeini; or an oligarchy like the Taliban, the ISIS bunch, Al Shabaab – all motivated by greed for power, privilege and wealth. Dress it up how you like, it boils down to the overweening desire to be top dog, to renounce democracy, to tolerate only your own agenda, to boss others around, to get rich.

However, the *cause* is more broadly-based than just politics. It has its roots in the grossly distorted distribution of wealth. When one percent of the world's population now has as much wealth as the other ninety-nine percent combined, that is both a problem and a recipe for turmoil - if not revolution. And at the other end of the wealth spectrum, when an individual working a forty hour week cannot earn enough money to support oneself and ones' dependents, that is also a problem and a recipe for societal instability.

The oligarchies that have co-opted even democracies to serve their own interests would have us believe in trickle-down economics. We have had a long enough run at this to test the thesis. I see no evidence of it in the current widely disparate wealth distribution across the planet. Mark this: with a world population expected to rise to the nine-to-eleven billion range, with high youth unemployment in many places, and with the amazing interconnections now available across the Internet, there is big trouble ahead unless these inequities can be mitigated.

Refugee flows that today seem unmanageable, no, *are* unmanageable – at least in Europe -- may well seem small in the future. We need to do some fresh thinking on the subject of human migration. Presuming Canada has some *moral* obligation, how do we show it? Do we have the *capacity* to address the causes? Or are we stuck with only some role in addressing the effects? Can we forge international partnerships that will, together with us, work at these challenges?

Can we admit that national borders are not immutable as though ordained by God? They are the blessing – or the curse – of history. National borders are elaborate strategies for protecting our stuff. I'll leave to you the moral implications of all this. My purpose this morning is to give you some things to think about over these two days.

Now let's narrow this down; let's move on to see whether *morality* has any place in immigration policy. Or is it only pragmatism that belongs there? It's mostly pragmatism now. Our Immigration and Refugee Protection Act is candidly stated to be a "Labour Market Strategy". This is our strategic plan. This is meant to ensure that the wheels of the economy move slowly in an upward direction – I would add, editorially, "according to the shallow thinkers that designed the act". And I would remind you that such thinking, such tipping of the hat to industry and commerce, came during the Liberal government era that preceded the Harper one.

Did you hear comedian Rick Mercer's "rant" in the closing days of the election campaign? He ranted on about all the wonderful things in the platforms of all the

parties, how great they all were. But then he closed with the devastating comment, "...if only one of them had shown any *vision*." There is nothing in IRPA about *nation building* - nothing about any vision for Canada.

Our strategic plan for immigration has us in a box – the labour market strategy box. We need to get outside that box and into the heart of the matter. That's where we can ask questions about morality.

I had a young man come to my office last Friday. He'd arrived here a couple of years ago under our sponsorship. He proudly showed me his membership card in the Carpenters Union. He has a good, well-paying job in Fort McMurray. He wants to sponsor his father to Canada, but the queue for sponsoring dads is a long one, and he said, "They only let in 5,000 a year." How long is the queue for parents, for grandparents?

Haroon Siddiqui, the former editor, wrote last week in the Toronto Star that the processing time was more than 69 months, and that was after there was a determining of the qualifications of the sponsor, which was taking 45 months. That sounds like a nine year wait to me. Most of these older applicants could well be dead by then.

Is this a moral issue? Or is it all about the money? The Labour Market Strategy?

I'm turning down the sponsorship of 5,000 refugees every year, refugees whose sponsorship is requested by their relatives living in Winnipeg. They're family. They love them. They're worried about them. They're sending money overseas to support them, making sacrifices to do so. And why am I turning them down? There are caps on the sponsorship entitlements imposed on me by Ottawa, as on other sponsors. There are 24,000 refugees waiting in the private sponsorship queue overseas and they're only letting in 6,500 a year. Do the math.

People die waiting, or they get desperate and try another route like crossing the Mediterranean. When one ship went down I lost nine whom we had sponsored. Others just disappear during the long wait and nobody knows what happened. I have a case this week of a young girl, sponsored years ago, and still waiting, sheltered in a house in a city in Africa. She's the household slave. Now the master of the house wants to sleep with her, and his wife is alright with that; she's just dirt. I'm trying to find her another refuge.

There's no sense of urgency within the system. It's all about process, all about shuffling the paper. When you bring forward a case you think is urgent and try to jump the queue, there is a standard answer: "All the cases are urgent"; so none gets any priority over another.

Does any of this raise a moral issue? Or is it all about the money? The Labour Market Strategy?

The ceiling age for kids and dependency has been lowered from 22 to 19. This is splitting families. Is *this* a moral issue? I know *that* one is all about the money because statistics show that older children don't integrate into the labour force as successfully. The Labour Market Strategy again.

What kind of a soulless country are we creating here with moves like those?

What about all those moves by the Harper government to make citizenship harder to get and easier to lose? What about those earlier moves to increase the number of Temporary Foreign Workers and make it tougher for them, or students, or nannies, to gain citizenship? What about the moves to make it harder to file a refugee claim? And so the story goes, or at least has gone.

Who benefits? Well, the answer is pretty simple. It's those invested in the status quo, the old stock, the ones who would like fewer new voters to challenge the entrenched

world and its privileges -- while still making sure there are enough workers, *though disenfranchised*, to keep the system running. It's that Labour Market Strategy again -- and the elites, the oligarchs that created it.

Is that the way we want to build this nation? Is it all about the money or is there another *nation building strategy*?

Immigration is obviously key. The demand is there. Jason Kenny admitted when he was immigration minister that the demand was triple what was being let in. He said 750,000 a year. Back in 1913 we landed 400,000 when our population was 8 million. An equivalent number today would be 1,750,000. You wonder about the Future of Settlement as a theme for this conference? Let in more people and there'll be no question about that!

You know, I know, that immigrants create jobs. And we've got the space. On a list of countries by population density, Canada ranks 99th.

I'd like to see us have, as a first principle, as a kind of litmus test for any immigration strategy - and instead of a labour market strategy -- a "humanity strategy". What is the kind, the decent, the humane – yes, the moral thing to do? Now that would really be a *nation building* strategy of the finest order.

Let's apply that to refugee immigration. It's made a lot of news lately. We had a kind of bidding war during the election campaign. Now we'll see what Mr. Trudeau does. Didn't he promise 25,000 Syrians by year's end? I can tell you that there are other former refugee populations among us that are a little miffed about this. "What about our people?" they ask. Why are we capped at tiny numbers while everyone wants to sponsor Syrians? They *could* ask, "Where's our "Humanity strategy?"

It seems to me that refugee policy should be separated from immigration policy. Right now it's just a piece and a small piece of the overall immigration pie, a pie set at about

250,000 a year. Add to the refugee numbers and you take away from the others in the pie – like parents and grandparents. These categories shouldn't be competing against each other. They should be separated.

Then there is the “processing” mindset – not a *rescuing* mindset. People come to me with urgent stories. A refugee is clearly facing a life-threatening situation. I have to tell them – refugee sponsoring is not a rescue program. It is an immigration program, and like all the other streams (“lines of business” the call it), processing takes years.

What is the kind, the decent, the humane – yes, the moral thing to do – to have a “humanity strategy”? How do we help Europe with its refugee crisis – or Africa – without breaking the bank? What is the right *nation building strategy* for Canada?

How much can we do? There is a campaign in the settlement sector to have the government increase its GAR [Government Assisted Refugee] arrivals to 20,000 a year. I'm sure you know about this. That's a great plan, but it is an expensive one probably tripling the budget now set aside for that program. There is at least this much demand within the private sponsorship, the PSR, program – especially if this one old guy in Winnipeg can come up with 5,000. And it would cost government, relatively, peanuts because, like now, the families here will bear the cost.

So, think outside the box. With a new government in Ottawa, now is the time to press forward with fresh ideas. Plunge into the river like Yahya. Have courage. And watch out for the crocodiles.