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Chair

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

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•(1005)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.)): Good morning. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on June 16, 2016, the committee will resume its study on immigration measures for the protection of vulnerable groups.

Please note that because of the sensitive nature of the committee's study, as we hear from witnesses during the course of our study, the content of some witnesses' testimony may be upsetting to participants and the viewing public.

The first panel appearing before us today are human rights activist Ms. Nadia Murad; Mr. Murad Ismael, executive director for Yazda; Mr. Mirza Ismail, from the Yazidi Human Rights Organization International; and, joining us by video conference from Vancouver, Mr. David Berson, co-chair of the Or Shalom Syrian Refugee Initiative.

I would like to thank all of the witnesses for appearing before us today on this very important study. I would like to remind witnesses that they have seven minutes for opening statements.

I will begin with Ms. Nadia Murad.

Ms. Nadia Murad Basee Taha (Human Rights Activist, As an Individual) (Interpretation): Good morning, everyone.

I'm very happy today to be in a country like Canada and to be among you this morning. I'd like to thank you for your support of minorities who are subjected to criminal acts committed against them. I'd like also to thank you for the good work that you are doing for our cause. I'd like to thank Michelle, Rona, and everyone who stands for the truth.

My name is Nadia Murad. I am from the Yazidi minority. I'm 22 years old. I lived in Sinjar, in northern Iraq, in one of the Yazidi villages, the village of Kocho. I was a student in the fifth class. I was so happy with the life among my family and friends. In the village we lived peacefully, and as a peaceful society we lived together with the Muslims, in Bashiqa, in Bahzani, and also with the Christians. With everybody, basically all the other minorities, we coexisted peacefully.

On August 3, 2014, ISIL attacked the Yazidis. They killed more than 4,000 members of the Yazidi community, and as well there were explosions. More than 4,000 Yazidi individuals ran to the mountains on one of the hottest days of the year and more than 6,000 women and children were taken as hostages. Simply because of our religious

identity, ISIL acted with the Yazidis in a very different way from the other minorities because they consider them to be infidels or *kafirs*. When they were attacked, the goal of ISIL was to destroy the Yazidi identity, to kill all the men and to take girls and children as hostages. That's what happened to me.

I was in the village, along with more than 1,700 individuals, and we were seized for two weeks under the control of ISIL. We asked for help from all sides because we knew that our destiny would be for the men to be killed and for the women and children to be taken hostage. We asked for help, but unfortunately we did not get help. On August 15, they gathered us at the village school, they separated the men from the women. They killed our men. More than 700 men in a matter of two hours were killed in the village of Kocho. We saw our fathers, our brothers, and our sons getting killed at the outskirts of the village.

Then they took us, the women and children, and they divided us up by age. Girls from the age of 9 to 25 or 27 years were taken to Mosul. As for the older women, more than 80 of them, they were killed because they were older. The male children were taken to the training camps. The married women who had more than three children each were taken to a different location. They acted towards them just like the girls, but after 40 days they basically violated them because they were with the Yazidis. This is what happened as far as my village is concerned.

•(1010)

This is the same story that was repeated in hundreds of other Yazidi villages, where thousands of people were killed in Sibaya, in Gir Azêr, and in Hardan. In all the other Yazidi villages, thousands of Yazidi people in Bashiqa and Bahzani had to be displaced.

When they took us, the girls and children, we were not simply held prisoners, but they committed crimes against us. They forced us to change our religion. They raped us. They sold us. They leased us. This continues today against more than 3,000 women and children in Iraq and Syria. There is no place in Iraq or Syria under the control of ISIL where girls were not distributed. Girls who were 10 years old were in my company and they would be raped, and they would be sold among themselves. Until today, some girls continue to be raped by tens of ISIL members. This is not a secret; it's done in public. ISIL videographs the girls, and they're proud of what they are doing toward those girls.

Thousands of other Yazidis in the camps struggle with extreme poverty. Thousands of Yazidis had to migrate. Hundreds drowned in the Aegean Sea. Thousands of widows in camps are not able to raise their children. More than 35 mass graves have been discovered so far in the areas that have been liberated in Sinjar, and they have not been documented to date. With the grave where my mother is buried, for more than nine months I knew that my mother was buried there, but she has not been properly identified. Imagine human beings having to see more than six or seven of their siblings killed and not be able to even go to collect their remains. You see your mother killed with no guilt other than her Yazidi identity that meant others considered her an infidel.

We're talking about not being able to buy a container of milk for the children in the camps in Greece, Turkey, Syria, and Iraqi Kurdistan. The Yazidis are being eliminated. Since August 3, 2014, no Yazidi child is being helped by any side. Yazidis are not getting help from anyone.

We're talking about girls who have been raped tens of times, and they're currently in the camps of Iraqi Kurdistan. They've lost their mothers, their fathers, and their brothers. They are living just like other refugees in the camps after having been the victims of ISIL, but they're not receiving any help or assistance. I know of girls who have been liberated. They're in the camps, but there is nobody to help them.

As Yazidis, we feel that the world is negligent toward us, especially when it comes to the survivors, the widows, and the orphans. We do not know for how long we will continue to be in this situation where we're being killed off.

• (1015)

The campaign to eliminate us continues. About this time two years ago, I was a student. I was on a vacation from studies, but I was a student. I was getting ready to go to grade 6, and during my vacation I was preparing myself by studying so that I would get good grades once I made it to grade 6. But 15 days after that we were attacked by ISIS or ISIL. I could not even see my books. I had hoped to be able to obtain the certificate from my school so that I could show it to my mother, but I was not able to get the certificate from that school. In that very school, I got separated from my family and friends and village residents. I did not even have the chance to say goodbye to my mother. Six of my siblings were in the school. They had been going to that school, and I saw them being taken in cars to face death. I did not even have the chance to say goodbye to them.

For more than a year our children have been brainwashed in the ISIL camps, and the world is silent about this. Frankly speaking, I don't know what else to tell you about this kind of suffering, about the very painful cases that I witnessed among young women and children. The whole world is negligent when it comes to standing up for the rights of the Yazidis. We are a peaceful community that has been subjected to more than 74 genocides, and we continue to put up with this genocide. It's our hope that one day the world would feel for our situation and would see how a peaceful community like us is facing genocide for no reason other than being of a different religion. We only want to live peacefully. That's the only thing we want. There is no one in the world who would accept that their daughter be held as a hostage for more than a year at the hands of terrorists or to

see a wife being taken hostage by terrorists. For women, their husbands were killed before their very eyes, and they were taken hostage and then they were raped.

When I was besieged I heard that thousands of girls had been taken as hostages. I thought, well, maybe they would take me as a hostage, and perhaps I would try to reason with them, try to convince them that I am a human being, that I have done nothing to deserve to be raped, to be sold for nothing. I thought I would try to reason with ISIL because they are human beings, but when they took me away they did not give me any chance to say anything, to say that I was a young girl, that I had the right to live. When ISIL did not give me the chance, did not want to hear from me, I said I was going to talk to the world, and the world would understand me. For more than six months I went to more than 17 countries, talking to presidents, to parliamentarians, and other people, and saying, "Listen up, we're talking about girls who are being raped in the jails of ISIL, people who are dying of starvation in the camps, thousands of children who have been deprived of education." And they were just simply silent, quiet about it, quiet about our right as Yazidis.

• (1020)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Murad, for this very difficult testimony.

Mr. Ismael, you have seven minutes for your testimony.

Mr. Murad Ismael (Executive Director, Yazda, As an Individual): Mr. Chair, honourable members of Parliament, ladies, and gentlemen, it's an honour for me to be here and to testify after a remarkable woman whom I have been with for the past seven months, and I see her tragedy every day. With every speech she gives, she gives some of her soul. She gives so many of her emotions to pass on the story of thousands of people like herself, thousands of children who become orphans, thousands of women who are enslaved; the story of men, like her own brother whom I met a week ago, who is still waiting for his wife who was taken by a militant from the Islamic State.

After listening to Nadia give this testimony that is so deep, it's hard to put my own testimony into words. In fact, I've been having a very hard time to put my own testimony into words for the past two years. I'm a geophysicist who came from Sinjar, who had a normal life in Houston, going to the University of Houston to receive an education. I received two master's degrees, in geophysics and engineering, and I wanted to have a normal life in the U.S., but that normal life changed in one moment. That normal life changed for me, for my family, and for every Yazidi on this planet.

What happened to the Yazidi people was a genocide, and the purpose of this genocide was to wipe the Yazidi people from the face of the planet. ISIS members said in *Dabiq*, their journal, that the purpose of this attack was to wipe out the Yazidis. In fact, they said that the existence of the Yazidis within the Muslim world was a shame on Islam, and that Muslims should have eradicated the Yazidis in the past.

A community of 700,000 people, a community that is more than 4,000 years old, coming from the history of Mesopotamia, of which we are all proud, the history of Babylon, the history of the Assyrians, a community whose heritage we all should be proud of, is now finding itself at a crossroads. When we say that we don't know what the future will look like for us, we indeed mean it. When we say that the Yazidis will probably be wiped out in 10 or 20 years, we mean it. The Yazidis had more than 200,000 people in Turkey and now there are only 300 families in Turkey. In Syria, we had 50,000 people, and now we have 3,000 people. In the Shekhan District, we had 200,000 or 300,000 people, and now we have 100,000 people. That's also for the city of Sinjar, where the majority basically systematically changed the demographics so the Yazidis would not have a homeland.

The ISIS attack on the Yazidis was the last straw, the last attack to wipe the Yazidis from the Middle East. It has been recognized by the United Nations. It has been recognized by other countries. It has been documented through my work, through all work. In Dohuk, we received more than 900 women like Nadia, and we have their accounts and they all faced the exact same thing that Nadia faced. In fact, Nadia was lucky compared to others. I met girls who were eight years old, who were raped. I met children who came back from captivity, who still pray the way the Daesh trained them to pray. Just a week ago, I met five beautiful women with their children, none of them older than seven, eight, or 10 years old, and they've all lost their husbands. Two of the girls, Gelan and Jihan, committed suicide in captivity. Two older children, Rizan and another one of their children, who were students at the medical school in Mosul, were killed when ISIS attacked.

What the Yazidis need from the world is a stand for humanity. The Yazidis must be seen as human beings, not seen as a distant community that must face this alone. I think for us as human beings looking at this tragedy and not doing anything is a shame on us, all of us.

This is what we would like Canada to do. First, we were surprised that the resolution that was put on the floor was objected to, that the genocide against the Yazidi people was not recognized in Parliament.

● (1025)

We were surprised that a country like Canada would not see our tragedy. It's very important to the thousands of people who survived that they get recognition from the Canadian people and the Canadian government. As Parliament is the voice of the Canadian people, we would like that resolution to pass. We would like that resolution to be reintroduced.

We are also here because we have thousands of people who put their lives at risk to immigrate. We would like Canada to have a quota for the Yazidis, between 5,000 and 10,000 people, who could immigrate to Canada. They are beautiful people. Trust me that they will contribute to the success and democracy of your country. They will be a good part of this country. You have about 2,000 to 3,000 Yazidis here in Canada, and they are integrated into the community in Canada.

We would like this quota to be especially for the victims, like the German program that brought in 1,100 women and girls who were victims of rape.

For people who are in Turkey now, waiting for the UN process is not a solution. The Yazidis, even when they are very lucky and have a few dollars to go to the interview, have to wait until 2022 to be interviewed for the first time through the UN system. Leaving the Yazidis in this situation is not the right solution.

We would like you to have a special quota of 5,000 to 10,000 people, sponsored by the Government of Canada, to allow the Yazidis to come. I think the Yazidis must be allowed to go to any country, exactly as the people of the Holocaust were. The world finally recognized their genocide and allowed them to come in.

Those are my two main points.

The last point is to help the Yazidi communities that stay in the camps. Help the Yazidi community refer its case to the International Criminal Court. We have asked the world to look into these crimes, to look into these mass graves, and there has still been no investigation. We would like Canada to take the lead on the ICC case, to take the lead on the documentation of the genocide, and to take the lead on immigration.

Thank you so much for your time.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ismael.

Mr. Ismail, you have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Mirza Ismail (Chairman, Yazidi Human Rights Organization International): Distinguished gentlemen, honourable Chair Borys, committee members, and honoured guests. I am honoured to be here. Thank you for this opportunity to speak at the CIMM meeting on the situation of the Yazidi refugees in Turkey, Syria, and Greece and of the IDP in northern Iraq.

I also would like to thank our Canadian government for recognizing and actually declaring last June that ISIS committed genocide after the UN declared it so. I would like to thank our government for declaring that.

Yazidis are indeed the victims of genocide. The Yazidi are an ancient and proud people from the heart of Mesopotamia, the base place of civilization and the base place of many of the world's religions. We believe in a supreme God and in God's seven archangels. Yazidi is a religion, a culture, and a language.

Yazidis are desperately in need of your immediate help and support. During our 6,000 years of history, the Yazidi have faced 74 genocides in the Middle East, including the ongoing genocide. Why? It is simply because we are non-Muslims. Yes, some of you may say, there are many, even Shia Muslims, facing this. This conflict has been between Shia and Sunni for centuries, but when they commit genocide against us, they do it because we are non-Muslims, because we are Yazidi.

We are considered infidels in sharia law, or what they call "the people without book", whether it is Yazidis, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, etc. They are encouraged to kill, rape, enslave, and convert us.

On June 23, 2016, in the Skaramagas refugee camp in Greece, the Arabs, Kurds, and Afghans called a jihad to kill the Yazidis in the camp. These Muslim jihadists attacked the Yazidi refugees with knives, metal bars, sticks, and stones. They injured 18 Yazidi men who tried to defend their families and their people. The 18 injured men were taken to the hospital for medical treatment. They also ravaged their tents and belongings. The attack started at 9:30 p.m. and ended at 3:00 a.m. on June 24. This is not the first attack against the Yazidi refugees in Greece. There have been attacks and violence against the Yazidi refugees in Greece, in Turkey, in Syria, and even in Germany, many times, by ISIS supporters or ISIS members in those countries.

There are about 750 Yazidi refugees in Skaramagas camp. In total there are about 3,363 Yazidi refugees in Greece. This is happening in Greece despite the fact that Greece is not a Muslim country. What about countries like Turkey or Syria? If that could happen in Greece, you can imagine what is happening. You can see on the screen pictures of the victims of the attack by ISIS members or supporters in Greece.

Most of the staff of the UNHCR in Turkey and Syria are Muslims and they violently discriminate against the Yazidi, who do not dare protest their ill treatment or demand their rights. They are given four to five years for a UN interview. I have evidence I am happy to show anyone who wants to see it.

There are thousands of Yazidi refugees currently languishing in Turkey, Syria, and Greece. At the top of the threatened and persecuted list are Yazidis, then come Chaldo-Assyrians and Mandaeans. More than 5,000 Yazidi were murdered by ISIS in August 2014, and more than 3,000 are still enslaved, mostly young women and children.

• (1030)

Humanitarian aid, while necessary, is not sufficient. Much of the humanitarian aid distributed by the Kurdish regional authority and the Iraqi government never gets into the hands of those who need it, those for whom it was intended, because of skimming, corruption, and politics.

If humanitarianism is the chief reason being cited in accepting the refugees, they should receive priority simply because they are the most vulnerable and persecuted in the Middle East, and they are the ones who have nowhere else to go.

There are thousands of young Yazidi women, girls, and children who as I speak have been enslaved and forced into sexual slavery. These girls are subjected to daily, multiple rapes by ISIS monsters. According to many escaped women and girls I met within northern Iraq, the abducted Yazidis, mostly young women and children, numbered more than 7,000 at the beginning. Some of those women and girls have had to watch seven-, eight-, and nine-year-old children bleed to death before their eyes after being raped by ISIS militia multiple times a day. I met mothers, whose children were torn from them by ISIS. These same mothers came to plead for the return of their children only to be informed that they, the mothers, had been fed with the flesh of their own children—children murdered, then fed to their own mothers.

ISIS militia have burned many Yazidi girls alive for refusing to convert and marry ISIS men. Young Yazidi boys are being trained to be jihadists and suicide bombers. The entire Yazidi population of Mount Sinjar was displaced in less than one day, on August 3, 2014.

On August 2, 2014, on the eve of the ISIS attack against the Yazidis in Sinjar region, more than 10,000 of the local authority's forces were present, allegedly there to protect the Yazidis. The Yazidis tried desperately to flee for their lives to Mount Sinjar, but the KRG militias didn't allow it. At about 10 p.m. they escaped back to the KRG region, and they refused to give any weapons to Yazidis to defend themselves against ISIS.

They trapped the children and women. For them it became a waiting room for death and carnage at the hands of ISIS. The Yazidis who begged and pleaded for weapons to save themselves and their people were killed like dogs by peshmergas. Thousands of men were killed on the spot, including hundreds who were beheaded. The UN estimates that 5,000 Yazidis were murdered and thousands of women and children taken hostage.

Today I am pleading with each and every one of you in the name of humanity to lend us your support at this crucial time to save the indigenous and peaceful peoples of the Middle East: the Yazidis, the Chaldo-Assyrians, and the Mandaeans.

Our demand of the Canadian government is to bring as many Yazidi refugees from Turkey, Syria, and Greece as possible, because they are the most vulnerable group and their lives are in danger. If the Yazidis can be attacked in Greece, how about the Yazidi refugees in Turkey and Syria, which are Muslim countries?

We ask Canada to bring in the abducted Yazidis who were able to escape from ISIS. Canada can bring those escaped Yazidi girls from Iraq under section 25 of the immigration law. As my colleague said, Germany has accepted 1,000 who are underaged with their families, so why can Canada not do that?

We ask the Canadian government to be the leading hand in rescuing the more than 3,000 Yazidis who are still being held in captivity by ISIS in Iraq and Syria and in monitoring the ISIS borders so that ISIS doesn't transport them to other countries. Humanitarian aid must be sent immediately and directly to those internally displaced Yazidis, and especially to the Yazidis in Mount Sinjar in northern Iraq. The KRG has put food sanctions on the Yazidis there. There is an imminent threat of starvation, dehydration, and disease.

•(1035)

We ask our government to intervene with the Iraqi government and support the creation of an autonomous region for the Yazidi Chaldo-Assyrians in Sinjar and the Nineveh plain under the protection of international forces and directly tied to Baghdad's central government. This right is guaranteed under the Iraqi constitution, article 125. It needs implementation. This is the only way we can survive in our homeland in the Middle East.

Thank you so much for listening and for your careful consideration going forward. We beseech you to act with the greatest urgency to help save the remnants of our Yezidi nation of the Chaldo-Assyrians and other minorities who face the same thing. Only with your help, after we have experienced so much death and suffering, is there a possibility of a peaceful life going forward for our people.

Thank you.

•(1040)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ismail.

Now we will go to Mr. David Berson.

Mr. David Berson (Co-Chair, Or Shalom Syrian Refugee Initiative, Or Shalom Synagogue): Good morning, members of the House of Commons standing committee and honoured witnesses. Thank you for the invitation to speak today.

Immigration is part of Canada's story. Refugees are part of Canada's story.

My name is David Berson. I'm a member of the Or Shalom Syrian refugee initiative. Or Shalom is an east-side Vancouver synagogue that has 180 members, is of modest means, and has a deep commitment to building community, pursuing social justice, and repairing the world.

Many of our members come from families of origin who have migrated, fled persecution and genocide, and experienced discrimination abroad as well as when arriving in Canada. We understand and appreciate how precious our lives are here, as Canadians, and welcome the efforts being made to improve our country's record of resettling immigrants, especially vulnerable refugees who are in inaccessible areas.

Our synagogue is sponsoring four families, including two families of four and five members in the Kurdish area of northern Iraq, and one family of five in eastern Turkey. These families are Kurdish Syrians who have family members in metro Vancouver. Our fourth family is an LGBT couple, presently in Beirut. We do our work in partnership and collaboration with the United Church and Rainbow Refugee.

Eighteen months ago members of our synagogue, in partnership with our local Tibetan community, resettled two displaced Tibetan women who came from remote areas of northeastern India. Our group raised additional funds so that we could provide training grants for these new Canadians by embarking on a trek to those remote areas. We showed up so that they could show up.

The Old Testament mentions 30 times, do not ill-treat a stranger or oppress him, for you were once strangers in a strange land.

"Sometimes", said our former minister of justice, the Honourable Irwin Cotler, "you need to get a taste of injustice to have urgency to fight against it.". Our community has done so countless times during our history in Canada, together with many other Canadians.

For the purpose of my presentation this morning, "vulnerable" means families whose lives have been disrupted too many times by traumatic transitions, families with young children living with critical health issues and dwindling resources, families in despair, such as Alan Abdul-Rahim, a toddler who had heart surgery at the age of one and requires stable and accessible medical care, or his father, Adnan, who suffers from a serious respiratory condition and is limited in his mobility and physical activity. A distant hope they have is of immigrating to Canada.

"Inaccessible" in our case refers to areas where our families reside, which is the Kurdish region of Iraq, areas apparently inaccessible to our IRCC and consular staff. According to the inter-agency information sharing portal for the Syrian regional refugee response, 249,395 refugees are in the Kurdish region of Iraq, including the regions of Erbil, Dohuk, and Sulaymaniyah. That's 88,772 households. That is the population of Gatineau, a stone's throw from where you sit today. Despite specific suggestions to the Honourable Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, and despite opportunities to partner with the myriad agencies on the ground in northern Iraq, more than 100 individuals, Kurdish Syrian refugees, still await processing. These are individuals who are sponsored by families in metro Vancouver.

Dear standing committee members, there are more humanitarian and government organizations and agencies involved in operations and services than there are letters in the alphabet. In metro Vancouver, private sponsors have mobilized more than 3,000 people to participate in these resettlements. We've raised more than \$775,000 and are prepared to do more. We've educated ourselves in terms of language, food, culture. We've been active long before November 2015 and we are ready to deploy.

Change is needed in how we expedite the processing of vulnerable populations in isolated areas. Here are some recommendations and possible solutions to consider.

Increase the number of private sponsorships allowed to sponsorship agreement holders because private sponsors significantly increase the acculturation process to Canada, even more so in cases where people are vulnerable and have special needs. Private sponsorships cost the government and taxpayers much less, and they develop more resilient communities and stronger community networks.

•(1045)

Encourage support and collaboration with agencies in isolated areas such as northern Iraq.

Recognize internally displaced people as candidates for sponsorship.

Take the UNHCR and the IOM to interview these folks to get the ball rolling.

Accept the UNHCR's designation in places where we, as Canadians, do not have processing centres. If we cannot send personnel, then interview the people by telephone.

Use existing UNHCR refugee cap mechanisms to accelerate security processing and vulnerability assessment. UNHCR has already introduced a digitalized protection monitoring tool to assess for vulnerability and identify needs, and 99% of the people in the camps have been scanned for these records.

Prioritize cases by expediting the ones that have the most sponsors or the most people actively engaged in sponsorship in Canada.

Waive transportation loans for the most vulnerable refugees.

Rent special armoured personnel vehicles to transport Canadian staff so they can safely travel to this area and interview vulnerable families.

Finally, a rather irksome suggestion. On numerous occasions I've thought to myself, being a philanthropic adviser, that perhaps we could embark upon a fundraising campaign to help the IRCC.

We will support your efforts. Let our people go so that we can tell our children and yours that our values called out to us and we acted; so that we can say with pride that our Canadian team is on the ground, well aware of the dangers, taking the risks to save the lives of vulnerable people; so we can say that together with our government we made miracles happen.

Let us resolve that vulnerable refugees' lives matter. Let's resolve to do something.

Finally, I urge you to be decisive in your deliberations and recommendations. Irwin Cotler said of the present crisis and the inaction of the world community that "We are living in the time of bystander leadership." Let us not be bystanders. Let us enact the responsibility to protect. As our sages taught, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, who am I? If not now, when?"

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Berson.

We'll now proceed to the round of questions to the witnesses.

Mr. Tabbara, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you to all the witness for being here today. The tragic events that keep unfolding in Iraq and Syria are very disturbing.

I want to thank Nadia Murad for her bravery and for raising awareness around the world of the plight of the Yazidis. The UN Secretary, Ban Ki-moon, has spoken of your strength and your courage and your dignity, all of which were witnessed here.

Ms. Murad, you mentioned during your recent appearance at the UN, and here today, that you lived in peace and that you were happy, and that you did not want to be a refugee. There are currently more than 3 million displaced in Iraq, many of whom are in the northern region of Kurdistan. Their local government has publicly spoken about the funding deficiencies, and with the recent flare-up in Fallujah there has been much conflict going on there.

I have an article here from Al Jazeera, from Shaker Mahmoud Hadi. Some of the things he mentioned in this article are that in Fallujah right now it's really a catastrophe, that the resources are not enough, and we can provide for only 30% of the displaced. Hadi called upon the international community to help the Iraqi government in dealing with the internally displaced people.

This is what the committee is here today to talk about, the IDPs and how we can better assist them.

The current Government of Canada has increased its humanitarian aid for Iraq to an unprecedented level of \$1.6 billion. It provides training and troops fighting Daesh, including helping the peshmerga forces, and it is working with local governments for stabilization and development.

This is to Ismail. Would you say that this government's whole-of-government approach, including diplomacy, humanitarian aid, political negotiations, and training, is a good way to ensure long-term peace in Iraq?

• (1050)

Mr. Mirza Ismail: I think, as you said about the IDPs, especially who are in northern Iraq, you can help, but at the same time, they should not deal just with the government. The aid that goes to the government doesn't reach the people who need it.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: The humanitarian aid you mean?

Mr. Mirza Ismail: Yes, humanitarian aid, medical aid. You can send teams—we have many in Canada and in the U.S.—or work with other NGOs to make sure that the aid actually reaches the people. We have many people, and they scream. Some of them don't have two meals a day. On the other hand, all is politics. If I am not affiliated with one of the politics there, I am lost, and they don't give me.... You have to do something. We hope that the international community can send direct aid with the people from here, from the United States, from Europe, to make sure that the aid actually reaches the people.

In September 2014, and November, Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, a Hindu Guruji, donated about 110 tonnes of food and clothing. He went with the food and the aid there, to make sure that the people received it. On the other hand, they give some to government, and the government distributes probably less than 10% of it. As soon as the officials leave, the government takes the rest. They don't tell you that, but they give you the picture when they distribute that less than 10%. The aid doesn't reach them.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: What I'm getting from you is that you're saying that there's a lot of corruption—

Mr. Mirza Ismail: There is a lot of corruption.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: —and the aid that's being sent is not directed to people who need it the most.

Mr. Mirza Ismail: That's right, yes.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: What kind of suggestions would you give Canada and the international community to make sure that the aid that we have increased recently does reach the people and does go to the people who need help?

Mr. Mirza Ismail: We suggest that, whether you are in Canada, the U.S., or Europe, you work with the community here, in the U.S., or in Europe. Most of them are Canadian citizens, U.S. citizens, or European citizens, so they can go there. We are willing and more than happy to be volunteers with Canada or whoever wants to send the aid. We are willing to do it and we are more than happy to do it to make sure that the innocent people, the people who are suffering, receive this aid. Work with the community to make sure that the aid is going to be received by the people who need it.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: There's been talk in our government about having a trip in the fall to go to northern Iraq. There have been issues raised, concerns about individual safety if Canadians travel abroad. How is the situation there?

Mr. Mirza Ismail: The situation is not safe. The problem is, when Canadian officials or the U.S. officials or whoever goes there, they are accompanied by security forces, military. You are asking me if everything is okay, but there are four armed men behind you pointing a gun at me, so what do you expect me to tell you? I hope you understand my point.

•(1055)

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: I understand what you're saying.

Mr. Mirza Ismail: The humanitarian aid should be sent directly... they should work with the individual community, whether Yazidi, Assyrian, Baha'i, Kakais, and work with northern Iraq to make sure that aid reaches the people who need it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Tabbara.

Ms. Rempel, seven minutes, please.

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

To Mirza, Murad, and Nadia, it's my understanding that the UN is not practically prioritizing Yazidi refugees. Is that correct?

Mr. Mirza Ismail: Yes, 100%.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: How long is the average wait for an interview for Yazidi presenting to the UN?

Mr. Mirza Ismail: I have the evidence on some of the UN papers with me, and as I said I am willing to show anybody—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: What evidence is that?

Mr. Mirza Ismail: It's the UN papers. At the initial meeting, they give them a certain amount of months or years—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: How long is that wait?

Mr. Mirza Ismail: For example, now we have some families who are waiting and their next appointment is on July 7, 2022.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Do you have evidence to that effect?

Mr. Mirza Ismail: Yes, I have it with me.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Would you be willing to table it with the committee?

Mr. Mirza Ismail: Yes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Excellent.

Given that you showed evidence of the treatment, persecution, and discrimination against Yazidis in refugee camps, is it practical for us to expect Yazidi refugees to remain in camps until 2022?

Mr. Mirza Ismail: The problem is that most of the UN staff, as sister Nadia said...the UN is not helping, because most of the UN staff are Muslims, and they don't like us. Unless we lie to ourselves, they don't like us. They don't treat us equally.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: To be clear for the committee, have the Yazidi people experienced discrimination in UN refugee processes?

Mr. Mirza Ismail: Yes. Why is it that when there is a Yazidi family and a Muslim family, to the Muslim family they give one year and to the Yazidi family they give five years? What kind of equality is this?

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Nadia, would you like to comment on this?

Ms. Nadia Murad Basee Taha (Interpretation): Murad will.

Mr. Murad Ismael: The truth is that not many Yazidis have been able to be processed through the whole refugee system. As you know, there are millions of refugees from all backgrounds. What we know as Yazidis is that not many Yazidis have been able to resettle, internationally. Initially about 65,000 people made it to Turkey. That was in August 2014. Those people were given very long interviews. Even now we have 3,000 or 4,000 people in Turkey; the situation is still the same.

The fact is that people have been unable to come, and that's why we are asking for a specific program. We in Yazda are now helping the Australian government to resettle Yazidi Syrians. We have registered about 200 people; there will be about 300 people. Those are the remainder of the Yazidis who migrated from Syria to Iraq. We are working with the Australian government to bring them directly, without going through the UN system. That's why I said in my testimony that we would like Canada to have a special quota, so that we can bypass all these lengthy processes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: The government's current policy is to rely solely on UN lists to process government-sponsored refugees. The government has also said that we should turn a blind eye to religion in processing refugees. Given your testimony, is that practical?

Mr. Murad Ismael: Well, when the Yazidis on August 3 were put on the road and, based on their religious identity, if they were Yazidi men they were killed and the children were taken into the training camps and the women were enslaved, I think it's unfair that the world would not look into the question of identity. I think it's important that we understand that everyone is suffering in the region. Yes, there's a big tragedy in the region, a big humanitarian crisis; but also religion is a big factor. ISIS is a Sunni group that has used the radical Sunni interpretations of Islam, and it's committing crimes against people who oppose its ideology. On the top of that list come the Yazidis, the Christians, the Shabaks and other minorities, and the Sabians.

It will be unfair, I think, for any country to not take that into consideration. At the same time, I believe in human equality, yet in this particular case, if we are trying to prioritize the process, I would also look into what group they are from, but at the same time at what kinds of victims they are—for example, people such as Nadia, people who are orphans, people who lost a husband. The identification, I think, also should be based on what they have witnessed.

• (1100)

Hon. Michelle Rempel: The Canadian government has said it is unwilling to track and is currently not tracking the success of our refugee programs, based on who is coming into the country, in terms of ethnicity and religion. As part of your recommendation, would you recommend that the government track and report, as part of this system that you're talking about, the number of Yazidis who are coming to Canada both through private sponsorship and government sponsorship streams?

Mr. Murad Ismael: I think that accepting vulnerable communities, groups, or individuals is the right approach to take. I think it will not hurt to say that those people were, for example, Christians, Yazidis, or whoever they are. I don't think this necessarily means that you are discriminating against them. I don't think it's a wrong approach to look into people's background, the region, the religion, the race, the LGBTs, for example. It's important that you look into this, because the discrimination in that region is based on these factors.

The problem is that looking from the viewpoint of our approach to what's happening in the Middle East is not the right approach. I think we have to deal with the facts the way they are.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Would you characterize the process that the UN is currently using to produce lists to support governments such as Canada in bringing government-sponsored refugees to Canada as flawed in terms of its ability to protect Yazidis and vulnerable minorities and persecuted minorities?

Mr. Murad Ismael: Yes, it's flawed and it's unfair, and what is happening is unacceptable.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mirza, would you characterize it as flawed?

Mr. Mirza Ismail: With—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mirza, I just have ten seconds left, so a yes or a no.

Mr. Mirza Ismail: What the UN is doing? Actually the UN is not giving equal rights and we hope that Canada could recognize that

and Canada could give, like my colleague said, a quota to the Yazidis.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: A final word goes to Nadia. Would you characterize the UN process for selecting refugees as flawed, and would you characterize it as being able to adequately protect Yazidis, yes or no?

Ms. Nadia Murad Basee Taha (Interpretation): Yes. Whether you're talking about the Yazidis or other minorities, yes, there should not be any discrimination against all minorities, but all the more not those who have been subjected to genocide. It's not good. It is flawed, it's not good.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Rempel.

Ms. Kwan, for seven minutes please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): I want to thank all of the witnesses for their very compelling testimony, and very thoughtful testimony. I think we as committee members learned a lot.

You shared a lot of information and I can't imagine, Nadia, you having to continue to tell your story and having to relive it each and every day when you tell it and share that story. I have to say it is so tremendous what you're doing because you're educating the world to try to make a difference for your people. I thank you for that.

I want to focus on solutions. What can we do as a country here in Canada and with the international community? How can we change the course of what's happening today? Even if we can save one life, it's worth it. That would be to pay tribute to you and your people, and your experiences, and to that of others who have gone through genocide. The Jewish community comes to mind, and Mr. Berson and his community's experience, and that means a lot to all of us. Yesterday I was in discussion with some of the committee members about the work that we do, and perhaps this might be one of the most important moments of the work that we do here at this committee.

Mr. Murad Ismael, you mentioned that you are working on a program with the Australian government. You talk about quota. In your testimony you talk about a quota of 5,000 minimum in bringing Yazidis over here to Canada. Our current immigration level for the humanitarian compassionate category is at 2,800 to 3,600 people. There are limitations with respect to that. The first thing then is to call on the government to increase the numbers so that we can in fact absorb at least to a degree the people who are faced with genocide at the moment from your community. Is that correct?

•(1105)

Mr. Murad Ismael: First, if you talk about the overall solution in Iraq, it's becoming a proxy war now. The conflict needs to be depoliticized. We need to get rid of ISIS as soon as possible. There is the long-term solution and the short-term solution. I think we need to get on ISIS as soon as possible to get rid of them and establish safe communities for people to go back. At the same time, we need to provide people of vulnerable communities with some sort of guarantee that this will not happen again. If you ask Yazidis or Christians, will you go back to your areas, they will tell you they will not go back unless there is international protection. They are saying that because in many cases those are their neighbours, who are basically in the next village, next door, and they aligned themselves with ISIS when they came, so there's a lot of mistrust in the community.

You have to build peace to bring people back. To establish peace, you have to have justice. That's why we are asking for the ICC to open this case to look into the crimes and to bring the perpetrators to justice. I think I would prefer an approach like Germany's. It was a very quick thing. A decision was made by the German government, actually it was made by the state, not even by the federal government, and then the approval was received from the federal government. They created a committee, the committee went to Iraq and did the interviews very quickly in a couple of months and then we had 1,100 women come to Germany very quickly. I think it's important that we raise all these numbers to bring in refugees, but at the same time I would prefer a targeted program.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay, thank you.

I'm very conscious of time. I have less than three minutes now. I wonder if we can't, as a committee, receive a proposal from you on what that program would look like, in terms of the implementation of such a program for our consideration. We don't have time to get into it in this committee meeting at this moment, but you also talked about targeting victims, women, girls, orphans, children, etc. Could you also highlight what that prioritization would look like in terms of who to target? Could we get a commitment from you to do that?

Mr. Murad Ismael: Yes. For example we have a database of 900 women. About 600 of them are still in Iraq. They're exactly like Nadia's case. We have databases for the orphans. We have a psychosocial centre where all these women come. We can create a list very quickly and provide it to you.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Mr. Berson, thank you for Or Shalom and the work that you're doing in the community. I want to go right to the solutions that you have proposed. You have a list of them. Specifically, yesterday we had a presentation from the UN representative who suggested that in places where it is not possible to get to, where we don't have a processing centre and there are security issues, there is a process whereby we could bypass all of that. That is for Canada, as an example, to waive the processing that is required in Canada in order to bring the people over. Is that something that your group will support and call on the government to do?

Mr. David Berson: I have a lot of respect for the government's processes and procedures, but as someone who's grown up in Canada and lived in other places in the world, I know that we can be

extremely persistent in our due diligence. I think that in terms of expediency, accepting the UNHCR's processing and designation—I've been poring over reports from the refugee camps throughout northern Iraq—is a worthwhile and expedient measure to take on.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

There are over 100 families at the moment. Is that correct?

Mr. David Berson: There are over 100 family members in metro Vancouver, sponsored by about 10 or 11 private sponsorship groups, who have been waiting since November for there to be some contact made with them by the Canadian government. That has yet to happen.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Correct, and you have no sense of when those families would be able to come to Canada because they cannot be processed, and you've been waiting and waiting patiently.

•(1110)

Mr. David Berson: Yes, and I want to point out that the Kurdish Iraqis and the Kurdish population that exists in that whole area suffer from a high level of persecution in a similar way to the Yazidis.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, we're over time at this point.

Mr. Fragiskatos, you have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I echo the sentiments of Ms. Kwan opposite. All of you have shown great bravery today in being here. Needless to say, your advocacy is very important.

I was intrigued to hear of the situation facing Yazidis in the camps. Could you speak to the specific needs of Yazidis in terms of trauma—obviously mental health issues are at play—and specifically the needs of women and children?

Dividing it up, in terms of trauma, Mirza and Murad, if you could speak to that, we'll hear from Nadia on the perspective of women.

Mr. Mirza Ismail: With the situation of the IDPs, especially when it comes to humanity, order, and medical treatment, they're in a very dire situation. The problem at the organizational level is hard. Whether it's our organization, or his, or any other organization, it's difficult trying to provide medical treatment to those, especially women, who are traumatized while escaping from ISIS. It's difficult trying to do it because it's beyond our capacity. We hope the Canadian government, like Germany, could provide some treatment, or open some facilities until they do something. The most urgent thing we are asking Canada to do is to bring as many as possible of those abducted and the orphans to Canada. The community here is more than willing to work with the government to help and to provide whatever else. They can provide help and support here.

It's very difficult. There are many skin diseases, for example. We are working with some doctors from India, especially kidney doctors, because humans cannot drink the water in the camp. It's very dirty. The food nutrition is bad, and people face many types of diseases. We are now working with some Indian doctors who are willing. They have some volunteers to provide some medical treatment and volunteers to take them to India for medical treatment and then bring them back.

While Canada is accepting refugees, we hope that Canada could be the leading country on these issues. This is the only way the community can survive. These remaining cases, who you can see exist today, are the children of the 74 Islamic genocides. It's not something easy that we face. This time ISIS is doing it openly. They don't hide it. That's the reason we don't think the UN needs any type of investigation. They behead somebody and they put it on video. I think some of you saw the pictures. They rape women, and then they put it on video. They put that on sale on YouTube. They show their work. There's no need to pay someone to investigate and get the information. They tell you.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I understand.

Ms. Taha, if you could speak about the specific needs of Yazidi women in the camps, please?

Ms. Nadia Murad Basee Taha (Interpretation): For over a year I was in a Kurdistan camp. There were programs to help survivors psychologically. I was offered that, but I did not accept. I did not go because in the camps I did not have access to food, education, electricity, or running water. All the basic needs were not there. I did not go because I felt that psychological therapy would not help me if I end up going back to the camp with this situation. There were other girls with me who had difficult psychological situations. They went to Germany. They received a residence to live in. They received an opportunity to get education. They received all the basic elements of living, so they were healed from their psychological issues without getting specific psychological treatment. I believe that receiving psychological treatment within the camps, even though it is needed... but there are factors that continue to cause these psychological things. Once you provide them with the basics of food, drink, and housing, then they would be probably healed from that.

• (1115)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Even those who are not in the camps face similar issues that are quite traumatic, obviously.

I know my colleague, Randeep, wants to ask a question as well. Mr. Chair, I'll turn it over to Randeep.

The Chair: Mr. Sarai.

Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.): Just to start, you have my full sympathies, all three of you, but because of the brevity of time I won't get into that. It's gracious of you and brave of you to come out and share your story, especially you, Nadia.

I want ask some solid questions to figure out how we can help you the best. First, how are the girls able to escape from ISIS control, if you can briefly tell us that? I'm going to give you the questions first. The second is: what is the best way to get them out of Iraq, if they are in Iraq, to a safe third place, such as one of the UN camps? Third, are there any camps run by the UN that are better than the others, for example where you face less discrimination within the camp? Are there any that are particularly better, so we can support those more often?

Ms. Nadia Murad Basee Taha (Interpretation): When it comes to girls, some of them in Iraq or in Syria risk their lives; and some of those girls, when they are contacted by people, when they tell their location they receive help. There are a few Muslim families in Iraq and Syria who have helped girls, just like the family who helped me to escape. But currently escaping is getting very difficult because there is no possibility to contact outside families. There are no possibilities to have news about the girls, some of the girls. For more than a year there has been no news about them, so escaping is becoming more difficult. When it comes to the families, the Muslim families in Iraq and Syria, this would be the only way to help them escape.

Mr. Murad Ismael: I want to add to that answer, too, because it's very important. The smuggling networks or the brokers pay through third parties in some cases. This process requires a lot of money. When I went there a couple of times, I saw many women begging for money, going from tent to tent asking for a dollar to be able to rescue their families. That's something I can share more with you privately.

Once a woman comes back, I want to share a few things. There is absolutely no network to receive her. There is absolutely no program to receive her. She would come and she would be first questioned probably by the police for a day. Or just directly, she would be left to go to her family, and in some cases she doesn't even have a person who survived. In some cases she would go to a cousin. When I was there this time, there was a woman who didn't have anyone, and they had to put her with a very distant relative because she had no one surviving from this genocide. There is no one to receive them.

There are no simple things like \$100 to buy clothes. Before January 2015, I met one woman and she was still wearing the clothes from when she was taken into captivity. She said she didn't have the money to afford to buy new clothes for herself. For the women we see at the centre, there's collective trauma and they need a psychosocial program, but they need financial help. I think they need a monthly salary. Through the Iraqi government we provided salaries for 600 of them, and each one is receiving \$120 a month, but also the Iraqi government has been giving us a very hard time to process the applications.

It would be good for a country like Canada to allocate, for example, a monthly contribution to these women so they can live with dignity. I think asking someone to treat their trauma while they don't have a place to live, while they cannot afford food, while they cannot even afford to go and see a woman doctor, a gynecologist... Many of these women come back with gynecological problems, which they cannot afford.

That's why what Nadia said was right. I think bringing people to a different environment, then also you don't have to deal with other things like stigma, so bringing them to a different environment and then treating them, and then....

• (1120)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ismael.

Ms. Rempel, you have five minutes, please.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Just to the witnesses physically here in Ottawa first, just for the clarity of the committee, most Yazidi refugees are Iraqi nationals. Is that correct, a majority?

Mr. Murad Ismael: Yes, there are only a few thousand Syrians.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

With that as context, to our witness from the Or Shalom Syrian Refugee Initiative, the government has eliminated the exemption for Iraqi nationals under the mission cap for private sponsor refugees. Given that you have many families who are willing to sponsor refugees through the private sponsorship stream, would it be helpful if the government reintroduced this exemption for Iraqi nationals through the private sponsorship stream?

Mr. David Berson: I don't know that I can speak specifically to the Iraqi nationals. What I can tell you is that we are maxed out with four families right now, but I know from the sponsorship agreement holders with whom we work that there is a readiness to sponsor more families regardless of whether they're IDPs or whether they're Kurdish Iraqis. There are many more families I know of for whom we are searching to find private sponsors, but we've run out of the numbers in terms of what the government is prepared to allow.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: And that would be through the private sponsorship program.

I would like to clarify one comment that Mr. Ismael made. Your organization and others like yours have identified and do have lists of Yazidis in terms of their location, and who could be relocated through these types of programs. Is that correct?

Mr. Murad Ismael: Yes, and we can facilitate that so that the government officials here should not have any problems going to the

countries where Yazidis are. We can help you to go there. It's mostly safe in the countries where Yazidis are, and we have lists of the direct victims, to a certain extent.

I heard from the previous discussion yesterday that there were some issues, that the government would not be able to go because of safety. I think that should not be something to block the path.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Very briefly, the government here has stated that there should be concern for Canadian officials' safety in terms of going to Iraq, as well as NGOs. But certainly when we look at ourselves as a country, helping people, we understand that there are risks to be taken. I don't want you to walk away thinking, because of these questions, that Canada is not willing to help, because I think we are.

I'll pass this over to my colleague Mr. Kent.

The Chair: Mr. Kent, you have two minutes.

Hon. Peter Kent (Thornhill, CPC): Thank you to all our witnesses for your powerful testimony today, for your advice, and for your appeal for extraordinary action to rescue the survivors of the continuing genocide.

I would like to just refer back to a suggestion made by a government colleague yesterday that because of the Yazidis' ancient language and culture, they may, as refugees, face particular difficulties in integrating in Canadian society.

I wonder, Mr. Ismail and Mr. Ismael, whether you would respond to that.

Mr. Mirza Ismail: The Yazidis have no problem at all in integrating into a different society. I think that the Yazidis, almost like a nation, are the most open-minded to live with others just as a brotherhood. The Yazidis would have no problem at all in integrating into Canadian society, as we did. We are here. We are Yazidis who came from Sinjar, and now some of us are working. Most of our friends are Canadians and Americans, and we have no problem. In religion, the Yazidis say that we are human beings, and we are all like one family, and we should respect one another and we should respect God's words. The Yazidis would have no problem at all with integrating into Canadian society.

• (1125)

Mr. Murad Ismael: I share the same thing. We have a homeland in Turkey and Iraq, and in Syria, but we are always on the move because of the persecution. Just as the Jewish people who have been all over the world, I think sometimes you don't have a choice. The Yazidis have no choice, and I think they will be integrated.

The results from the high school just came out in Kurdistan, and I think probably the first three or four schools on top are the Yazidi schools. It's not because they are very special, but because they have seen so much tragedy and they believe in hard work, so I think they will be integrated into a community.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Zahid, you have five minutes, please.

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): My first question is for Nadia Taha. Nadia, I would like to thank you for joining us today and for courageously sharing with us, and also with the world, your story and the plight of your people.

I read with interest your powerful address to the United Nations Security Council. You discussed resettlement for the most vulnerable, but also the liberation of your homeland so your people can one day return home and live in peace.

Could you discuss how the international community can help bring that needed safety and peace, and improve the conditions in that region?

Ms. Nadia Murad Basee Taha (Interpretation): Yes. When it comes to the Yazidis we have two issues that we ask of the world: either they admit that genocide has taken place and they give us safety and protection in our homeland; or they facilitate our migration. I think that's reasonable.

We are no longer willing to put up with more genocide. They either protect us in our homeland or provide protection for us elsewhere so that we could live peacefully elsewhere if we have to leave our homeland.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: My next question is for Murad Ismael.

You mentioned the number of 5,000 to 10,000. How do you arrive at that number? For this number that you have mentioned, would you draw on people in camps or those people who are still in northern Iraq? If they're still in northern Iraq, how can you gain access for the processing and the security purposes for those people?

Mr. Murad Ismael: Yes, northern Iraq is safe. The civilian program has been done through that, so there is no problem. With the German program, people went to Dohuk in northern Iraq, and they were processed there. It is not an issue to go to northern Iraq and process the applications. As for how to select those 5,000 to 10,000, I think the direct victims of the genocide should be given priority and also the refugees in Turkey. We can work on a recipe, or some composition of people, with some people who are direct victims and some people who are in Turkey. I think it will not be an issue to find who are the most vulnerable.

There is also access to all the camps. For example, the camp of Qadiya is where most of the women are who escaped from captivity. That camp is in Zakho. It's accessible and anyone can visit it.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: As we all know, unfortunately, settlement cannot be a solution for everyone in this situation. What can we do to improve conditions on the ground? How can we help countries hosting camps to better support the population in those camps?

Other than resettlement, what are the other things that can be done on the ground?

Mr. Murad Ismael: We have to also think about the long-term solutions. We have to free or recapture all the areas, for example. We still have 30% to 40% under the control of ISIS. We have to have a safe zone, or international protection, or some sort of administrative and security parameters to ensure that no future genocides will occur against the Yazidis, Christians, or other minorities.

We have to think about the long-term solution. We thought the recognition of the genocide through the ICC would probably provoke the international community to set up these parameters for the future of the Yazidis and others. That's why we are focusing on that.

We need to think about the long-term solutions and at the same time resettle some people and provide humanitarian aid. Go to a camp and ask them when they last received dry food such as rice, sugar, and flour. They will tell you the last time they received that was six months ago. This is something that could be purchased in Turkey, Iran, or other countries and could be given to the people. Immediate humanitarian aid needs to be provided.

• (1130)

Mrs. Salma Zahid: The same question to Mr. Ismail, what do you recommend?

Mr. Mirza Ismail: For the long term, Canada could work with other allies like the U.S., and other European countries like the U.K., to support the creation of an autonomous region for the Yazidis and Chaldo-Assyrian Christians. This is the only way we can survive in the Middle East, because both governments... The central government in Sinjar, allegedly to protect them, they defeated in June, and the KRG had more than 10,000 of its peshmerga they say. The Iraqi government failed, so the Sinjar has to be part of KRG now, and they say, "We're going to protect you".

When ISIS attacked, many of the peshmerga and local Kurds joined up with ISIS and killed their Yazidi neighbours. The Yazidi lost trust in our neighbours, both the Yazidi and the Assyrians. We hope that... Iraq is a federal government now. Under the new constitution, if a region wants to have a separate administration, then they're allowed, but they don't accept that because we are Yazidi and we are Christian.

That needs the intervention of the international community to work with the Iraqi government and with the KRG government. It is only by word of mouth that they say they are democratic, but in fact they are not democratic. They are dictatorships. We have seen it with the governments now in place, the local government and the national government.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Mirza Ismail: They need international support to create a safe zone for the Assyrian Christians. We hope Canada will provide them with military training. We have more than...at least now in Sinjar. There are two Yazidi forces. We have 10,000 to 15,000 men and women who are protecting their lands and families with the Christians. We need to provide military training to those people until we have a safe zone for them.

The Chair: If there is additional information and recommendations that you'd like to provide, please do so through the clerk of the committee. We would welcome any information that you didn't have an opportunity to bring forward.

I'd like to thank the panel for their powerful testimony. In particular, I'd like to thank Ms. Nadia Taha for your courage in sharing the personal horrors of genocide that you've experienced, your insights, and for your recommendations.

Thank you so much.

We will now suspend for a couple of minutes to wait for the second panel to arrive.

• (1130) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1140)

The Chair: Welcome back.

Appearing before us today in the second panel are Ms. Gloria Nafziger from Amnesty International; Mr. Chad Walters and Mr. Paul Tolnai from Foundation of Hope; and Ms. Christine Morrissey from Rainbow Refugee, who will be sharing her time with Mr. Dylan Mazur of the Vancouver Association for Survivors of Torture.

Thank you for accepting the invitation to appear before our committee.

I'll begin with Ms. Nafziger for seven minutes, please.

Ms. Gloria Nafziger (Refugee and Migrant Coordinator, Toronto Office, Amnesty International): Good afternoon. I'm very pleased to be here this afternoon. Amnesty International would like to thank the honourable committee members for the opportunity to comment on the important subject of how Canada can best support vulnerable groups in inaccessible regions. Our briefing will provide some background on the issue of vulnerable groups, with a particular focus on internally displaced people, or IDPs. Before offering recommendations for immigration reform, or suggestions to better assist these populations, I would like to review some of the international law standards and background.

Unlike the 1951 convention relating to the status of refugees and its 1967 protocol, which provides special protection to individuals seeking asylum who are outside their countries of origin, there is currently no global binding international law instrument specifically addressing the plight of IDPs. However, this does not mean that international law is silent on the issue. General international human rights law and, where applicable, international humanitarian law establish clear obligations for states to protect IDPs and other vulnerable populations still residing within their countries of origin.

Furthermore, the specific protection needs of IDPs and state obligations towards them have been clearly delineated in soft international law instruments as well as certain binding regional instruments. Although efforts to further develop an international legal framework for IDP protection have focused primarily on articulating state obligations towards IDPs located within their own borders, international law has long recognized the crucial role of international actors. According to the UN guiding principles on internal displacement, international humanitarian organizations and other appropriate actors have the right to offer assistance to IDPs,

and the consent cannot arbitrarily be withheld. The principle and that right of civilian populations to receive humanitarian relief have been recognized by the International Committee of the Red Cross as reflecting customary law applicable in both international and non-international armed conflicts.

There is therefore a clear recognition that, under international law, international actors have an important role to play in responding to the protection needs of IDPs. In many circumstances, even most circumstances, state authorities have played an active role in persecuting groups under their jurisdiction and cannot be relied upon to fully protect these populations. Even when they are willing to aid IDPs within their borders, states often suffer from institutional incapacity due to conflict or natural disasters. The sheer number of IDPs can often prove overwhelming to international aid efforts as well. According to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, the number of conflict-related IDPs has surpassed the number of refugees every year since 1990.

The centre also found that the number of conflict-related IDPs has increased significantly in recent years, reaching the astronomical figure in 2015 of 40.8 million persons internally displaced by conflict.

Responding to the protection and humanitarian assistance needs of IDPs requires action on many fronts. A comprehensive response certainly must include responding generously to UN appeals and providing expertise and training to national institutions. For Canada, it should also include facilitating legal migration to allow individuals to escape situations of generalized violence and targeted persecution.

• (1145)

As a part of its response, Canada could consider the following measures. It could ensure that visa policy does not serve as a barrier to individuals accessing protection in Canada, either by lifting visa requirements for countries with significant protection needs or by ensuring there is an alternative procedure for individuals seeking to travel to Canada to access protection. It could enhance family reunification schemes by removing financial barriers to families in Canada who wish to sponsor family members who are IDPs and living in refugee-like situations. Canada could adopt a broader definition of the family for the purpose of family class sponsorships, again with respect to IDPs. Eliminating the excluded family member rule to ensure that initial omissions in immigration applications do not necessarily lead to lifelong separations is very important. This would be true for IDPs and many refugees. Canada could permit private groups and groups of five sponsorships for individuals who are internally displaced.

There is a need to streamline the application process and forms that are used in sponsorship referrals, as the current system is often onerous for private sponsors and unable to be responsive in a crisis. Canada could consider other humanitarian admission programs, including flexibility in the provision of student and work visas. Canada could also consider being flexible in the provision of temporary residence permits that would allow one to travel to Canada, where a refugee claim may be likely to follow. Finally there's providing the necessary resources to visa posts, which are responsible for processing all applications.

In addition to reviewing the current resettlement and family reunification programs, the committee could also recommend the creation of new immigration programs designed specifically for vulnerable groups still residing in their countries of origin. In the past Canada has done so through the programs such as the political prisoners and oppressed persons class and more recently the source country class. The latter was repealed in 2011.

Amnesty International supports the reintroduction of a source country program based on objective risk criteria. A government review of the source country class identified a number of shortcomings in that program, including resource constraints where a reliable case referral mechanism does not exist in a particular country. A reformed program, with strong coordination with humanitarian partners, could play a very important protection role for IDPs. The source country program was limited to specific countries, which were listed through regulatory amendments. We recommend a more open approach, not limited to designated countries, which would allow the government and humanitarian partners to be more flexibly responsive to situations and case processing of need.

Let me close by saying what is perhaps obvious, but nonetheless very relevant. It is so important that Canada open up flexible programs that respond to urgent protection needs of IDPs and other vulnerable groups, and do so by including a source country program. None of that, however, should ever detract from the resources and the commitments that are made to our current refugee protection and resettlement programs.

Thank you.

• (1150)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Nafziger.

Mr. Walters and Mr. Tolnai, seven minutes.

Mr. Chad Walters (Board Member, Foundation of Hope): Mr. Chair, honourable members and guests, it is a pleasure for us to be here today on behalf of the Foundation of Hope.

My name is Chad Walters. I am a board director with the foundation, and I'm here with my colleague, Paul Tolnai. We are grateful for this opportunity to share with you today our experiences and to contribute to your study on this matter. In addition to my role as a board director, I have also completed research on the topic of gay-identified refugee claimants and their experiences throughout the refugee status determination period. Thus, what I share with you today is an expression of my knowledge in both of these capacities.

The Foundation of Hope's vision statement is a world where LGBT+ refugees and newcomers can live freely and be themselves.

We are a registered charity providing financial assistance to other Canadian charities actively supporting LGBT refugees and newcomers. We are a working volunteer board that is the first of its kind in Canada, and possibly the world.

From the beginning we recognized that a tremendous amount of resources are needed to help people find the freedom they need to be themselves. We saw a need for a fundraising organization that does not work directly with individual cases of LGBT persecution; therefore, our goal is to enable and empower those who do by providing targeted funding.

Under our charitable status, the foundation is legally required to direct all its charitable contributions towards other Canadian charities. Our mandate is to ensure broad representation exists to meet the needs of LGBT refugees and newcomers. This includes not only offering funding for private sponsorship applicants, but also support for our newest Canadians once they arrive in their new home. We believe there are emergent benefits that the foundation can foster through collaboration with charitable organizations that share common interests. The goal is for the Foundation of Hope to be the primary contact for Canadians who want to financially help organizations that fall under our mandate. This allows organizations to focus on providing services rather than fundraising.

Mr. Paul Tolnai (Acting Secretary, Foundation of Hope): Mr. Chair, in our first two years we've raised well in excess of \$100,000 mainly through our flagship event, Strut, where we invite participants to walk a mile in shoes they normally wouldn't wear. After all, a mile in someone else's shoes is better than a lifetime in the closet. To date we have granted nearly \$50,000 to partner charities. This includes Rainbow Railroad of Toronto, who work directly with LGBT people who need to get out of danger; Mosaic in Vancouver, who provide peer and mental health support to LGBT refugees once they are in Canada; Egale in Toronto for targeted LGBT youth newcomer support services; and the Inland Refugee Society of Vancouver, who offer emergency housing for LGBT refugees and newcomers.

One of the most heartbreaking stories came from earlier this year when we received an application for funding from the Iranian Railroad for Queer Refugees. They were seeking financial support to create a network of activists for Iranian LGBT asylum seekers in Turkey who faced specific discrimination not only for being LGBT, but also because of language and cultural issues. Despite this legitimate charity receiving Government of Canada funding for their projects, the Foundation of Hope had to reject their application because IRQR was not a registered Canadian charity. Our friends with Rainbow Refugee, who you'll hear from later, have informed us that they are also in a similar situation where they cannot request funds from us for their important work because they have yet to receive charitable status. This limitation for tax purposes has needlessly hindered the foundation's work. One of our recommendations would be for the government to provide specialized charities, such as the Foundation of Hope, with the ability to give to legitimate charities that either do not have, or are in the process of acquiring, their registered status.

• (1155)

Mr. Chad Walters: As a masters graduate student of social work, whose research focused on the experiences of gay-identified convention refugees, I have obtained an understanding of various challenges claimants face. I would make the following recommendations, based on my research and the narratives of the five participants.

First, ensure substantial LGBT competence training for immigration lawyers and officials. Hearing things like “but you don't look gay” is commonplace for claimants. Their journey to safety in Canada begins with doubt and disbelief, and we need to start from a place of trust. It is imperative that the way one looks is not a factor in one's credibility as LGBT. As it stands today, claimants are still required and encouraged to perform gayness in ways that may not feel authentic in order to appeal to stereotypes that are entrenched in the refugee apparatus. Passing as straight was a strategy for survival in their home countries, and expecting stereotypical mannerisms here is expecting falsity. In an atmosphere where credibility is constantly questioned, we should not create a situation where we demand that claimants are acting anything other than authentically themselves.

Second, reconsider asking claimants the question “when did you realize you were LGB or T?” This question assumes a clearly defined moment of realization in one's life. It is not something that can be easily answered and was distressing to some claimants. At times, claimants were made to choose an age arbitrarily in order to make a clear narrative. This speaks to a dissonance between claimants' authentic stories and the requirement to match lawyers' and adjudicators' understandings of LGBT lives.

Third, allow explicit mention of sexual orientation and gender identity as reason for protection as opposed to including SOGI peoples in the category of a particular social group. Explicit mention further legitimates these claims and moves toward greater inclusion and acknowledgement of this vulnerable group.

Mr. Paul Tolnai: Mr. Chair, on behalf of the Foundation of Hope and our partner charities, we offer our heartfelt thanks for extending this opportunity to meet with the committee this summer and also for extending this committee into the summer. It shows the truly non-partisan support of this House on this critical issue.

Mr. Walters and I welcome any questions.

The Chair: I will now provide seven minutes to Ms. Morrissey and Mr. Mazur.

Mr. Dylan Mazur (Executive Director, Vancouver Association for Survivors of Torture): Thank you very much to the committee for the invitation. I'm honoured to share this place with Rainbow Refugee.

My name is Dylan Mazur, and I am the executive director at the Vancouver Association for Survivors of Torture, otherwise known as VAST. For the past 30 years, VAST has been providing trauma-focused psychological counselling for refugees who arrive in British Columbia with psychological trauma as a result of torture, political violence, and other forms of persecution, including that inflicted on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.

In the realm of refugee protection, we believe that persecution on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity is unique, different from other forms of persecution in the enumerated grounds of the refugee convention, such as nationality and political opinion.

Why is it unique?

First, there is black-letter law in more than one third of countries in this world to criminalize homosexuality or the promotion of homosexuality. For LGBTI communities, this means that their own government has enacted legislation that criminalizes their identity; legislation that criminalizes this most fundamental form of human expression, the expression of gender and sexuality.

Second, persecution on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity is unique because it is not reserved for contexts of armed conflict or political violence. It takes place in any and all contexts in which identity is criminalized. These unique circumstances, we believe, require a unique response. First is to deem all LGBTI communities in the contexts in which their identities are criminalized as vulnerable groups and to not use armed conflict or political violence as an indicator of vulnerability, but rather to use the context to determine whether or not their identities are criminalized.

• (1200)

Ms. Christine Morrissey (Special Advisor, Rainbow Refugee): I am the co-founder and a volunteer with the Rainbow Refugee society, which was begun in the year 2000 specifically to support LGBT refugee claimants, and now asylum seekers, because the basis of their persecution is their sexual orientation, gender identity, and HIV status.

As Dylan has said, and clearly as has been recognized by the federal government, you're aware and I'm aware that members of the LGBT community are in fact vulnerable persons. This is reflected in the fact that in 2011 the federal government initiated a pilot for the sponsorship of folks seeking asylum because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

It's a national program. We form constituent groups and work with sponsorship agreement holders. We currently have groups that are working on initiatives in Halifax, Ottawa, Toronto, and B.C. The constituent groups raise funds for nine months and provide support for 12 months, while IRCC's RAP provides three months' worth of funds and a start-up package. These sponsorships do not affect the quotas of the SAHs, nor are they limited to specific geographic areas.

Since 2011, there are 70 LGBT individuals who are being sponsored, some of whom are couples, several of whom are blended visa office referrals, with Rainbow Refugee project sharing the cost. Approximately \$1 million has been raised over the past four years by these constituency groups.

The need to continually renew this project does not work. At any point the project could end. Regularizing this project will enable LGBT folks to continue to sponsor members of a very vulnerable population.

Mr. Dylan Mazur: While we're addressing refugee protection here, we have worked with cases where people leaving their home countries will actually increase their vulnerability. What we are recommending is a pathway whereby LGBTI people can use the existing private sponsorship pathway with Rainbow Refugee and other groups across the country to apply on humanitarian and compassionate grounds for protection by the Canadian government. The reason for this is that they may be leaving one country in which they're criminalized in order to seek refuge in another, and that increases their vulnerability. We are recommending a pathway whereby they can apply for humanitarian and compassionate status through private sponsorship means.

Ms. Christine Morrissey: While there has been reference made to source countries and the procedure that we have had in the past in our immigration legislation, we're actually talking about vulnerable groups being identified regardless of the country, rather than having country-wide blankets, so that folks are able to make applications and have those applications processed in their home countries.

Every day I receive emails from members of our community from several of the 73 countries that criminalize sexual and gender minorities, including the 10 that have the death penalty. While the majority of LGBT refugees are not in inaccessible places geographically, our position is that because there are very few, if any, safe places for members of our community to access UNHCR and Canadian visa officers, this is what creates the inaccessibility. Lesbians are particularly vulnerable as women, often because of their inability to travel. Some have no access to Canadian visa officers outside of their home country.

Consider the following situations: a gay man from Uganda often goes to Kenya, where the legislation is identical to that in Uganda; a Syrian lesbian couple goes to the United Arab Emirates; a

transsexual Singaporean may need to go to Malaysia, and vice versa. In all of these cases there is no safe access.

I want you to imagine that you have fled your country because of a fear of persecution because of your sexual orientation or gender identity. You have no contacts, no friends. You are not able to access any support agencies. You may be able to work legally; you may not. You may have had to apply for a visa to enter the country and have only six months, or in some cases only two weeks, to stay in that host country. Depending on where you have been able to go, you face processing times that create excessive hardship and danger over prolonged periods of time.

Currently the LGBT applicants that we are sponsoring face some of these unacceptable time lengths. For example, people we're sponsoring who are currently in Pakistan face a six-and-a-quarter-year wait. In Kenya, they experience six years; in Egypt, four and a half years; and in Cambodia, four years. Although UNHCR has developed guidelines for the interviewing of LGBTI individuals, most applicants are terrified that they will be interviewed by someone who is homophobic. Despite this, some do approach UNHCR; however, others do not. We, as constituent groups, do have experience in assessing credibility.

• (1205)

The Chair: Thank you.

I'd like to thank the panellists for their introductory remarks.

We will begin with Mr. Sarai for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you all for coming. Thank you to VAST for coming from British Columbia.

Maybe I'll start with Gloria first.

Canada used to have a category of refugees that were identified by source country. This allowed persons to present an application for resettlement within their country of origin without a UNHCR referral. What are your thoughts on this? What do you think the advantages or disadvantages of that category are?

Ms. Gloria Nafziger: There are serious advantages to the category, and I think my friends have articulated that need, particularly for LGBTI claimants. Without a doubt, there are some people for whom leaving their country is actually more dangerous than staying in their country. The ability to have a mechanism that can identify people who are at risk within their country is absolutely critical. Canada was viewed as a leader when it introduced the concept of a source country program, because it really does fall outside of the remit of a refugee program. There's no effective and easy tool currently that helps to identify people in that situation. In the course of the work that we do, we work with many human rights defenders: lawyers, journalists, people who are in hiding and can't leave.

The challenge in the program is finding adequate referral agents, organizations, individuals, that have the capacity, the willingness, and the ability to determine who of those source country individuals are most vulnerable, because I think the criteria of most vulnerable still always has to apply. I think the challenge they're in is actually finding the referral agency and the screening of the applications, but I don't think that should be a barrier to the introduction of such a program. It need not be geographically based. I think the suggestion that I heard, where it could be open and flexible to countries where there is a need, is an important one.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Thank you.

This question would be to Mr. Walters. You said many LGBT community members are asked to demonstrate their "gayness". Is that the UN, or is that Immigration Canada asking them to demonstrate that?

Mr. Chad Walters: All these folks that I interviewed for this project were inland refugee claimants, so that's on the Canadian side, the IRB.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: What would be the best way, do you think, for government intake workers to find out someone is a member of the LGBT community without offending them or putting them in an awkward situation? Obviously they have to demonstrate it in order to be a refugee, but what would be a more comfortable, more socially acceptable way for somebody in the LGBT community to be asked and to get a truthful answer out of them?

• (1210)

Mr. Chad Walters: It's a tough question to answer. If I just listen to the voices of the folks that I interviewed, none of them said they didn't want to have to prove their membership in the community. Each actually supported that requirement. It's just sometimes the way that it was approached was perhaps overly personal, like asking about quite specific sexual situations. I don't know. I'm not sure.

Mr. Paul Tolnai: If I may, for the purposes of what you're studying today, it is fantastic that we have Rainbow Refugee here. We've done the work for you. When we do a private sponsorship, we're pretty sure that they're gay, or LGBT, or part of that umbrella. We've done the work. It's easy.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: The problem with that is that you still need to have somebody in Citizenship and Immigration Canada to verify that, but it would be good for cultural sensitivity to know what the appropriate ways to ask are. I mean, for heterosexual couples, they're asked—

Mr. Paul Tolnai: A person can't come up to me if I'm a refugee and say, "Are you LGBT?" I'm sorry, it's not going to work. That's why the private sponsorship scheme that we're proposing that needs to be normalized is the best way for you to do it.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Okay.

I'm going to ask Mr. Fragiskatos to take the last minute and a half.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thanks very much.

I want to ask about the pilot project. I read a CBC report published in 2015 that said that between 2011 and 2015 only 32 individual refugees have been helped by this project, yet it started in 2011. I just wonder...and I've heard from my own constituents.

In fact, a friend of mine works for a settlement agency in London, Ontario, the city I'm from and the city I represent here today. His primary responsibility, I should clarify, is to work with members of the LGBT community, those who come and are refugees and who require support based on that sensitivity. He said this program was not very well advertised and it wasn't promoted on government websites. Can you speak to that?

For only 32 individuals to be helped over four years is quite surprising. In principle, the program is great, so why so little help?

Ms. Christine Morrissey: I would say several things. One is that I'm assuming the numbers he's giving are those who have actually arrived. The processing takes so long that in fact, between those who've arrived and those who are still in the pipeline, there are 70. My stats show a minimum of 70. That's one issue.

The second issue is that we're all volunteers. We have no infrastructure. When this pilot project began, I asked the federal government at the time if we would be able to get some funding to establish an infrastructure. We have no infrastructure, we have no office, we have no telephones, and we have no money for advertising. We have absolutely no infrastructure whatsoever.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Ms. Morrissey, I want to ask about the funding. This is a \$100,000 program. How much was allocated since 2011?

Ms. Christine Morrissey: I don't keep those statistics, because the three-month funds vary according to province because they're welfare rates. I know that during the period of time we have not depleted that budget.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Okay, thank you very much. It would have been interesting to find that out, but I appreciate that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fragiskatos.

Ms. Rempel, you have seven minutes.

• (1215)

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I will be splitting my time with Mr. Saroya.

Very briefly, Ms. Morrissey, I was wondering if you could perhaps clarify or expand upon your comments around the processing, selection, or identification of LGBTI refugees using the UN selection process. We've heard from other groups that there may be difficulties or inadequacies with that particular process, and given that we use the UN list to select government-sponsored refugees, do you just want to complete your thought on that? Should we be relying solely on those lists in terms of identifying LGBTI refugees to come in through that stream?

Ms. Christine Morrissey: I would say clearly and absolutely not, for two reasons. First of all, the UNHCR has begun to do work in terms of identifying appropriate interviewing processes and interviewing questions. So there has been some work done; however, it's in a booklet on paper and it doesn't necessarily filter down to the person who is actually doing the interview. From that point of view, it's problematic. The second piece that we've heard from other witnesses as well is that the problem is how long it takes to get an interview, especially if you're looking at, for example, somebody who has gone from one hostile country to another having to wait two or three years even to get an interview. Solely using the UNHCR process is totally inadequate. I think the private sponsorship process is much more appropriate for the folks we see, without excluding the UNHCR process.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Walters, do you want to expand upon that thought based upon your experience?

Mr. Chad Walters: When we're talking about the sponsorship that Chris just referred to, I feel as if we, as members of the LGBT community, have kind of a way of communicating, understanding, or empathizing with experiences of other LGBT members. So it's almost like—I don't know exactly how to express it—we can identify with them in a way.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Absolutely.

Mr. Chad Walters: If, let's say, there was an IRB member or an adjudicator who was of the LGBT community, I think there would be an easier way of knowing whether or not that person is or is not....

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I understand what you're saying. It's a member of the community, sort of an intangible. I think that's very valuable for us in terms of recommendations coming out of this committee.

Thank you, and I'll pass my time over to Mr. Saroya.

Mr. Bob Saroya (Markham—Unionville, CPC): Thank you all for coming. It's a very difficult subject. I worked with a number of LGBT persons many times in my life and it's always difficult, even to start where you start.

Ms. Morrissey said there was a death penalty because they were lesbians and gays. How do you help them? How do you raise some money and give them the money? How do you help those in other countries, sitting in Canada?

Ms. Christine Morrissey: Currently we use the process that's in place. It means that people from Iran, Yemen, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia have to take the initiative of actually leaving their countries and going to another country. We're not in a position to be able to do anything financially to help or support them during that process. It's their job and their responsibility to leave their home country and to travel to a host country, where they have to survive during however

long the processing takes. We don't have any money. We don't have any funds. The money that is raised goes directly to the applicants once they arrive in Canada as permanent residents.

Mr. Bob Saroya: I have a question for Gloria. At Amnesty International you are doing good work, and you have seven million people helping you in 150 different countries. You mentioned that Canada should help IDPs legally escape. What do you mean by that? How do you escape? How do you legally escape from these people? How can the government help these people escape?

Ms. Gloria Nafziger: Legal pathways for people who are inside their country to leave the country and come to Canada.... The biggest barrier for most people in terms of legal pathways is more flexibility with respect to various visa requirements, different types of immigration-related programs that can provide legal pathways for people to move across borders.

I mentioned a number of different legal pathways that people could take advantage of, which would require more flexibility in terms of the immigration programs that we currently already use. But when we're looking at vulnerable people, people who are at risk, we sometimes need to think about a broader definition of family.

• (1220)

Mr. Bob Saroya: Are you talking about section 25 of the immigration act? Is this what can help out?

Ms. Gloria Nafziger: The humanitarian and compassionate applications that individuals are able to have access to is another tool that's already at the government's disposal. To make better use of the application is definitely another route that individuals can take.

Mr. Bob Saroya: My last question is about raising \$1 million, and \$100,000 for your project for your humanitarian situation.

I worked with some of the people from Iran. There are a number of very difficult situations there, and I know, Ms. Morrissey, you are working with them, and I know you are helping those people. Would you talk a little more about it?

Ms. Christine Morrissey: The \$1 million comes from the fact that as private sponsors, they have to raise sufficient money to support them for 12 months.

If you look at cities like Vancouver, I averaged \$15,000 for supporting an individual, times 70. We do not allow people to submit applications until they have raised that money because we cannot put the sponsorship agreement holders in jeopardy.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Kwan, you have seven minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you to all the witnesses for your presentations today.

I think I heard pretty well everyone touch on the issue around source country, and that as a remedy to addressing some of the challenges we face for vulnerable groups.

I will perhaps focus on that piece at the moment. Chris, are you suggesting that the source country category be reinstated, and that the LGBTI community be specified as a vulnerable group within that so that it could have access to resettlement applications?

Ms. Christine Morrissey: Yes, that's exactly what I'm suggesting.

Given the challenges, I'm also suggesting that it happen with LGBT folks who are actually connected with a private sponsor.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay.

And that identification is not tied to the country of origin, but rather to the laws that exist within that country. For example, for the LGBTI community, if it's deemed to be illegal, you would then identify that as a country of access to the source country classification.

Ms. Christine Morrissey: Yes. If you're a member of the LGBTI community and you are a citizen of a country that criminalizes you because of your sexual orientation, that satisfies the country of origin challenges. Then what remains is the assessment of the credibility of the applicant.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay.

Now, one of the things we heard yesterday from both the UNHCR and from government officials is that they actually don't track vulnerable groups. In this instance we're talking about LGBTI communities. They have no idea who is coming in who is identified with that group, and they have no idea who is coming into the country who is identified with that group.

To our colleague's point about the number of cases and how you're processing them, I would say that you're doing better than the government on that score.

That being said, how can we overcome this problem? Do you have any suggestions as to how we can address that? Would that be through the private sponsors who can make the identification, and would that, then, be processed perhaps through Rainbow or through any other organizations in that way? How can we address this issue of not being able to identify the groups? If we can't identify them, how do we provide assistance?

Okay, go ahead, Paul.

• (1225)

Mr. Paul Tolnai: It's interesting. As the Foundation of Hope, we are reached out to by people who are in need of assistance. It's amazing. When you don't have to go into a UNHCR camp and you don't have to go into an embassy or a consulate, these people on the Internet reach out very quickly to us, and we identify them with great ease. Then we pass them off to the actual service provider or to a group that can do it. They have obstacles. One, they need to find a group of people who are willing to do it. The gay community in Canada is tremendously giving. There are lots of people waiting to help. The second is that they need to find the funds to privately sponsor them. Then they have to fill out the myriad of forms that Rainbow Refugee is great at helping with, but it's not good enough. There's more that needs to be done.

Then we need to get the processing times down. I was reading over Chris' shoulder that in the UAE, it's seven months. Why in the UAE is it taking seven months? Being gay is illegal there. Why is it taking seven months to get to an interview from a country that doesn't have many other problems with it right now with regard to that issue. Why seven months? It's amazing.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: To that suggestion, then, it's actually having an international organization in those countries that can help identify individuals or groups that can come forward with the application, perhaps through Global Affairs Canada, Amnesty International. No, that's not something...? Okay.

Through groups that would be able to do this work would be one avenue to help identify individuals and help make that connection.

Mr. Dylan Mazur: I think the one thing that could happen is, as you said, Global Affairs could create a stream of funding for international human rights organizations. In a lot of cases in countries where being LGBT is criminalized, often LGBT organizations are very much underground. What does exist often is small to medium-sized human rights organizations that don't exclusively do LGBT work, but they are there on the ground. If there were a stream in which they could protect LGBT people and document their cases, this would help to document persecution on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation. That would be one means of tracking it, and then forming this international relationship between those organizations and a sponsoring organization like Rainbow Refugee. That's one possibility.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you, Dylan.

Chad, did you want to add something to that?

Mr. Chad Walters: Yes, I just wanted to add too that we're talking about how we identify them, but we also have to think about the fact that there's a lot of self-identifying. A lot of these people are coming forward, and in that coming forward there's almost proof in their credibility because they're putting their lives at risk by coming forward, finding and seeking out these underground agencies, and saying, "Hey, I'm LGBT." That, alone, in my opinion, is proof of credibility. It's dangerous to do that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay. I want to go to the processing-time question, because you're exactly right. If you self-identify, or even if you're working with a group in countries where it is a crime, then you're putting yourself at extreme risk, and perhaps one of the reasons that the UNHCR can't really quite identify people is because people put themselves at risk by self-identifying.

To that end, on the processing time, what needs to be done? Chris you talked about how individuals leave their home country and go to another country and they're not in a better situation. In fact, they might be in a worse situation because of the discrimination in the laws that are there. How do we address this issue on the processing time? What needs to be done, and what is reasonable in terms of extracting someone from that situation so they don't put themselves at further risk?

Ms. Christine Morrissey: I'm going to say that we talk from the perspective of LGBT people, and there are likely to be other groups who could be equally identified for religious reasons, for example. I think that when an application comes in where clearly this is a group that has been identified as vulnerable, it needs to get priority. It needs to be put on top of the pile or in a separate pile, and not at the bottom of the pile and work its way up to the top. That's what happens now.

• (1230)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Ehsassi, you have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): Ms. Nafziger, thank you ever so much for your opening remarks. The clarity of what you were speaking to was very helpful, so I'm very grateful.

You started off your opening remarks by saying you are here to draw from your experience and assist us help the most vulnerable. Now, as you know, one of the issues that have come up over the course of the past two days has been the practice of the UNHCR to recommend against countries prioritizing one group over another. I was wondering, given your lengthy experience in this field, whether you think that is a sound and prudent practice by the UNHCR.

Ms. Gloria Nafziger: When it comes to resettlement referrals, the UNHCR gives, as a matter of priority, priority to the most vulnerable. But I think we also have to understand the environment in which the UNHCR is operating: 20 million refugees, of which the UNHCR has identified just over one million who are in need of resettlement, of which just over 100,000 are actually resettled in any given year by the countries that step up to do resettlement.

The problem is not a problem in identification of refugees to be resettled or of vulnerable refugees; the problem is to have states stand up and actually come forward and be prepared to do the resettlement.

The numbers are atrocious. One of the ways that Canada needs to take leadership is by, as we have done, taking leadership in resettlement. There's a global conference coming up in the UN this September at which Canada has an opportunity to challenge all governments to respond to those vulnerable people the UNHCR is putting forward; to have a distribution system whereby countries are required to take refugees for resettlement who are identified by the UNHCR.

UNHCR is working under an incredible burden of numbers, without an adequate budget to do its job—the funding is voluntary. There are many challenges, so it is easy to criticize them, saying that they're not doing a good enough job of identifying the most vulnerable, without taking a look at the numbers to see what their actual capacity is in that regard.

That doesn't even take us anywhere close to a conversation about identifying internally displaced people.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you for that.

In another segment of your opening remarks, you alluded to the amazing work that a wide variety of international organizations are doing on the ground in various countries. One problem I have, and a recurring thing that I've heard in the past two days, concerns a number of private organizations that don't have lengthy experience

broaching the topic of actually going to war-torn countries and deciding to do some work on the ground.

Given your experience and knowing of all the safeguards that have to be in place, the risks that obviously are there, and the procedures, the practices, the challenges, what would you say to organizations that are saying they would like to go to war-torn countries to do the grunt work?

Ms. Gloria Nafziger: I'm not sure what the context is: whether they're going to those countries in order to identify refugees for resettlement or going to provide humanitarian aid. One way or the other, clearly, in order to enter any kind of war situation in which one is working with vulnerable people, history and depth of experience are absolutely critical. It's a depth of experience that understands the entire context of a country: all of the political players, the impact of bringing a western—if they are western—organization or individuals into a country. Sometimes your very presence on the ground can in fact put people more at risk than your not being there.

Amnesty International is extremely cautious, when we go into any country. We always take precautions, because the presence of any outsider in a community is always known to everybody else in that environment, to know what your purpose is, what your goals are, whom you are working with. It takes incredible depth of political knowledge and savvy. Partners are absolutely critical; local partners are absolutely critical. The lists go on.

• (1235)

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you.

My final question is this. At some point you talked about the reality that we need action on many fronts to assist with the staggering number of refugees in the world. Would you elaborate on that segment of your opening remarks?

Ms. Gloria Nafziger: When we look at refugees, there are three solutions that are always talked about: local integration, return to your home community, and finally resettlement as the third option. The resettlement option is always the last option. There's always the hope that there are opportunities for a return to your own country or for local integration in order for that to happen. Without a doubt the vast majority of people are never going to benefit from resettlement, so we really need to be looking at what we can do in terms of capacity-building in host countries or in source countries to ensure that there is stability within those countries so that they can realize the first two goals, which are local integration or a permanent return to your own country.

Humanitarian aid, development, capacity-building, all of those solutions are by far the answer. Resettlement is only a very small part of the answer, but to eliminate resettlement from that equation would be wrong as well.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you.

My last question is for Mr. Tolnai.

You referred to a group, which is the Iranian Railroad for Queer Refugees. It's a group I'm quite familiar with, given the lengthy work that it's done for quite a few years. Your suggestion was that it should try to establish as a charitable organization, which seems like a very sensible approach to the issue. As I understand, as long as an organization has two years of experience, it's not a very difficult process.

Are you aware of all the various requirements that are needed to establish a non-profit organization?

Mr. Paul Tolnai: For sure, based in B.C., obviously I know it from that perspective. Each province will have its own intricacies with doing it; however, the federal system is somewhat homogenous across the country. In fact, IRQR is in the process of requesting registered status from the CRA, which will enable it to get the funding. However, in emergent situations like this, where we have a critical need immediately, that wait is unacceptable. When you're

dealing with a six-year wait for an interview, and now you've put two years on it, people will die before we get help to them.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'd like to thank the panel members for their insights, for their recommendations. As a Canadian I'm very proud that, because of the work of your organizations, associated organizations, and your volunteers, you've put Canada at the forefront of creating a veritable rainbow railroad for some of the most victimized individuals around the planet.

Thank you for your good work.

We will now adjourn. I'd just like to remind our committee members that we will be reconvening for the next session in 20 minutes

Thank you.

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