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Chair

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj

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• (1110)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskij (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.)): Good morning. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on March 8, the committee will resume its study on the federal government's initiative to resettle Syrian refugees.

Appearing before us today are Ms. Adeena Niazi, executive director of the Afghan Women's Counseling and Integration Community Support Organization; Ms. Moy Wong-Tam, executive director of the Centre for Immigrant and Community Services; Mr. Aleem Syed, from the Scarborough Muslim Association, and Ms. Zaib Mirza, from the iTrust Foundation, both representing greater Toronto area mosques; and finally, by video conference, Mr. John Mandarino, executive director of LiUNA Canadian Tri-Fund.

Welcome to all the panellists.

We'll begin with an opening statement of seven minutes from Ms. Adeena Niazi.

Ms. Adeena Niazi (Executive Director, Afghan Women's Counseling and Integration Community Support Organization): First of all, I thank the standing committee on citizenship and immigration for the opportunity to provide our comments on the federal government's initiative to resettle Syrian refugees.

I will start by providing you with some information about the Afghan Women's Organization, and the significant role it has played in the settlement and resettlement of refugees, including Syrian refugees. I will then provide you with our comments on the government's initiatives.

The Afghan Women's Organization was established in 1990, in response to the particular needs of refugees and women, particularly Afghan women and their families. We began by offering English training and settlement services, and then soon expanded to include family members, men and boys. The AWO has significantly expanded its services and broadened the scope of its projects and programs. Currently, the AWO assists thousands of refugees and immigrants from a variety of ethnic backgrounds who have experienced war and violence back in their country of origin. That includes also Syrians. The AWO is also a sponsorship agreement holder, SAH, organization.

Over the past years, AWO has sponsored and successfully settled more than 3,000 refugees from various parts of the world. Our partners, particularly IDRF, greatly supported us in our efforts.

We support and applaud the Government of Canada for keeping its promise to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees from Syria to Canada. We are grateful that the government has restored the IFH, interim federal health, program for PSRs.

One of the many notable achievements of this government initiative was the ability to substantially increase public awareness of the plight of refugees and raise the profile of refugees in Canada. However, we are deeply concerned about the many other refugees around the world who appear to have been forgotten.

Unequal treatment of refugees can cause backlash against Syrian refugees. The Pretoria, Nairobi, Cairo, and Islamabad visa posts have been capped for the past few years, since 2012, and Islamabad had zero allocation in 2014. We understand that over 6,000 people in Africa, and many Afghans, including persecuted women, have been waiting for five to six years to hear an answer from Canada. There are 4,000 vulnerable Christians in Thailand who have four-year waiting times.

We urge the Government of Canada to treat the processing of all refugees equally.

There are thousands of Canadians who have already raised millions of dollars to resettle refugees. These Canadians are ready, willing, and able to sponsor hundreds of additional Syrian and non-Syrian families.

We call upon the Government of Canada to allocate additional resources in various visa posts to make sure that refugees can arrive in Canada quickly.

We strongly feel that family reunification should be given priority.

In terms of settlement services, while we first need to make sure that the help to other refugee populations is not diverted to the Syrian response, we are concerned about the many challenges that Syrian refugees face. While we welcome the government's plan to double—it's more than double, likely—its target to bring in refugees, we are concerned that the settlement budget has been cut by almost \$2.5 million in Ontario. Six years of federal funding cuts to settlement services have already had a big impact on the settlement of refugees and on the settlement sector. Delay in providing proper settlement services for the Syrian refugees will cause numerous problems, including delay in participation in Canadian society and the Canadian economy.

We request that, while increasing numbers of refugees are being sent to Ontario, the budget be increased to accommodate the number, and sufficient and sustainable multi-year funds be allocated for up to five years for the settlement organizations in Ontario.

Also, many Syrian families have come with a high number of issues. One key concern at our organization, where we are focusing on women and their families, is gender in relation to immigration. You will agree that women's issues are distinct from those of men. There is a need to address the psychological and social needs of the women who are survivors of violence and trauma.

• (1115)

These women are socially isolated. Many have a large number of children, and most of them have limited or no formal education. These women need special programs. For example, it would be very important to have women-only LINC classes. However, due to a lack of child-minding spaces, many women end up waiting for months before they are admitted to the program. Moreover, the program will be closed during the summer, although we hear there might be some funding available.

There is a need for women-centred programs and support groups for those women who are suffering from PTSD.

As a sponsoring organization, the AWO is the first point of contact for many refugees who arrive under PSR and BVOR. The combination of our experience as a SAH and as a settlement service provider makes us extremely well positioned to identify the needs and assist Syrian and other refugees who are entering Canada via both private and government sponsorships.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

I would now call on Ms. Moy Wong-Tam, executive director of the Centre for Immigrant and Community Services, for seven minutes, please.

• (1120)

Ms. Moy Wong-Tam (Executive Director, Centre for Immigrant and Community Services): The Centre for Immigrant and Community Services, CICS, is an organization that has been serving newcomers and immigrants in the GTA for the past 48 years. Our engagement in the Syrian refugee efforts includes airport reception services, where we coordinate with IRCC staff, airport personnel, and the umbrella organization for Ontario, OCASI, to deliver services to newcomers at reception.

I won't go into the details of the services, but they go from facilitating communication to giving them guidance for the first few days in Canada, or even for the first few hours in Canada, because it is a traumatic experience. Even though they're now in the safety of Canada, many refugees haven't really gotten rid of the psychological trauma they've brought with them.

We have a special program in Toronto. It's not unique to Toronto. In Ontario, we have the settlement workers in schools program, SWIS. CICS is one of the five organizations in Toronto that provide that service. We help newcomer children and their parents.

In terms of the Syrian refugees, we are all aware that the families are large, with anywhere from six to eight children. We help them settle in schools. We also help the school administration cope with the newcomers. There are cultural sensitivity and language issues, along with the routine of schools and conduct expected from children, which are not necessarily understood by newcomers or are

new to the newcomers. We help them get familiarized with the routine.

We also help the parents. Actually, we serve just as many adults in the schools as youths, if not more, in giving them information. It is the most natural gateway to getting in touch with newcomers who otherwise would not be able to navigate the geography to find the settlement agencies. That's why this program was created about 17 years ago.

We help them find employment and refer them to colleges or universities, where they can have a good career transition. We provide cultural sensitivity sessions to the school administration. We assist the Syrian refugees in understanding the importance of certain documents, especially their PR card or any landing documents, because a lot of them haven't brought a whole lot of documentation with them. We also inform them about basic budgeting, banking, and even avoidance of fraud, because we have heard that several refugees, at least, have been defrauded by scammers. We heard about that in Alberta. I'm sure it happens in other provinces.

We also provide settlement services in-house in our locations. One of them is the Markham South welcome centre. Again, the welcome centre system is quite unique in York region. I think there are only two in Ontario, if not in all of Canada, one in York region and the other one in Durham.

We're very proud to run one of the welcome centres in York region. Each refugee receives a settlement plan. We have a case management system and a database that is all coordinated among the welcome centre systems. We also have many volunteers coming to us to assist in interpretation and befriending the newcomers.

We realize that for some of the refugees, because of the trauma they have experienced, it takes a really experienced caseworker to be able to tell what the underlying issues are. They may come with presenting issues, but they may not be aware of the other deeper issues they have. They don't necessarily know where to seek help, so it takes an experienced worker to help them unpack their issues and to know when to bring up traumatic incidents. One area that I'll touch on afterwards is emotional and mental health needs.

One of the major issues is language training. As we all know, immigrants come with much higher levels of official language capacity, whereas refugees don't necessarily come with any language ability, because they were not prepared. The majority of refugees, especially the government-sponsored ones, do not have any capacity in either official language. Many of them are actually on wait-lists for language classes funded by the federal government in a program called LINC. LINC classes are great, in that they also come with child care or childminding in the same space so that people can concentrate on studying.

• (1125)

There is a preference for a lot of the Syrian newcomers to walk to their classes rather than take transit. Even if a transit subsidy is available, we find there is a phenomenon. Some classes will be fairly empty. They won't come because it takes transportation. It could be left over from.... We don't know all the reasons but they don't always go to classes that require transportation. We would recommend some workplace classes or classes that are focused on work-related vocabulary or learning. We understand that many of them are trained. When they were in Syria they were in construction, agriculture, or the food industry. Many have been hired by the food industry. They are not necessarily book smart. They learn much better in the work setting. They say that they are work smart but not book smart. If possible, we'd like to see more innovative classes in that area.

Regarding questions about integration challenges facing these refugees, many of them don't have any family in Canada. Some find people from their own community and they support each other. Some are fearful of liaising with people from their—

The Chair: You have 30 seconds, please.

Ms. Moy Wong-Tam: I recommend that we revive the host program that the government used to fund, which was very helpful in helping newcomers.

I will skip the employment counselling. I'll go to health.

The Chair: You have 10 seconds.

Ms. Moy Wong-Tam: Okay, I think you will read what I have written.

Mainly there are a lot of health issues, from physical health issues to mental issues, and we recommend that there be holistic services for them to recover more fully from health issues.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Wong-Tam. All the committee members will have copies of your submission.

I will now proceed to Mr. Aleem Syed and Ms. Zaib Mirza, for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Aleem Syed (Representative, Scarborough Muslim Association, Greater Toronto Area Mosques): Thank you for having me here. I'm honoured to be participating in this study regarding the settlement of Syrian refugees in Canada.

The Syrian newcomer settlement initiative is so expansive that it requires a collaborative effort on many fronts. Some of the organizations that I work collaboratively with are the Scarborough Muslim Association, Masjid Al Jannah, Malton Masjid, ISNA, Pickering Islamic Centre, Muslim Welfare Centre, the Southeast

Dental Clinic, as well as several hundred dedicated individuals, like Muzammil Mahmood, Tina Aseffa, Khadija Cajee, Humera Khan, Iqbal Shaikh, Fahad Hasan, Sameer Sait, Rashid Mohammad, and Dr. Ikramuddin Syed, all of whom volunteer their time, their professions and their skills to make things happen on the ground.

I would first like to express my deepest appreciation and gratitude to the Canadian government on behalf of all the Syrian newcomers and numerous volunteers who are working on the ground for this cause and for the government's decision to bring in 25,000 refugees in a short period of time. There should not be an iota of doubt in anyone's mind that the decision to open our doors and hearts for Syrian refugees was a correct one. Despite the challenges and economic costs involved, a few years from now, history will witness this massive undertaking to be a monumental and honourable achievement.

Our first family of five arrived on February 6. Although it has been over four months now, it feels like only yesterday, and words cannot express the immense joy we all felt in receiving this family. The honourable Salma Zahid personally visited the family. This gave them a lot of encouragement and support. Thank you. It was a truly emotional moment as the family broke down in tears and were continuously thanking and praying for the sponsors and all Canadians. I can still hear the silence of that moment. Moving on, with a quick succession of social gatherings, outings, and community support, we were able to build trust and help them get adjusted to life in Canada.

We followed a planned curriculum for the families, including steps that were to be taken on their first day of landing to the tasks that had to be accomplished in the first week, the first few months, three months, six months, and so on. This also included medical and dental checkups.

I am happy to say that in about three months the family was independent and living life as common residents. They have received their OHIP cards. They have received their child benefits. They are enrolled in ESL, and their kids are attending public school, as well as evening spiritual classes at the Scarborough Muslim Association.

They know where Canada is located in the world. They know the emergency procedures, the rights of women, children, and others, the laws regarding smoking, driving, and drinking. They are able to do household chores. They know how to operate coin laundry machines and home appliances, use public transit, do banking transactions, and make and attend health appointments all by themselves.

If anything can wipe away the images of a young child washed ashore from our minds, it will be the tears of joy and the smiles on the faces of these families and kids who have been given a new chance at life.

The iTrust Foundation collaborated with the Scarborough Muslim Association and Masjid Jannah, and conducted a survey to inform the newcomers of the settlement checklist and also to plan for what's beyond six months.

We found the following elements in the settlement process to be encouraging: the interim federal health coverage, the one-year financial security, the child benefits, public awareness and community support both material and social, supplementary payments by Scarborough Muslim Association for its families, and spiritual education being offered at no cost.

Aside from mental health and the language deficiency, challenges like the lack of availability of language instruction, affordable housing, and what have you are quite similar to those faced by the general immigrant population. Nevertheless, with time, patience, and hard work, we believe these challenges can easily be overcome.

This group of Syrian newcomers are significantly different from the usual immigrant population that arrives in Canada every year, in that they have experienced significant trauma and stress, including physical torture, personal loss, and forced separation from their loved ones, homes, communities, and livelihoods.

This presents a huge responsibility on society at large to embrace and welcome them. The general community has done a spectacular job in this regard by organizing social events, family outings, workshops, and so on in an effort to reach out and ease the refugees' resettlement process.

The sheer number of hard-working volunteers speaks to the scale and the magnitude of this initiative, and iTrust Foundation is launching a new app to help streamline the coordination effort and assist in effective utilization of resources.

• (1130)

I will move on to recommendations.

Nations that progress always seek for areas to develop and improve. The following are some considerations for the committee.

One, examine modern digital service delivery. It will be beneficial to study and validate the standards, processes, and systems that were employed to assist in the settlement process for relevance in this modern changing landscape.

Two, undertake early intervention for success. If the ultimate goal of the settlement process is to ensure that newcomers are successful in integrating with society and start to positively contribute to its welfare, it is important that settlement be perceived and be looked at from the newcomers' perspective, and that is as an end-to-end process. While government may be organized into different levels and different ministries, it is essential that participating entities at all levels, including agency-sponsored groups, have access to information in a timely manner so that early engagement can happen.

Three, establish new partnerships. Governance in the digital age requires us to effectively partner with individuals, community organizations, and private sponsors. The journey over the last six-plus months is a testament to how this partnership, if formalized, can help build stronger communities more effectively and more efficiently.

Four, make language training accessible. Looking at alternative channels of providing language instruction as well as at other programming will provide better returns on investment. Virtual learning, self-paced learning, PowToons, non-verbal media, infographics, and the use of mobile technologies, which are prevalent regardless of the literacy of newcomers, should be explored.

Five, extend the support period for families—

The Chair: You have 15 seconds.

Mr. Aleem Syed: —with critical illness to help them cope with the additional stress and anxiety.

Six, increase support for youth and women's initiatives.

Seven, provide affordable housing.

In closing, keeping the Canadian spirit of humanitarianism alive, as we did in this case, is the most important essential element that can provide us with inner satisfaction and the drive to promote peace, universal brotherhood, and global citizenship.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Syed.

Mr. Mandarino, go ahead for seven minutes, please.

Mr. John Mandarino (Executive Director, LiUNA Canadian Tri-Fund): Good morning, and thank you for the opportunity to address you today.

My name is John Mandarino. I'm the Canadian national director with the Laborers' International Union of North America, or LiUNA. The department and area of LiUNA that I direct is the Canadian Tri-Fund, and among the responsibilities of the Canadian Tri-Fund is training and recruitment for the organization.

We represent approximately 110,000 union workers across Canada, predominantly in the construction sector. LiUNA has 19 training centres across Canada and 10 training centres alone in Ontario. Since our inception in 1903, LiUNA has prided itself on keeping our doors open to skilled immigrants. Through our comprehensive training infrastructure, we have trained tens of thousands of immigrant workers, and they in turn have become the foundation of our membership. In fact as an organization, LiUNA depends upon healthy, robust, and steady immigration to recruit and train our future workforce. We have come to rely on immigrant recruits to build the strong union that we have today.

Through our commitment to training and the hard work we have put into establishing comprehensive training programs to develop a safe and productive workforce, we've established the tools to overcome many of the obstacles that might seem to be a hurdle in delivering training to new Canadians. Through partnerships with community groups and government agencies, we have overcome language barriers and worked to embrace new cultures.

The construction industry has been in an economic boom. The need for trained and skilled labour has perhaps never been greater. There is a labour shortage that has to be addressed. LiUNA, along with our employer partners, continues to recruit and train to fill these shortages. As we have done since the mid 1900s, LiUNA has embraced wave after wave of new Canadians to bring them into our membership to build a strong construction industry that remains a key factor in Canada's economic growth and strength.

LiUNA represents workers in 32 different sectors of construction and five major industries, including manufacturing and hospitality. We've made a commitment to our employer partners that we will recruit and train workers to build our highways, our schools, and our homes, to fabricate our machinery, and to serve conferees and visitors to our great city. It is because of the diversity of work we represent there is a need in LiUNA to constantly recruit, train, and embrace new Canadians as new members in our union and in our workforce. The diversity of our representation is also one of the reasons that there is great opportunity for work.

I am the son of Italian immigrants who came to Canada in their early fifties. Without the opportunity to enter this country and prove that we could contribute and enrich Canadian society, I don't know where my family would be. Syrian refugees deserve the same opportunity, and it is our turn to embrace the next wave of new Canadians, train them, and provide them with the opportunity to contribute and enrich our Canadian society.

LiUNA is prepared to offer new Canadians work opportunities. Through local unions and training centres across Canada, we can provide outreach and connection to jobs. As I said, new Canadians provide an opportunity to fill labour shortages and strengthen the workforce in key areas of the economy while providing themselves with a new life, a career, and a chance to build a future for their next generation.

The Laborers' International Union of North America is prepared to be a partner in this opportunity. A strong and successful immigration program must provide newcomers a foundation upon which they can build their new future. LiUNA, through our training programs and industry partnerships with employers, is prepared to be a partner in providing the materials and tools to help the Syrian refugee community build that foundation in Canada.

I'm proud to be speaking to you here today on this issue and I am excited about our country's future. As a first generation Canadian, I'm proud of the opportunity that Canada is providing to Syrian refugees and excited at the infinite possibilities this opportunity will provide for their generations of Canadians.

• (1135)

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you here today.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Mandarino.

Mr. Sarai, for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.): I want to thank you all for being here today and giving your great thoughts on this important subject that we're studying.

I'm going to question Ms. Niazi, first.

Finding employment is one of the greatest challenges facing new arrivals. Some refugees feel a tension between working and taking time to learn English or French. What are some of the innovative ways your society is working on reconciling that issue of helping people learn one of the two official languages while working in Canada?

• (1140)

Ms. Adeena Niazi: First of all, I have to mention that all refugees, including Syrian refugees, when they come here, are already a hard-working population and they want to get into the workforce as soon as possible.

One of the main problems the refugees are facing and that we are identifying is the language program. It's easy to get them employment if they don't go into a language program, but once they get into those types of jobs, not in their own profession, they will stay there for the rest of their lives. They will not be productive members of society, and it will cause lots of emotional and psychological problems for them.

First of all, we assist them with their language programs. We have all-women classes, which I find very useful for women because they feel very comfortable. We also have some mixed classes in the evening. We assist with the language. If they need language training, we can place them in the language classes. However, I also need to mention that we have long wait-lists for learners to be accommodated because there are not enough places.

We also have somebody who works with job placement. For those who are ready for a job, we do an assessment. Most of the refugees have transferable skills. They may not realize that, because when they come here they are told that everything is different, but we do encourage them to maintain their self-esteem and to realize that they have lots of transferable skills and things they can do.

We sit with them and we work on short-term and long-term jobs in Canada. For the short term, if they need to upgrade and go to classes if they are ready and can take an upgrading program, they do something part-time and they do some upgrading programs to fit in with the job.

We also make them ready by preparing them for an interview. For most of us, including me—I also came here as a refugee—talking about my own qualifications feels as if I am boasting. You have to talk about the qualifications you have, what talents you have. Also, we prepare them and we have mock interviews. We also work with employers and we connect them with employers.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you.

Mr. Mandarino, I want to thank you for your support to help secure employment and train Syrian refugees or other refugees who want to integrate and get jobs in the labour sector or the construction sector.

How have you been working out language training, or at least work-ready language training? Have you been successful in getting the refugees to learn the language simultaneously or contemporaneously while you're getting them job skills, or has that been a challenge?

Mr. John Mandarino: It has been a challenge, to be honest with you, and we've employed several different approaches to it in order to achieve some success.

In partnering with some of the community agencies that are either sponsoring or working with the community, we've established some early education or English as a second language education prior to going into training programs. That's for the very fact that it's key to being productive and a safe worker that you understand the language, because so many regulations and so much of what goes on in construction sites is done in English right across the country. It's also true for English-speaking parts of Montreal, of course, in Quebec.

That's the approach we've had, but there is also a lot of language that we find in recognition of English that happens right in the training program by just being subjected to it every single day.

As I said, it's multipronged. We're looking for new answers every single day, and finding new avenues that lead us to success in overcoming language barriers.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Mr. Syed, you said you've had great success in helping the refugees settle, get their medical cards, bus transfers, etc., and integrate and get housing.

Can you tell us a bit of the key to that success? Some people have had challenges, but it seems that you're doing a great job and you're getting the resources that are required from the government. Maybe your agency can tell us how your system has been successful.

• (1145)

Mr. Aleem Syed: Before the arrival of the families, we met as a group and actually planned out what activities would have to be undertaken. Starting from day one, we had a list of activities that needed to be taken care of. From a planning perspective, we started off by identifying and understanding the refugee families. We're working, not only at the Scarborough Muslim Association but also at our masjids, with approximately 120 families.

In terms of the success story we mentioned, 90% of them have the same progress rate of settlement: 90% of them have received all of these, and they are doing things on their own. The only questions for them right now are on continuing with their LINC or ESL classes and on starting to look for employment.

We actually conducted a survey with regard to employment. We found that 85% of the population surveyed so far are in the skilled trades. Only a few are professionals. Some of them are lawyers. Some of them are teachers from back home. We're identifying those groups. In the next month or so, we are planning to have skills-related workshops in a private setting with them so that we can have focused communication and focused workshops with them for more successful implementation.

For those who are in the self-employment business, we are looking at business models and investors who can look into

investing in business, whether it's a shawarma place, a restaurant, or a dry-cleaning place where tailors can be put to work. We are looking at those models where it works for not only the investors but also the refugee families, who will be able to prosper and start contributing to the economy of the country.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you.

Ms. Wong-Tam: you wanted to complete something about the host program. Perhaps you can let us know what the former host program was, and the benefits, quickly.

Ms. Moy Wong-Tam: The former host program was a way to befriend newcomers. It matched an established Canadian with a newcomer. It had the same concept as private sponsorship, where you have a Canadian showing the newcomer the ropes of daily living, from how to cross the road safely to what size of diapers to buy, anything that people need to know. You can't really ask those questions of those in professional services.

We know that the huge difference between the success rate of government-sponsored refugees versus privately sponsored refugees is really due to the network that the private sponsors can provide. The program really helped them create a social network. Many of them became friends. There was a screening process and a matching process under a supervised setting. The newcomer, especially for the many without a family, benefited from having instant friends in Canada.

Those were basically the key social benefits. There were also occupational benefits. In some mentorship programs we matched them with people who had the same occupation or a similar occupation and who showed them how to get back on their feet in terms of finding a job.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Was this administered through settlement agencies or through the government itself?

Ms. Moy Wong-Tam: Through settlement agencies; it was defunded about four or five years ago.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sarai.

Mr. Kent, for seven minutes, please.

Hon. Peter Kent (Thornhill, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair.

Thanks to all of you for the insight and advice you've offered us today.

I'd like to start with you, Ms. Wong-Tam. I was delighted to hear your reference to the York region welcome centre, which I can remember attending back in 2007, I believe, when it was opened as a pilot project. I think its success is worthy of examination by communities and regions across the country. It's wonderful how it's expanded. For the privately sponsored refugees it's very helpful to connect with all levels of government and services and language training and child care and so forth, but I think it's essential for refugees arriving under conventional circumstances.

I'd like to ask you, given the overburden we saw in December, January, and February, how the capacity of the welcome centre and other reception agencies as well has levelled out, hopefully, or is continuing to cope with stresses on capacity to provide services.

Ms. Moy Wong-Tam: Most of the stress has been in the Toronto region versus the York region. The York region has received mostly privately sponsored refugees. You're right that the pilot welcome centre was opened in 2007 and then four more opened in 2010. We've been operating for six years now as a system. Durham followed suit about five years ago.

The City of Markham held a refugee summit in January. The welcome centre together with the Regional Municipality of York also held a refugee forum where all the private sponsors could come and learn what is available in the community. They're not aware of all the resources. Some of the private refugee groups are extremely well organized. They even have an education committee and other committees for their families when they come. They became a mini agency all on their own, but we want them to know resources are already available. For example, the City of Markham also opened parks and recreational services to them.

In terms of the welcome centre, we're able to deal with the influx of refugees. The last we heard, a meeting is happening right now. We have had a round table with the Regional Municipality of York. The whole community has been planning together. For us, York region is more manageable than Toronto. In Toronto the refugees have emptied out of the core of the city, mostly out of Scarborough, Peel, and so on, because of the cost of accommodation.

Just to give one more plug for the welcome centre, we have been studied by Germany and Sweden, and we've received different delegations internationally, so kudos to York region.

I think you're my MP, incidentally.

●(1150)

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you for that endorsement.

Mr. Syed, you spoke to the housing issue, particularly in Scarborough, and the shortage of affordable housing. We've heard stories in recent months of some unethical landlords taking advantage of newcomers. I'm wondering whether you have any examples of attempted exploitation or unethical handling of newly arrived tenants.

Mr. Aleem Syed: Affordable housing definitely is an issue, and it is much larger than the Syrian refugee resettlement process. It is the same for anybody else who wants to stay in the city.

With regard to exploitation, yes, through our colleagues we have heard of cases where the landlord would ask for the whole year's rent as a deposit—

Hon. Peter Kent: —which is against the law in Ontario.

Mr. Aleem Syed: Exactly. If the settlement workers were working with them to provide them with housing and to get into a lease agreement, how is it possible that somebody is able to even think of doing that? Issues like that were brought to the volunteers' attention. The volunteers dealt with it, working with the settlement agencies very closely and were able to mitigate those issues.

While I understand that affordable housing is an issue, we also need to look at the equity in terms of the refugees, or the newcomers, versus those residents who are already in Ontario. We know some of the newcomer families receive \$1,070 in their monthly support payment but \$1,000 goes for rent. It is no different from any other

resident in Ontario. In the grand scheme of things. It has to be looked at as something we can overcome in the future.

Hon. Peter Kent: Thank you.

Mr. Mandarino, you spoke about work site safety. I'm wondering whether English training in the jargon of work sites as it relates to workplace safety is provided by employers or by your union.

Mr. John Mandarino: Yes, there is, through our union and our training programs. Employers, of course, rely on us to have an individual who is sent out to the job sites prepared to operate safely. We accept the burden of doing it because we want to turn out an individual who is prepared to go to a work site and operate safely, but of course, employers are also partners in that and they are doing that on a regular basis on their job sites as well.

Hon. Peter Kent: Have I time for one more question, Chair?

The Chair: You do. You have 40 seconds, sir.

Hon. Peter Kent: Coming back very quickly to Ms. Wong-Tam with regard to the arrival, I've met any number of arrivals from Syria with significant language abilities and professional certification. I'm just wondering whether your organization or TRIEC, the Toronto region immigrant employment group, is working to assist recognition of those certifications for those professionals.

●(1155)

Ms. Moy Wong-Tam: As do most settlement organizations, we do provide services for assessment of foreign credentials; however, a lot of these refugees came without documentation, as you can understand, so it is an issue for them. Basically, our staff have counselled them to transition their career to find related work, not exactly in the same field. For example, a doctor would be advised to study to become a lab technician, maybe; an architect could become a home inspector, that kind of thing.

For those who don't have professional credentials, it's a lot of networking to help them find work in their own ethnic community where language is not an issue.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Moy Wong-Tam: But we need them to continue to learn the language at the same time. So their evening classes—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Wong-Tam.

Ms. Kwan, you have seven minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses. My first question is for Ms. Niazi.

You mentioned in your comments that delay in settlement services is an issue. We've also heard from other witnesses about those delays, particularly around language training. In the LINC program that you mentioned, the classes for the summer are now being cancelled because there's no funding. How widespread is that problem?

Ms. Adeena Niazi: Actually, this is a big problem for the refugees who come here. First of all, for the period that they are not going to class, there are no programs for them. They stay at home, which will cause depression and more isolation.

As I mentioned, there have been cuts for the past five or six years. There have been cuts to the settlement services. The last time when we had those cuts, we had no other option but to close the classes. It's not only that the classes are closed, but we also have a long list of learners who are waiting for the classes and we cannot accommodate them.

One of the major problems that we face, especially with the Syrian refugees who come here, is that they're coming with large families and there is a large number of children here. In some cases, even if there is space available in the class, we don't have enough childminding spaces for them, so they can't go to the classes. We have women waiting for classes for a period of four or five months, and now, when the classes close, another two or three months are added to that. It's a big problem for them.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Have you had any problems with access to health care particularly for the women? We just had a witness on Tuesday, someone who came forward, who has been diagnosed with cancer, but because of the lack of translation services at the health organizations, she wasn't able to receive that diagnosis until three weeks after, and from a stranger who happened to speak Arabic and was there at moment. She said to the stranger, "I don't understand what they're saying. Can you help me?" That's how it happened.

I'm wondering, and I'll open this up to all three of you, if you could give me a quick response about what kind of experiences you have seen with respect to that. Is it an issue, or it just a one-off in my own community?

Ms. Adeena Niazi: In our organization, we are working with sponsored refugees. Lots of refugees are coming under sponsorship. So far, we haven't received any major health issues.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay.

Go ahead, Ms. Wong-Tam.

Ms. Moy Wong-Tam: Part of my speaking notes really speak to the medical issues that are faced by the Syrian refugees.

Most women would prefer to be seen by female physicians or specialists who speak Arabic, so that really limits the pool; it may be non-existent in some areas. I would recommend that medical or qualified interpreters be provided for these refugees, at least during the first year after arrival, because it's critical. People are not being treated for serious conditions. I think some of the most common problems are respiratory tract infections, diarrhea, skin infection, hypertension, diabetes, and so on. Also, a large number of the children have not been inoculated since the war. The *Canadian Medical Association Journal* mentioned that 43% and 52%, respectively, of Syrian refugee children have received the primary series of diphtheria-pertussis-tetanus vaccine and polio vaccine. A large percentage haven't been inoculated.

• (1200)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Mr. Syed.

Mr. Aleem Syed: For one of the Syrian newcomer families who we are directly helping, the response our Scarborough Muslim

Association is.... The 15-year-old child has been diagnosed with stage 4 cancer. It's unfortunate. It's a very difficult situation for the parents to go through. All we have heard from the parents, though, are words of gratefulness for the services SickKids is offering and the quick turnaround in terms of services and translation services being offered. We have no issues in that regard.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Those translation services are being done by the resettlement service agency.

Mr. Aleem Syed: No, this is the blended category, and the translation services are being offered by SickKids directly. All hospitals have translation services.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: From the hospital itself...

Mr. Aleem Syed: Yes.

Also, in the absence of any translation services, we do have volunteer translators who will go with the family.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I see.

Also, in your comments you mentioned needing to establish new partnerships.

I also want to touch on the housing issue, because I'm quite worried about the month 13 phenomenon, even for the private sponsors. Come month 13 they might not be able to make ends meet, given the income assistance rate they have.

Some of the other witnesses are supportive, for example, of a larger strategy and of the minister engaging with his provincial and territorial counterparts to address the welfare rate issue. I just want to get your sense on the month 13 issue with respect to that, as well.

Mr. Aleem Syed: With regard to the private sponsorships, given the futuristic role of how governance moves forward, whether federal, provincial, or what have you, we see that a lot of engagement with the citizens and private sponsors needs to be taking place. This is because all citizens are taking an active role, and with social media and all the technological devices and gadgets available, they seem to be more meaningfully engaged than before. That is where I think the government will be in a much better position to move away from delivery and to look into policy-making and into taking advantage of the private sponsors from a delivery perspective, whether it be housing, settlement, or things from that perspective.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Would you support the call for the minister to engage with his provincial and territorial partners to talk about the issues around affordability of housing and of the overall need to address increasing the welfare rate?

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Mr. Aleem Syed: That would definitely be positive. We would definitely support that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: That was one second.

The Chair: Twenty seconds.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Oh, 20 seconds. I thought you said "one second".

Okay, Ms. Wong-Tam, could you respond to the same question.

Ms. Moy Wong-Tam: Definitely the welfare rate has to be addressed. Especially regionally in different urban centres, the rate should be adjusted to the cost of living.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Ms. Niazi.

Ms. Adeena Niazi: Yes, I agree. The welfare rate has to be adjusted.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Zahid, you have seven minutes, please.

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair

Also, thank you, witnesses, for coming today and providing your input to us. It will be very helpful in our study.

I know the important work many of you are doing to settle the refugees in their new homes, so I'm very thankful to you.

My first question is for Ms. Niazi.

We have heard from other witnesses that many newcomer women often feel socially isolated and stuck in their apartments taking care of their families, making it difficult for them to become comfortable in their new community and culture.

I am also an immigrant. I came here about 17 years ago with a toddler. I was an immigrant and not a refugee, but I certainly experienced this, as well.

Could you discuss the experiences especially of the newcomer women whom you have worked with and share any best practices you have for helping them successfully integrate into Canadian society?

Ms. Adeena Niazi: Actually, the best practice would be to reach them at home, in the safety of their homes. We have met some of the women who have been here for a couple of years, but they don't even know how to do their basic groceries. The approach we have taken is to reach them in their homes. We make home visits. Our workers go to their homes and talk to them about their issues.

Sometimes the men don't feel very comfortable letting the women go out. We worked with the interpreters who came from Afghanistan, from a war-torn country, and they were very isolated, so we started that up. We went to their home, spoke with the men, talked about the issues, and we made some visits.

Then we had groups, for women only, at the library, where we talked to them.

We started teaching them how to use the elevator, because they mostly didn't use the elevator, and cooking and all. That proved to be very successful.

We did things like taking them to get their groceries, taking them to LINC classes...how to walk there. They were not involved in their LINC classes.

Home visits are very... What's more important is how you do outreach with the most isolated and marginalized segments. We don't have many problems with those who are coming to us for services, but we are concerned with those who don't come to us.

•(1205)

Mrs. Salma Zahid: That's a very good point.

During our study, we have also heard from some sponsorship agreement holders, SAHs—and you're also one of the SAHs—who have said they have funds and would like to bring in additional Syrian refugees over and above the ambitious levels committed to by the government. As you know, Canada has finite resources to process and settle refugees, and there are refugees from regions around the world who are needing settlement. Could you comment on the impact that further increasing private refugee resettlement of Syrians could have on other refugees from the other parts of the world?

Ms. Adeena Niazi: As a sponsorship holder, we are working with different groups, and actually diverse groups of the population who have not been involved in the sponsorship like the... What we're hearing from them is that there has been concern because some of the refugees in some parts of the world seem to be forgotten. I mentioned the Africans, the Afghans, and the Christians in Thailand.

Sponsors are willing to bring refugees in from Syria and other parts of the world, refugees who are in need of protection. The refugee program is a protection program to save the lives of those who are at risk. It doesn't matter if the person at risk is coming from Syria, from Africa, or from other parts of the world. They have that openness.

There has been a response to the Syrian initiative because most of them wanted this program to succeed and reach that 25,000. I'm glad that you're part of that program, under which we brought in many refugees. One of the reasons sponsors are not encouraged to bring them from some areas where they are not visa-ready and there might be five or six years of delay is that we know there are no guarantees that the refugees will arrive, and six or seven years is a long time. Because the Syrians were coming quickly and were fast-tracked, that's why most of us got involved in bringing them here.

Although there have been some problems with the communication in terms of CIDA.... For example, for some of the SAHs, including us for the BVOR cases, we put in for sponsorship in December. So far, we haven't heard, and we thought they were visa-ready. There have been such problems, but overall it has had an impact. Also, there's CPO-W. The expedited Syrian cases from the processing centre in Winnipeg, CPO-W, caused delays in other cases. We have Syrian and other refugees, and the Syrians are already almost having their interviews, but we don't have the confirmation from CPO-W so far.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: My next question is for you, Mr. Syed.

We all know how important proficiency in English or French is for the newcomer in making a successful transition and integration into Canadian society. Key to achieving this is access to classes for English as a second language. You mentioned in your comments that you are working with almost 120 families. Could you talk about the success the newcomers you are working with have had in access to ESL? How many of your families are registered with ESL already?

Mr. Aleem Syed: I would say that 90% of the families have been registered with ESL, especially through the LINC classes, and especially those who have come here in the January and February time period. Having worked with them and having visited them, I will say it is clear that they are going to the ESL classes, to the LINC classes. Those who have come more recently are in a bit of a waiting state, and I don't have the actual percentage for the people who are actually waiting.

One of the things that has come up as a challenge in certain cases is the incentive for the newcomer families to actually go to the LINC classes. Although they are registered, they don't want to go to the LINC classes, whether it be from their social perspective or in terms of what they should do in going to LINC to learn English. They feel that they are going back, that they are regressing and going backwards in their lifestyle. Those are some of the concerns they raise, but then, after having discussed it with them and after having told them that we can only go so far, we can only take the horse to the lake, we can't make it drink.... It's important that we distinguish, and this is what we keep saying—

• (1210)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Syed.

Mr. Aleem Syed: It is important that we distinguish between providing access to services versus making sure that access is convenient.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Saroya, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Bob Saroya (Markham—Unionville, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for giving us their input. We want this to be a huge success and we welcome their recommendations.

Mr. Syed, you mentioned that in some cases the family income is \$1,070 and the rent is \$1,000. How are they making ends meet?

Mr. Aleem Syed: In this case, the community is pitching in and raising community funds. That's how the ends are being met.

Mr. Bob Saroya: The community is pitching in. Thank you to the community for doing this.

Ms. Niazi, you mentioned that the Syrian refugees come with many issues, including isolation and the number of children with PTSD. What are the solutions? What should the government, the committee, and Canadians do to fix all these issues?

Ms. Adeena Niazi: One would be that there has to be funding available for the mental health issue, support groups. Also one of the big problems is culture shock. Mostly when they come here, a different population is involved. They are under the impression that everything is different here. Support groups would be very helpful to bring them together. That's what we do. For the refugees we have sponsored, as a SAH, mostly we try to bring five or six families together to provide support and a social network among themselves.

Also, get them enrolled in English-language classes. I heard that some of them don't feel like going to classes. Make it interesting for them. Mostly for women when they go to women-only classes, we have some activities like outings that will attract them to the classes. Sometimes when I have gone to the classes, during the break they

sing their own songs and play their own music. It makes it very attractive to them and helps them come out of the home and be less isolated.

There are multicultural women's wellness programs. We work with the Canadian Mental Health Association. We found that very useful for newcomer women with stress. There are other issues. There is a need for parenting programs. We had a loving family, and their children are now at risk of being taken by the Children's Aid Society because of the way they were dealing with them. Parenting programs are needed, not just for women.

As for the host program, the host should be from their own community and connected with other community members.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Ms. Tam, is there anything you would like to add?

Ms. Moy Wong-Tam: We do also have women's support groups. I think that is very helpful. We can talk about stress management as well as parenting, budgeting, just how to make ends meet in Canada and how to stretch your dollars. I think those are important for mothers.

We also once ran a program called babes in arms. I think we might try that with the Syrian newcomers to see if they would come out. Mothers who are not ready to attend classes because they have very young children can still come out and socialize and learn a little bit of English and through that learn about Canada in general.

• (1215)

Mr. Bob Saroya: Adeena, you also mentioned about fairness in the refugee programs, some people wait longer and some people wait shorter. What do you mean by this?

Ms. Adeena Niazi: For language classes?

Mr. Bob Saroya: Your opening remarks....

Ms. Adeena Niazi: Do you mean overseas?

As I mentioned, the waiting period, especially for Pretoria and Islamabad, is five to six years for the refugees to come here. We had some of the refugees sponsored on our program. They couldn't wait that long. One of our sponsored refugees went back and was killed there.

The Chair: Ten seconds, please.

Ms. Adeena Niazi: Also, one of the women had to be taken from a forced marriage.

Lots is happening. Also, there is an impact on their settlement when they come back to Canada.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Adeena Niazi: The longer they stay, the more difficult it is to settle into Canadian society.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Niazi.

Mr. Tabbara, go ahead for five minutes, please.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you very much. I'll be splitting my time with Mr. Ehsassi, in case we don't have much time for him.

First of all, thank you very much, all of you, for being here.

My first question is for Mr. Mandarino.

You mentioned that a lot of Syrians are being trained in the construction industry. You've set up training centres for support during labour shortages. Can you elaborate more on the types of training facilities you're providing so that they can integrate well into the construction sector?

Mr. John Mandarino: Yes, absolutely.

In almost every major city where we are involved in, as I said, the construction industry, manufacturing, and hospitality, we have a local union to represent members who work in that vicinity and also a training centre to support existing members in upgrade training and also to support apprenticeship and new skills training, which is the type of training we would use for new recruits, including those from the Syrian refugee initiative.

The idea is to bring them into a situation where, after they've done what we call the life skills and the language skills and they're a little more comfortable in the classroom setting.... We start in the classroom setting discussing what happens on a construction site, discussing safety, familiarizing them with, as I think Mr. Kent or one of the other gentlemen mentioned, job site jargon, and getting them comfortable with what they'll see on the job. Aside from that, there's a practical element, which is the most important part of the training, in which they will actually be working hands-on.

The beauty of the way we've set the training centres up is that they very closely simulate what happens on a job site. We've found, traditionally, with every individual we train, from a young apprentice to a new Canadian, that this is the best way to transition them into the work site safely and productively, to subject them to the types of tools and practices they'll see on job sites.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Could you give me a quick short answer to this? Have many construction contractors or construction companies reached out to you, wanting to hire Syrian refugees?

Mr. John Mandarino: Absolutely.

As I think I mentioned, we see shortages and we're looking everywhere we can for the next recruit, not only to provide opportunities but also to put people into jobs and fill the need in the construction industry.

Many sectors have come to us and asked us what we are doing about recruiting. We are working with community agencies for that very purpose.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Mr. Ehsassi, you have two minutes and 10 seconds.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): Thank you. I will just use this opportunity to follow up on my colleague's questions.

I understand, given the benefit of having visited your union previously, that there are two hallmarks of the workforce you're

training. First of all, it's incredibly diverse. I think everyone could agree with that.

The other thing is I know there's a very big emphasis on upgrading, training, and things of that nature. Given that there are opportunities available insofar as LiUNA is concerned, and you would be willing to train new people who would be interested, how does it work? Would prospective employees necessarily have to have skill sets or do you have different programs that could focus on different types of prospective applicants?

• (1220)

Mr. John Mandarino: We are prepared so that if someone comes to us with a certain skill set, that's absolutely a benefit, but if they come with a willingness to learn and to become a part of the construction industry and build a good career there, we will take care of the supportive training to get them there, whether it's a pre-apprenticeship or apprenticeship program or an upgrade or training that will help them get to the next level, if they come to us with certain skills. The support is there for every level of individual who comes into our recruitment and sees the potential of working in the construction industry.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: I also noticed you said that when people join your programs, they are taught life skills. Also, there is some assistance with developing linguistic skills.

Does this suggest that if someone does not have basic English, they would not be a good fit for LiUNA, or would there still be opportunities for people who don't necessarily speak English?

The Chair: Ten seconds please.

Mr. John Mandarino: There are some opportunities. We do everything we can to help them overcome that and get to a certain level, because for their safety and in order to operate productively for themselves they need to have some basic language skills in the construction industry.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. John Mandarino: We do everything we can to fill those gaps.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Mandarino.

Mr. Saroya, for five minutes please.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Thank you, Mr. Chair, once again.

I have a few questions for the panel. Are there special programs or services available to the refugee women through your organizations, and do they seek to address their unique needs and circumstances? Are the programs you have pre-existing programs, or are they new programs specially created for the Syrian refugees?

We can start with Adeena.

Ms. Adeena Niazi: Being a women's organization, we have always had special programs for women. Of course, for the support of the Syrian refugees, we have to enhance our programs. We have to include support based on the needs of the Syrians, but all our programs are women centred and look at the special needs of women.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Do you see an increase in the Syrian women coming here with a number of children, and is there more pressure on the system?

Ms. Adeena Niazi: There has been. One of the positive aspects of working with the Syrian refugees is that there are lots of volunteers from the public that get involved. We used to have 100 volunteers, and now it has increased to 250 volunteers who are coming to help with the Syrian refugees. That's 150 more volunteers included for the Syrians. This is one of the opportunities.

There has been pressure. We work overtime. Our staff works overtime, especially those who speak Arabic. One person who speaks Arabic had to visit 100 new clients in a one-month period, which is a lot of work.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Does the organization get some additional money for these programs?

Ms. Adeena Niazi: We have only one settlement worker in Toronto, but our Peel office.... We have an office in Peel, and we have a contract with the government. It doesn't get additional funding. What happened is we were cut in our overall funding. A percentage of our funding was cut. There's a line at the bottom where money was put back for Syrian initiatives. We do have wait-lists for other refugees overall, and we were asking for additional money. The money was cut for other refugee immigrants and was put on a different line for Syrian initiatives. That means we do not have any additional funding for that; it's just that the funds were shifted from one category to another. It's very difficult for us to manage because we cannot kick out refugees and immigrants from that class in order to accommodate Syrians. That has been a challenge.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Are you saying we have a double standard, one for the Syrians and one for the others?

Ms. Adeena Niazi: I can't say it's a double standard, because Syria was a special initiative, and we appreciate it. We applaud the government for this initiative, and it had to do it. What we are saying is the needs of other refugees, whether they are overseas or they are here in Canada, have to be taken into consideration, and they have to be treated equally.

We are happy for the Syrians, but we want the same for other refugees and newcomers.

• (1225)

Mr. Bob Saroya: Would you like to add something else?

Ms. Moy Wong-Tam: With the overall budget—although the federal government has said it has provided \$38.6 million extra to help with the Syrian refugees—I think the bulk of that has gone into transportation and hotels. What's left for settlement services is very small. We have been told in our budget that 5% of our existing budget could be allocated to Syrian refugee initiatives, but that means we have to cut something else.

We don't want to set up this dynamic where all the other immigrants feel that Syrian refugees are special. What about the other refugees? What about the other immigrants? It's difficult for agencies that don't get additional funding, but to be fair, IRCC is looking at additional summer programs. Decisions haven't been made as to what we can do with summer programs.

It's very short. There are only two months in the summer that we can do something with either the children or the women. More than half of the government-sponsored refugees have children under 14 years. We're looking at a huge youth population. It's great for the demographics of Canada in the long run, but in the meantime, we have to invest something in the youth programs.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Wong-Tam.

We will now suspend to allow the witnesses to leave. We will deal with some committee business that we agreed to discuss in the last half hour.

Thank you.

• (1225)

(Pause)

• (1230)

The Chair: The meeting resumes.

We have a motion before us that we agreed to deal with today.

Ms. Rempel, the floor is yours.

Hon. Michelle Rempel (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Earlier today, the United Nations Human Rights Council issued a report entitled, "They Came to Destroy": ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis". The summary of this report states:

ISIS has committed the crime of genocide as well as multiple crimes against humanity and war crimes against the Yazidis, thousands of whom are held captive in the Syrian Arab Republic where they are subjected to almost unimaginable horrors.

The present report, which focuses on violations committed in Syria, is based on 45 interviews with survivors, religious leaders, smugglers, activists, lawyers, medical personnel, and journalists. Considerable documentary material was used to corroborate information collected by the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic.

ISIS has sought to destroy the Yazidis through killings; sexual slavery, enslavement, torture and inhuman and degrading treatment and forcible transfer causing serious bodily and mental harm; the infliction of conditions of life that bring about a slow death; the imposition of measures to prevent Yazidi children from being born, including forced conversion of adults, the separation of Yazidi men and women, and mental trauma; and the transfer of Yazidi children from their own families and placing them with ISIS fighters, thereby cutting them off from beliefs and practices of their own religious community, and erasing their identity as Yazidis. The public statements and conduct of ISIS and its fighters clearly demonstrate that ISIS intended to destroy the Yazidis of Sinjar, composing the majority of the world's Yazidi population, in whole or in part.

The summary concludes by saying, "The genocide of the Yazidis is on-going."

On page 37 of this report, the commission begins its recommendations. Under section 212, which is, "The Commission recommends to the international community", it recommends, "Recognize ISIS's commission of the crime of genocide against the Yazidis of Sinjar".

It goes on with several other significant recommendations, but my motion today deals with the recommendation under paragraph 212 (g), which is “Accelerate the asylum applications of Yazidi victims of genocide”.

During the course of our study looking at the government's response to the Syrian refugee crisis, we have heard from many groups that it is difficult and that there are many roadblocks in having the ability to bring Yazidis to Canada. In fact, we heard Ms. Dawn Edlund, a department official, say that, in terms of what the department is tracking, the department has tracked only nine cases of Yazidis being processed to date.

There are groups in Winnipeg and around the country. I will reference one. The title of the umbrella organization is Operation Ezra, led by the Shaarey Zedek Synagogue. I understand the minister has already met with this group. They have raised over \$250,000 to privately sponsor seven Yazidi families. There have been other groups that have presented to the committee and have said that we should be looking at ways to, as the UN has recommended, “accelerate the asylum applications of Yazidi victims of genocide”.

I think that the information presented to the committee to date shows that the government and our country writ large would benefit from a committee study that would look at ways in which we could accelerate this, given that there has been a significant amount of evidence showing that there are significant roadblocks that groups experience in order to help these people.

Given the urgency of this report, the urgency that the United Nations has compelled upon us with this particular recommendation, I move:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the Committee study ways for Canada to —

—as the UN report lays it out—

— to accelerate the asylum applications of Yazidi victims of genocide; that this study be comprised of no less than three (3) meetings to be held as soon as possible; that departmental officials be in attendance for at least one (1) meeting, and that the Committee report its findings to the House; and that Pursuant to Standing Order 109, the government table a comprehensive response thereto.

There are many tools at the disposal of the government that can be used to accelerate the application of asylum claims for groups that are vulnerable. I think that, given the report issued by the UN today, which, through evidence-based analysis over a considerable period of time, explicitly shows that genocide is in fact happening to Yazidis, and the fact that the UN itself has called upon the international community to accelerate asylum applications in this area, the committee would take this to heart, see this as a non-partisan way to help the international community, and certainly look at ways and tools at our disposal to help these people.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

•(1235)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Rempel.

Mr. Sarai.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: I want to commend Ms. Rempel on her thoughts and concern for the Yazidi people.

I have some suggestions of my own. I think the issue at large is how we deal with domestically displaced people, people in their own countries who are displaced or being harassed. A lot of these are stateless governments or they have civil unrest in which there is no proper form of government and redress for these. But we have a definition of refugees that we must work with. How, too, do we see these people?

I think to address the concerns of constituents of my own riding as well as Mr. Saroya's, who brought up the Afghan Sikhs, and others in this House who have brought up other minorities that are being persecuted, from the Caledonians to other groups, the LGBT communities in Iraq, perhaps we could amend the motion by replacing the words “ways for Canada to accelerate the asylum applications of Yazidi victims of genocide” with the words “options on how Canada can best support vulnerable groups in inaccessible regions” and the words “one (1) meeting” be replaced by the words “two (2) meetings”.

I hope this will address the concerns of various groups that exist in this. The scope should be not as to really hearing about the groups' own vulnerabilities, but how legally, mechanically, this government and governments around the world can help these individuals in these communities.

Thank you.

•(1240)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sarai.

Ms. Rempel.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Through you, Mr. Chair, I'd like to have Mr. Sarai clarify that included in the scope of his amendment of the study, we would be able to look at ways to expedite asylum claims for groups designated as genocide, such as was recommended in the UN report today with the Yazidis.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: I think that's the goal of the scope of the study, to figure out how we best deal with those, and I think that would be the study's prerogative. That would be the study's purpose, to figure out ways and how we can help these vulnerable groups.

The Chair: Ms. Kwan, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the committee members actually on both sides of the House with respect to this discussion.

I appreciate the motion that's been brought forward by Ms. Rempel. I think this has been an issue that has been brought to committee members' attention, and for some time has been out in the public in the sense that the atrocities that are taking place have been publicly reported and acknowledged as real, and yet, there seem to be barriers and roadblocks to action from government. We had witnesses who presented to committee around the work that they have been doing, and yet to no avail in terms of really moving this forward.

At the end of the day, what we're talking about is humanity. We now have a situation where other human beings are at extreme risk and have gone through indescribable suffering. I can't even imagine what some of the women and girls have gone through, and yet the international community seems not to be able to do anything.

We have an opportunity here at this committee to look into this issue, to try to find ways to address those barriers and roadblocks preventing humanitarian and compassionate action to be taken from Canada.

I welcome this motion. I welcome the amendment to make the scope broader, because I think it is important to acknowledge that there are a number of different groups and communities that are in similar situations that also need attention as well.

We just heard from a witness today who talked about a couple of groups that she had identified. I myself had been working with other community groups with respect to the LGBTQ community, and, in fact, they have been assessed. They have been processed. The UNHCR has acknowledged the risks that they are in, and they are actually under active persecution at the moment with the risks that they face. And they cannot find a pathway to here, to Canada, without extensive delays.

If we can find a way to expedite the support and the compassionate and humanitarian action from Canada with these vulnerable groups, I'm all for it. I will support the amendment as put forward in support of the motion.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

Mr. Saroya.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Mr. Chair, the Yazidi women, especially Sikh groups in Afghanistan, are very dear to my heart. Many other issues are out there. Would three meetings be enough to cover this complicated, big issue, or do we need more than three meetings?

The Chair: Mr. Sarai.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: When we spoke to Ms. Rempel, we said no fewer than three. If we need more, we should have more. By saying "as soon as possible", the goal is to do this over the summer, if necessary, and to do as many as possible to accommodate the concerns.

• (1245)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Rempel.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Chair, through you, my understanding is that all committee members are amenable to a robust and large witness list, which focuses on ensuring that witnesses who can provide concrete recommendations on how we can achieve this would be dealt with, hopefully, in a very non-partisan manner, in a very expeditious fashion as well. I'm sure Mr. Sarai will confirm that.

The Chair: Mr. Saroya.

Mr. Bob Saroya: One last thing, I will make myself available if I need to attend any meetings over the summer at any time of the day. These are very serious issues.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Kent.

Hon. Peter Kent: Chair, very briefly, and as a guest member of the committee, with respect, I appreciate the amendment. Going forward under the amendment, we should keep in mind the appeal by the UN report today which says that a genocide has not only happened with respect to the Yazidi people, but it is continuing. I

think that consideration should be front of mind to.... You're quite correct that they are not in official UN refugee camps in northern Iraq, in the Kurdish autonomous area, but they remain highly vulnerable, even those who have escaped Daesh captivity.

A key element of the eventual report should respond specifically to the plight of the Yazidis, who may yet be saved from genocide, and an appropriate number accepted here in Canada.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I want to make sure I clarify the scope of the study. Part of the issue in northern Iraq in particular is that the government does not have a processing centre there. People cannot get their applications processed even if they have been identified by the UN as a group or a family that meets the requirement to come under the Syrian refugee initiative. This has been ongoing for some time, and therefore the delay in getting the families out has been incredible. I can't even tell you the frustrations that I hear from sponsoring groups here, waiting for those families. I hope this study will also encompass that, because that is a reality today. All those refugees there are vulnerable in that context.

Related to this issue is the LGBTQ issue. As we heard from government officials, while the government identified the LGBTQ community as vulnerable, and at the outset, when the government announced they would embark on the 25,000 Syrian refugee initiative, that would be an identified group to which they would try to provide support. When the officials were before this committee and were asked how many people came under that category, they had no idea because it was not being tracked.

We don't know in that context whether or not the government's own targeted vulnerable group has been successful. We need to find a way to address that as well.

I want to have a clear understanding at this committee that the scope of this motion will include those aspects in our study, because I think it is an important part of the broader extension of the vulnerable groups.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

It appears that we've exhausted the speaker's list, so I will put the amendment to the motion to—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Before we vote, may I please get confirmation in the affirmative from the movers of the motion and the amendment with respect to what I just commented on, so I know that's incorporated in this study?

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Sarai.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Sure. I have no objection to having to study that to figure out how we can process people in those areas where there's no processing centre.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now move to a vote on the amendment to the motion.

(Amendment agreed to)

The Chair: We will vote on the motion as amended.

(Motion as amended agreed to)

We will now suspend and go in camera. A budgetary matter has come up that we need to deal with.

The Chair: Thank you.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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