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Chair

Mr. David Tilson

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• (1545)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC)): Thank you, ladies and gentlemen.

Today is Thursday, March 18, 2010. This is meeting number 3 of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we will have a briefing by the Department of Citizenship and Immigration on its role in the Government of Canada's response to the earthquake in Haiti.

Before we proceed, I'd like to correct something. I would like a motion that the supplementary estimates be reported to the House.

Mr. Dykstra.

Mr. Rick Dykstra (St. Catharines, CPC): So moved.

(Motion agreed to [See *Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: We will now proceed.

It seems you are here as much as the committee members, Madame Deschênes.

You have a presentation to make to us. You have the floor for a few moments, and then I'm sure the committee members will have some questions for you.

Thank you for coming.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes (Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

My name is Claudette Deschênes. I am the assistant deputy minister of operations at Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

I am joined by Sandra Harder, who's the acting director general of the immigration branch at CIC.

I would like to thank the committee for inviting me to speak. Today I will provide you with an overview and update on the special immigration measures the department took in response to the catastrophic earthquake that struck Haiti on January 12 of this year.

[Translation]

As members of the committee are aware, the Embassy of Canada suffered significant damage as a result of the earthquake. Nonetheless, in the aftermath of the disaster, on January 16, CIC announced special measures that would be available to those who self-identified as being directly and significantly affected by the earthquake.

Foremost among these measures, CIC and our federal partners developed and implemented an evacuation plan for Haitian children who were at an advanced stage in the process of being adopted by Canadian citizens or permanent residents. From the time of the earthquake until the end of February, almost as many adoptive children arrived in Canada as would normally have arrived in two years, that is, 237 for the years 2008 and 2009 combined.

Of the 250 adoptees identified for possible evacuation, 203 are now in Canada with their adoptive parents, pending finalization of their immigration or citizenship process, and it is possible that one or two more children will be able to come to Canada under the special immigration measures.

As the situation in Haiti has stabilized, specifically with the return of commercial flights, the families of these children have been informed to make their own travel arrangements.

[English]

After close review, some of the children did not have the required provincial-territorial government approval for adoption. In other cases, the prospective adoptees were over 18 and not eligible to be adopted, were not matched with a family in Canada before the earthquake struck, or the parents were unable to obtain provincial approval to adopt. But the children may be able to come to Canada at a later date through the regular adoption process if all requirements are met. All of the parents whose adoptive children were not able to come to Canada under the special immigration measures have been contacted.

It should be noted, Mr. Chairman, that the interest expressed by many Canadians to adopt children who lost their family and friends in this tragedy is a testament to their generosity and open spirit. But it is international policy and practice to try to first find homes for children who have been orphaned in their own country before placing them in a foreign country.

The processing of any new adoption application will depend on when the Government of Haiti re-establishes adoption procedures. Anyone interested in international adoption of a Haitian child is asked to contact their provincial government ministries or adoption agencies.

[*Translation*]

Other immigration measures necessitated our working quickly to establish criteria that would allow for the priority processing of new and existing family-class sponsorships, including spouses, common-law and conjugal partners, dependent or adoptive children, parents, grandparents and orphaned family members such as brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews and other grandchildren under 18 years of age.

We also established priority processing for protected persons with family members in Haiti, and citizenship certificates.

I am pleased to report that although service at the Embassy of Canada in Haiti was limited, the Government of Canada evacuated more than 4,600 Canadian citizens and permanent residents, while ensuring that all applicants met standard admissibility requirements.

Our processing centre in Sydney, Nova Scotia conducted more than 928 verifications for people who had lost their documents and expedited 257 proofs of citizenship, for the period ending March 12, 2010.

• (1550)

[*English*]

In order to respond flexibly to the urgent need for help, Mr. Chairman, CIC temporarily exempted certain categories of foreign nationals from the requirement to obtain a temporary resident visa to transit Canada en route to Haiti. This meant that passengers on board non-commercial aircraft bringing aid to and evacuating people from Haiti, and making stops in or transiting through Canada, did not require a visa.

We also waived fees on applications for temporary residents for Haitian nationals in Port-au-Prince and for extensions of temporary residents within Canada. As of March 10, we have processed over 1,500 applications for temporary residence from Port-au-Prince and Santo Domingo, of which the majority are Haitian nationals. In addition, 168 permanent resident visas have been issued to Haitian nationals by authorities in Port-au-Prince and Santo Domingo, and more visas will be issued in the coming weeks and months.

All removals to Haiti were temporarily halted, and although normally the Government of Canada does not deport people to Haiti except in limited circumstances, this rule applies in all cases. The visa office in Port-au-Prince has limited capacity to provide immigration programs and services to Haitians, so their services remain focused on Haitians affected by the earthquake.

To relieve pressure on the visa office in Port-au-Prince, we opened a new visa post in Santo Domingo to provide services to citizens and all others who were lawfully admitted to the Dominican Republic, including Haitians. With the exception of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, all other nationals of countries previously covered by Port-au-Prince must now submit their applications to the office in Port of Spain, Trinidad. We have also established a Haiti processing office here in Ottawa to support the ongoing activities of the mission in Port-au-Prince. This office has been designated to process all cases for those overseas who have self-identified as qualifying for the special immigration measures.

In response to overwhelming demand for information on the government's special immigration measures, CIC extended the hours

of its call centres for three weeks, and out of concern for the fact that members of the Haitian Canadian community were being misled that paid immigration consultants could speed up the arrival of their loved ones, CIC also held information sessions across Canada. More than 3,200 people attended information sessions in Montreal, over 800 attended several sessions in Ontario, and one session was held for 45 people in Vancouver.

[*Translation*]

Given the return to normal processing, to the extent possible in Haiti, Mr. Chairman, CIC has lifted some of the fee exemptions that have been in place since January 16, 2010.

We will continue to waive fees for Haitians who are applying in Haiti, as well as Haitian nationals in Canada who are destitute and applying for a work permit. All other Haitian applicants, including those who are outside of Haiti, or who are in Canada but who are not destitute, will no longer benefit from the fee exemption.

CIC continues to process applications in the order that they are received, again to the extent possible in Haiti. Humanitarian and compassionate applications submitted in Canada prior to January 2012 are also receiving expedited processing.

[*English*]

Our highest priority will remain closest family members, as defined in the regulations, and urgent and exceptional cases. Other members of the family class will constitute our second priority, followed by applicants who meet the requirements of the Quebec special measures and who are not in the first two priorities.

Thank you. I would be pleased to answer any questions the committee might have.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Madame Deschênes, for your presentation.

We will now have the seven-minute round.

Monsieur Coderre is first.

Proceed, sir.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Denis Coderre (Bourassa, Lib.): Good afternoon, Ms. Deschênes and Ms. Harder.

Ms. Deschênes, it is a pleasure to see you again. We know each other. I will begin with some specific questions. Following that, I will go more in-depth as to the very concept of what the department should be doing.

First, I want to recognize and thank the front-line workers. It was not easy, we know that. We also know that the embassy had problems. Which does not change the fact that steps had to be taken. The figures, in my opinion, do not say it all.

Am I to understand that the children that were being adopted needed a permanent visa? Because if they automatically become Canadian citizens, if you override the provisions and ensure that they legally do so, are you obliged to issue them permanent visas, 203 of them?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Among the 203, some will be granted citizenship and others will receive a permanent residency document.

• (1555)

Hon. Denis Coderre: All right, so of the 168, how many will go to adopted children?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: None of the 168.

Hon. Denis Coderre: So this is apart from the 168.

Among the temporary visas, how many of those people are simply making the trip and will be obliged to go back home?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: The vast majority. We expect that 784 cases of people having received a temporary visa will qualify for sponsorship to stay permanently in Canada.

Hon. Denis Coderre: So this is the famous sleight of hand that allowed for the inland process. Is that right?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Precisely.

Hon. Denis Coderre: You brought them over so that they could apply from inside Canada?

We have seen cases where these people, if we enforced the law to the letter, would not be eligible. However, for humanitarian reasons, you have the power and authority to let them in nevertheless. As opposed to what he said yesterday in the House, the minister has the power to sign off and he even has visa powers. How many ministerial permits has he issued in the case of Haiti?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I will tell you how many the department has issued, because the minister has not personally issued any. The department issued 1,263 temporary resident visas and 383 ministerial permits.

Hon. Denis Coderre: That explains your figure of 1,500. Therefore, among your temporary visas you are including 383 ministerial permits.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Exactly. They were issued by the department and its representatives who saw they needed to do so.

Hon. Denis Coderre: I know Haiti very well. You know that there is a rather difficult geopolitical relationship between Santo Domingo and Port-au-Prince. As the trip to Santo Domingo takes 10 hours, it is somewhat unacceptable to tell people who are suffering already that once they get across the border, we will provide them with all the necessary services. Because we were well aware—we saw reports on that—that people were stopped at the border.

Do you not believe that we should have gone to the Cap-Haïtien side, where there was already an interesting landing point, rather than moving everything around? Do you not think that moving all of our workers there resulted in other problems rather than solving the situation?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: What is clear is that we required a certain infrastructure in order to be able to work, that is to say to do the checks, know who to contact, and so on. That was available in

Santo Domingo, but not in Cap-Haïtien. We had no Canadian embassy office there. Therefore, beginning there may have been a possibility, but we would have had to start from scratch whereas in Santo Domingo, we had the existing infrastructure.

Hon. Denis Coderre: But you would agree that there is a political reality—and I'm not asking political questions—between the Haitian population and that of the Dominican Republic. Even though they are on the same island, there have been problems and the border has been closed because of those problems.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: We worked with the authorities of the Dominican Republic to ensure that people who were requesting to travel to go and get documents were allowed to move through the border.

Hon. Denis Coderre: You told me last Tuesday that you had had no news from Quebec. I now understand that there are some 2,000 new applications that have been filed since February 12, coming from Haiti, for new applicants, and that you already had 3,000 in the system. That does not include the 3,000 from the Quebec government.

Explain to me why you have had no news from the Quebec government. Is it a lack of cooperation on their part? You have not received any information, and what is the problem?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I do not know if that was what was said.

The intended message was that outstanding cases from before the earthquake were being dealt with and that new cases under the new criteria had not yet been referred to us.

We are working very closely with the Quebec government to ensure that the ultimate objective of helping people in Haiti is achieved.

Hon. Denis Coderre: Ms. Deschênes, you know that I have a great deal of respect for the department. I spent the best years of my life there, in particular as the minister. I have enormous respect for you.

However, when I see that only 168 permanent visas have been issued and objectives for the number of checks to be done in Sydney have been established, it seems to me that saying that there is a special unit just because the word "Haiti" appears on an envelope to ensure that cases are dealt with...

There is a domestic crisis right now within the Haitian community, and I am wondering why the numbers are so low. I understand about your 1,500 temporary visas and all that, but it seems to me that the minister could have used his authority to ask you not only to accelerate the process but also to put in place a kind of procedure that would have allowed visas to be issued much more quickly. Another possibility would have been to use the inland process much more—as you have done for some 300 cases—and tell these people to come to Canada, since we know they will come here in any case, in order to resolve the situation.

Do you think that things could have been done differently? Unless—and I know what the answer will probably be—you are sure that things could not have been done differently?

Members of Parliament, especially those from the Montreal region, are receiving a huge number of requests from the Haitian community.

Could the department have taken another approach?

• (1600)

[English]

The Chair: Time is up, Mr. Coderre.

[Translation]

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: It is always possible to try to do more. I think that we have been very successful in what we have done. After all, up until last week, there were no direct international flights. That means that every time a document was issued for a departure from Port-au-Prince, these people had their travel paid by the Canadian taxpayer. When I think about the number issued in the two months following the earthquake...

I would remind you that all the officers' houses were assigned to the mission. There was no access to the mission. We still have officers living three or four to a house. There is still only one interview room. When I think about the number of visas that have been issued... More visas were issued for Haiti during the two months after the earthquake than in a usual two-month period. In addition to all the individual efforts to bring people home, we currently have 42 officers and LES, locally engaged staff, working on this file. In normal times, Haiti has 19.

[English]

The Chair: Okay.

Monsieur St-Cyr.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr (Jeanne-Le Ber, BQ): Thank you very much.

I would like to obtain more details about the priorities and priority order, which you referred to at the end of your presentation.

When the Quebec program was announced in Quebec, the minister publicly confirmed that she had been given assurances that Ottawa would give priority to these applications and process them rapidly. Now, based on my experience—I have been the critic for citizenship and immigration for more than two years now—I know that this is a department with many priorities. Many people are processed on a priority basis. Essentially, the problem is that when everybody is given priority, no one has priority.

In rereading your text, I see that your highest priority will remain members of the immediate family—namely, people who submitted an application under the federal family reunification program—as well as urgent and exceptional cases. Other members of the family class will constitute your second priority—and here we are already going down in the order of priority. This is followed by applicants who meet the requirements of the special measures established by the Government of Quebec. In my opinion, the priority level is starting to get low.

I understand that, up until now, there have not yet been any applications from the Government of Quebec, but when this starts happening, will you change the priority level in order to quickly

process the applications for people with nominee certificates under the Quebec program?

Could you give us a ballpark figure as to how long the wait time will be for people under the federal government program, in other words, how long will it take to do the security and medical checks?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I want to be very clear. Our top priority is to reunite the immediate families and the other families. To a large extent, this also represents Quebec's cases, because the majority of cases dealt with in our Haiti office were cases going to Quebec.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: You said that the priority remains the members of the immediate family. Am I to understand that this includes people who applied through the federal government family reunification program as well as those who applied through the Quebec program and who met the federal requirements?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: That is correct.

These are spouses or children, they are our top priority. Parents and grandparents are given second priority. The third priority comprises those individuals who are eligible under a special relief measure, or any other humanitarian or compassionate case which does not meet the criteria of the "family" category.

Usually, only a certain number of parents and grandparents are sent in each mission. The other files are waiting in Mississauga. No one from Haiti who has been affected by the earthquake has had to wait.

• (1605)

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Indeed, the cases who are at the end of the queue are those pertaining to applicants under the Quebec program whose situation goes beyond the traditional definition of family. The Quebec government program broadened this definition to include uncles, aunts, cousins, etc. These people will be farther on down the line. I know that you prefer to talk about priority cases, but those cases that are not viewed as being priority cases are farther down the queue.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: They may be further down the line, but qualified and independent applicants are even farther down the line than they are because we may not have time to process their applications given that our priority is to process applications for those people who have relationships with Canadians or permanent residents in Canada.

Our other priority is to process the applications of those individuals for whom we already have a file in Vegreville. These are refugees, for example. We want to ensure that they can be reunited with their families as quickly as possible. Those cases are even more urgent, as far as we are concerned.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: I would like to address another issue with you, because it is something that myself and my Bloc Québécois colleagues often have to deal with in our offices. I am talking about temporary visas for actual temporary visitors to Quebec. We have seen examples of late, for instance, with the case of a woman who wanted to bring her sister from Haiti, I believe, because she was suffering from cancer and her sister was in bad shape. If that person were to come here, they could help each other out for two or three months.

There was also a person in my riding who went down to Haiti in order to bring her grandmother back to Canada, but she does not necessarily want to live here, what with our winter and all. She simply wants to come for a few months in order to pull herself together a bit. In many cases, such applications are turned down. These people would need some temporary assistance before returning to Haiti and contributing to its reconstruction.

What are you doing in that regard?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Our mission in Haiti is attempting to assess such cases. Keep in mind that many people are showing up at the door. We are trying to find those whose cases we can process, despite the fact that we have no well-established office. The call centre can also be of some assistance. With regard to information, as an MP, you know how to contact the department in order to provide us with some information.

Needless to say, not all applications are made in good faith, which is why we must study their cases and determine whether they want to come as temporary visitors. We carefully look at each case and take into account people's individual circumstances.

I will remind you that, prior to the earthquake, we had to reject 40% of applications made in Port-au-Prince for reasons of questionable intent.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: In general, with regard to the issuance of foreign or tourist visas—which does not really apply in this case—applications are often rejected on the grounds that the applicants do not have any ties to their country given that they do not own enough real estate, for example. There have been cases where people were not issued visas because they had no real property. How could they? They were hit by an earthquake! All that is left is a concrete bloc in the back of the yard.

Have you instructed your officials to exercise some discretion? It might so happen that people with ties to Haiti want to return to their country even though they have lost their homes in the earthquake.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: First of all, I would like to assure you that our officials understand the situation because they have experienced it themselves. Second, we want there to be some flexibility. Things are greatly facilitated in cases where sponsors are involved.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: If someone does not want to—
[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

No, the time is up, Monsieur.

Welcome to the committee, Ms. Mathysen. On behalf of the New Democratic Party, you have up to seven minutes for questions.

•(1610)

Ms. Irene Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Thank you very much. I'm not sure I'll take that long.

Thank you for your presentation. My question has to do with a compelling case we just heard about this morning. It's not an adoptive case, but it's the case of Aline François who was recognized as a refugee in August of 2009. She and her mother are in Canada,

presumably because she was the target of street gangs and was granted refugee status.

Unfortunately, she was unable to bring her two children, a girl aged 13 and a boy aged 12. They were left with a friend. Since the earthquake they haven't been able to attend school. They haven't been able to even leave the house because there are criminal gangs in the streets. In fact, they are living in a tent.

The mother is very upset, obviously very concerned about the welfare of her children. She's been trying to get them to Canada. She's worried about the little boy being attacked, her little girl being sexually abused. So apparently this morning the children were given an appointment at the Canadian embassy. They thought they were going to be able to join their mother in Canada, but their request was refused.

The concern, of course, is why would these children be excluded? We're allowing adopted children in. Why not the children of a Haitian Canadian? I know you're working with UNICEF, so is there any way to involve UNICEF in looking out for these children until they can be repatriated with their mother? I understand the infrastructure problems, but these are minor children and we're very concerned. Their mother is frantic.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Mr. Chairman, as you know, it's a little difficult for me to deal with a specific case. I certainly will take that information and go back and look at it.

Certainly, we are trying to reunite people where there are those types of things. I don't know the specifics of the case, so I'll have to get that from you and then we can follow up.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: I would be very grateful if you could, because we're very worried on behalf of these children and their mum.

Madame, you mentioned the cost of bringing the evacuees to Canada. Is the cost of the evacuation a roadblock in terms of our humanitarian aid? Is it becoming an extremely difficult consideration? I know it's expensive and I know there are great demands on international aid, but I'm wondering if this is something you're encountering.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: No, at this moment, I think the department has the money it needs to do what it needs to do. Certainly, we're hoping we're going to be able to reconstruct more quickly and that type of thing. We've set up an office in Ottawa that will help us to do what we need to do.

When I was talking about the cost, I was talking about no commercial flights out of Haiti at the time, which meant that if anybody was coming out, that was being paid for by the Canadian government. So obviously we were trying to deal with people who had been in Haiti at the time of the quake and were citizens or permanent residents.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Okay.

In terms of our ability to function on the ground, I know the offices were destroyed, and it's very difficult. Is there any anticipation from CIC or anyone connected with those offices as to how quickly we can bridge that gap in terms of providing full service?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I think we have bridged the gap in terms of the priority movement that we want to deal with, by opening in Santo Domingo and in Canada the offices that will do all the front end and back end...and where the office will really be focusing on interviews where an interview is required.

The normal staff complement in Haiti is 19. Right now we have 26, and we continue to send temporary duty officers to support, and so on.

One of the issues, of course, is that processing becomes a little more complex when you don't have documents. As we move into new caseloads, we anticipate that we will not have documents. A lot of the work we're doing presently is with sponsors in Canada to try to get as much of the information as possible, so we're really inundated; we're pushing the envelope.

We have systems set up where we have been able to extend recently expired medicals so people don't have to redo medicals.

I have to say, as a movement, this is the first time we've put in so many additional resources to try to deal with this issue.

•(1615)

Ms. Irene Mathysen: That's very reassuring. It must be very difficult for the duty officers on the ground, given the conditions they're encountering.

This must have been a profound learning experience. What, if any, protocols, changes, or things have been learned from this that we could make use of in situations elsewhere?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: We always learn from some of these situations.

Everybody always laughs at me, but we are about to roll out a global case management system that will permit us to move work to where people are, as opposed to moving staff to where the work is. We're quite excited about that, so part of what the office in Canada is doing right now is trying to leverage some of that.

One of the first things we've ever done is use text messaging to contact people in Haiti to get them into the mission as required. One of our biggest challenges still is to deal with the people who shouldn't be at the door, so we can more easily and more quickly deal with the people we want to deal with. That again is why one of the instructions we have out there is, "Please don't go to the mission unless you've been asked to do that". We're dealing with the sponsors a lot in Canada on that.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Mathysen.

Mr. Dykstra.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much, to both of you, for being here today.

Obviously as a country, the work we're doing there, certainly in combination with our ministry, has required a lot of effort. I'm sure it has caused some consternation along the way. But, certainly, we are moving forward, and I just want to compliment both of you, and all of our officials working on this file, for the tremendous effort you've put forward. It certainly is making a difference.

I have a number of questions, so I'll try to be brief. One of the questions I have follows up on a couple of questions the folks on the other side had asked.

The Quebec government announced its own program to expedite the entry into Canada of siblings and others who are not part of the federal government's family class. Since that announcement, how many applications from that new class has the Quebec government asked the ministry to expedite?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: At this moment in time, none of the special measures cases has been referred to the Canadian government.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: So there are none. Okay, that's interesting.

Are they running into problems with their program?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Whenever you set up a new program, it takes a little while to get it all in place. I certainly wouldn't venture to say that. I think it's a challenge for all of us, and we're trying to work together to get things done.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: That's a fair response to the question.

We've been told on numerous occasions that, based on our accord, the minute we received those applications we would work consistently with Quebec and as quickly as possible. It's kind of hard to do that if we actually haven't seen a single request come from the Government of Quebec on this particular issue.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I would just say that our office in Mississauga, which takes the sponsorships, has 300 family class... one in three, so that's spouses and so on.

I have just received a note saying that 250 cases have been received by MICC, the Quebec government immigration ministry; of those, six or seven passed their initial assessments, and one case is ready to be sent over to CIC. That is the most up-to-date information.

Like everything else, we anticipate over the next few days and weeks and months that we are going to get more of those, but when a new program is set up, it takes a little while.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: You have done a reasonably good job of defining the fact that they will be processed as a priority.

•(1620)

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: They will be processed as a priority. We will be focused first on spouses and children, dependent children of the people who have been recognized as refugees. Parents, grandparents, and then cousins and so on will come as the next priority after that.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: A special CIC unit in Ottawa, as you mentioned a couple of times, has been set up to support the mission in Haiti and is working to identify and expedite existing adoption and family class sponsorship applications. Could you expand a little bit on what the responsibilities are?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Normally when either Vegreville receives a case in which they have dependent children of refugees who are in Haiti or Mississauga has a parent or a spouse sponsorship, all of that gets sent to Port-au-Prince in order to open the file and do the work to get to the interview stage.

In the Ottawa office we do the first part of the work, which is contacting sponsors to get the application forms and doing all of the processing up to the point of deciding whether we need an interview. If we don't need an interview, then they are sent for medicals. All that work is being done in Ottawa so that the officers in Haiti are really focused on interviews and making sure that when the documents are ready, they are in contact with the people to advise them to come to get their documents. We have the same number of officers in Haiti as in the past, but they're not doing a lot of the preliminary work and so on.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: They do that here. Okay, thank you.

One of the great successes out of this was Operation Stork, and you noted that in less than two months we actually brought 203 children over here. For 2008-09 it was 237, almost the same level.

I understand that approximately 127 children were going to Quebec, 27 to Alberta, 21 to British Columbia, 10 to Saskatchewan, eight to Ontario, six to New Brunswick, two to Manitoba, and two to Nova Scotia. Where are we in terms of the completion of that process? Are there more children? I note that the Haitian government approved 250. Are we going to hit that 250 number? Are we eventually going to exceed it?

Also, could you comment on the process involved for Canadians who have offered to adopt Haitian children, should they need it? How is that process going to unfold over the next number of months?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: We don't think we'll hit 250 in this tranche, because when we were trying to get as many approvals as possible, for any name that had been submitted to us we either had a file, or the provincial adoption agencies were telling us about it, or the human resources adoption desk was telling us about it, or we had heard it from someone. We submitted that name to try to get the approval of the Haitian government to let them come, but it was always under the strict understanding that we would not let any child leave Haiti who wasn't already matched with a parent, with someone in Canada, if the Haitian authorities hadn't already moved it forward quite a lot and if the province in Canada had not authorized the adoption.

In the end, there were some people on the list that the Haitian Prime Minister approved who had either not been matched or were not far enough advanced or whose prospective parents had not been authorized by the province to adopt them.

At this moment we don't foresee that the 250 children will come. That doesn't mean that these children won't come later on, when the Haitian government is back up and running and can authorize adoptions in Haiti.

In terms of new children, right now we're not taking any more because the Haitian government is not up and running in terms of adoption.

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Deschênes.

Mr. Dykstra, that concludes the seven-minute rounds. We're now on to five-minute rounds.

Mr. Karygiannis.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Thank you for coming today.

Can you please tell me how many extra officers you sent to Port-au-Prince or Santo Domingo in order to handle the situation on the ground?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I'll go through this. In terms of temporary duty, 16 CIC officers were sent to Port-au-Prince, totalling, if you count a five-day week—which was not what people were working at the time—it would have been a 62.8 work week—

• (1625)

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: I'm sorry, 16 officers, correct?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Sixteen CIC officers, plus 11 TD officers from the Canada Border Services Agency. Plus, we have three officers from CIC and one from CBSA in Santo Domingo.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Thank you.

Is this the first time that we're engaging so many officers to go abroad, or has this been done before?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: We've often sent temporary duty officers to do work, either—

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: In cases of emergency, is this the first time that we engaged so many? Or, in the case of the Gujarat earthquake, Bam in Iran, the Sri Lanka tsunami, China, Burma, do we engage?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Normally, we will engage temporary duty officers to go in a crisis when there's a large link to the Canadian population. I can only speak from memory. I can certainly speak here—

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: How many did we send to Sri Lanka? Do you remember?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I don't have that information. But we would have sent for the tsunami.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Okay. We've brought in 260 cases, permanent residents—or 160? How many did you say in the last two months?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I think it's 160. Somebody help me.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: That is 160 in—

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: One hundred and sixty were issued for permanent residence.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: So that's 130 as a whole, in two months, since the earthquake. If I were to do some calculations, that would be 80 per month, roughly speaking. So we have 5,000 cases to go?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: First of all, the adoptees are not in that. All the work that we did to support the repatriation of Canadian citizens and permanent residents—

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: My question is, how many cases do we have to go?

The Chair: Mr. Karygiannis, you have to let her finish her answer.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: How many cases do we presently have on the go?

At the time of the earthquake we had 2,900 permanent resident cases in the process in Port-au-Prince. That's all categories, including skilled workers. Now, with the opening of Santo Domingo we're moving 547 of those cases because they're Dominican Republic cases. There's a handful of cases from the French islands and so on that have been moved to Port-au-Prince.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: But of the new additions, how many cases do we have with them altogether?

The Chair: You have to be patient, Mr. Karygiannis. She's moving along.

Thank you.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Would you say 5,000, roughly?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I don't know that I said 5,000. I'm trying to find, if anybody can help me, the Mississauga processing numbers.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Sorry. Are they done in Mississauga or in Ottawa?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: If they're sponsorships they start in Mississauga and then they move to the Ottawa office. It's a two-step process. You need to get your sponsorship assessed.

I'm just trying to find that number for you. Okay, we have approximately 5,000 cases, 2,000 of them for non-Quebec and 3,000 for Quebec.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: So 5,000. If we take the speed of light, which is 80 cases per month, 5 divided by 80... I hate to guess how long it will take us.

My question is why, with India, China, Burma, Sri Lanka, and... I've been in the islands; have we not learned? Why don't we have something in place so that when this hits, it automatically happens with the department? I remember writing to the predecessor of Mr. Kenney. I asked why we didn't have a protocol. I was answered, in writing, that nothing like this is required. If Mother Nature is hitting us time and time again, why has the department not learned? Why don't we have something in place in order to have our loved ones—Canadian planes are flying back. Why can we not give minister's permits to the people who we're sponsoring to get on those planes and come up to Canada?

• (1630)

The Chair: We're way over, Mr. Karygiannis. We'll have to carry on.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Could I get an answer?

The Chair: Well, you're now at five and a half minutes, so I'm afraid not. You will have another opportunity—

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: I'm sure, Mr. Chair, you want to give the witnesses an opportunity to answer a very important question.

The Chair: —if the committee lets me.

Ms. Thi Lac, please.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thaï Thi Lac (Saint-Hyacinthe—Bagot, BQ): Good afternoon ladies. Thank you for being here today to answer our questions.

I would like to begin with a question that my colleague, Mr. St-Cyr, had started to ask you concerning visas for temporary visitors. We have spoken at length this afternoon about applications for sponsorship and permanent residents. Regarding temporary visa applications, the minister has the power to issue such temporary permits.

I have been dealing with immigration files for over 15 years and recall the time when Mr. Coderre was the minister.

Mr. Denis Coderre: Things ran smoothly back then. Those were good times. As a matter of fact, this lady worked with me.

Ms. Ève-Mary Thaï Thi Lac: Some visas were issued with the explicit mention that people could not submit refugee claims or permanent residency applications. Those visas were signed by the minister. You say that the current minister has not signed any such visas for temporary visitors.

As Mr. St-Cyr pointed out, there are many cases where people come to Canada but wish to return to their country, and have no qualms about committing to do so. Why is the minister so reluctant to issue such visas, which would greatly help those people come to Canada more quickly, especially since they would commit to leaving the country voluntarily?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Officials from the department are studying each case and they are being as flexible as they can. The fact that someone makes a commitment to leave or that he will not file a refugee claim does not really, under the Immigration Act —

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thaï Thi Lac: Excuse me, perhaps I did not put my question very well. Perhaps it was not specific enough. At the time, the member of Parliament could make a commitment to the minister and guarantee that person. The member would say that the person would be returning home. As MPs we no longer have this option, even if we tell the minister that we want to become a guarantor by putting down our name and saying that this person is coming on a temporary basis.

Why do we no longer have the option of making this request so that people can be allowed to come here temporarily?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Mr. Chair, I think that this question is not really one that can be answered by public servants.

[*English*]

The Chair: It is also probably a political question. You may have to put that question to the minister the next time he arrives. I really think it's inappropriate to ask this witness that question. The minister will eventually come here and you are free to ask him that question. I'm not going to allow that question of this witness.

Do you have a point of order, Mr. Karygiannis?

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: No.

The Chair: All right.

Sorry. We'll let you continue, and I'll give you a bit of time.

[Translation]

Mrs. Ève-Mary Thaï Thi Lac: Mr. St-Cyr will use the rest of my time.

[English]

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: I wanted to continue on the matter of fast-track measures; many people in our ridings are concerned about this. When we hear that the department is taking measures to accelerate procedures, we have no concrete examples to offer. For example, there is an issue that often comes back.

For medical examinations, would it not be more efficient to do them in Canada rather than in Haiti, given that there is not much of a medical infrastructure in Haiti even in normal times? This is even more true at this time because physicians might have other things to do in Haiti than to do checkups for Immigration Canada. Have you considered this solution? Have you any concrete and specific examples of different ways of doing things as compared to what is normally done, and that would show that you really have the will to speed things up and that we could offer as examples to our fellow citizens to explain what you are doing?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I know that two months seems like a long period of time, but our efforts were initially focused on permanent residents, Canadian citizens and cases of adoption. At this time we are really beginning to get down to business. This is the first time that an office has been opened in Ottawa for this purpose. This is the first time that, together with the sponsors, we will really examine the possibility of moving files forward. We have already expressed the idea that our agents in Montreal will also help us with this.

Given the fact that police documents about criminal records are non-existent, we have a mechanism ready for treating such cases. The entire program is managed on the basis of the fact that we must comply with the criteria.

Were it not for the situation in Haiti, we could possibly do something on the medical front, but there is a big problem with tuberculosis. Now that the physicians are on the ground, we want to begin again to ensure at least a minimum, medically speaking. In that way we can make sure that we won't be grappling with a medical problem in Canada that we were not aware of and we can do better follow-up.

We have another problem. When people enter Canada rapidly, all the work has to be done over again afterward, this makes twice the amount of work for the military personnel and for the—

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Sorry.

•(1635)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Young.

Mr. Terence Young (Oakville, CPC): In looking at this action plan, it looks very innovative. I want to congratulate you. It looks

like you changed the rules—with some level of caution—to facilitate a lot of humanitarian aid. I can tell you, the people in my riding are very proud of what you accomplished, and what actually Canadians accomplished in donating \$240 million, which was doubled by the government as well.

I wanted to ask you, the people who request special measures to be facilitated, I assume they have to ascertain somehow that the earthquake affected them. Is that correct, and if so, how would they do that?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Right now they have to provide us with a story, and they also have to provide us with some facts to support that. So that's where these cases are going to be a little complex to deal with. We know where the earthquake occurred and where the majority of damage is, and that's part of the work that has been done at the mission in Port-au-Prince. So once we look at that, if it looks like it's an area that was affected, we'll be using that as a prima facie situation. But if we think there are doubts with that story, then there will be an interview and we'll be asking for more documentation.

Mr. Terence Young: Mr. Chair, I'd like to share my time with Madam Wong.

Mrs. Alice Wong (Richmond, CPC): Thank you very much for coming.

I am very proud of the work the CIC has done for Haiti. We were the first to send our aid there. We were the first to send our troops there. And our forces have done a great job. So I wish to congratulate you on that.

You were also talking about international adoption and the fact that there are still a lot of people who want to adopt. Can you explain further the challenges for people, or for the government to approve the adoption? A lot of families would like to adopt. What are the proper procedures?

Ms. Sandra Harder (Acting Director General, Immigration, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you.

Typically, the adoption process is a two-stage process. So there is work that's done at the provincial and territorial levels in order to ascertain if a family is in fact eligible to adopt. So there's that work that goes on. There is also, then, CIC's responsibility for the immigration piece of that, and obviously then later the citizenship status of the child who's adopted.

Right now, I would say probably the biggest challenge is around the readiness of the Haitian government to resume inter-country adoptions. Canada is signatory to two important conventions that define how we operate when it comes to adoptions—the Hague convention and the principle of the best interests of the child. Both of those govern how we move forward on adoptions, particularly in situations where a country's readiness to resume adoption is risky. So at this point, until the Haitian government declares that they're in a readiness state to resume, we are suggesting that no inter-country adoptions take place at this time.

•(1640)

Mrs. Alice Wong: Will the different territories and provinces in Canada play an important role in this as well?

Ms. Sandra Harder: They do play a very important role; they're the first part of the process, when it comes to adoptions. We've been working with provinces and territories very closely throughout the Operation Stork process in order to make sure that all the paperwork...as my colleague said, all the adoptions that were expedited were those in which a match had been made in advance of the earthquake and for which we could have secure understanding of the situation of the child and the adoptive parents. International best practice is typically that one tries to find a solution for a child, if there's a solution available, in their country of origin. But cases in which adoptions were already in process, matches had been made, and everything was in a state of readiness were the cases we moved on first.

Mrs. Alice Wong: What happened to the situations in which some of the documents were lost? How can we prove that those children are genuine orphans and who they claim to be?

Ms. Sandra Harder: That's precisely the challenge, I think, when we're facing the situation in Haiti. What we did was work directly with the Haitian government to get approval and authority to proceed with those adoptions. It was necessary to have that exchange of information and the authority to move forward on those cases, because the documentation for pending cases was destroyed.

Mrs. Alice Wong: Thank you very much.

The Chair: You still have four minutes.

Mrs. Alice Wong: Four minutes? We'll share the time.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Ladies, thank you very much for taking the time to appear before us. I know yours is a very difficult job, but keep up the good work you're doing.

Can you please explain the operational challenges that CIC faces in difficult environments such as post-earthquake Haiti?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Right now, one of the bigger challenges we have is.... For the first couple of weeks, for example, we had no access to our files; our files were in a place we couldn't get to. We presently have office space in what used to be the reception area of the mission. Some other offices are in what used to be the garage area of the mission.

All of the staff quarters where the officers lived have been affected one way or the other. We have some that are in better shape, but people are actually sharing accommodation because there is not enough accommodation. The Department of Foreign Affairs is presently working on sending 50 containers, which will be set up as accommodations. Some of our locally engaged staff lost their houses, so 13 of them are living in tents, for example, that have been provided by the Canadian government. All of those issues are difficult.

There are a lot of people who are trying to get to the different missions, so crowd control outside, so that we know who is coming in and who's going out, is also difficult right now. Obviously, the trauma of officers and local staff who have had to deal with their own situation is also there, which was why we sent quickly some temporary duty officers to support.

From a processing perspective, there's also the aspect of criminal records not being accessible. We've had to set up a mechanism, not to say that nobody could come to Canada, but to make sure that from

a public safety perspective we were meeting our requirements. So we set up these processes to permit us to move forward.

Obviously, because more or less 40% of past applications have historically been refused, because of bona fides or people saying "this is my child", but it's not, we've also had to make sure that, while being flexible, we don't forget that this is a movement that's difficult to deliver.

•(1645)

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Can you talk about what was done to ensure the safety of Canadians and locally engaged CIC staff during the crisis?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Some of the things that were done, of course, were with the assistance of the Canadian military, who came down and supported us. One of the challenges in the first few weeks was, of course, identifying the adoptive kids, but also getting to where they were to ensure that they had the security they needed in the time we needed to bring them.

There were a number of cases in which people claimed to be related to Canadians or a permanent resident, so a lot of the department—in Sydney, for example—was involved in making sure that the people claiming to want to be evacuated were actually going to be permitted to be evacuated, because, as you can imagine, in a crisis some people try to take advantage of the situation.

The Chair: Okay, that's it.

Ms. Jennings has up to five minutes.

Hon. Marlene Jennings (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Lachine, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you so much, Madame Deschênes and Ms. Harder, for your presentations here.

I've been approached by a Canadian of Haitian origin who works for one of the departments of the federal government and who has a surviving niece and nephew, I believe it is, in Haiti and is attempting to bring them here and is encountering problems—I don't know what. Is it possible for you, after this meeting, to provide me with the name of somebody, perhaps in that team that you've put together here in Ottawa, whom she can communicate directly with to explain her story and what documents and what application she has filed to date, and perhaps have it sorted through?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: What I would suggest is that if you have that information—the name of the person—I'll take it back, and we will get our case management group to give her a call.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: I'll give you that. Thank you so much.

Another question has to do with Haitians who are here on valid student visas, but who have lost everything—in some cases family as well—back in Haiti and therefore have no income. My understanding is that some universities have been providing them with emergency assistance, including emergency funds, but that's pretty much dying out, because the universities don't really have the resources for this.

I'm wondering whether there is anything the Canadian government is doing, either solely or in conjunction with provincial governments, to respond to that. Are you aware of it?

The second question comes to the question of my colleague Mr. Karygiannis about 160 visas in the last two months. If that's the pace—and my understanding is that it's double what normally is issued—if you don't foresee a picking up of the capacity to pick up the pace, then we would be talking about more than 60 months. That's over five years.

Am I correct?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I don't think the last two months are a predictor of how quickly we're going to be able to move. Certainly in the first couple of weeks we told Mississauga not to send any applications anywhere until we decide where we're going to deal with them. I don't think it's an indication. You will, however, understand that the number of people who can come is dependent on a levels exercise more generally.

We will continue to work very hard to move as many of those as we can, but both Quebec and we have the same issue: are you going to let all the Haitians we can process in as quickly as possible while some other country has to wait longer?

We don't expect it will be 60 months. We want to move them much faster than we would normally move them. We understand what the situation is.

Will all of them come? Will all of them be found to be affected by the situation—

Hon. Marlene Jennings: No, I did not ask that question—

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: No, but I'm just saying—

Hon. Marlene Jennings:—because we all know that not all of them, under the current law, will be eligible. That doesn't preclude your having to process the file until you come to that determination. You may in fact deal with a number of cases in which—in the next couple of months, there's a whole series—you make the determination, so those files are closed.

To come back to the students...?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Right. We're just looking at each other. We want to make sure we don't give you the wrong information.

Ms. Sandra Harder: It would depend on the individual situation of the student. Some of them may in fact have off-campus work permits, which would allow them to work while they're in Canada.

With respect to—

• (1650)

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Okay, I'm going to stop you right there.

We already know from Stats Canada that the unemployment rate among youth is double that of the general population in Canada, and when we talk about visible minority students, it's even higher. And within the visible minority category, when we talk about students, young people of black or African ancestry, theirs are the highest unemployment rates. So my sense is that they may have a visa to work, but unless it's the university that's hiring them, their chances of finding work will be very limited.

But put that aside. I'm talking about students of Haitian origin and citizenship who are here legally on student visas and who have no income. Is there anything the Government of Canada can do and is

doing, and is there anything, if you can do something, that you're doing in conjunction with the provincial governments? That's my question.

Ms. Sandra Harder: I would say two things. One is that it wouldn't necessarily fall in CIC's ambit—

Hon. Marlene Jennings: I understand that. That's why I said Government of Canada.

Ms. Sandra Harder: Yes, indeed, I understand. I am not aware of a specific program or initiative that is under way at this point. That does not mean there isn't work going on, or at least some exploratory work.

I am aware that there have been several groups and organizations of a non-governmental nature who have been working together to seek to support students in particular, but I can't speak to the knowledge of a government-wide program.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Harder.

Mr. Calandra, it's your turn.

Mr. Paul Calandra (Oak Ridges—Markham, CPC): Thank you for attending. I'm going to ask you advice and opinion questions, and I understand if you can't answer them.

From your perspective, what was the level of cooperation between departments responding to this? Who took the lead? How was your ability to answer this huge humanitarian crisis in the quickest timeframe? And what lessons can we take from what you've learned?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: As I said before, the first priority was definitely for us to deal with the Canadian citizens and permanent residents. The lead on that would be the Department of Foreign Affairs. Certainly the agreement we have, even with our officers overseas, is when there's a crisis, that's where they go first. That's the first priority.

I think the cooperation between all departments was excellent. In terms of Operation Stork, we got significant assistance from the Department of National Defence to ensure that the children who were coming were in good health. We had consular officers from DFAIT, we had CIC officers, we had the military police in Haiti going out to look for the children. Certainly the Ontario government helped in terms of their arrival in Canada and support. The Quebec government and all of the provincial governments helped in terms of adoptions. Certainly CHEO and PCO played a lead in terms of making sure the government had the resources it needed.

I personally think it was a success, even having to stay up a couple of nights without sleep to make it happen. I think it was a success. Certainly I would not argue that everybody can feel we should do more, but I think we tried to do as much as we could.

Mr. Paul Calandra: I'm fortunate in my riding to have a large number of NGOs who actually were on the ground pretty quickly. I have Emmanuel International and the Christian Blind Mission International. A gentleman in my riding sponsors a couple of orphanages there, which are supported by the Springfield Baptist Church.

One of the things they mentioned to me was that the scope was something they had never seen before, that level of destruction. They were on the ground pretty quickly, and because of the work they had done there and had been doing there for so many years, they also had a bit of institutional knowledge of Haiti.

In the future, is there a way that we can utilize their skills faster, if we haven't already done that? We may have done that. Did we do that? Is there a way of utilizing these people? Some of them did extraordinary work. Two of the ones I was talking to were on the ground within 24 hours. So they managed to get their way there and have food going through the Dominican Republic. I will say that they had nothing but good things to say about how the government reacted and how much more comfortable they were because the Canadian military was on the ground to protect them. That made a big difference in comparison to previous disasters.

• (1655)

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I really can't respond on how to use them better or more quickly or if it was done. That is really humanitarian aid and that would be under CIDA.

Mrs. Alice Wong: How much time do I have. Can I jump in?

You were in the middle of completing what you described as some challenges regarding medical requirements. Can you explain that to us further and what precautions we have taken in order to protect the health of the Canadians as well?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Certainly, initially, we had minimal facilities to support medical. So what we did is we let people come to Canada, and then they were given instructions, and that includes some of the children, to get their medicals as quickly as possible. We wanted to make sure that if there was a public health issue we were aware and could work.

Some of the children who were evacuated in Operation Stork had a few medical issues, and right away we had DND doctors on the flight, the air companies also had doctors, and CHEO was here right away in Ottawa to help. And then, if they were transferred to a province, we worked with the province to make sure their health was taken care of.

Our designated medical practitioners, the doctors who do our medicals pre-immigration, are now up and running, so we plan to use them to start doing medicals, in part because of issues like tuberculosis in Haiti, to ensure that we've at least done tests so that we know, if there's a health problem, to support them when they arrive in Canada.

So those are the major things we're doing right now.

One of the other aspects that we think might happen, because documents will be harder to get with all the destruction and because of the nature of the case, is we may do a little bit more DNA testing so that we can establish a relationship.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Dykstra.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I did want to pursue this a little bit. It has certainly arisen as an issue, and I wanted to get your thoughts on it and on how the

ministry has worked through this issue, and that is subsection 230(3), which provides that persons inadmissible to Canada for reasons of security, for violating human or international rights, serious criminality, organized criminality and war crimes, or crimes against humanity, normally continue to be removed to countries despite a temporary suspension of removals.

Could you just clarify how specific we have been to that piece of the code, and in fact how wide the net actually is for us to ensure that we are certainly working as quickly and expeditiously and as fairly as we can with those who in fact have made their request?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Are you talking about removals?

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Yes. Sorry, I'm speaking specifically to removals in section 230.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: To removals.

Certainly there's TSR, temporary suspension of removals, on Haiti. Normally, exceptions are made for what I call real bad guys, so war crimes, organized crime, security risk.

In this case, the government made a decision not to even return those people immediately to Haiti, to have a suspension on even that. So we're looking at it case by case, and of course if there are such cases, we're not removing at the moment, but we're trying to work with the authorities, the IRB, to keep them detained in the meantime, so that we can ensure the security of Canadians while not putting them in a situation that is difficult.

• (1700)

Mr. Rick Dykstra: So in fact that suspension covers everyone at the current time. Obviously, where it's deemed necessary, these folks who may fall under the category of section 230 in fact are being held?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: We are making the case in front of an independent IRB member to keep them detained.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: What are your thoughts on...and I don't mean to implore personal thoughts, but just—

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I have no thoughts.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: I realized as soon as I said it I'm putting you on the spot, as if you should write the new....

You do have thoughts, Claudette, I know you do, but the fact is we do have a motion from one of the members of this committee to seek a permanent suspension to what we have deemed, at least for the moment, a temporary suspension.

It would seem to me that we've done everything humanely possible to be fair, but at some point in the near future the suspension of the removal aspect is going to have to be lifted for certain individuals who fall under section 230.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Yes.

I guess I do have a thought. When it comes to immigration, I really do think it's case by case, and we should be careful not to take that possibility of looking at a case that might be very difficult and for which there might be security—

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: A point of order, Chair. Wouldn't this question be out of order?

The Chair: You hear everything I say up here—that's the problem—but I was going to say, Mr. Dykstra, that that is probably a political question as well; it's probably a policy question.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: No, it's a policy question.

The Chair: I'm wondering whether it's appropriate. You're asking her to look into a crystal ball, and I don't know whether that's fair.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: No, I'm not. At some point I would like to think that regardless—throwing politics aside here—we already have a provision with subsection 230(3) that is a clear policy by this ministry, and what we have said, or what the ministry has said and the government has agreed to, is a temporary suspension of that, but there will come a point where we will have to honour section 230 and the temporary suspension will be lifted.

All I was asking was, is that consistent, and is that something the ministry believes should happen?

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Chair, that is, if the ministry...and that's the minister's decision, not the bureaucrats. Therefore, I would say to you that this is out of order.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: You put a hold on my time obviously? Okay, thanks.

The Chair: It's frozen.

You know what? I'm going to rule that Mr. Karygiannis has a valid point of order, and it's the same ruling I made with Madame Thi Lac. I'm going to say it's a political question and it would be inappropriate for you to answer that at this time.

There will be a time when the minister comes and you can ask that question of him.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Asking an official whether or not a policy should be—

The Chair: Don't do that, Mr. Dykstra. I'm ruling it out of order.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: I understand. I'm not necessarily agreeing with your ruling, but I will respect it.

One of the aspects that I also have a question on is the whole issue around how difficult it has been having to work outside of Port-au-Prince and the damage to the buildings there. Overall, what is the current status, and how soon do you think we'll be moving into a position where we're formally more organized on the ground in Port-au-Prince?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Again, what I want to say is that the Port-au-Prince office is being set up in part because we want to test delivery networks in different ways. So we've used the situation of the earthquake in Port-au-Prince, but some of us believe that if you centralize the front end of creating files and all of that, you can probably do it in a more cost-effective manner. So I think it is clear to say that we're not anticipating, that even if Port-au-Prince is up and running and rebuilt, there will be major construction to the chancery and so on. We're not necessarily going to go back to the same model. We're going to test this model and see if that means we can do more within the resource space we have.

But certainly DFAIT anticipates at least a year before a lot of the construction is....

• (1705)

The Chair: I'm sorry. It's Mr. Coderre's turn.

Hon. Denis Coderre: Mr. Chair, for the record, I heard a lot from my colleagues in the government who are pleased with what the government did with Haiti. Maybe I should put on record that in the hour after the earthquake I spoke personally with the Prime Minister's Office and with the Minister of Foreign Affairs and we offered our full collaboration. So it's not a partisan issue. It was a non-partisan issue and everybody contributed to the success. Saying that,

[*Translation*]

I think that you were right to talk about adoption, but I must say, Ms. Deschênes, that there no longer appears to be a sense of urgency concerning the processing of cases. Some 168 permanent visas were issued. As for the way in which the other cases will be processed, you spoke of there being a level exercise.

I clearly sense that Haiti is currently facing a domestic crisis. Indeed, a great number of people cannot afford to wait. By April, 60% of the million displaced persons will not even have a roof over their heads. And that is when the rainy season begins. The situation begs for humanitarian assistance. I know that you are aware of that because you have heard from our officials on the ground.

You say that you are trying out a series of measures. I do not think this is a time for experiments. I do not sense as much urgency any more, and we should be investing more effort for want of staff there. An additional \$4.8 million was released in the aftermath of the Haiti earthquake. CIDA ponied up part of that amount. National Defence also contributed. I think that the role of Citizenship and Immigration Canada is to ensure that families are reunited.

I would like to point out another issue of great concern. The federal government has left the Government of Quebec find its own way out of the quagmire because it did not want to get involved in family reunification. I will sidestep the political question, but what concerns me at present is the fact that there are two measures. There will be one way of doing things for people living in Ottawa, and another for those living in Gatineau. That is according to the agreement between Quebec and Canada. Minister Yolande James has stated what she intends to do. You yourselves already have 250 cases to process.

How can we make sure that this very tight-knit community, which shares the French language with us and does not see any boundaries between the provinces and the two countries, given the very close ties, will not have to wait another four years before seeing its cases processed? There is an envelope stamped "Haiti", but how can we speed up the processing of those cases? I think that it will be extremely difficult.

My friend Karygiannis will be asking a question following your response.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Frankly, I can tell you that we are still scrambling in order to do more. I think that we will achieve a number of outcomes over the next few weeks and months. Let me assure you that we are continuing to invest much time and effort. The fact of the matter is that permanent residency applications cannot be processed in two days. Nevertheless, if we were to appear before you again, we would be able to demonstrate that cases today are being processed much faster than they were in the past.

[*English*]

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Thank you.

I heard you say something about levels. Am I to understand that these cases are going to be viewed as levels, in terms of the people we let in? I thought the minister was saying we're going to expedite family class—parents, grandparents, spouses, and children under the age of 22—and then I heard you say the word “levels”. Am I to understand we're applying levels to Haiti?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: What I'm saying is that every year we submit a levels plan, but certainly I also said that in the case of Haiti we're moving all the cases that have been identified as being affected into active processing immediately.

• (1710)

The Chair: You have seconds, so be quick, sir.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: I will give my time to Ms.—

The Chair: Well, you gave her about 10 seconds.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Is it true that there is more Canadian federal money earmarked for Gaza than there is for Haiti?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I have no idea.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: It's being reported in newspapers in Israel.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I have no idea.

Hon. Marlene Jennings: Would you be able to verify that and get that information to the chair?

The Chair: Ms. Jennings, is that within her purview? I don't think it is.

Go ahead, Monsieur St-Cyr.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to come back to the issue of wait times. Mr. Coderre is wondering whether those people will have to wait four years. My concern is whether or not they will even be told how long they will have to wait. When people apply for permanent residence, they know more or less how long they will have to wait, given past cases. They can consult the statistics that you published and find out, for example, that similar cases submitted in a given country take a certain number of years to process.

The problem is that, in this instance, people have no idea how long it will take to process their applications. I know that you are reluctant to give specific figures, but could you still give us an idea of how long those people who turn to their MPs for help will have to wait before their applications are processed?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: It is difficult for me to give you that information, because we do not have it. We intend to do much more,

much faster. That might not satisfy you, but the only thing I can tell you is that we are currently devoting all our efforts to significantly speeding up the process. However, we have to find our rhythm, before we can speed things up. I will be better placed in a few months to give you a rundown.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: You implemented a number of measures that are intended to speed things up, which you spoke of in your response to my earlier question. You are facing a number of additional obstacles at the same time, obstacles that normally do not exist, for example, the destruction of documents, and so on. Could you at least assure us that things are speeding up faster than the obstacles appearing in your way? Are we making real progress? If not, are we at least preventing additional delays? Do you understand what I'm saying?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Yes, we do want to outpace any potential obstacles. Does that mean that all cases are processed faster? No. That said, we will have to decide which cases can be processed faster. We will have to identify those cases and accelerate their processing.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Very well.

There was talk earlier of temporary visitors, people who want to stay in Canada temporarily. My understanding is that you are worried that if people arrive in Canada, even as temporary visitors, and decide to stay, we would not be able to send them back to Haiti because they could make a refugee claim, as well as because of the moratorium.

That said, does the moratorium that you implemented apply only to the people who were already in Canada when it was declared? If not, will it also apply to those who have arrived since then? Have you considered that it might not apply to those who, in the next few weeks and months, will be applying in good faith to visit Canada temporarily?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I do not believe that the policy allows us to make that distinction.

Ms. Sandra Harder: There is no difference between the two.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: You have, therefore, not considered presenting the minister with the following scenario. People might be told that, for example, if they want to come to Canada temporarily, they will be issued visas but will not be covered by the moratorium. You have not considered that possibility.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Not to my knowledge, and I believe that even if we wanted to do that, we could not necessarily proceed in that way.

• (1715)

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: When you declare a moratorium, you have to establish who is covered by it. You explained that, in the case of the moratorium that was declared prior to the earthquake, a decision was made not to send those people back. However, they can be returned. The moratorium could also very well include a date.

[*English*]

The Chair: We got a head shake. That's all you're getting.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: I just want to know whether it is feasible. You are not prepared to answer that.

However, I do have other questions.

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry, Monsieur St-Cyr, the time has expired.

Ms. Mathysen, you have a turn.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Again, thank you.

I want to follow up on a couple of things that I heard. The first comes from a question by Mr. Young. He was talking about the special measures. You said the first step was that someone comes with a story, and the second step is that they have to provide facts, some kind of proof in order to substantiate what they're saying.

I wondered about that, because it would be very difficult, would it not, to provide that kind of proof. Documents would be missing. I wondered exactly what that burden of proof is. Could you explain or expand on what you would be expecting people to be able to provide in terms of that proof?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: I think they send a sponsorship first—and that's what we're talking about; the first part is the sponsorship to Mississauga, in which they indicate why their relative has been affected. That's the first start of the examination.

But, for example, if someone was to claim that their house was affected and it was outside the earthquake zone, then we would want to understand how that could happen, whereas if you're in the earthquake zone, we may be *prima facie*, because, as has been noted earlier today, the size of this is quite out of the ordinary in terms of the number of people who died, the number of houses that were affected, and the geographical area that was affected.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Okay. You talked about having 16 temporary CIC people, 11 TDs, and three other officers on the ground. The scope of trying to track all of this down must be quite enormous.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: It is not easy, and that's why we try not to lose anybody in the.... We talk about 80% of our cases processed in a period of time, because there are always exceptions. But yes, that's where setting up the system so that we're not actually losing anybody is quite important.

So sending files somewhere to be sitting in a box wasn't helpful. Better to leave them in Mississauga and know what our process is going to be.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: The second thing I want to follow up on had to do with a question from Madam Wong. She asked a question about the health of people on the ground. We are approaching the rainy season in Haiti, and you said that some of the temporary staff were actually living in tents in less than ideal conditions. How are you protecting or following up or looking out for the health of Canadians? Do you have any information on that?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: For Canadians on the ground?

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Yes.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Of course a number of them are getting evacuated out and so on, so there's a rotation because of the situation. But that's really where DFAIT comes in, Foreign Affairs, in terms of what I'm going to call the care and nurturing of our officers overseas. That's what their main concerns are.

Our concern is about making sure that if the people coming to Canada as immigrants have health issues, we can follow them.

Ms. Irene Mathysen: Yes, it's very difficult.

I think that's fine for me. I thank you for your answers.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Mathysen.

Mr. Dykstra.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Ms. Wong has a couple of questions in whatever time is left. Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Wong.

Mrs. Alice Wong: Thank you very much again for doing all the great work, either here or in Haiti.

On the record, I want you to clarify the difference between the number of applications you've processed versus the number of visas issued. If we use the number of visas issued as the divider, that's not a true picture.

You also mentioned the fact that in the beginning, the priority of the immigration department right there was to evacuate the children and the nationals who were in Haiti. So in that case those times cannot be counted as regular processing times that the ministry takes to do the processing of other applications for entry into Canada. Am I right to say that there is a difference between those two numbers?

● (1720)

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: There is a difference in terms of when we issue a document, because we've made a positive decision. There are cases that we might have dealt with where we refused to issue a document. So they would have been told no and we wouldn't be reporting on that.

Certainly our first priority was Canadian citizens and permanent residents, so we weren't actually processing. We couldn't get access to the files. We had to set up a way to at least have access to the electronic forms and so on.

So yes, cases and positive determination, or visas issued, are not necessarily equivalent. But initially we were really focused on only doing the ones that we wanted to say yes to. For the others, the paperwork wasn't following in the first few weeks for sure.

Mrs. Alice Wong: Is it fair to say that the actual work in starting processing of these applications actually could not be started until almost February? This is March. So there are six weeks in between—

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Initially, we weren't running on those cases. That wasn't where our priority was. That's why I think it's clear to say that we think the first few months are not indicative of how many we will be able to do in the next few months.

Mrs. Alice Wong: I just needed clarification.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Mr. Dykstra.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I did want to acknowledge and formally thank Mr. Coderre for his comments about the non-partisan way in which we've moved forward, and obviously for his support for all of the efforts the government has made, regardless of which side of the House it sits on. I think it's a fair point to say that we all need to be focused on whatever we can do as four political parties.

I did have one further question, and I know I don't have a lot of time here, Mr. Chairman.

I found it fascinating that one of the most specific and positive things out of this is that the applicant or sponsor has a responsibility to demonstrate that they or their family members are directly and significantly affected by the earthquake. Applicants filling in new sponsorship applications are asked to identify themselves by simply writing "Haiti" prominently on the mailing envelope.

What inspired that? That seems to be a very simple and very direct way to make sure that we turn all of these cases into a priority, as we should.

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: Obviously this is something that we've used in the past. Things coming into a mail room have to be sorted and that's one way of doing it. It's easy, but it's distinctive, so that's why we use it.

Mr. Rick Dykstra: It's very clever.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The Chair: Thank you, sir.

You have the final word, Mr. Karygiannis.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Thank you.

I think the words regarding expediting would be for Haiti, for Iraq, for China, Burma, Pakistan, and India. They go back 10 or 15 years. The only thing that's new now is this operation in Ottawa.

However, what I go back to is that over the years, regardless of which government is in place, we have not learned our lessons. We have not learned that we need to have something in place should a major catastrophe happen in order to be able to deal with this. Again it was evident that we did not have something in place in order to react to the level of the disaster that was there.

In the past, we've had smaller disasters and we had some sort of a reaction. But to not be able to react to the level of disaster that we had, it only goes to show that we have not done our homework. It only goes to show that we need to get back to the drawing board. We need to make sure, should this happen tomorrow, that we are able to get our bureaucrats who are shaken out of there and be able to replace them. We need to be able to have field offices that we set up, be it under tents or something. Certainly the way we reacted—and

we only got 160 people up here—is a tragedy. It's a tragedy because we had planes that were going down and they were coming back empty.

To have the relations with somebody...you can have kits on DNA—DNA done in Canada, DNA done there, in portable hospitals—and get these people up here and out of harm's way.

It's a tragedy that time after time this political football is not taken away from the minister and given to the department. Let the department go ahead and do things. I'm just wondering, why is it that we haven't got to that point? Why is it that we don't have something in place to deal with such emergencies, be it for Canadian citizens or the people we're sponsoring? Why is it that you have not taken it away from the minister, or the department does not have a plan in place in order—

An hon. member: A point of order.

An hon. member: I also have a point of order.

• (1725)

The Chair: Just give me a minute. We'll let him finish and then I'll rule him out of order.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Why is it that we have not come up with a plan?

The Chair: Mr. Karygiannis, I'm going to put that question in the same category as I did for Madam Thi Lac and Mr. Dykstra. I think it's a political question and I think it's unfair to ask these witnesses that question.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Chair, I didn't say "the minister". I'm asking why the department has not come up with—

The Chair: I heard your question and I'm ruling it out of order.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Maybe you want to give these witnesses the opportunity to answer it.

The Chair: I'm ruling the question out of order.

If you want to have a vote, you can have a vote. I haven't had one of those in a while.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: I'm splitting my time with Mr. Coderre.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Coderre.

[Translation]

Hon. Denis Coderre: Ms. Deschênes, 90% of the Haitian diaspora lives in Quebec. This is very much a Quebec matter. With regard to the cases that are currently being accepted by the Government of Quebec, could you confirm or state whether CIC has committed to in fact accept them or do you have your own procedures, given the whole issue of security?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: We must conduct medical and security assessments. However, we are working very closely with the Government of Quebec.

Hon. Denis Coderre: Can you assure us that the process will be sped up?

Obviously, concerning the medical issue, we know that the conditions in Haiti are different, and I imagine that also has an impact on DNA tests, among other things. The Haitian government also has its own set of circumstances.

Have you entered into an agreement with the RCMP or CSIS?

Ms. Claudette Deschênes: We have agreements intended to speed up security matters, even for people who have no documents. As for medical care, we have designated physicians on the ground. In cases where people have no documents, we already have a charter that sets out other means that can be used. If all else fails, we will fall back on DNA testing and proceed as quickly as possible.

Hon. Denis Coderre: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Deschênes and Ms. Harder.

The time has come to say goodbye.

Thank you very much. We've put you through the usual rigorous time. You've been very helpful with your answers. Thank you for your patience.

Before I adjourn, Ms. Mathyssen, I don't know whether Ms. Chow is going to be appearing on Tuesday. If she is, would you tell her the agenda is changing slightly? We will be meeting with a delegation from the Swedish Parliament. It will be a two-hour meeting. We will be discussing migration and integration, which is contrary to what we had agreed on before, but the committee has changed that....

Sorry, I made a mistake. I got confused. It's best practices, as scheduled.

This meeting is adjourned.

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