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Chair

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

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• (1540)

[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 on October 4, 2016, the committee will begin its study on the 2011 LGBTQ refugee pilot project.

From the Department of Citizenship and Immigration we have Mr. David Manicom, associate assistant deputy minister, strategic and program policy; Mr. Donald Cochrane, senior director, international region; and Mr. Jean-Marc Gionet, director, refugee affairs.

Welcome, gentlemen. We're starting a little bit late. We had an exciting QP today.

The floor is yours.

Mr. David Manicom (Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic and Program Policy, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

As mentioned, my name is David Manicom, associate assistant deputy minister of strategic and program policy at the department. I am here today with Donald Cochrane and Jean-Marc Gionet, as already introduced.

[Translation]

I was here last July with some colleagues to speak to you about the programs and practices of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, or IRCC, that pertain to protecting vulnerable populations. I am pleased to return today to speak to the committee's specific interest in the vulnerability of LGBTQ2 refugees.

[English]

As you know, there are several streams in the resettlement program through which refugees come to Canada. Under Canada's government-assisted refugee program, the United Nations refugee agency is responsible for identifying and referring for resettlement to Canada the most vulnerable refugees. These include individuals fleeing persecution based on their gender and/or sexual orientation.

[Translation]

Canada has a strong and longstanding relationship with the United Nations Refugee Agency. We rely on the agency as the international expert best placed to assess the vulnerability of refugees. The United Nations Refugee Agency uses objective criteria, established through

consultation between all resettlement countries, including Canada, to determine vulnerability. It does not make distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender/sexual orientation, religious belief, class or political opinion.

[English]

Upon receiving the referrals, the government does not systematically track cases on the specific characteristics of an individual's claim. We know, however, that those identified as vulnerable by the UNHCR include many individuals who have fled persecution based on gender and sexual orientation. Of course, many individuals fleeing persecution on other grounds are members of this community.

The United Nations refugee agency refers cases for resettlement to countries, including Canada, based on seven categories: legal and/or physical protection needs; survivors of torture and/or violence; medical needs; women and girls at risk; family reunification; children and adolescents at risk; and lack of foreseeable alternative, durable solutions. Individuals who are persecuted based on their gender and/or sexual identity fall within the category of legal and/or physical protection needs, although you can understand that often there will be crossovers into other categories.

Our urgent protection program also exists to allow the UNHCR to quickly refer to Canada the refugees who are in imminent danger in the country to which they have fled. Canada makes available up to 100 cases a year—although this is a flexible envelope—through this program, including some individuals fleeing persecution based on gender and sexual orientation. These individuals often find themselves in particularly precarious situations as they await resettlement, as it may not be safe for them to remain in some countries of asylum. In many camp settings, there are challenges in ensuring the physical protection of individuals fleeing persecution based on gender and sexual orientation. Each of these urgent protection cases is referred directly to Canadian visa offices abroad by the United Nations refugee agency, and is processed on urgent timelines, sometimes within days, to ensure the refugee's arrival in the most expeditious manner.

Under Canada's private sponsorship of refugees program, private sponsors identify the refugees they wish to sponsor. Canada has for many years encouraged refugee sponsorship organizations as well as gay and lesbian organizations across the country to privately sponsor refugees from abroad who face violence and persecution, including due to their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. This includes sponsorship through the pilot project with the Rainbow Refugee Society, which is the topic of your study today.

[Translation]

The department entered into a cost-sharing arrangement with the Rainbow Refugee Society based in Vancouver. Under this agreement, the department provides financial support directly to refugees via the resettlement assistance program, to support these refugees' initial costs when they first arrive in Canada, as well as three months of income support for each refugee. Private sponsors provide the remaining nine months of income support for each of them.

• (1545)

[English]

The initial intent was for this initiative to be temporary, aimed principally at building capacity and interest within the settlement community to augment resettlement efforts of individuals in the LGBTQ2 community. The agreement, which was initially intended to expire in 2015, has been extended to the end of March 2018.

To date, over 57 refugees have arrived in Canada through this arrangement, with about 18 more in process. These refugees are in addition to those LGBTQ2 persons we know anecdotally have also received support through sponsors who were not part of this agreement. We remain confident that this continuing support will further enhance the capacity of LGBTQ2 groups to sponsor refugees in partnership with sponsorship agreement holders. We also know that the efforts of LGBTQ2 groups will be buttressed by other Canadian sponsors who have also indicated their continued interest in offering protection to members of the LGBTQ2 community.

Moving forward, our objective is that LGBTQ2 groups will be able to meet the financial and social support responsibilities of private sponsorship in the same manner as Canada's other private sponsors.

In conclusion, Mr. Chair, by continuing to work with the UNHCR, as well as Canada's diverse and vibrant private sponsorship community, Canada will continue to play an important and leading role in protecting vulnerable individuals, including members of the LGBTQ2 community.

[Translation]

Mr. Chair, thank you for this opportunity to appear before this committee once again.

We will be pleased to answer any questions that committee members may have.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Manicom.

Ms. Zahid, you have seven minutes.

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Thanks to the officials for coming today as we start this study.

Let me first say that I'm very supportive of the objectives of this program, and it is very apparent to me that members of the LGBTQ+ community face persecution and discrimination in many countries around the world because of their sexual orientation or their gender identity. Creating this program as a pilot project was an excellent initiative of the last government, and I thank them for leading on this. I hope with this study we can find ways to improve the program, and build on the important work it is doing right now.

Could you please discuss the number of refugees who have come to Canada under this program? Are these numbers meeting or exceeding forecasts and available caps? You mentioned a number, but is it exceeding or meeting the forecasts that were set before?

Mr. David Manicom: Since the beginning of the agreement, 69 cases have been identified for sponsorship. Of those, 57 persons have been resettled, 18 persons have not landed yet, and there were four persons whose cases were withdrawn. There were not formal established quotas, or numerical objectives to my knowledge. I would ask Mr. Gionet to correct me if I'm wrong. The intent was capacity building, to develop capacity within the community to further enhance Canada's ability to welcome and integrate members of the LGBTQ communities.

The program numbers are relatively modest, but we feel that the intent to build that capacity and therefore the objectives of the program have been met to date. We continue to look at it. Because it was designed as a temporary program, it has not had a formal evaluation. We're at the point now of determining what is the most promising way forward to ensure the success of our ability to integrate these individuals.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: For the cases you mentioned that have not landed yet, have they been processed? What stage are they at? Is there any issue getting them here?

Mr. David Manicom: No, most of the 69 cases identified for sponsorship have landed—57 persons. There are 18 persons in process, and they're at various stages of processing. I don't have the individual case-by-case details, but they would be expected to arrive in Canada in the coming weeks and months.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: I would like to discuss the awareness of this program within the LGBTQ+ community. I've heard the sense that it is not as high as it could be, leading to less uptake for the program than there otherwise could be. Could you comment on your understanding of the awareness of this program, and what steps the department has taken to advertise it?

Mr. David Manicom: I don't think that I am best placed to speak to the awareness of the program in the community. In fact, it is in creating agreements with organizations like this that we want to raise that awareness. We know that the organization has been working closely with a number of sponsorship agreement holders who have a history of welcoming members of the LGBTQ community. We do not see a direct link to only this program in Canada's welcoming of LGBTQ refugees.

Many sponsorship agreement holders have been very active in welcoming members of this community for many years, so this additional capacity building was designed to enhance that in areas of the country where the capacity was not strong. I would defer to others to speak to the awareness of the program in the community, but certainly we know anecdotally that a large number of members of the LGBTQ community are part of our refugee resettlement efforts.

• (1550)

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Is there an awareness program out of Canada, initiated by IRCC, in the different parts of the world where the community members are coming from? Are there any other parts of the world where you are doing some awareness programs?

Mr. David Manicom: No. We wouldn't have awareness programs perhaps in the sense you are suggesting, Madam. We have been very proactive for many years in Geneva and globally with UNHCR in saying that if there are individuals whose vulnerability is linked to their sexual orientation or gender identity, Canada is ready and willing to accept those individuals in our government-assisted programs.

In our private sponsorship programs, the government quite consciously does not advocate with the private sponsorship community for a particular vulnerability. We don't say to the private sponsorship community that it should sponsor a religious minority, a political opinion minority, or a type of particular vulnerability in a particular country. The nature of our public-private partnership in that program is that the community identifies those individuals.

I think the answer is no. Because of the nature of our programming, we are not doing awareness raising globally outside of the auspices of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which is active in all parts of the world in identifying those most vulnerable for resettlement.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: As we start this study, we will be hearing from witnesses. We have received some letters to this effect requesting that this pilot program be made permanent. Is this something the department is currently considering? Would it be feasible? If so, what would be the factors that would help to make such a decision?

Mr. David Manicom: This program is a funding program to a service-providing organization. We have no permanent funding arrangements under our grants and contributions programming. We have calls for proposals at regular intervals, to which we make Canadian funding available to those who are interested in providing the particular types of services that we have. To make the pilot project permanent would not necessarily mean funding one group on a permanent basis. The question I think would be, would we want long-term to have a program designed like this one with three months of support for one particular refugee vulnerability group?

We're looking at the various options for the best way to continue to meet the needs of LGBTQ refugees. The reason for the extending of the funding is that we can continue the conversation with the broader community to determine and provide advice to our minister on the best way forward to most fully integrate our support for LGBTQ refugees into our settlement programming. This is a relatively small pilot. Is making this sort of pilot as a separate envelope the right way to go, or is ensuring that we have across our settlement network appropriate supports, as we do in a number of service-providing organizations, unnecessary?

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Rempel, you have seven minutes, please.

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

It's my understanding that in 2014 1,022 LGBTQ Iranians were resettled in Canada by the government. Is that correct?

Mr. David Manicom: We do not track LGBTQ refugees numerically.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: This statistic was cited in several news articles after being pulled from your departmental data, so is this in fact the correct number?

Mr. David Manicom: I do not believe we have that statistic from the department, but I would have to verify that. In our systems, we do not track refugees by sexual orientation or a number of other factors.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: A similar news article said that in 2016, 152 LGBTQ Iranians were resettled into Canada. Is that correct?

• (1555)

Mr. David Manicom: We do not have those statistics, to my knowledge.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I would ask that you look twice at that, given that this was a statistic that was widely cited in many news articles.

Mr. David Manicom: Yes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Given that I have to take these news article statistics as correct, there were news articles that were published subsequently that said that end-users, or people who are associated with the pilot project, were told that processing Syrian refugees was given a higher precedence than processing LGBTQ refugees from Iran. Is that correct?

Mr. David Manicom: No.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: No?

Mr. David Manicom: No.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Can you explain the vast difference in numbers from 2014 to 2016 and why we have end-users of the program saying that the Canadian embassy was directing people to the United States to apply as opposed to Canada?

Mr. David Manicom: It's difficult for me to comment on statistics from news organizations when I do not have those statistics from the department. There was never a program to resettle LGBTQ refugees from Iran. Because there was never any such program, I cannot speak to the preference of that program—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Just for the record to show, the article that I'm citing is a DailyXtra news article that was published on March 2. It says, "The department's data shows that Canada took in 1,022 Iranians through that process in 2014, 374 in 2015 and just 152 in 2016". You do not have data to this effect.

Mr. David Manicom: We certainly have data on the number of Iranians resettled, yes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: That is the question I asked you.

Mr. David Manicom: Sorry, I misunderstood your question. I thought your question was with regard to LGBTQ Iranians.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Quite.

Mr. David Manicom: With regard to Iranians, absolutely, the previous government announced a program on January 15, 2013 to resettle 5,000 refugees located in Turkey by 2018.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Is the assertion that people were being directed to apply to the United States as opposed to Canada correct?

Mr. David Manicom: To my knowledge that is incorrect.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Okay.

Certainly I would like to put on the record that I feel, and many of my colleagues feel, that LGBTQ refugees are, I would say, among the most vulnerable in the world, outside of genocide victims, and that they should be prioritized in most situations. Yet we're in a similar situation here, as we were with the Yazidi genocide, where we're hearing that we're using the UNHCR process to prioritize refugees, yet we know that many LGBTQ refugees cannot make it through the UNHCR referral process, given the persecution that they might face at camps or, certainly as the situation in Chechnya is right now, they can't escape the country.

Bridging into the situation in Chechnya, has the department received any political direction to date in terms of issuing special visas to assist in the resettlement of persecuted gay men in Chechnya?

Mr. David Manicom: We are working closely with our embassy in Moscow and other international partners such that, if urgent protection cases come to our attention, we would be able to respond appropriately, given the individual case. We do not have any cases identified to us at this time.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Okay. So there have been no cases of gay men from Chechnya being resettled through special visas to date?

Mr. David Manicom: No, we have not had contact with any individuals at this time.

Mr. Donald Cochrane (Senior Director, International Region, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): I can add that this is, as you can imagine, a matter of some sensitivity at present. I can say that there has been some contact made with our embassy in Moscow and with the department; however, I can't go into that.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Has there been a target set for the number of gay men who can be brought to Canada through this program from Chechnya? They are currently essentially being rounded up and tortured at the government's direction.

Mr. David Manicom: We don't have a program related to gay men from Chechnya. We are working with civil organizations in Russia to ensure that, if individuals come to our attention, we'll be able to assist as best we can in individual cases. It's very preliminary days.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Given that we don't track the number of LGBTQ refugees, to your assertion, again using the Yazidi genocide as a similar issue—I feel like we're retreading the same ground—do you believe that it's necessary for Canada to set targets for the number of LGBTQ refugees in our resettlement programs and then track that data to ensure success of resettlement programming?

Mr. David Manicom: I don't think I can answer that question in a simple way. I don't have a yes or no answer to that.

A decision to begin to track refugees by reasons for persecution raises a very large number of complex operational and privacy issues.

• (1600)

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Sorry, again, I hate to cut you off, but we have your answer on the record from the Yazidi genocide, so I'll leave it at that.

I think it's fair to say that the Rainbow Railroad program was a success. I certainly would like to see it become a permanent program.

In your answer to Ms. Zahid, you said that you would like to see more broad, system-wide changes rather than specific, targeted programming with regard to how we can best address the issue of prioritizing LGBTQ refugees.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds, please.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Do you believe that UNHCR actually has the capacity to prioritize LGBTQ refugees, given the persecutions they face and the low numbers that are referred to Canada through our resettlement process?

Mr. David Manicom: I don't know that there are low numbers resettled to Canada through our resettlement process.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: But you don't know the number.

Mr. David Manicom: We also don't know the number of every individual vulnerability factor identified, because, for a lot of good reasons, we don't track those.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Kwan, you have seven minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): I thank the officials for their presentation.

I would like to build on the question of the situation in Chechnya right now. As we know, there is a dire situation over there. The Prime Minister refuses to even condemn the situation. There is a recent article that has been put on the public record: "Chechen authorities tell parents: 'Kill your gay sons or we will', survivor claims".

The presentation states that we have an urgent protection program, and that "Canada makes available up to 100 cases a year through this program, including some individuals fleeing persecution based on gender and sexual orientation."

Our leader, Thomas Mulcair, asked the Prime Minister today about providing support for some individuals he named. The Prime Minister responded by saying that we don't do one-offs; we do a coordinated approach with the program.

In light of this situation, I wonder if the officials can tell me whether there are any programs in place to assist in this urgent and dire situation right here, right now.

Mr. David Manicom: Yes, we have the urgent protection program. That is the primary means by which we identify cases that have an urgent protection need.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay, so on that basis, is that program being utilized for the current situation in Chechnya? Of the gay men who are being persecuted right now, how many have been identified to be resettled through that program?

Mr. David Manicom: We could not use the urgent protection program as it is constituted right now for Chechens who are inside their country, or inside Russia. We are continuing to monitor the situation in Chechnya. As Mr. Cochrane mentioned, we are working closely with individuals. It is very important to protect these individuals in the way we help them and make sure that, if we have an individual coming directly to the attention of our officials, they do not exacerbate or put at further risk the individual still in Chechnya.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

So we don't have a program in place right now. There is no program. This program, the urgent protection program, cannot be applied. That's just what I heard you say.

Okay. Let's move on to another issue.

Mr. David Manicom: It depends on what you mean by the word "program". We are working very hard and very closely to make sure that any individuals who come to our attention and who need our urgent protection will be provided with it.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: You are saying that not one person has been brought to your attention, even though today Thomas Mulcair, our leader, brought some cases to the attention of the Prime Minister.

Mr. Donald Cochrane: I can also say that any of these individuals who find themselves outside of Russia could of course avail themselves of the protection of the state in which they are or the protection of the UNHCR, and ask for resettlement.

I can say that any cases that are brought to our attention will be considered on a case-by-case basis with the tools that we have at our disposal.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The issue around UNHCR—and this has been brought up over and over again—is that people feel very nervous about identifying themselves, for obvious reasons, because someone could out them, even within the UNHCR, somehow, some way. There are lots of concerns with respect to that. With that in mind, if the government is looking at that, in this instance, only through the UNHCR, you can understand the problems existing with your approach.

I'm going to park that there for a minute because I have only seven minutes and it's fast becoming probably two.

Now, I would like to ask the officials this question. With the urgent protection program, which can be made available to up to 100 individuals, how many of those are identified based on gender and sexual orientation?

•(1605)

Mr. David Manicom: We don't keep statistics based on sexual or gender orientation.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: So we don't know. All right.

I would urge that we need to try to find that out in order to figure out what we're doing, and, by the way, some 73 countries criminalize same-sex relationships or gender diversity, some with the death penalty, so I would say that this is fairly urgent and that we need to do a little more work on this.

We also don't have a program to deal with internally displaced individuals. We used to have such a program, and now we don't, and that is another issue.

I want to return to Rainbow Refugee and the great work it is doing. Right now, we acknowledge its work, and I think it has resettled close to 75 people; some of those are in process at the moment but it is close to 75. If you average that out over three years, that's a record of 25 per year, or a little bit better, I would say. Let's just even assume that if all 100 of these under the urgent protection program are from the LGBTQ community, I would say that their record is pretty good.

Rainbow Refugee and other organizations are doing great work, and there is a great need out there to do this work and to magnify the work that is done. What work, if any, is the government embarking on in this process to move beyond a one-off pilot program on a year-by-year basis? Is anything being done?

Just give a short answer on that, yes or no.

Mr. David Manicom: Yes. We have a number of integration-related programming initiatives in Canada to continue to build the capacity inside Canada to ensure the successful integration, welcoming integration, of LGBTI persons. This has been going on for a long time.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm sorry, but when you say "integration capacity", I'm talking about active resettlement, helping people to bring people here as opposed to other programs. Are there any other funding streams or programs that exist that bring here for resettlement people from the LGBTQ community who have faced persecution?

Mr. David Manicom: No. LGBTI persons come into Canada with the active encouragement of Canada through the private sponsorship programs and through our government-assisted refugee programs. I don't want there to be any confusion that—while we don't ask every single refugee their sexual orientation and their gender identity and compile statistics and databases about those—we are not continuing to do all we can to protect these individuals. We are very cognizant of the risks they face.

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: So the only other initiative you have identified is the privately sponsored one, which is not specifically targeted for the LGBTQ community. There is nothing within government in terms of additional programming that would target these highly persecuted and vulnerable individuals who, without support, may well face death.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Dzerowicz, go ahead for seven minutes, please.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz (Davenport, Lib.): Thanks to the presenters.

I have a lot of questions for you, so I'll try to get through them.

I want to get to a little bit of the data we might have. You indicated on page 4 that the UNHCR refers cases based on seven categories. Might we be able to get the data with regard to what percentage of the cases that are referred to us are within the legal and physical protection needs category? That's one.

What countries or regions are they actually from? Is that data we'd be able to get? I don't need to get it now, but would that be something we'd be able to get?

Mr. David Manicom: I'm sorry—the first question is with regard to the referral categories from UNHCR?

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Yes. There are seven categories. Can we actually get what percentage of referred cases for resettlement to Canada actually come from the legal and physical protection needs category?

Mr. David Manicom: That's a very broad category. We could certainly inquire as to whether between our operational data and UNHCR data we could extract that information.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Also, which countries and regions do they come from? Is it possible to get that as well?

Mr. David Manicom: If we can extract the first, I think we would be able to extract the second.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: That would be helpful, just because you've indicated that individuals who are persecuted based on their gender or sexual activity fall within that category, and that would give us at least some sort of idea.

Second, you mentioned on page 6 that the main reason for this pilot was to build capacity. What metrics do you have in place to determine success?

•(1610)

Mr. David Manicom: As I mentioned, this was designed to be a temporary program, so we haven't done a formal evaluation of it. We hear both from the Rainbow Refugee Society and from a number of the sponsorship agreement-holding organizations they are working with that this has led to a significant increase in both sensitivity in certain communities where there wasn't previously a good understanding of the particular needs of LGBTQ individuals and also a lot of community connection work about the specialized needs of these refugees in a number of our service-providing organizations.

I don't have a metric in the sense of a number. This program was not designed to be ongoing and has not been the subject of a formal evaluation in that way.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Just to pursue that slightly, typically when you do a pilot you're trying to say that these are the purposes of our pilot and this is how we would determine whether or not it's successful.

What are the determinants that would make you say that this has or hasn't been a successful pilot? I'm not looking for a number. I'm looking for the factors, the determinants, the things that would allow you to determine success. Do you have any of that in place?

Mr. David Manicom: I've spoken to them. The attempt was to build these community supports, build these bridges, enhance sensitivity, and ensure the specialized support needed. Again, through our conversations with Rainbow Refugee Society and with stakeholders across the country, we think there has been an improvement in this regard. This is quite small pilot. The funding is quite modest. It is by no means the only work we are doing with the communities to develop specialized resources for LGBTQ individuals.

I have quite a large amount of material here, but certainly we could provide details to the committee of all the different initiatives across the country that are specifically targeted toward the needs of this community.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Okay. I'll leave that for now.

You indicated that there have been conversations with UNHCR in Geneva. In your conversations, have they in any way indicated that more should be done to support the LGBTQ community globally? Have they indicated in any way that more needs to be done and that countries like Canada have to step up more? Have there been any of those types of discussions or those types of call to action at the international level?

Mr. David Manicom: Yes. I think there's certainly a broad understanding. I served as Canada's representative in Geneva for several years, and I know that in many fora Canada was at the forefront of ensuring that the needs of the LGBTQI community were highlighted in the programming of UNHCR.

There are a number of special UNHCR initiatives to help various vulnerability categories, including this one, including what they would describe as mainstreaming knowledge of the particular needs of LGBTQI individuals in the camp settings, identifying where inside camp settings and urban settings there are particular vulnerabilities, and ensuring that their own staff are sensitive to the needs of these individuals and making resettlement referrals when appropriate. It is not the case that LGBTQ individuals will have particular vulnerabilities in all settings. In many settings they do. In other settings the vulnerabilities of religious minorities may be more acute. You will have individuals who are members of both the LGBTQI community and religious minorities and so forth. It's complex.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: So there is a recognition globally, and you're saying that they are taking certain steps to try to address that or to—

Mr. David Manicom: Yes. UNHCR programming certainly is alive to this issue.

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: My last area is this. You mentioned a number of times that you don't track vulnerabilities for a number of good reasons, but logically one would ask why it is we don't track the LGBTQ2 refugees. Can you explain, even just for my own purpose, why it is we don't track them and why that's an issue?

Mr. David Manicom: Yes. We get asked this question by members of this committee with regard to every group that is and should be a priority. It was a very acute question under the previous government, and it remains one now. It would be a very major undertaking, with considerable consultation with the Office of the Privacy Commissioner, if we were to get, in every interview, a categorization of every individual on the file against a number of indicators. Regardless of the reason for persecution, should we or should we not ask every refugee if they identify as a member of this community? Should we in every instance ask individuals what they consider their religion to be and whether they consider themselves to be a religious minority, store this information in databases, and capture that information systematically so that we can produce statistics? Even when we have some numbers, if your statistics aren't global and comprehensive, you can't use them. They are just sophisticated anecdotes.

It would be a major decision point for government in terms of the operational overhead and in terms of the consultation with the Privacy Commissioner, who would generally say that you have to explain a reason to keep data on individuals in government databases. It's a very complex issue.

• (1615)

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: You're saying basically from a human rights perspective, from a privacy perspective, those are the reasons why we can't track—

Mr. David Manicom: If we're interviewing a refugee who has fled the civil war in Syria for whatever reason, at the interview should we be asking the person, "Oh, and by the way, are you a member of community A or community B? What's your religion? Are you LGBTQI?" That's the—

Ms. Julie Dzerowicz: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Rempel, you have five minutes, please.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I think your response is predicated on the assumption that we would only rely on the UNHCR for referrals, so that the interview process you just mentioned is predicated on that tracking system being overlaid with the UN referral system. Would that be correct?

Mr. David Manicom: No.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Okay, so building on your answer to that—

Mr. David Manicom: I mean, in all referral refugees, privately sponsored refugees, or—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Okay. For example, on the problem we saw earlier this year when we were asking you how many Yazidi genocide survivors had been sent to Canada through the government-assisted refugees program, you also gave the same answer in terms of lack of tracking, saying, "It's very bureaucratic", and "We couldn't do this", and that sort of thing.

But we were able to do that. After a lot of political pressure, the government decided to prioritize Yazidi genocide victims, and you are, in fact, tracking those statistics because you're managing a program that's directly related to responding to a specific instance of extreme violence against a certain group of people. As a sovereign

nation, we have said that we are prioritizing these genocide victims. I would argue that there is a great degree of congruency with what's happening in Chechnya right now.

The article that Ms. Kwan referred to earlier, as well as many of the accounts that we're seeing come out of this particular group, should have every Canadian lighting their hair on fire at the atrocities that are happening there.

In that situation, do you think, first of all, that it is feasible, from a bureaucratic perspective, given the situation with the Yazidi genocide, for Canadian politicians to provide political direction that, when there are instances of either genocide or programs, as we're seeing against the LGBTQ community, that we actually can and should be tracking how many people we're bringing in under, let's say, the issuance of special visas? Should there be a political direction to do so?

Mr. David Manicom: Yes, I think it's a very good question, and there is a distinction between globally and permanently collecting data on individuals under a number of these characteristics and collecting program data. For example, because of our program codes, we do know how many refugees the Rainbow Refugee Society has brought in because we have a program code for sponsors. We know who the sponsor is, so we can count them.

Similarly, for the victims of Daesh, we have developed a program code. But if you asked us, "How many Yazidis has Canada brought in over the last five years?", we still could not answer that question—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: But it is possible, and it hasn't been as much of a—

Mr. David Manicom: —because there would have been individuals meeting that description who came in in previous years and who will come in in future years.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I guess what I'm trying to say is that you've just illustrated that it is possible, and it's not a giant monstrosity, privacy, human rights breach—

Mr. David Manicom: —to identify the number of gays and lesbians that Canada has brought in?

Hon. Michelle Rempel: If we—

Mr. David Manicom: Not at all. It would be very complicated, over many years.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: For example, if we were going to say right now that we have a targeted number of Chechen gay men who we would like to bring out of concentration camps to Canada, we could track that, right?

Mr. David Manicom: If we created a program for just that—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

Mr. David Manicom: —sub-descriptor, we could.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: With the time that I have left, one of the issues in getting referrals for Yazidi genocide survivors was that many of these genocide survivors were internally displaced people. This is the same issue that many LGBTQ persons face.

With the Yazidi genocide program, my understanding is that the government worked with NGOs on the ground to develop lists or to identify resettlement candidates outside of the UNHCR process. Could this not be done for instances of persecution against the LGBTQ community such as we're seeing in Chechnya? And if it can be done, what's stopping the government from doing that right now?

Mr. David Manicom: I think it could be done. There are 70, 80, 90, or 100 countries in the world where, to varying degrees, members of the LGBTQ community are severely persecuted, subject to criminal prosecution, and so forth.

With regard to the Chechen situation, this is an emerging situation. We are certainly intent on doing what we can.

•(1620)

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I have 30 seconds left, and I'm sorry to interrupt.

Do you think that it is feasible for the Government of Canada to implement a program or process by which the government can better respond to instances of genocide or systematic cleansing of sexual minorities, such as we're seeing here, so that we're not having to do study after study and having you in front of committee each time we see incidents like this happening?

Mr. David Manicom: We have a large number of programs that have responded to a large number of individual circumstances over the years, and I think many of them have worked very well.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Tabbara, five minutes, please.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

Under this pilot project, how are refugees identified for resettlement? The UNHCR prioritizes people who are particularly vulnerable and face imminent risk. Can you elaborate on that, please?

Mr. David Manicom: Mr. Gionet will correct me if I err.

The project was not prescriptive in how the refugees would be identified. As it has played out, about half or more of the refugees have actually come in through our blended visa office-referred program, where members of the LGBTQ community identified by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and interviewed by Canadian visa officers were made available to the sponsorship community and were indeed picked up by the Rainbow Refugee Society and their sponsorship agreement holder partners.

Another portion of the movement was identified by the Rainbow Refugee Society itself, with sponsorship agreement holders. Exactly how those identifications were made would be a question best addressed to the Rainbow Society. It's a mix of UNHCR referrals and private connections.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: That was going to be my next question, but you said to refer to the Rainbow Refugee Society.

Does the pilot project fall under the 2017 annual levels planned target of 16,000 privately sponsored refugees? If so, how many refugees does IRCC plan to admit through this program in 2017?

Mr. David Manicom: This program does not have a numerical target attached to it. The individuals come in through either our blended visa office-referred program, or the private sponsorship program. The numbers that the Rainbow Refugee Society assists would be part of those two categories, within the levels planned.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Okay.

Since the pilot project was announced, IRCC set aside \$100,000 for the first three years of the initiative, and another \$100,000 was set aside for the program for two years. Can you tell us how much of this funding has been spent on the initiative, and how many beneficiaries there are?

Mr. David Manicom: Of the \$250,000 made available, the information I have is that \$156,000 has actually been used to date. The number of individuals who have been sponsored is 79 persons in 69 cases.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Since when?

Mr. David Manicom: Since 2011.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Since 2011, the beginning of the project. Do we know which countries they came from?

Mr. David Manicom: Yes, we have all that data. It's from all over the world. Probably it would be most efficient if we provided that table to the committee. We have the origin countries and the destination communities in Canada of all those who have participated.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Do we have a measure or mechanism of...? Earlier, one of my colleagues stated that there are certain countries that have the death penalty for it and certain countries where it's a crime. Do we have a system where there's a ranking of vulnerability, in terms of which countries to focus on?

Mr. David Manicom: I don't think a "ranking of vulnerability" is, generally speaking, a term that the international community would use. There are seven identified specific vulnerabilities. How they end up weighted against each other is very much case by case, and I think that's probably the way it has to be.

To speak hypothetically, you could have a member of a religious minority in a camp who's at immediate risk. You could have an unsupported female with a couple of dependent children who could be at immediate risk. You could have a member of the LGBTI community in the refugee camp in Kakuma whom UNHCR is simply not able to provide protection for, and who needs to be helped immediately for resettlement.

It is really case by case how it unfolds in these situations. It's very challenging work in a situation where, unfortunately, the system can only resettle a small fraction, even of the most vulnerable refugees.

•(1625)

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Mr. David Manicom: That is simply the reality.

The Chair: Mr. Manicom, you had stated that there has been no formal evaluation of the program. When do you plan to do a formal evaluation?

Mr. David Manicom: I don't think there's a plan to do a formal evaluation at this time. It's a fairly small program. A formal evaluation might cost more than the dollar value of the program. What we're looking at over the coming year, given the decision to renew the funding to the program, is to talk with the Rainbow Refugee Society and some of their partners to determine the best way forward to make permanent Canada's programming to assist the successful identification and integration of these refugees. It's more about what is most effective in the long term, and I think that at this point it's a very open-ended discussion that we want to have.

The Chair: This pilot has been renewed twice. It's been ongoing for six and a half years.

Can we take it as an indicator of the success of this program? At what point, and after how many renewals, does the pilot become a permanent program?

Mr. David Manicom: That's an extremely interesting question. We have some pilots out there in all government departments that have been going on for many, many years.

The numbers we settled on in the program are very modest but very important. The partnerships that have been developed by the Rainbow Refugee Society facilitated those.

I think it probably is time to decide on a more permanent platform for providing the sorts of assistance that this pilot has put in place. Whether this is the right mechanism, or whether there are other organizations out there that serve the same community that may wish to be involved, is something that I think we need to take a good hard look at, and provide recommendations to our minister.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'd like to thank the department officials for appearing before the committee and starting off this particular study.

With that, we'll suspend for a couple of minutes to allow the assembly of the next panel.

Thank you.

• (1625) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1630)

The Chair: I'd like to call the meeting to order.

With Capital Rainbow Refuge, we have Lisa Hébert, coordinator; and a program participant. With the Rainbow Foundation of Hope, we have Chad Wilkinson, director; and Eka Nasution, director. With Rainbow Refugee Vancouver, we have Sharalyn Jordan, board chair; and Soubhi M., a member.

I'd like to welcome all the witnesses before us, and we'll begin with seven minutes for the Capital Rainbow Refuge.

Ms. Lisa Hébert (Coordinator, Capital Rainbow Refuge): Thank you for taking the time to hear our issue.

Capital Rainbow Refuge is a private sponsorship group that supports sexual minority refugees. We're proud to have been the first

in Canada to have sponsored under the program that you're studying, the rainbow refugee assistance program, or the rainbow RAP.

That was six years ago, when we began the settlement of a lesbian couple from Asia, and without further ado, let me introduce a program participant.

Witness 1 (Program Participant, Canadian Citizen, Capital Rainbow Refuge): Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak and share my journey as a refugee who settled under the rainbow refugee assistance program.

I'm an LGBT sponsored refugee who came to Canada in 2012 with my partner. We both were sponsored by Capital Rainbow Refuge and I understand that we were the first to come to Canada under this program in 2012.

In 2010, I met my partner through an online dating site in Thailand. It was not an awkward feeling for me to meet a lesbian who was married to a man with three children. Lesbians often have to live a secret life. Being from a country where homosexuality is a punishable crime, women do not have any other choice but to meet other women in hiding. My partner was 14 years old when her mother found out that she was interested in other women. To cure her so-called homosexual inclination, her mother forced her to marry a man at 14 years of age. She conceived her first child when she was merely 15 years old.

We started exchanging emails and text messages, only to realize that it was a mistake and her family found out about us. She escaped her home at midnight to protect herself from her husband's anger. We both went into hiding, as her husband threatened to prosecute us under the current anti-LGBT law in our home country. Her children were ready to testify. They were too young to understand what was happening.

Having no safety by law and an expired visa, we decided to go to UNHCR and request protection. I remember a lady from a non-profit organization that supports asylum seekers. She was flabbergasted that UNHCR registered us, as we did not come from a war-torn country.

While we were waiting to get a decision from UNHCR about our status, we were under constant threat from the country where we both were living illegally, with no right to work and no legal existence. We were fortunate that the rainbow refugee assistance program happened to roll out in 2011. I doubt we would have made it here, if no such supporting effort was made by government and CRR to help LGBTQ refugees.

It took us about one year, where in most cases it takes about four years. We received tremendous support from day one with all emotional and financial assistance with CRR and partial settlement funds from rainbow RAP. We were under sponsorship for a year and since then we both are working and pursuing higher education. We have contributed our share to the economy and workforce and we are proud to say that we recently received our citizenship.

I would like to thank rainbow refugee assistance program for helping, not only me, but many other LGBT refugees who were persecuted, harassed, and at times, went through unspeakable tragedies by their people and governments. The rainbow refugee program creates families—and this is from my personal experience—where people choose to be a part of trials and tribulations and emotionally support each other. This is the support I got from CRR.

The rainbow refugee assistance program encouraged people to come together, share responsibilities of reaching out globally, and to champion the value of Canada in protecting the most vulnerable people.

Thank you for letting me share my experience.

• (1635)

Ms. Lisa Hébert: The rainbow RAP has been vital to our sector, and we believe that it should become a regular program with an ongoing multi-year funding commitment—notice the word “regular”. I think that one would work.

As you see in our brief, we have some lower-income groups we mentor that appreciate the seed monies attached to the program, but there are other aspects that are essential. We fear that, without this program, we would not be able to sponsor in this important sector. The rainbow RAP allows us to partner with sponsorship agreement holders, or SAHs, which are primarily churches, without taking away from their work with their congregations. It allows us to sponsor individuals who are afraid to or unable to register with the UNHCR, which has to partner with states that often kill or jail LGBTQ people. We know that all it takes is one person to threaten or ruin their lives.

Canadians are proud that our country has recognized LGBTQ human rights, and it makes sense that our country has a regular program to support this sponsorship. There is a need for a specialized program because LGBTQ refugees tend to be among the most vulnerable. They face potential persecution from multiple sources, including the state, militarized groups, their own community, and for many, their own families. This sector has a very high instance of family violence.

When they flee, they go to nearby countries that also criminalize. There they face the same threats. Unlike other refugees, they can't turn to the state, or their community, or family for support, so they tend to be very alone. Unspeakable tragedies happen. Cases we've sponsored have dealt with terrible attacks while on the run like stabbing, kidnapping, torture, death threats, jail, assault, sexual assault, and motherhood from rape. This is why we desperately need to improve processing times.

For everywhere outside the Middle East, Canada's processing times have shot up to four to seven years. We're currently trying to sponsor a case with a family stuck in a processing time of seven years. It's hard to imagine that anyone living that long in desperate conditions would not be severely harmed. By expediting processing, Canada can reduce post-traumatic stress and basically save lives.

The rainbow RAP makes settlement of LGBTQ refugees humane and welcoming. We know that, for even Canadian-born LGBTQ minorities, challenges persist. Resettlement in a new country is hard for anyone, but when you add identity discrimination and high rates

of HIV in Canadian cities, there are extra barriers. This program works because it brings together caring Canadians to help navigate our society. In our experience, settlements led by private groups like ours are among the most successful. For newcomers, there's nothing better than having their own support group. That's why Canada's private sponsorship programs have been lauded as a success around the world. In what's actually a public-private partnership, the Government of Canada facilitates, and the community settles. We work together very effectively. Both government and our community have benefited from this collaboration. It engages our communities and sponsorship.

It makes sense to formalize this work on an ongoing basis. In summary, let's position our country as a place where we value the lives of everyone. Every person we've sponsored sends a signal back that we value their humanity. Together, we can work to show the world that LGBTQ are people too.

• (1640)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Hébert.

Now the Rainbow Foundation of Hope has seven minutes.

Mr. Eka Nasution (Director, Rainbow Foundation of Hope): Good afternoon, honourable members of Parliament. Thank you immensely for the opportunity to allow Chad and me to attend this special hearing on the rainbow refugee assistance program.

My name is Eka. My husband and I were married discreetly in Canada without any friends or family present. It broke my heart, but having him next to me at the Nepean Point here in Ottawa with our officiant, I told myself that it was perfect. We had no celebration afterwards.

We went back Indonesia. Only our best friends knew about our marriage; however, things changed. The Government of Indonesia issued a new criminal code article 292 stating that adults who conduct sexual intercourse with others of the same sex will be put in prison for five years. The Islamic Defenders Front and the police worked together to legally ban the education seminar on LGBT in Jakarta on February 3, 2016. They came into the meeting savagely and hit several participants who were all transgender. However, the government has succeeded in concealing this act of persecution from the international community.

My husband and I were victims of cyber-bullying on Twitter in Indonesia with #dieyoufaggot. Our photos were everywhere, and they wrote on Twitter that we should both rot in hell. We couldn't report this to the police, or things would turn the other way around.

[Translation]

One day while I was substitute teaching at the French institute of Indonesia, my students and I talked about what we liked and did not like in life. One of my students said that she really did not like homosexuals. I was stunned and confused. I then listened to why she hated us. After listening to her, I decided not to say anything more. I was afraid of the consequences.

In the end, my husband and I decided to leave Indonesia with the sole purpose of starting our own family here. To save our lives, we looked for information on the IRCC website. I have to say honestly that I found all the information on the site rather complicated. Through a Canadian organization located in Ottawa, Rainbow Railroad, which supports the LGBTQ+ community, we got help with the steps involved in making a refugee claim. We were even put in touch with a lawyer in Vancouver.

For that reason, I would like to thank the Canadian government for the support it provides to organizations devoted to supporting the LGBT community in this country, which I now call home. I would like therefore for the government to continue providing support to Rainbow Refugee's assistance programs in the years to come.

Thank you kindly, ladies and gentlemen.

Mr. Chad Wilkinson (Director, Rainbow Foundation of Hope): Thank you, Mr. Nasution, for sharing your experience.

The reach of our organization has truly become international owing to the many people who have suffered injustices because they are part of the LGBTQ+ community.

•(1645)

[English]

Foundation of Hope trusts that our briefings provide ample evidence for recommendation of the continuance of the rainbow RAP. We are here today to offer perspective. As a former private sponsor and co-founder of Foundation of Hope, I am here today as a human being and as a Canadian citizen.

Our organization has worked over three years through the generosity of the LGBT+ community and our allies. On June 11, 2016, we raised over \$45,000 in our premier fundraising event through grassroots efforts. Less than 12 hours later, 50 human beings were killed in what President Obama came to call the single largest mass shooting in American history. This is a nation that prides itself on being the epicentre of the free world. Two days later, this government voted against a motion to recognize such atrocities on the basis of ethnicity, religion, and sexuality as a form of genocide.

Protecting transgender rights and the commitment by the Prime Minister to fight homophobia are important milestones, but Canada has a ways to go. His own father sat in this very House and declared famously, "There's no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation." His historic bill decriminalizing homosexuality achieved royal assent on June 27, 1969. Again, less than 12 hours later, ironically, four New York policemen busted into the Stonewall Inn, where violence erupted and started the modern LGBT rights movement in the U.S.

It has been less than a year since Orlando, and almost 50 years since the Stonewall riots, but gay men are being thrown off buildings in Syria and Iraq. Lesbian women are being raped and murdered all across the African continent. In a city in northern Brazil earlier this year, a transwoman was dragged into the street, beaten, and brutally murdered while onlookers filmed it and posted it on Facebook. As I speak, a hundred men are being detained in a concentration camp in the southern republic of Chechnya.

Detainment and murder of millions of individuals occurred in World War II on the basis of ethnicity, religion, and sexuality. Considering the motion voted down last June, does this Parliament not equate terms like "ethnic cleansing" and "Holocaust" with "genocide"?

This is a moral issue. It must rise above partisan camps. This is the worst humanitarian crisis in our history. To sit in a political camp and ignore injustices beyond our borders is a choice. It sits in stark contrast to working across party lines to do what's morally right as a nation so revered in its respect for human rights across the world. I guess the real question is, in which camp does the government choose to sit?

Private sponsorship of queer refugees takes donors, volunteers, and government support. Applications to IRCC are challenging, especially around regions like Chechnya, where processing times can exceed four years, as Ms. Hébert has pointed out. If the Government of Canada is serious about the LGBT private sponsorship programs, or LGBT rights in general, the rainbow RAP is essential to this work.

[Translation]

Thank you for giving us this opportunity to express our feelings.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Wilkinson.

The floor goes to Rainbow Refugee, for seven minutes, please.

Ms. Sharalyn Jordan (Board Chair, Rainbow Refugee): Thank you.

[Translation]

On behalf of all Refugee Rainbow members, thank you for this opportunity to present the work we do.

[English]

Rainbow Refugee is honoured to steward the rainbow refugee assistance program, and we are proud to partner with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. Together we have encouraged Canadian LGBTQ communities in 15 municipalities across Canada, from Halifax to Winnipeg to Salt Spring Island, to sponsor refugees fleeing homophobic, transphobic, or HIV-related persecution. These communities have welcomed 75 LGBTQ newcomers from every region of the globe, and together we have raised over \$1.4 million to more than match federal funds.

These numbers tell only some of the success of this program. For a more personal perspective, I'd like to introduce Soubhi.

Mr. Soubhi M. (Member, Rainbow Refugee): Hi.

I chose to take this chance today to be here for the thousands or maybe millions of people out there who have walked my path and probably much more difficult paths, with no hope of light at the end of that tunnel. I am facing one of my fears, which may not be speaking in public but speaking about a taboo, or maybe just speaking in general. Where I come from, speaking out loud and expressing one's self is absolutely forbidden.

I'm a Syrian citizen and I grew up in Damascus, where I have never been my true self. I always lived the lie with family, friends, and a tight-knit community. I graduated in 2013 as an architect, and I left for Dubai, United Arab Emirates, to start my career, after Syria was besieged by war. In the UAE, it was no better than Syria, and maybe worse. I always lived in fear, never my true self, spending each and every day expecting deportation for being myself and for numerous other inhuman laws. After more than three years there, my partner and I started searching, for months, to learn about resettlement in Canada. We were connected to Rainbow Refugee.

Our application was under process in June 2013 when I was trapped by government officials and put in detention in Dubai. I was kept there for five days without seeing my home or anyone else. My residency permit was cancelled, and I was taken directly to the airport to be deported. Usually that would be to my home country, but I was deported to Beirut, Lebanon, with no expectation of how long I was going to be there.

Members of my circle in Vancouver, Get Serious, contacted other LGBTQ organization members in Lebanon, who did their best to help me get my life together when I had no place to stay, and no job or income. After six months in Lebanon, our papers were ready and we flew to Vancouver, Canada.

My first month in Vancouver was a relief, yet challenging. I went through very frequent ups and downs, and I'm still recovering from the impacts of trauma. One of the biggest challenges that I realized after five months in Canada was that for a person coming from the Middle East who grew up with a lot of beliefs about sins and impurities, a lot of stigmas, shedding all the taboos and insecurities takes a lot of time.

My life had been a roller coaster, and arriving in Canada felt like the last slope, a sudden fall, a jolt, and then gradually coming to rest. Arriving in Canada has changed the entire direction of my life. Today I'm able to talk in front of all of you about who I am and where I come from. Today I get to be the only author of my own

book and write the beginning I want for my new chapter. Today I'm not afraid of being deported for who I am, for being homosexual. Because of this program, I'm not in Syria, fighting in Syria; I'm not in Lebanon in a camp, and I'm not threatened to be killed.

I'm here today as so many people who have arrived here are, and who have yet to arrive. I'm here today to talk about this and to talk about my experience, safe.

• (1650)

Ms. Sharalyn Jordan: Witnessing acts of courage like this is one of the rewards that keep us going.

The targeted backlashes against sexual- and gender-diverse people in Chechnya, Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Uganda in just the past five years make it clear that homophobic and transphobic persecution persists and may be on the rise. Criminal sanctions in 73 countries mean it impacts every region of the globe. The RRAP is a critical initiative and we urge the IRCC to make it a regular program with an ongoing multi-year funding commitment.

More broadly, we seek a commitment from the federal government to work with LGBTQ civil society organizations, like those of us here today, to ensure that Canada takes a proactive stance in promoting the human rights and protecting the lives of all sexual- and gender-diverse people internationally. The RRAP extends refugee protection and resettlement to some of the world's most at-risk refugees escaping threats of violence from their own families, communities, and states. They arrive in nearby countries that are often just as dangerous. Afghans try to lay low in Pakistan, and Ugandans are struggling in Kenya.

For many reasons, LGBTQ refugees do not know or trust that the UNHCR would protect them. The rainbow RAP uses networks of trusted NGOs to identify people for possible resettlement. RRAP sponsorship groups form a community of care that connects pre-arrivals, offering hope and practical support. On arrival, RRAP circles immediately support newcomers. Sharing our social networks opens up LGBTQ-affirming job contacts, health care, and friendships. Settlement presents distinct challenges for LGBTQ refugees, and RRAP circles offer open conversations about the daily realities of living LGBTQ in the often confusing diversity of Canadian cities.

Partnerships and collaborations are key to rainbow RAP's success. The federal government contributes three months of income support plus start-up funds for each sponsored person. Circles fundraise the remaining nine months. Canadians get great value for a small investment of public funds. Holders of sponsorship agreements are willing partners because their allocations are not impacted. The SAHs ensure fiduciary responsibilities are met and contribute decades of sponsorship know-how. RRAP circles bring passion, sweat equity, and lived LGBTQ know-how. We all become better at welcoming LGBTQ refugees in the process.

●(1655)

The Chair: You have twenty seconds.

Ms. Sharalyn Jordan: Leadership in the minister's office and the IRCC support is crucial. IRCC staff have been willing and able to troubleshoot when life-threatening emergencies arise. So we applaud all the parties around this table who are enthusiastic about ensuring the safety and rights of LGBTQ refugees. Making the RRAP a regular program will enable us to build and grow it sustainably, promote it more robustly, and allow more confident sponsorship of people in regions with long processing times.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Sharalyn Jordan: Spikes in homophobic and transphobic violence will continue to occur. People fleeing this violence need safer pathways to protection. The RRAP is a small example of how this can be accomplished through deep community engagement and a public-private partnership. With longer-term federal government commitment, this program can be a shining star, a made-in-Canada innovation addressing a lethal and grave human rights abuse.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Jordan.

Ms. Sharalyn Jordan: Canadian LGBTQ communities are passionate about doing this work. They've stood up in solidarity and want to do more and we hope you'll give us this opportunity.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Jordan.

Mr. Anandasangaree.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree (Scarborough—Rouge Park, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to start, Witness 1, Eka, and Soubhi, to welcome you to your new country. I came to this country as a refugee when I was 10, and I've worked with refugees for a very long time. I understand many of the anxieties and also the excitement that comes about as a result of settling in Canada.

I have two sets of questions. The first is for the three of you. Very briefly, what are some of the challenges you faced in coming to Canada?

Then to the agencies, how many potential sponsors do you have in your list, and what are some of the challenges you face—other than processing time, which we hear about consistently—in resettlement? It's more of an open-ended question. Maybe we can start with Witness 1.

Witness 1: One of the most important challenges we had was to prove we were a couple. We had to go through a rigorous process with UNHCR. Another important challenge was to get the knowledge of how to go about it. There is no documentation, no research paper available for somebody who fears for her life and does not know what to do. I was fortunate to have a bit of English, and I searched what to do, how to make my life and my partner's life safe. I eventually found the track through the help of other third-party organizations working with UNHCR. This process itself is difficult and the emotional struggle as you go through the process is horrendous.

Ms. Lisa Hébert: For me one of the hardest things is all the emails I get regularly from people who are in a desperate place,

fleeing a desperate situation, and then they are in a country where it's terrible. I feel as though I don't have options. The program we work under takes a lot of time and money. Each one takes so much work. It takes about two months to do each application. I wish we could do more. I feel as though Canada could do more. We could. You know, we have a great country and we have space and we have a welcoming community. We could do more. If we could just have some help, then we could.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Lisa, how many potential sponsors do you have or is there a group that's still waiting to be matched up?

Ms. Lisa Hébert: We're working with about six to eight groups. Some of them are here. We have Baker's Dozen here and we have the Ottawa Rainbow Friendship Alliance. We have some individuals who have come as Inland, and we have formed separate groups with them. I'm very grateful that they have shown an interest in coming to the committee too. I think we feel that we can do more and we'd be happy to.

●(1700)

Mr. Chad Wilkinson: We are a registered charity in Canada. Getting our registered charitable status was critical for us to be able to build up our donor base, because they obviously benefit from the tax credit. A condition of our charitable status is that we grant funding towards only other registered charities. We do that. Obviously Capital Rainbow Refuge is the main one. We worked with Rainbow Refugee to get their registered charitable status, and they recently got it, so now they can apply directly to us for grant funding, which is wonderful.

I'll say something that is really fascinating about what's starting to happen. There is a movement starting to happen. Not only are people coming to us and actually wanting to hold fundraisers on our behalf, but we actually have massive corporations like TD Bank coming to us and bestowing on us incredible gifts. The TD Aeroplan Pride program gave us three million Aeroplan miles that we could use for our cause. It seems really obvious at first to say, "well, that's great, because you are bringing refugees over." However, we can't do it with our Aeroplan miles because there is a very entrenched process in place that requires the Government of Canada to supply the International Organization for Migration with the money to organize the flights to bring the refugees over, so we can't actually see it in that revenue stream, which would be coming from a deep pocket. So, that's a major challenge for us. We are hoping we can work with the government to find a way to make our case so sponsorship groups that we've actually supported will be eligible quite easily to have the costs of their travel covered. We have TD ready and able to help us. That's a big challenge, and I think it's important for me to point that out.

Mr. Eka Nasution: For me and my husband, the most difficult time was when we tried to get a visa to come to Canada. We applied in November of 2015, but at the same time there was an influx of Syrian refugees coming to Canada so we needed to wait from November 2015 and we got our visa in February 2016. So, it was almost five months of waiting, which felt like five years. Then we came here. Actually the worst thing was the moment of waiting, but, thankfully, Rainbow Railroad, which is also part of our network, guided us on how to come here. Using our documentation, we had to show the Immigration and Refugee Board in Vancouver that we were coming here as a couple. We had our official letter and registrar, so in terms of documentation, it was not very hard for me. I am also the director of the Foundation of Hope, and I'm handling the grant committee services applications. Some of the applications were coming, and we actually got emails from Uganda and from Turkey asking for help. It seems to me that it would be better for all the assistance programs for LGBTQ refugees not to be focused on only one single country in the Middle East. It has to be done in terms of humanity and not by region.

The Chair: Be very brief. You have 10 seconds.

Ms. Sharalyn Jordan: We've had the honour of working with 800 people. We have 19 circles in formation in B.C. and 12 more on the go. There is clearly the capacity. You've heard about the fundraising capacity. There is the desire to do more. We want to be given the opportunity.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Rempel, you have seven minutes, please.

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

I'll just preface this by saying that I fully support turning the RRAP into a permanent ongoing program with ongoing funding.

To the agencies that have been working here to do this, I want to express my thanks for your work. For those of you who came here to share your stories, I want to thank you for your courage, as well as Chad for making us uncomfortable because we should be uncomfortable.

The reality is that nobody should be persecuted or tortured for who they love or for living their own personal truth. Canada has to make that statement permanent, not just through statements and nice words, but through programs such as this.

I would like to use the remainder of my time, because we don't have a lot of meetings scheduled for this particular study, to talk about how a permanent ongoing program could be structured in terms of values, metrics, and an operating framework.

Some of the suggestions that I've heard in both your briefs and your testimony today include ensuring that the funding and the program are set up to be cognizant of the unique integration and support needs of the LGBTQ community when they come here as refugees; ensuring that processing times are contextualized within the fact that the LGBTQ community are some of the most persecuted people in the world, in many parts of the world; and ensuring that if we have one initiative or another, we're not seeing those numbers drop because they're all of a sudden not prioritized.

I've heard that we need to have some emphasis around demystifying or taking the confusion out of the process. For people who are in need, the last thing they want to be doing is trying to figure out how to access the program—so some sort of initiative around, again, demystifying the process or providing simpler information.

This program should also have the ability to react to situations such as that in Chechnya. The point has been made over and over again that there are 76 countries around the world, that there are so many places where the community is persecuted, and that we can't react to everything. I would argue that this program, if it's ongoing, should be able to react in situations like this. It should be nimble, and it shouldn't take six months of committee study to react to it.

I would also say that I've heard about the issue of questioning, the questioning that happens through the UNHCR process or through the Canadian process. I've heard that members of the community have been asked really inappropriate questions, such as "Are you a top, or are you a bottom?" I think there should be some sort of sensitivity and a coordinated effort to make that happen.

What I also heard was that the funding provided should really harness and build capacity, and continue to build capacity within the personal generosity of Canadians to do this. That should be a value.

I would also argue that there are some tangential things we need to look at, as well, to.... I'll close by saying that we should probably have some discussion—and I would look to you—on metrics. How do we measure this? You heard the discussion within the department. This is a very difficult issue within the government-assisted refugee stream. How do we address that?

To the point that was made about this being a global issue, it can't just be about resettlement. The country also has to pair an ongoing program with continued outspokenness against regimes that entrench within governments the persecution of the LGBTQ community. It can't just be about resettlement. There also has to be a diplomatic position in our messaging against countries that do this.

That's how I've distilled the summary. I have three minutes left in my time. I'd just love to hear your feedback on this. Have we got it right? Do you support that? Is there anything that I've missed?

• (1705)

Ms. Sharalyn Jordan: I think you've distilled many of the critical elements. There needs to be support for civil society organizations, centring LGBTQ civil society organizations to be able to work pre-arrival and post-arrival.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Should the civil society organizations also have a mechanism to work with the department to identify people in situations like we're seeing in Chechnya?

Ms. Sharalyn Jordan: Yes. Often it is the NGOs on the ground that know who is seeking protection. We are already working with Rainbow Railroad, which is working with LGBTQ Russian networks. The networks are there. It would be helpful to communicate and work closely to identify two sources, like the UNHCR. I think we need a both-and solution. This is not an either-or.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Sure.

Mr. Chad Wilkinson: You should go first. I do have comments on the funding.

Ms. Lisa Hébert: Thank you. I love your comments and would agree with them.

One of the things we don't always mention, because it gets involved in the jargon, is that one of the things that makes this work is that we're outside of the quotas to work with the SAHs.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Sure.

Ms. Lisa Hébert: Queer groups are not necessarily a natural alliance with the churches, though we've had great work with our SAHs. Unitarians have been fabulous partners, but they've been really frank about saying they can't work with us if we take away from their quota. That's in the brief that we sent to you. That's one of the kind of specific things that would be useful.

I also wanted to mention that every once in a while, when we have a really urgent case that we're working on as part of the rainbow RAP, the government has been good to turn it around, sometimes because they can act more quickly. If we have somebody who has had a death threat, they have been able to move them ahead as, perhaps, government assisted refugees or temporary resident permits.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Perhaps an additional set of criteria should be entrenched in the program that would allow the government to be permanently more nimble.

• (1710)

Ms. Lisa Hébert: Well, they have been good and we would encourage them more to do that—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Sure.

Ms. Lisa Hébert: —because we always feel that we ask politely and they respond politely. It would be nice to know we could do that more frequently.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Sure.

Ms. Lisa Hébert: You make an interesting point, too, that this program has never been on the website. Some of the churches have not known it exists and we have to convince them, but there's never been anything public about the program's existence, so it could come out of the closet.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Quickly, I want 10 seconds.

Mr. Chad Wilkinson: The only comment I would make is that we exist entirely as a volunteer organization and we're committed to our donor base. They want to see our money going out to help, so we are full-time employees and we do this in our spare time. We have in our constitution that we will not use more than 10% of any of our capacity as an operational expenditure.

Rainbow Railroad has raised over \$100,000 through Facebook for Chechnya, which is amazing. Rainbow Railroad is the reason that Eka is here. Rainbow Railroad is an organization that we support.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Of course, but I think I have one second and I'll close with this. To the church comment, I would argue that any faith group should prioritize compassion and love for people who receive that love, or persecution, and that's a value we should also promote.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Kwan, for seven minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you to all the witnesses for your presentations. Particularly, I want to acknowledge the individuals who share your personal stories. It takes an incredible amount of courage for you to share your stories.

I tell you that you can't help but be moved by your stories, if you're human and you value humanity, in what you're striving to do. I can't thank you enough for the great work you're doing and for standing up for all of us and for humanity.

With that we have a few minutes to ask some questions, so I want to move in the direction of getting recommendations coming out of this committee for our report. I think I heard all of you say how much you value rainbow RAP, so can I simply get everybody on the record here in the affirmative that you're calling on the government to regularize the program so it's not a pilot any more, so that you have stable funding and know how you can plan ahead to do this important work and how to expand on it?

I can move it down the line, starting from over here, and if everybody can quickly answer that I will have another question to ask on that.

Witness 1: I would highly recommend that, because it will give some ease to the people who are sponsoring to come together, and also to people who are seeking such help. Yes.

Ms. Lisa Hébert: Yes. We use the term “multi-year” as well in terms of funding. Thank you.

Mr. Chad Wilkinson: We're saying yes. Every single sponsorship program we've given out has made use of it, so it's inextricable to our funding work.

Mr. Eka Nasution: Let's recommend this program to be a multi-year funding project.

Ms. Sharalyn Jordan: Yes, absolutely. It's what will allow us to build and grow at the program.

Mr. Soubhi M.: Yes, definitely, because there are a lot of people out there there like me who need this to be permanent.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Likewise, on the issue around expediting and processing and the issue around delay, as all of you have expressed, if there is a delay people's lives literally hang in the balance. Individuals have to escape from country to country and sometimes put themselves in an even more precarious situation from the home country they're in, aside from the fact that they have a lack of resources, financial or otherwise, to try to make ends meet.

In terms of expediting and reducing processing times, would you support then a call for the government to put in a special measure, a special initiative that targets the LGBTQ community in expediting processing times and sets standards on what the processing times should look like?

Again, I'll run down quickly to get everybody's response.

Witness 1: There are times we have to wait as long as from one to four years. This can be very stressful and can make somebody depressed to the point at which they may attempt to kill themselves.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Ms. Lisa Hébert: There's a backlog of 54,000 people that should be processed. I don't want to say that LGBT have to be the first ones there. Our community is clearly among the most vulnerable, but I don't think we should stand before other people. I think there should be fair criteria. If people face death threats or violence, then they should be expedited.

I think by that very criteria, the people we sponsor tend to be expedited, which I support, but I would also say that there could be a woman at risk who could also be expedited. I would just like to stand together with people who should be processed quickly. Canada has a backlog of 54,000, and it has to be dealt with.

• (1715)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Then would it be fair to say that we should have standardized processing times for all vulnerable groups, including LGBTQ communities? You're right that the processing times are unbelievable across all groups. For those faced with imminent danger, death threats and so on, we need to standardize the times and have a regularized approach.

Ms. Lisa Hébert: Well, we do feel bad jumping ahead of the line. Sometimes the government has been quite responsive...to be able to do that. We had some cases recently that were processed quite quickly, and we were very, very grateful that they were.

At the same time, in this other case we have, where there's a seven-year processing time, I got woken up at three o'clock in the morning this week when they were taken into the police station and wrongly accused of something. The police interrogated them for five hours. How can you live for seven years in a situation like that?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Perhaps I can switch the question. What would be deemed to be an acceptable time frame? Would it be one year, two years...?

Ms. Lisa Hébert: It shouldn't take more than a year. Like, why would it take six years to read a brief?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay, then, let me switch the question. Should it be one year to standardize the time in processing?

Ms. Lisa Hébert: At most.

Mr. Chad Wilkinson: On this I'd like to say that we sponsor the application process, and they have to have the funds available to get here. That's one milestone. Then it's an unknown. Then it can be up to seven years. We have to step outside of our ability to fund, because they have to get money from somewhere.

At Capital Rainbow Refuge, three of the four applications that they had put forward in a short period of time already have had their hearings in the visa office in the country of refuge. That's what we'd

like to see as a measure of success. The faster the better, as far as we're concerned.

Ms. Sharalyn Jordan: There are grave inequities across regions that need to be addressed. If we could get it down to one year globally, then it would be essential to have SOGI analysis—sexual orientation or gender identity analysis—incorporated across the board, in all of IRCC's operations, to remove systemic barriers against LGBTQ refugees accessing protection.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: To the other two witnesses, do have you anything else to add, based on what people have presented?

Mr. Soubhi M.: On the processing time, I would just add that life events happen. A lot of things can change in a month, so imagine in a couple of years.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Let me switch to this. We have a major problem with people being able to make applications, because we don't really take applications from people who are internally displaced. This is a major problem. Perhaps I could ask a couple of you to quickly share your thoughts on what Canada should do about this.

I'll start with you, Sharalyn.

Ms. Sharalyn Jordan: We do need a specialized program for the internally displaced. Sexual orientation and gender identity and expression need to be considered in the vulnerability factors for that. This program should involve consultation and collaboration, resourced collaboration, with civil society organizations that have the know-how, the knowledge, and the connections to do this work.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Lisa.

Ms. Lisa Hébert: Chechnya is something that really has caught fire within our community. I think people are really interested in hearing about something being done about that. I think internally displaced is something that might be really uphill. I would say that there are a lot of cases the government could move on that are currently identified by the UNHCR, such as in the camp in Kenya. The government has brought in a handful of people from Saudi Arabia in the last year. In Saudi Arabia they hang 100 men annually in public, in Riyadh.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Tabbara, you have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you to all the witnesses today. Thank you as well for the great work you're doing in changing the lives of so many people by getting them accepted in Canada, helping them with their processing. The great work you do is just invaluable.

First, do private sponsorship groups have criteria that they have to meet in order to participate in the rainbow refugee assistance program?

Ms. Sharalyn Jordan: All the sponsorship groups that participate must include members of the local LGBTQ community. They must participate in a code of ethics orientation and process. Each member signs on to this code of ethics. There is an orientation session as well, which also works with the circles around their decision-making and conflict resolution processes and ways they are going to work together.

Once people have completed that, they officially become a named group. Only then are they matched with one of the cases we're working with.

• (1720)

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: How do you determine if they're from the LGBTQ community?

Ms. Sharalyn Jordan: Yes, this is obviously a complex question. There is no one single right answer. Many of the people we work with are referred through NGOs. There's sort of a trusted network. You heard how people had reached out to local NGOs, and they're the ones that reach out to us. People self-identify with us, and then we work through an interview process by Skype.

Rainbow Refugee has been doing this work since 2001. In the process, we've developed a great deal of knowledge on how to do this with some sensitivity, and we ask people to consult and corroborate their stories.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Okay.

Ms. Hébert, you mentioned processing times and that you want to see them reduced. I just want to give you some figures on what our government has done to reduce processing times.

They've ballooned in the last 10 years. For example, just looking at spouses, it took up to two years plus for you to bring over your spouse through a sponsorship. Now we've reduced that to 12 months.

Under the family class, in 2006 it was around 16 months, and that ballooned up to 35 months to process applications. There are a lot of initiatives put in place by our government to reduce processing times. That was the minister's mandate: to reduce processing times in all sectors, whether it be student applications or sponsorship of family class.

There are initiatives in place to reduce processing times. It takes a little while. We've had a year and a half, and it takes a bit more time. We've put in more resources within the department.

What areas of the pilot project funding can be improved to make the project more sustainable in the long term?

I open it up to any of you to answer.

Ms. Sharalyn Jordan: The longer-term commitment would allow us to build fundraising capacity. It would also allow us to share what I call emerging best practices across groups. One of the benefits we've seen in this program is that the capacity in a local community increases, not just in the circles or groups themselves but also in settlement agencies. Many of our groups liaise with settlement agencies in order to access services for people they've sponsored.

In the process, we're kind of learning and growing together. This is a metric that isn't captured in the original plans or goals of this program, but we're seeing on the ground collaboration among faith, settlement, and LGBTQ communities, building the capacity overall. I would like to see us document and build on that over time.

Then the other, as we've been talking about here, is that we would like to focus on an area where there has been a very protracted and volatile situation. The Nairobi processing centre in Kenya has a very slow processing time. There are Ugandans and Congolese nationals

who have escaped an incredibly deadly situation but have been stuck there for many years under very dangerous circumstances. We would like to build capacity across the country to do a committed resettlement of individuals from that area.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: My next question is for Mr. Soubhi.

I just wanted to ask more questions about your personal experience. You mentioned you went to Dubai, and that you were in prison there.

Mr. Soubhi M.: Yes.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Could you elaborate a bit on why you were in prison and under what...?

Mr. Soubhi M.: I'm sorry, I'm not going to go into details. Generally for who I am, for being homosexual, I was just called in one day and not to be told... that I had to go to a police station or something. I was trapped in a place which is non-governmental and found myself taken by governmental officials to a place which is not a jail, but jail-like, where I stayed for six days without being given any chance to go home or to pack or do anything.

Then my employer had to finish off all my papers, get my employment permit cancelled, and I was taken directly to the airport. That's briefly how it was.

• (1725)

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: I understand. I was born in Beirut, Lebanon, and there are certain people in the extended family who still have some conservative values, and I have a lot of debate with them.

Mr. Soubhi M.: Yes.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: They do not agree with some of my values.

The Chair: You have 20 seconds, please.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: I understand that you grew up in Syria and Lebanon obviously in similar circumstances.

Mr. Soubhi M.: Yes, it's similar.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: I'm glad to hear that when you went back to Lebanon that you were able to contact Rainbow Refugee and arrive here safely.

Mr. Soubhi M.: Yes, they helped me. They put me in contact with the LGBTQ organization in Lebanon that helped me get settled, because being Syrian I could only stay in Lebanon for two weeks. Then I had to fly to Malaysia two times in three days to get a one-year visa to stay in Lebanon, because I didn't know how long I would be staying there.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Tabbara.

I know I speak on behalf of all of the committee members when I express a heartfelt thank you to all of the witnesses who appeared before the committee today, the NGOs for the critical life-saving work that you do, and the witnesses for the courage that you've shown and the courage in appearing before this committee. I know that at least in one of the cases it took tremendous courage because it puts friends and family in your birth countries at potential risk.

I'm so glad that your adoptive country, Canada, is a place where you have found a loving home, where you don't have to hide in fear of who you are, where in fact we celebrate who each and every one of us is. With that, I'd like to say thank you.

Committee members, just before we adjourn I'd like to inform you that if there is agreement, the Atlantic Canada study witness lists need to be provided by the 12th to allow all the regular committee arrangements to be made. Are there any questions to that?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Could you also let us know how many witnesses we would be entitled to?

The Chair: We'd have to check the minutes, but it was agreed to on April 3. I'm not sure of the exact allotment.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I can't remember what the number is. I just thought you could remind us.

The Chair: We will provide you with that number.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you once again.

The meeting is adjourned.

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