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Chair

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskij (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on February 25, the committee will resume its study on the resettlement of Yazidi women and girls.

We have before us today, from the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees, Johannes van der Klaauw, who is a new representative in Canada, and Michael Casasola, resettlement officer. Welcome back, Mr. Casasola. Welcome, Mr. van der Klaauw. You have seven minutes for an opening statement.

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw (Representative in Canada, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees): Mr. Chair, honourable members of this House, ladies and gentlemen, it's an honour for me to address this committee today on World AIDS Day.

Thank you for providing me with this opportunity to testify on Canada's plan to resettle victims of the atrocities attributed to ISIS, notably Yazidi women and girls. As this is my first opportunity to appear before this committee since I have been in Canada as the new representative of the UNHCR, I should first add my voice of appreciation to the Canadian public for their outpouring of support for the public mobilization with their government at all levels for the resettlement and sponsorship of thousands of refugees in need.

By the end of this year, we expect that well over 40,000 refugees will have landed in Canada by means of resettlement. This is a record high number. I also wish to commend this Parliament, this House, for its consistently high level of support for resettlement to Canada of the most vulnerable refugees, and also for its support for the record level of funding of UNHCR operations this year, received from both the government and the Canadian private sector.

We are all longing for an end to the conflict that is fuelling the humanitarian situation in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere. The entangled conflicts in Iraq and Syria account for almost a quarter of the world's displaced. The Syrian war, now in its sixth year, continues to be the cause of the biggest humanitarian crisis, with 6.5 million Syrian people internally displaced and 4.8 million Syrian refugees abroad.

Iraq, and that is mainly the core of attention today, is experiencing a growing humanitarian crisis amid ongoing conflict, restrictions on humanitarian access, diminishing coping mechanisms, and funding shortfalls. As a result of the conflict, continuous displacement, and disruption of services, the protection needs of the population are very

large. In all, today in Iraq more than 3.18 million Iraqis have been internally displaced since January 2014. That is in addition to the over one million Iraqis displaced since the sectarian conflicts of the mid-2000s. One out of 10 Iraqis at the moment has been forcefully uprooted. A further 230,000 Iraqis have sought refuge outside, in other countries in the region.

There are 6,700 Iraqis from in and around Mosul who have taken the extraordinary step of fleeing into Syria, into the al-Hasakah governorate in the northeast of war-torn Syria where both of us were some years ago. You might be interested to hear that of the 6,700 Iraqis in al-Hasakah, 2,260 are Iraqi Yazidi.

As a result of the current conflict in Iraq, the situation of women and girls is of utmost concern. This is an understatement. As your committee is aware, in ISIS- controlled areas abduction, sexual slavery, rape, forced marriage, forced abortion, and killings have been reported, affecting women and girls belonging to religious and ethnic minority groups, including and in particular Yazidi women and girls.

I am here today to explain to your Parliament our plans with the Canadian government in response to your motion to resettle victims of ISIS out of the region within the next 120 days, and in particular Yazidi women and girls.

As you know, the identification of refugees for resettlement is based on independent criteria established with resettlement countries. These criteria are informed by specific vulnerabilities covering protection concerns in the countries of asylum. They aim to identify survivors of violence and torture, including sexual violence, women and children at risk, refugees with medical needs, LGBTI refugees, refugees at risk of detention or expulsion, and so on.

The resettlement referrals of Iraqi refugees that UNHCR is currently preparing for Canada focus on the victims of the atrocities meted out by ISIS, notably women and girls, and then in particular the members of minorities, such as Yazidi women and girls. Given the unspeakable human rights abuses experienced by Yazidi women and girls, we will be able to identify them through this process, which, however, will also benefit other women and girls facing a similar plight.

In order for UNHCR to identify refugees for resettlement, they need to be registered as such. In Turkey, where large numbers of Yazidi have sought refuge, they need to register not just with UNHCR but also with the Turkish authorities if they wish to be able to leave the country by means of resettlement. As many Yazidi so far have not done so, we are, as the UNHCR, actively encouraging them to get registered in order to enable us to refer them for resettlement.

Recognizing that resettlement is a voluntary activity, an additional but important issue is whether the refugees wish to be resettled, since in some cases Yazidi refugees have informed us that they wish to stay in the region in the hope of reuniting with their families still in Iraq or, from their country of refuge, to continue caring for the members of their families in Iraq. Other Yazidis do not wish to leave neighbouring countries, notably Turkey, because they hope to return home in the very near future.

To give you a few figures, in recent years the UNHCR has referred 1,445 Yazidis for resettlement to resettlement countries in the world at large. In 2015 alone, we submitted for resettlement over 10,000 Iraqi nationals, Iraqi refugees, out of the region. Of that number, 3.6%—373—were Iraqi Yazidis.

At the moment, we continue to refer Yazidi refugees, both Iraqi Yazidi and Syrian Yazidi, to the Canadian missions in the countries around Iraq and Syria for resettlement consideration in response to your motion. Given their extreme vulnerability, Yazidi registered refugees in Turkey, but also in Lebanon and in other countries, are clearly eligible for referral for resettlement—it's obvious—because they have been subject to atrocious forms of violence and exploitation. I've mentioned it.

When we look at the Yazidis still in northern Iraq, where they are internally displaced, we see that UNHCR and its partners are continuing their protection and assistance programs, if not stepping them up. They cover a very wide range of services and activities. They involve our presence in areas affected by serious disturbance or conflict in northern Iraq, where physical safety and security for our staff are concerns. Still, we are operating there, and we provide the services. We do this to provide life-saving protection and assistance to families, making sure that they have adequate shelter and basic household items, including mattresses, stoves, and kitchen and hygiene sets. More and more, we also provide cash assistance to IDPs so that they themselves can make the best choices for how to care for their own needs.

• (1540)

The Chair: Mr. van der Klaauw, we've run a little over time. Could we wrap up?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: I will try to hurry up.

During the questions, I can also explain a bit about what we do for the Yazidi in northern Iraq among all the other IDPs.

This has been an issue. If it comes to Yazidis in Iraq, we provide these protection assistance services on the ground, but we are not involved in the extraction of IDPs out of Iraq to other countries, be they Yazidis or others, because, as you know, we do resettlement of refugees, and that means people who have gone over a border into another host country.

The Germans have explained how they can do this with other organizations.

I wish to end with two remarks. First of all, I wish to comment briefly on allegations of discriminatory conduct by UNHCR staff against Yazidi refugees, which has been reported in this committee, I think, by witnesses in the summer when you had your previous sessions, and my colleague was there.

I would like to assure your members that HCR makes every effort to vigorously uphold the integrity of our programs for refugees and all the displaced. We have a code of conduct to which our own staff and our partner staff are expected to adhere. If there is any discriminatory conduct—for instance, on religious or other ground—by our own staff or partner staff, that is considered misconduct, and as such, if you have these complaints, I encourage you to inform our inspector general's office in headquarters that deals with those claims. I can give you the email address.

In closing, let me reiterate that in all our humanitarian work, including our resettlement work, we prioritize the most vulnerable at risk. We do not make distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class, sexual orientation, political opinion, or minority status. We have this approach and have developed these resettlement conditions over many years, and it is critical to ensure that we maintain the continued support of resettlement countries.

That said, it is obvious that prioritization according to vulnerability criteria should and does result in the inclusion of those refugees for refugee resettlement who, by virtue of their membership in an ethnic or a religious minority, have been the victim of extreme violence and widespread and systematic human rights abuses, such as the Yazidi. Yazidi women and girls are obviously, and I repeat obviously, among those most vulnerable, and I wish to assure this committee that UNHCR will do everything within our authority and our means to provide Yazidi women and girls with the protection and assistance they so badly need, including and particularly now by means of resettlement.

Thank you.

• (1545)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. van der Klaauw.

We begin with Ms. Dzerowicz for seven minutes, please.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz (Davenport, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My heartfelt thanks to both you, Mr. van der Klaauw, and to you, Mr. Casasola, for being here today and for your presentation. Also, thank you for all your wonderful work, and a special welcome to you, Mr. van der Klaauw, in your new position.

We have very limited time in asking questions, so I'm going to ask three in order and have you respond to them, and then I'll transfer to my colleague, whose time I am sharing.

First, you've talked quite a bit about both Iraqi and Syrian Yazidi refugees, and you've talked a lot about Turkey. Can you give me a clear idea of where you're planning on sourcing the Yazidi refugees for us? Is it only in Turkey, or is it also in Lebanon? Can you speak very directly specifically to that?

Second, how many do you think you can process within the 120-day period that we have set out?

Third, you've indicated something interesting. Not only do the refugees have to register with the UNHCR, but they also have to register with Turkey for them to leave. Is that going to also pose a time limitation or problem if we're trying to help Yazidi women and girls and their families leave expeditiously? Is there a limitation as to how many can leave Turkey?

I'll leave you with those questions.

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: I can directly answer.

On your first question, we do submit Yazidis for resettlement, not only out of Turkey, but also, for instance, out of Lebanon. However, the largest number of Iraqi Yazidis is in Turkey. In Lebanon there are more Syrian Yazidis, but for this Canadian program, the plan is to resettle not just out of Turkey, but also, as I mentioned, Lebanon.

To comment on your last question, as I said, the situation in Turkey is such that they have to register first with the Turkish authorities. We do encourage them to do so. We do speak with the Turkish authorities, because quite a number of Yazidis live in southeastern Turkey close to Iraq, and they are not that easy for us to reach out to. Now we are much more focused on doing that, and we encourage them to register with the Turkish system so that we can then prepare the files.

I also want to take this opportunity to say something else, which is that in previous discussions there has been some criticism of the waiting time within the UNHCR itself, such as, for instance, that for a Yazidi to get an interview and to get prepared for resettlement, the time is far too long. We have taken action. If we clearly have very vulnerable people, we fast-track them. We put them in front. We now have diversified our own determination procedures so that those extremely vulnerable refugees go to the front of the queue.

I also have to say that one reason it takes us so long in Turkey is that if we prepare cases for resettlement and they need to be determined as refugees for us, but we have too few places, that is a reason, unfortunately, for us to not accelerate too much. When we have more resettlement offers, it spurs us into action to fast-track many more cases. I say this particularly with a view to the Yazidi claims.

This is also a partial answer to your question of how many dossiers we can refer in the next 120 days. I cannot give you a clear answer, because it's not dependent just on us. It's also dependent on what the Government of Canada is able to process. I can tell you something, though. If we base ourselves on vulnerability as the main criteria, and if I were to mention a number, there are some 230,000 Iraqis in the region, and if I tell you now that over 50,000 have been registered by us as having special needs, then you can see there is a large number, so we have a large enough group, including Yazidis. I can tell you that we have hundreds and hundreds of cases that we could possibly refer, but it means resources, and it also takes two to tango: we need to also see what the Government of Canada is able to take further.

I want to reassure this House that there will be a sizable number that you can bring over when it comes to our work and the types of profiles we have.

• (1550)

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: We have not given you a specific number. In the absence of that, you're not able to tell us the maximum number that you can process within 120 days.

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: No, but what I can say is that almost all these 50,000 who have been—and these are all Iraqis—

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: That's all of them. It's not Yazidis—

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: —but there are those who are Yazidis and other minorities, of course, who are victims of violence by ISIS/Daesh, so we are working on this. We are, as we speak, not only identifying them but also preparing the dossiers.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: I will give the floor to Mr. Sarai.

The Chair: You have one and a half minutes.

Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.): I'll be quick.

Does the UNHCR have any guidelines on offering temporary protection when they do see these Yazidi girls?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: We have guidance on temporary protection in various different situations. For instance—but this is a side remark—the Turkish authorities have offered temporary protection to Syrians. This is a temporary measure. If you can't really go into a long-term solution by means of resettlement, for instance, or through proper integration in a host country, we have interim measures so that at least... The UNHCR encourages governments, as we did with the Turkish authorities for the Syrians, to give people a document—in this case the Syrians—in order for them to be protected and to have access to services for a limited period of time. This is then prolonged, normally, if the conflict has not come to an end and people cannot yet go back. That is a global policy, and it's applied in the region, at least for Syrians in Turkey.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: When you speak of Yazidis who don't want to leave, who want to go back and don't want to permanently settle elsewhere, is it the same for Yazidi girls who have been victims, or is that a general Yazidi thought that you're referring to?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: It's more the general policy.

The Yazidi live in many parts of Turkey, particularly in the southeast. They live also in areas that are not so easy for us to reach with our partners, but we encourage them and the local authorities to see they have access to services. The problem, of course, is there are many very traumatized people, and they normally will not find the psychosocial and very specialized medical support. You've also heard the testimony of the Iraqi Yazidi doctor here who works out of north Iraq. It was mentioned that some of these refugees really need specialist treatment in countries like Canada.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Ms. Rempel, for seven minutes, please.

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

We've had witnesses in front of our committee, departmental officials, who stated that only nine Yazidi refugees were admitted to Canada from the 25,000 that the Liberal government initially expedited. My colleagues have asked questions about the number of Yazidis that it would be realistic to process in the four-month window that is now three months, yet you were able to process over 25,000 refugees within a similar period with this government.

I'm just wondering why so few Yazidis were referred to Canada as part of your referral process, and what steps you've undertaken to rectify that gross negligence.

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: Thank you, Ms. Rempel. As for why there were so few, as I said, in terms of numbers, if you look at the segment of Yazidi refugees among the many Syrian refugees, you see there are not that many. Iraqi Yazidi are more numerous among the Iraqi refugee population.

Second, not all the Yazidi, as I mentioned earlier, wish to be resettled far from their home area, but I think it's fair to say that now with your stricter focus and your initiative on the plight of the Yazidi women and girls in this House, there will be much more resettlement now thanks to your initiative on the Yazidi.

•(1555)

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Based on the comment that you just made with regard to the difference between Syrian and Iraqi refugees and the acknowledgement that many vulnerable minorities and victims of Daesh, of ISIS, are actually from Iraq, would you say that perhaps there was a missed opportunity in terms of prioritizing the most vulnerable in the 25,000 who were referred to Canada through your agency?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: I would not call it a missed opportunity. What I would say is, because all the Syrians you have resettled so far... In resettling any refugee or any refugee family, there is a vulnerability aspect. Many non-Yazidi are also very vulnerable.

What I could say is that maybe the situation of the Yazidi as a particular minority is now very much in the limelight and has been since 2014, but as I explained, resettlement is not based on minority status but on vulnerability, and many other vulnerable people are also there from many other groups.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: We heard from—

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: Therefore, they might not have been represented as much in the group of total resettled refugees as you had wished.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: We've heard from NGOs working on the ground that thousands of Yazidis have been identified who wish to resettle to other places, particularly Canada, but we're hearing from you that there are only a few hundred that you would be able to refer to us. Why the disconnect?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: I cannot speak for those who have come forward and have done their own identification. I can speak for how we and our partners identify those refugees for

resettlement. As you mentioned yourself, we have identified for the moment a few hundred Yazidi, in Turkey and also in other countries, and not yet the thousands as others have said. I cannot speak for them, but we have a whole system of how to identify high needs for resettlement.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: What are you doing to be able to speak for them?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: Excuse me?

Hon. Michelle Rempel: You said you can't speak for the Yazidis, yet they want to resettle to Canada as government-sponsored refugees, so what is the UN doing to speak for them?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: We, of course, in our field operations liaise with them. We liaise with their organizations and we try to identify as many as possible for resettlement.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Okay, so would you be willing to work with NGOs that have these lists of names if the government provided you with that direction in order to increase the number beyond the 400 that you've identified?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: Yes, in general, in order to identify the most vulnerable for resettlement, we are always open to whoever has the information, and particularly those on the ground who work with those persons concerned.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Just to clarify, if the government directed NGOs to work with the UN to provide additional names beyond what you've already identified, you would be open to ensuring that those names were added to the 400 that you've already identified. Is that correct?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: Yes. In general terms, if it comes to resettlement—and I used to be head of resettlement—if it comes to identification of cases, we are open to information from whichever group of partners. Refugees themselves also self-refer to our offices. The issue is more that if we get this information, then we need to make our own assessment: are they indeed high-need and the most vulnerable?

Hon. Michelle Rempel: It's quite possible for this government, then, that you could process a number for resettlement that would be well over 400 and that would fall into the criteria listed in the motion that passed in our Parliament.

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: That is if we have sufficient resources ourselves. That's another element: do we have enough staff?

Hon. Michelle Rempel: How is the UN able to process 25,000 refugees in a four-month period, but now it can't process over 400, even if those names were referred to them by NGOs?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: I'm not saying that we can't now process a couple of hundred. If this is now a program, we will do whatever we can to make this happen for Canada.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Do you have the capacity to process over 1,000 within this time period if you are presented with names?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: I cannot bind my own colleagues in Turkey or in Lebanon, but I know that if there are these offers and there's willingness, we will do everything to ramp up our resources.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: How were you able to bind your colleagues to 25,000 if you can't do it for 1,000?

Mr. Michael Casasola (Resettlement Officer, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees): I would add one important qualification, not knowing the individuals to whom you're referring. Again, there were the imperatives, such as are they registered as refugees, are they outside their country of origin? The barriers were fixed.

•(1600)

Hon. Michelle Rempel: We heard from many Yazidis that they felt they were discriminated against by your processing reps in these camps. They showed time periods of over five years, when other refugees had been given appointment times in a far shorter period than that. What are you doing to rectify this discrimination?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: As I said, we need that information. It needs to be shared with us, and we need to take action if this is proven to be true, because this would be discriminatory.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: If these groups were to come to you with these instances, you would be open to a formal review of your process, and then to making changes to ensure that these people are not experiencing continued instances of discrimination.

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: If these delays are attributed to discriminatory treatment on the part of our staff, the answer is yes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Kwan, you have seven minutes, please.

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

Thank you to both the witnesses for coming today.

I have a couple of questions. First, you've identified around 400. These are government-assisted refugees, correct?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: No, I have not identified numbers for this particular program. I've mentioned that until today

Ms. Jenny Kwan: My apologies. You've identified Yazidis, so are those individuals candidates as government-assisted refugees?

Mr. Michael Casasola: If I might just add, in our methodologies we refer to resettlement countries. They decide which programs they admit them under. It's traditional that UNHCR-referred cases tend to come under the government-assisted refugee program, but also under the blended visa office-referred program as well.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: If the Canadian government were to come to you and say this is a major initiative they want to embark on, and

that within the 120-day window, which is now about three months, could you assist them in identifying Yazidi women and girls who are victims of genocide for the purposes of resettlement, would you be able to do that work? If so, do you have an estimate of the numbers you can produce for the government within that window?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: The day after the adoption of your motion, your government came to us precisely with this. Since then we have been discussing the numbers of the most vulnerable and what we can do.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: What number of Yazidis are you going to give to the government?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: I cannot say that here, because it's up to the government in the end.

The government has mentioned certain numbers and how many we should refer by the end of this calendar year—we're in December already—because it takes time, as you know better than I, before they arrive in the country. We pace it to have a sizable number submitted by UNHCR to the government within these 120 days.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: You have submitted a number to the government for this initiative.

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: No, we have been discussing numbers and times—how many in the next month, in the second month. I assume this is now happening, because this was already three weeks ago.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: You have numbers and a timeline, and you're in discussion with the government.

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: Yes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: You cannot share this information with us—

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: No, but the timelines are there.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: —unless the government authorizes you to share that information with us.

With regard to internally displaced persons in northern Iraq, do you have no data or information on the number of Yazidi women and girls who are victims of genocide in northern Iraq?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: What I do have are the numbers of Iraqis displaced in various locations: in Dohuk, in Sulaymaniyah, in the camps, and in urban settings.

In principle, if the people are registered... I can speak on other situations. I have come from Yemen, where we set this up exactly on the IDPs: where they are and what the numbers are of women and girls. It's aggregated. I need to check with my colleague in Iraq to see whether they have this system there also. What we do have, of course, is Yazidi women and girls in northern Iraq.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: But you don't know how many Yazidi women and girls are in those camps—or do you have that information, and you can send it to us?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: I don't have this aggregated information. What I have is the number of IDPs per location in the various subregions of northern Iraq.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: They could be any refugees, but you don't have the information—

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: They could be any Iraqis from any kind of background, but if you wish, I can try to find this out for you.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: It would be very helpful if you could submit that information for the purposes of this initiative.

• (1605)

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: Yes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: In northern Iraq particularly, the German government actually worked with the NGOs on the ground to identify them.

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: Yes, I know.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Do you work with any of those NGOs? If so, can you provide the names of those NGOs for us?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: What I know is what I have read, of course, *in extenso*, in regard to Mr. Blume's testimony here. I know that there's been program work, particularly with IOM, which is not an NGO but a UN-affiliated agency, and with Luftbücke Irak, or Air Bridge Iraq. I cannot tell you here, but there have been other local organizations working for this program. I'm sure that we are in touch with them. I can tell you that we work very closely with IOM, of course, and IOM has a key role in this German program.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Can you provide, then, for this committee's information, a list of NGOs that you work with, that UNHCR works with, in northern Iraq? They are the people who can identify where the Yazidi women and girls are located.

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: Yes, we can definitely provide you with a list of partner NGOs that we work with.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: For the Syrian refugee initiative, the 25,000-plus resettlement initiative, did the Canadian government give you additional resources to help with the processing? If so, how much?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: That was before my time here, but they did get additional resources. This is, of course, a point that is also along the lines of your interventions. If we could get more resources, we would be able to step up to the plate.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Can we get that information from you in terms of how much the Canadian government provided to the UNHCR to get that project done? Also, when did you receive that money?

As well, could you provide what kinds of resources would be required for you to help with this initiative if we were to identify and process 1,000 Yazidi women and girls, let's say, and then 2,000? Just aggregate it up so that we can have a sense of what kinds of resources are necessary to make this project successful.

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: I'll take your question with me and I will see what I can answer. I cannot answer on the part of the government. I need to see how public the information was in terms

of the support we got for that program for the 25,000 in upscaling our resources. I can check in-house and I will come back to you with whatever I can find.

I see also that you put this question because you would then see something replicated for this Yazidi program, if I understand you correctly.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: That's right. It's so we actually have a base to work from. I'm asking that question of you so that you can tell us what resources you received and what resources you require in order to help Canada resettle *x* number of Yazidis.

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: Yes, but ultimately, for this particular program now, it depends in the end on how many the Government of Canada wants us to refer.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I understand that, but I'm just trying to figure out how much you need for you to do that job.

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: Yes.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll move on to Mr. Tabbara, please, for seven minutes.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll be splitting my time with Ms. Zahid.

My first question is about the dangers in Iraq. Now that we have a military campaign to take back Mosul, what is the situation on the ground there? Is it dangerous for Canadian officials or any officials to go there and have work done on the ground?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: Like us, you follow the news, and we have a very recent update of the situation on the ground in Iraq, differentiated as to areas where ISIS was in control, where ISIS is no longer in control—which doesn't mean it's safe—where ISIS is still in control, and where the situation is very fluid. It's obvious that the situation in northern Iraq around Mosul is still extremely volatile.

Does that mean that you can't go there? We have our offices there and we have our staff working there, but of course we have a whole security detail. Sorry for the parenthesis. I come from Yemen and spent three years in a war zone, so I know how it works. Government officials have their own security regulations, and we humanitarians are sometimes active where government officials cannot go because of their own internal security regulations.

That said, you've heard in the German group's testimony that Mr. Blume and his team regularly went to northern Iraq. I would say wherever we can be helpful... Here again, I'm speaking of my own experience in Yemen. If there were foreign delegations coming, we would provide them with our security detail, but in the end we could not take responsibility for the security or safety of government officials. That is their own internal regulation.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you.

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: Where we can, on the ground, we will create a safe space so that partners can operate.

• (1610)

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: The reason I'm asking is that we have a time frame to finish this operation. If there's ongoing conflict, this might jeopardize the time frame. The Germans mentioned that they did it in an allotted time frame, but it was quite difficult for them as well.

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: Yes. They did it in a year, as you know.

What I want to say is that if it would be too dangerous for Canada to extract Yazidis out of northern Iraq as IDPs, you still have hundreds of Yazidis that you can resettle as refugees out of Turkey and Lebanon and a lot of countries. You could still bring Yazidis into Canada.

Of course, I see your concern that the most vulnerable are still locked up in the country.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: I have roughly 40 seconds for my next question.

The UNHCR has a mandate mainly focused on refugees. Do you provide humanitarian aid to those who do not fall under this category?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: Yes. Internally displaced people, who are 40 million of the 65 million, are also on our mandate; however, they are not like refugees.

For IDPs, you have a division of labour in a country like Iraq between UNHCR and other agencies. We are there to provide protection and shelter to IDPs. This protection comes with a host of services, such as psychosocial services, a particular problem for women and children. We have so-called "interagency coordination" to bring humanitarian aid to make sure that all the needs are being addressed for our IDPs, but UNHCR has a key role. Again, I can speak here out of my own experience in Yemen as the humanitarian coordinator. This is how we work.

The Chair: Ms. Zahid is next.

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

Thank you for coming today.

We have heard at this committee.... Many Canadians involved in the efforts of bringing over Syrian refugees, particularly the private sponsors, witnessed the difficulty of getting the refugees out of the host country. We understand that one of the reasons for this difficulty is that the host countries can take their time giving exit visas. I heard, for example, that in Turkey, they only issue 20 visas a day.

How do you see this impacting the process with respect to bringing Yazidis here to Canada?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: Thank you for this question—

Mrs. Salma Zahid: You mentioned that more Yazidis are in Turkey, compared with Lebanon.

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: Yes. You have mentioned one of the key problems. Even if we have a number of dossiers of refugees ready for referral, and the country—in this case, Canada—is willing to accept them, the host country still needs to give the exit permit and their permission. If we notice there is a slowness or an unwillingness in the bureaucracy, we put pressure to get the people out, but it is sometimes easier said than done.

We should also not forget the current situation with Turkey at the moment. The failed coup in July has also had a negative impact on exits and permits and visa policies. It's getting normal now again, but we lost valuable time.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Do you think we can work with the Government of Turkey to expedite this process of giving the exit visas, or would that not be possible?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: If this is indeed a problem—and I will check that again—then yes, we should see together how we can reassure the Turkish authorities that Yazidis should get an exit permit, if that is the obstacle, so that they can find safety and security and a new life in Canada. Yes.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: If you find some information, would you be able to send it to the committee? Would it be possible for us to get that information?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: We can work through the Canadian officials with the government, but if this is an issue and they need to solve it, then of course your support will be welcome and necessary.

If I may say so, this is also an issue if we want to have Yazidis extracted out of northern Iraq. You already might have seen in press reports that the Iraqi authorities have asked why that minority should leave the country. They say that they do not see this as a priority, and that there are so many other vulnerable groups and minorities. This is also in Iraq—

Mrs. Salma Zahid: My next question is linked to that. The selection process is a very important part of this discussion. We have already heard details from the German officials who completed a very similar project on their selection process. Because we are specifically targeting the most vulnerable Yazidi women and children, this committee would like to hear more about your selection process. How do you determine who is the most vulnerable? Does religion factor into the determination? How do you identify the most vulnerable Yazidis?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: As I said, in order to determine vulnerability, we look at a number of issues, such as what violence has been meted out to the person, the sexual violence, the degree of human rights violations, and also, being targeted specifically because you are a woman or a child. There are also medical concerns. These are all important.

•(1615)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: We look at the family composition and if it is a single woman with children. We look at people who are at risk of detention, arrest, or removal. Actually, on religion—

The Chair: Perhaps you'd like to expand on it, but unfortunately we're already almost 30 seconds over time.

Mr. Saroya, you have five minutes.

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

Thank you to the witnesses.

We are talking about the Yazidi women, the most vulnerable women and girls, and this situation. We heard in the past that there is some disconnect with regard to the UNHCR and the real victims of this. For example, there were 25,000 refugees who came here, and there were only nine or 10 Yazidis. Some of the witnesses previously described the discrimination and described not getting along. In some cases, the UNHCR said that the interview will come in 22 months. That's a real number that was given here.

What can you do differently this time, compared to what you have done previously? Can you compare the situation today with the one last year?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: As I said, if it comes to the Syrian program, the number of Syrian Yazidi is relatively low. We're talking mostly of Iraqi Yazidi. The program this year was mainly geared towards Syrians, so that is one explanation for why there were so few Syrian Yazidis amongst the Syrians: basically, there are not that many.

That said, Iraqi resettlement continues. This House has now put a spotlight on the situation of Yazidi women and girls. It's no secret that this has created a lot of internal discussion, of course, as to how we as UNHCR, together with the Canadian government, can indeed increase the numbers for resettlement of this particular vulnerable group. We have the whole discussion about resources, as we've just had.

Also, as I mentioned earlier, if there's a delay in having a claim heard, if we now put a spotlight more on protecting the vulnerabilities of these Yazidi women and girls, and if there are places in the Canadian resettlement program, then of course we will fast-track their claims and we will prepare the referral dossiers as soon as possible.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Can you talk about the allegations of discrimination against the Yazidi women in Turkey and Lebanon, and many other things? Do you know anything about it?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: There are allegations of discriminatory behaviour by UNHCR in Turkey. I can't comment, because it was new to me when it was testified to. I don't say that it's not true—don't get me wrong—but what I say is that if this is being brought to your attention, they should contact us directly. We have a whole internal procedure in the Inspector General's Office. We need to take this very seriously, because I do not deny in general terms that these situations can happen.

Mr. Michael Casasola: If I could add to that, I think it would be helpful. Again, we'd like more specific information. Some of the testimony that took place over the summer was very contradictory. On some points, they seemed to be referring to UNHCR Muslim staff in Greece. The UNHCR doesn't run programs in Greece. I think there are some generalizations that may not have been accurate. Again, we need precise information that we can act upon.

Mr. Bob Saroya: The 120 days started about 30 days ago. We have only 90 days left to bring 1,000 Yazidis. That was the number we agreed on. Is it a realistic number? Can UNHCR help to bring these 1,000 people in 90 days? Is this a realistic number?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: What I can say again is that in the end, how many Yazidis will be brought to Canada in these 120 days is up to the Government of Canada, in consultation with this House.

As UNHCR, if we get the numbers, we will do everything we can to refer. I can already tell you that we have been discussing initial numbers. We have started today, after the adoption of your motion, and we have already been submitting—to come back to you, Mrs. Kwan—the first referrals. We have not been sitting idle these first months, because time is of the essence here, as we all agree.

Still, I cannot today commit to my colleagues—or to the Canadian government, for that matter—that we will handle this many cases by the end of February. This is all actively being considered. While we are getting there, we do as much as we can.

•(1620)

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Are there any other NGOs that can help us in this situation if you cannot bring 1,000 people to the table?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: I'm not sure if it's a matter of others being more capable of doing this than us, because if it comes to resettlement of refugees—Yazidi refugees in Turkey or Syrian refugees in Lebanon—we have a whole system in place together with partner organizations, with NGOs.

Going back to the previous question, they can refer through us. The Canadian government and all of them have a system by which we have agreed that resettlement referrals go through UNHCR, but with the input of all the partners on the ground.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. van der Klaauw.

Mr. Ehsassi, you have five minutes.

As Mr. Ehsassi prepares himself, perhaps I could ask a couple of quick questions. You said in your opening statement that large numbers of Yazidis in camps in Turkey do not register themselves with the Turkish federal authorities. Is that the state of affairs for all refugees, or is it particular to Yazidis who find themselves as refugees within Turkey?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: That's a very good question. I have to say I can't give a precise answer. What I know is that the Yazidis in southeast Turkey are hosted in municipal camps and have not been registering with the provincial authorities. Now, is this a matter of their not knowing they have to do it, and in that sense this would apply to all the refugees, or is this something that the Yazidis themselves don't want to do? This I have to find out.

The Chair: Thank you, sir. Could you undertake to provide that information to us, as to whether this reluctance to register with federal Turkish authorities is particular to Yazidis or is just a general state of affairs and not particular to the Yazidi refugees? I raise this question because of the concern that's been raised over and over about discrimination, and perhaps it wasn't always exactly clear which authorities were potentially discriminating.

Mr. Ehsassi, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): Thank you. My apologies for the delay.

Thank you, Mr. van der Klaauw. With reference to the Yazidis in Turkey, would you mind explaining to us the support programs that are available to them while they are in Turkey, given that they are traumatized?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: I don't have that information as detailed as I have it for what we do in Iraq for the Yazidi IDPs, because some of the support we deliver to refugees in Turkey—or any refugee, be it Iraqi, Afghan, Somali—often goes through implementing partners. In the situation in Turkey, the Turkish authorities, as far as I know—for instance, for the Syrian refugees—have said, “We run it”, as Turkish authorities, if it comes to Syrian assistance.

Turkey is a bit of a special case, but if you wish, I can try to find out more about what type of support, assistance, and services are provided, in particular for the Yazidis, and through whom, and what UNHCR's particular role here is. I can do that.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: That would be very helpful, because there is the question of what the continuity of care should be when they arrive in Canada.

I would like to ask you another question. I understand that your focus is on refugees and not on displaced persons. That said, do you have mechanisms available in northern Iraq to refer Yazidis?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: If it comes to resettlement, we have a mandate for the refugees who have left their countries of origin and gone into a new host country. If it comes to being IDP, of course, we have this whole mandate to protect in-country and to support the government to protect its own people in-country, and we have shelter and everything around it as a responsibility.

If it comes to extracting IDPs, relocating them out of their country of origin into safety abroad, UNHCR normally does not do that. However if, in the case of the Yazidis, the German government has this program and works with the IOM and works with local NGOs, we are present there. We know these organizations.

For instance, we can give logistical support. Our office can be used for interviewing or those things that we can do, but we're not officially involved in such a program. I want to make this very clear, because this is sensitive and concerns the citizens of a state. Again, if

other organizations can do it, we are part of the whole humanitarian community here and we have our contacts, so then of course we are supportive behind the scenes, so to speak.

• (1625)

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you for that.

I have one last question. Given that our focus is on bringing Yazidi women, what would your thoughts be on bringing their family members as well?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: Normally, before a refugee is resettled, we try to get the family together and then resettle the entire family. If that is not possible and the situation is urgent, then the family members who are refugees somewhere are resettled, and then we try later on to reunite the family, but that often takes time.

Canada, of course, does a lot of this. Many of the refugees resettled, including the Syrians resettled over the last year, now have family members coming out of Syria—because normally they're still in the country of origin—by means of family coming to Canada. This would also apply once Yazidi refugees have been resettled to Canada if the remaining family members are still in northern Iraq.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, gentlemen.

Mr. van der Klaauw, just for additional clarity, you've referenced this twice, and our relationship and the confidence that we have in our long-standing, strong partnership with the UNHCR in a certain way has been called into question by some of these allegations. You said that to investigate these serious allegations, you request that we officially send a letter from the committee.

Just for clarity, if a letter were to be sent to the UNHCR headquarters in Geneva from the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration of the House of Commons, that would trigger an investigation into these allegations and that would then allow you to respond in a more extensive way to the committee as to whether or not we can maintain the confidence that we have in our partnership.

For clarity, would that be the procedure that you are looking for?

Mr. Johannes van der Klaauw: The answer is yes, that would be the procedure.

However, you might wish to substantiate the allegations, as my colleague said, with more detailed, precise information in order for us to make the investigation also substantive, because the more information you can share with us, the better.

Let me say it this way: the UNHCR office always comes across this in our work. I've had to refer to our Inspector General's Office. In all my assignments, at least once if not more times, allegations come to my attention as a representative of the UNHCR in the field by partners or others about misconduct. This is not something that is alien to me. This is very serious, but I know from my experience that we can only take action if the allegations are proven to be true, and it means that they should be detailed and substantive. I would like to ask you, then, to try to be as detailed as possible.

The Chair: Gentlemen, thank you for appearing before our committee today on this very important committee investigation.

I would also like to express our gratitude for all of the work that the UNHCR has done over the years in very difficult parts of the world, and at times at tremendous personal risk. I thank you

gentlemen personally, and thank you for the work that UNHCR does.

With that, we will suspend for a couple of minutes and return in camera.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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