



# National

## **Fraud squads chase down marriages of convenience**

### **Ottawa dispatches secret teams in bid to crack down on phony foreign weddings**

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From Wednesday's Globe and Mail

May 21, 2008 at 4:08 AM EDT

OTTAWA — The Harper government is deploying clandestine teams to fan out across foreign countries and gather raw information about elaborately staged phony weddings aimed at duping Canadian immigration officials.

The teams, which comprise up to five people, are part of a wider bid by the Department of Citizenship and Immigration to crack down on marriages of convenience as immigrant communities warn that thousands of foreign fraudsters are leaving lonely Canadians broke and broken-hearted.

The wedding spies report back to their colleagues staffing Canada's visa desks about particular regions or communities where lavish parties and convincing photos are little more than a front for getting a passport. "It's a serious issue. That's why there are fraud teams around the world now," a government source said.

Officials are loath to identify which countries have been targeted for added fraud measures for fear of upsetting diplomatic relations. They also say that providing too much detail would undercut their effectiveness.

For Conservatives eager to build support among Canada's ethnic communities, the measures approved by Immigration Minister Diane Finley require some political balancing, as well.

Vocal complaints of fraud by Indo-Canadians, for instance, must be addressed in a way that avoids triggering a backlash in such communities, where overseas arranged marriages are common. Critics warn that large numbers of genuine marriages arranged by relatives are being mistakenly rejected as fraudulent because Canadian officials misunderstand the tradition.

Visa officials are now being trained to ask better questions of couples requesting a life together in Canada. The minister is expected to announce further improvements this fall.

Immigration lawyers and consultants say they have come across everything from phony photos to the conception of children purely so applicants can gain an edge in their bids to live in Canada.

Ms. Finley is working with the B.C. government - which asked to co-operate with Ottawa on the issue - to warn and remind Canadians they will be on the hook financially if their new husbands or wives immediately leave them and apply for social assistance.

Fraudulent marriages have been an immigration concern for years. Ms. Finley has said gathering firm statistics is a challenge for the government because even good-faith marriages fall apart. Officials say the phony unions appear to be increasing and concern among immigrant communities is on the rise.

Palwinder Gill of Surrey, B.C., had an arranged marriage that quickly fell apart two years ago. The 43-year-old said his wife left him one year after he sponsored her entry into Canada from India. He is convinced she used him purely for immigration purposes. Now he advocates for change as part of a group called the Canadian Marriage Fraud Victims' Society.

The group says these marriages have devastating effects, leading to depression, embarrassment and economic hardship. "This is a very huge problem in Canada," Mr. Gill said. "Marriage is the easiest and fastest way to get Canadian immigration, so people are using marriage as a route to get into Canada. ... There are thousands of cases in each and every immigrant community."

Current law allows Canadians to sponsor a spouse for quick entry into Canada, but Mr. Gill's group wants Canadians to lose this privilege for seven years if they are found to have attempted marriages of convenience. It wants a similar ban to apply to foreigners who try to fraudulently marry a Canadian.

Vancouver immigration lawyer Andrew Wlodyka says he has seen it all during his past 17 years in practice, and over the previous seven years in various roles with the Immigration and Refugee Board.

"In many communities it's epidemic," Mr. Wlodyka said. He mentioned India, China and Vietnam as frequent sources of marriage fraud, but stressed those countries are also a major source of overall immigration to B.C. and that fraud is being committed by people of all backgrounds.

Mr. Wlodyka said the vast majority of fraud cases involve a Canadian sponsoring an overseas spouse with genuine good intentions, only to be betrayed by the new spouse. But Canadians are also taking part in jilting. The Indian government was forced to launch a booklet campaign in 2006 warning women about the so-called wedding "menace" to address the rise of Indo-Canadian men travelling to India's Punjab region to marry for dowries only, and to leave their brides behind.

Toronto immigration consultant Roy Kellogg, a former immigration officer, said the challenge for officials is that the most suspicious marriages may actually be the most genuine. Couples with little money often use phone cards to make calls and cannot afford lavish weddings or photos, leaving them with slim evidence of a long courtship. Meanwhile, couples with lots of money can stage elaborate but phony wedding ceremonies overseas and sail through the process.

Other than having visa officers ask better questions, Mr. Kellogg doubts there's much Ottawa can do. "It's impossible to know whether a couple is in a loving relationship," he said.

For those with money, the relative speed with which immigrants are approved through marriage makes fraud an attractive option.

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## **Fighting fraud**

Anyone who is allowed into Canada as a spouse of a Canadian qualifies for permanent residency. Many other countries take a more restrictive approach.

THE UNITED STATES

Congress passed the Immigration Marriage Fraud Act in 1986 in response to controversy over so-called sham marriages. For a couple who have been married less than two years, the law allows the status of "conditional resident." Interviews are conducted after two years and, if officials deem the marriage to be genuine, the immigrant receives permanent resident status.

## AUSTRALIA

Immigrants must live with their spouses for two years before receiving permanent partner visas.

## NEW ZEALAND

Immigration New Zealand's website states: "A partner will only be granted residence if both people in the partnership have been living together for at least 12 months."

How big is the problem of marriage fraud in Canada?

Immigration Minister Diane Finley said she was unable to answer that question when it was posed to her in writing by Toronto-area Liberal MP ROY CULLEN.

"Quantifying the rate of marriage fraud is difficult as relationships can break down at any time in a marriage, from the date of entry to Canada to several years into the marriage," the minister said.

When a New Democratic Party MLA organized a meeting on the issue in Burnaby, B.C., in 2006, nearly 200 people filled a town hall. An advocacy group called the Canadian Marriage Fraud Victims' Society estimates the number of victims to be in the thousands.

*Bill Curry*