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Chair

Mr. Robert Oliphant

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● (0845)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Robert Oliphant (Don Valley West, Lib.)): I'm going to call this meeting to order. This is the 73rd meeting of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we're continuing our briefing on the issue of asylum seekers who are irregularly entering Canada from the United States.

We welcome both Minister Hussen and Minister Goodale to continue in our briefing.

We've heard from officials in both of your departments as well as from one agency. We're delighted you're here.

Because it's Mr. Goodale's birthday, we'll begin with his opening remarks, and then hear from Mr. Hussen.

A voice: Happy birthday, Ralph.

The Chair: It's not every day you turn 39.

Hon. Ralph Goodale (Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness): Another one.

Mr. Chairman, thank you very much. That's a wonderful present. I'm delighted to be here. It's good to see you again in a new capacity; I remember you last being the chair of the public safety committee.

[Translation]

Hello everyone.

[English]

I'm very glad to have the opportunity with Minister Hussen to discuss the issue of irregular migration.

[Translation]

I would like to thank the committee and its members for their exhaustive and rigorous review of this important national issue.

Canada is an open, welcoming, and generous country, but it is also a country with the rule of law, and the Government of Canada takes its laws and the integrity of its borders very seriously.

[English]

Some people, in the circumstances of this year, appear to have been misled to believe that crossing the border into Canada in an irregular fashion is somehow a free ticket to Canada—but it certainly is not. We have been making that point repeatedly in Parliament, in

the media, in the public domain, and in the United States since the surge of asylum seekers began earlier this year.

We want people to know that crossing the border into Canada between designated ports of entry is contrary to the law. We also want to warn people about how dangerous that can be. That's why there are rigorous immigration and customs rules that must be followed.

To be clear, we enforce those rules through the CBSA, the RCMP, the IRCC, and other agencies to protect our border and to safeguard our communities while we also respect all of Canada's international obligations, including those that are reflected in section 133 of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act.

Everyone seeking entry to Canada must demonstrate they meet the requirements to enter and/or to stay here. That's a matter of fact, proof, and evidence. It is not negotiable. It applies regardless of where or how people try to enter the country.

Those entering Canada outside of ports of entry are subject to particular scrutiny. They are arrested by the RCMP or by a local law enforcement officer under the terms of the Customs Act. The RCMP then conducts a preliminary risk assessment to determine if the person has been involved in illegal activity or presents any safety or security risk.

This assessment involves detailed questioning, searches, the examination of documents, and so forth. It may result in the person remaining in RCMP custody for further investigation, if that is deemed necessary, or being transferred to another police agency, if that is the appropriate course. Or, the person will be brought to a Canada Border Services Agency officer at a port of entry or to an inland CBSA or IRCC office.

Once they have cleared that preliminary police and security check at the moment of irregular crossing, asylum seekers then face a careful process to determine whether they are admissible and eligible to make a claim according to Canadian and international law. There are no shortcuts, no exceptions, and no special treatment. There are also no guarantees that an asylum seeker will be able to stay in Canada. That is up to the IRB to determine. Not all asylum claims will be accepted, and not everyone is eligible even to make an asylum claim. The rules are very clearly specified in the IRPA, the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act.

Verifying an asylum claimant's identity is, obviously, fundamental and essential. It's done for all cases, each and every time, using both biographic and biometric information. This screening includes an interview, taking fingerprints and photographs, as well as medical, security, and criminal record checks. The process is intended to ensure that anyone who wants to come to Canada has not committed serious crimes and does not pose a health or safety risk to Canadians.

● (0850)

An asylum seeker's records are examined for any immigration, criminal, or national security concerns and they are checked against Canadian, international, and other databases, including Interpol's. No one leaves the port of entry without this initial security screening having been completed in a very professional manner, in the first instance by the RCMP, and then by CBSA.

If there is doubt, they can and will be detained. If the applicant is eligible, the person's file will be referred to the Immigration and Refugee Board for appropriate consideration. The person will be authorized to be in Canada to attend a hearing of the IRB, where each claim is decided on a case-by-case basis.

Bear in mind that the nature of the claim being made by asylum seekers is that they are seeking asylum in Canada because they need Canada's protection for their life or their safety. If the IRB determines that individuals are not in need of Canada's protection, they are removed from Canada. Under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, removal orders must be enforced as quickly as possible. The Canada Border Services Agency is firmly committed to doing so. Sometimes, you will note, they get some flack for that, but it is their duty under the law to effect those removals as quickly as possible.

Many people have been working very hard to ensure that the process I have described is managed effectively, efficiently, and in as orderly a fashion as possible. That includes reallocating resources to where they are most required within the RCMP, within CBSA, and within IRCC. Responding to the increase in asylum seekers this year has been very much a whole-of-government effort. Besides the two or three that are abundantly obvious, numerous departments are involved in the coordinated response, and that is all organized and coordinated through the Government Operations Centre in my Department of Public Safety. The leadership shown by all the agencies has permitted an efficient and effective response to a very fluid situation.

Enhanced processing capacity at Lacolle and at inland offices in Montreal and Cornwall has significantly reduced the backlog of people awaiting initial processing and eligibility determination. In some cases, we are able to conduct both the initial interview and investigation and the secondary stage eligibility interview at Lacolle, and that reduces pressures down the road.

As members of the committee will know, the ad hoc intergovernmental task force on irregular migration, of which Minister Hussen and I are members, was recently created, involving not just the federal agencies but also a number of provincial agencies, to work on issues related to the influx of asylum seekers entering Canada from the United States. The collaboration at that level has been very good. The task force has met four times so far, most recently a week ago today.

Canadian authorities are diligent in protecting the integrity of our border and the safety of our country while applying our rules and procedures to provide refuge for those in need of our protection according to Canadian and international law. The government will continue to address irregular migration in accordance with that law and in keeping with our values as an open and welcoming country.

Thank you for your interest, and I am happy now to give the floor to Minister Hussen.

● (0855)

The Chair: Minister Hussen.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen (Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship): Thank you very much, Minister Goodale.

Mr. Chair, first of all, happy birthday.

The Chair: It's not mine; it's his.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: It's not yours. Okay, I thought it was. Someone told me it was your birthday.

It's a pleasure to appear once again before this committee. I look forward to answering any questions committee members might have on this important and timely topic.

[*Translation*]

First, I would like to make a few comments.

[*English*]

I know you've heard from officials in my department over the past two meetings, and they've described to you some of the actions we've taken to address the recent increase in asylum seekers crossing into Canada from the United States outside designated ports of entry.

I'd like to follow up on these comments by stressing that Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada has been working very closely in partnership with other departments and agencies and with other levels of government to ensure that we have the capacity to deal with the situation and to process claimants expeditiously while maintaining the overall integrity of the asylum system. I'll also note that while asylum seekers await decisions, the social assistance supports they receive are funded and provided to them by our provincial partners. As we take these actions, we remain strongly committed to orderly migration and to, first and foremost, ensuring the safety of Canadians.

Mr. Chair, Canadians can be assured that we've been monitoring the situation for many months and putting in place the necessary plans. Although it's far from a routine situation that we're facing, it's one that we've been able to manage responsibly, effectively, and professionally. I'd like to take the opportunity to thank my department officials and officials in all the different agencies involved for how they've been able to rise to the challenge and respond with the utmost professionalism, nimbleness, speed, and ingenuity.

I'll now outline the concrete ways in which we're responsive. When we saw the numbers of irregular migrants begin to increase at the Lacolle border crossing, we were able to quickly mobilize in order to reassign staff and set up additional office space so that we could keep up with the volume and process asylum seekers quickly for their eligibility hearings. In fact, these efforts have enabled us to bring the eligibility processing timelines of from five to seven months down to from five to seven days.

We figured out a way to fast-track work permit applications from asylum claimants across Canada in order to alleviate the pressure on the social assistance budgets of provincial governments. This is an issue that was raised by the Government of Quebec, and we moved quickly to establish a new 30-day service standard for work permit applications so that asylum seekers may support themselves and become self-sufficient while they await the final decision on their claims. This minimizes the impact they have on provincial social assistance programs.

Similarly, we have built in flexibility to ensure that asylum seekers are covered under the interim federal health program immediately after background checks are completed, but while they are awaiting their initial hearing. This is important because we want to ensure that public health is protected, that asylum seekers have access to basic care, and that there is no undue burden on hospital emergency rooms and provincial health care budgets.

Mr. Chair, all of these are great examples of how we have been responding to an uncommon situation in an effective manner. At the same time, we've been working to dispel the false information that has prompted many to embark on a journey to cross our border. We know this situation is, in part, fuelled by misinformation on various social media outlets and other channels suggesting that certain groups of individuals will receive preferential treatment or be given status in Canada. This is, of course, incorrect, and all claimants have been and will continue to be treated according to existing laws.

We've taken a number of steps to dispel false information and inform people in Canada and the United States of the facts regarding the asylum process in Canada. In recent weeks, two of our colleagues, multilingual members of Parliament, travelled to the United States to help counteract this false information among different diaspora communities.

● (0900)

They met with local politicians and community leaders, and made appearances in the local media and multicultural media, as well as in Canadian and broader U.S. media. As well, I had the opportunity to hold a very fruitful round table discussion on this very issue with groups in the United States, in New York, groups who serve immigrant communities and actually take in phone calls from people who call them to ask them about the asylum system in Canada. This round table included the largest immigrant service providers in New York state, as well as the New York city mayor's office and the legal services provider for immigrants. These groups will now be able to provide and pass on the correct information to the thousands of individuals they deal with on a monthly and weekly basis.

One of the things that have become clearer through these meetings is that many different groups of people in the United States are receiving false information about the Canadian asylum process. We

are coordinating outreach approaches targeting each and every one of these communities through our U.S. missions and consulates. At the same time, we are conducting outreach to stakeholders right here in Canada. This is through targeted emails to key stakeholder organizations, video and audio messages available on the IRCC website, media outreach, and social media. All of these materials are being translated into the languages used by the diaspora communities we are trying to reach. We've also begun monitoring Spanish-language media in the United States, and have distributed our outreach products to those media.

Efforts are also under way to gather information from those who are already here, to determine where they came from and what sources of information they relied on in order to make that journey to Canada.

Mr. Chair, we are ramping up our outreach efforts and our intelligence-gathering to remain on top of this situation. I look forward to continued collaboration with our key partners, including provinces and territories, and contingency planning to handle any future fluctuations. In fact, in the middle of this process, whenever the provinces were bringing to us any pressure points, we were able to work with them and collaborate to coordinate solutions on those issues.

Canadians should be confident that our officials continue to manage this uncommon situation in a professional and effective manner.

I want to thank you very much, and I look forward to answering all your questions. *Merci beaucoup.*

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Both ministers were amazingly disciplined in their time. I would have expected that from Mr. Hussen. I'm surprised at Mr. Goodale—

Voices: Oh, oh!

The Chair: —from my previous experience.

We'll go to the Liberals for the first round of questions.

Mr. Anandasangaree.

● (0905)

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

Ministers, members of the panel, welcome to the committee. Thank you for your presentations.

Minister Hussen, you mentioned that the whole intake at Lacolle has been managed “responsibly, effectively, and professionally”. I think it's fair to say that this has been a very consistent message that we've heard from other stakeholders.

I do want to ask you specifically about the safe third country agreement. Perhaps you can elaborate on it—on the need to have it intact, the importance of ensuring the orderly entrance into Canada, and the importance of it with respect to our relations with the U.S.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Absolutely. The safe third country agreement is an agreement between Canada and the United States. The agreement is essentially based on a principle. This principle, supported by the United Nations refugee agency, says that an asylum seeker should not engage in asylum shopping. They should claim asylum in the first safe country they land in. In essence, if an asylum seeker lands in Canada, they shouldn't claim asylum in the United States. The opposite is also true. If they first land in the United States, they shouldn't claim asylum in Canada.

Based on that principle, Canada and the United States entered into this agreement in 2004. The agreement says that we will enforce that principle. At the time the agreement was negotiated, the agreement was basically supposed to cover official ports of entry where Canadian and American officials can see the asylum seeker present themselves. The agreement, as it was entered into, covers that situation where people would present themselves at a port of entry and claim asylum. That agreement continues to be in place. When, for example, an asylum seeker comes from the United States and presents themselves at a Canadian port of entry, the safe third country agreement applies. They're told to go back to the United States to claim asylum there.

There are exceptions to the safe third country agreement. For example, if you have a blood relative or if you are an unaccompanied minor, then you can still make a claim in Canada. Essentially, however, as a broad principle, if you present yourself at a Canadian or an American port of entry, from either Canada or the United States, you're supposed to claim asylum in the country you came from.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: Mr. Goodale, you outlined the screening that takes place with respect to health, criminality, and admissibility.

Can you specify any major trends or concerns, if there are any, that have come about with respect to the number of claimants you have processed so far?

Hon. Ralph Goodale: I'd ask the officials from CBSA and the RCMP who have the actual on-the-job experience in this.

When I look at the reports that have come in over the last seven or eight months, my impression is that—apart from the challenge of the volume of problems that have to be dealt with at the border from time to time—the actual degree of difficulty with the cases is relatively small overall.

The experience has not been one of significant risk to the health or safety of the public. In the very few cases where those issues present themselves, the management right on the scene is a combination of RCMP and CBSA, with a lot of co-operation from other law enforcement authorities, so they are able to deal with particular cases immediately and effectively to ensure that Canadians are not exposed to any risk.

Mr. Cloutier, would you have something further to add?

Mr. Jacques Cloutier (Acting Vice-President, Operations, Canada Border Services Agency): Thank you, Minister.

That's absolutely right. Generally speaking, Mr. Chair, we are dealing with situations on site, immediately as they are presented. They do not present themselves on a regular basis. Overall, in our estimation, even less than 1% of cases deal with serious criminality, and they are resolved at the time in their entirety.

• (0910)

Hon. Ralph Goodale: Mr. Anandasangaree, one thing is clear in the IRPA: that issue alone—serious criminality—renders a person ineligible to make a claim for asylum. It's a very effective screen.

Mr. Gary Anandasangaree: My next question is to both ministers, keeping in mind there's very limited time.

You mentioned, Minister, that we're dealing with an issue of due process, ensuring that those who come in—whether with an admissibility issue or an actual claim—get due process and are treated fairly.

Are you confident that the mechanisms, timelines, and resources are in place for that to take place, both at the admissibility stage and at the processing stage?

Hon. Ralph Goodale: I have seen absolutely no evidence to the contrary. In fact, from time to time, NGOs and the UN High Commission for Refugees are monitoring this situation. Their reports in terms of how CBSA, the RCMP, and IRCC have conducted themselves have been consistently very positive.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We've been able to manage the situation at IRCC by redeploying staff and rededicating resources. We've done it with the resources we have. It's been a question of being a little more efficient, finding innovative ways to deal with this, but essentially redeploying staff to pressure points and massively beefing up the Montreal IRCC office to do eligibility hearings there, as well as having a mobile team at that time at the NAV Centre in Cornwall, to make sure we were able to do that.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Anandasangaree.

Ms. Rempel.

Hon. Michelle Rempel (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): I'd also like to extend my birthday wishes to the minister. It would probably be uncouth of me to mention that he's a few years older than my father.

In all seriousness, I think all of us here, regardless of political stripe, would agree that ensuring rigorous control of Canada's border helps to instill confidence in the immigration system. I think it also helps to prevent the rise of nationalist rhetoric, such as we've seen south of the border. My questions are going to be in that context.

We heard this week that the IRB is at a 40,000-case backlog, which is incredible. Obviously, we need to have any means possible to ensure that the spirit of the safe third country agreement is being pursued. It has been noted that when the safe third country agreement was negotiated in 2002, there were several loopholes that were allowed. Frankly, they're being used today to thwart the spirit of the agreement by people who are entering Canada illegally from the U.S and then making asylum claims.

A previous colleague of mine who was a former immigration minister has stated that he "repeatedly asked the Obama Administration to amend the STCA to remove the loopholes." He also has stated that they "completely refused to consider any changes."

Yesterday, I noted that he speculated that this was "because the US government regards it as being in their interests that a certain number of illegal aliens 'self-deport' themselves to Canada, so the US doesn't have to worry about tracking, detaining, or deporting them."

I'm not asking you to comment on that, but rather on the following question. Has the government broached the topic of amending the safe third country agreement to cover claims made by people entering Canada through unofficial points of entry with the new American administration, especially as we renegotiate NAFTA? I think it could be argued that it would be hypocritical for the Americans to ask Canada to improve border security if they're not willing to reciprocate.

Or, is the government content to allow the new administration a convenient option to encourage people to self-deport to our country with a minimum amount of American resources involved?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'd like to just begin by saying that we in no way encourage irregular migration. If your question is about Canada becoming sort of like a second option for people who have exhausted their options or feel that they've exhausted their options in the United States....

• (0915)

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Just to clarify, my comment is whether or not the government has broached with the Americans the renegotiation of the safe third country agreement.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We haven't done that.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you

My next question is related to the IRCC document entitled "Ministerial opinions on danger to the public, nature and severity of the acts committed and danger to the security of Canada". In the event that someone who is seeking or has already received asylum protection commits an egregious act against the safety of Canadians, this document outlines how the minister can exercise authority to designate that person as a public risk and subsequently order that person's removal from Canada.

With regard to this document, I request that you and your officials table with the committee the number of times since November 2015 that the CBSA has advised clients that it will seek the minister's opinions on the basis of paragraph 115(2)(a) or paragraph 115(2)(b), or both, of IRPA. I also request that you table how many removal orders have been issued subsequent to reviewing these opinions, as well as the number of outstanding deportations associated with the removal orders.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We are happy to table that document with this committee.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

My question is then subsequently related to the information-sharing agreements and processes related to that process and other processes between hearing asylum claims and ensuring the safety of Canada.

The current law stipulates that institutions can share information if it's "relevant to the recipient institution's jurisdiction or responsibilities under an Act of Parliament or another lawful authority in respect of activities that undermine the security of Canada, including in respect of their detection, identification, analysis, prevention, investigation or disruption".

My understanding is that if Bill C-59 comes into force, Government of Canada institutions will be permitted to share only information that contributes to the recipient institution's carrying out of its responsibilities.

Has an analysis been done on how Bill C-59 will affect the minister's ability to carry out the responsibilities outlined in ENF 28?

Hon. Ralph Goodale: All of the implications of existing and proposed future legislation have been very carefully analyzed.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Could you table that analysis with the committee?

Hon. Ralph Goodale: I'll ask the department to....

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Specifically, I'm asking for the analysis on how Bill C-59 will affect the carrying out of duties in ENF 28. Will that be tabled with the committee?

Hon. Ralph Goodale: I will examine what's available and get back to the committee, Mr. Chair, with....

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I will remind you that you do have an obligation under Bosc and O'Brien to provide the committee with information requested here.

Hon. Ralph Goodale: I will do my very best to respond fulsomely, as I always do.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Happy birthday.

I'll turn this over to Mr. Maguire.

Mr. Larry Maguire (Brandon—Souris, CPC): The CBSA target stated that 80% of the failed asylum seekers would be out of Canada within one year. The departmental performance report, though, shows that 53% of those failed asylum seekers are still in Canada past that particular time frame.

Given this failure and that these failed asylum seekers are still in Canada and haven't been removed or have been left on their own, how many of these failed asylum seekers have slipped through the cracks and whose current whereabouts the government has no idea of?

Hon. Ralph Goodale: Mr. Cloutier, can you offer some perspective on the removal process?

Mr. Jacques Cloutier: Thank you, Minister—

Mr. Larry Maguire: Pardon me. We know what the removal process is. I just wonder if the government has any idea of where these people are.

Mr. Jacques Cloutier: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Generally speaking, we do everything we can in order to effect the removals as quickly as possible. That is our obligation under the law. There is a series of factors that would impede this, including our ability to obtain travel documents, to receive confirmation of other factors, to make arrangements with countries—

Mr. Larry Maguire: Can you table the number for those whose whereabouts you might not know or who have slipped through the cracks? We know the process and that sort of thing on this side. We just want to know if you've determined where all of these people are at the present time. Could you just table that information for us?

Mr. Jacques Cloutier: Mr. Chair, we will provide a document outlining our approach to this.

Mr. Larry Maguire: But can you give us a number as to how many you don't know the whereabouts of?

Mr. Jacques Cloutier: Mr. Chair, I understand the question that's being asked. I think in order to answer that question properly, we need to go back to the way the system of removals works. We have, at any given time, a removal inventory of about 15,000 people. Our priority is always to deal with national security concerns, to deal with people with serious criminality, and the second tier—

• (0920)

Hon. Michelle Rempel: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, again, to cite Bosc and O'Brien around the requirements of witnesses to answer questions, my colleague has asked a very specific question. According to the department's performance report, they have not met their target for deportations, and he is asking for the number of people whose whereabouts the government is not aware of. He is asking for that information to be tabled to the committee.

I would just ask that you remind the witness that, under this particular clause, he is required to submit this information to committee.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Mr. Chair, we're just working off the government's own report.

The Chair: Yes, and obviously witnesses are required to answer all questions that the committee puts to them; however, witnesses may object to the questions asked. The committee may decide whether or not to force an answer.

It is not my opinion that the witness is not answering the question. What I've heard is that they will present a report in response to the question. At that time, I believe, the committee could decide whether or not the report has satisfied the request of the committee.

I would now move on. We're over your time. We've balanced to have the same time that the Liberals had, so I now move to Ms. Kwan.

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

Welcome, Ministers and officials. Thank you for your presentation.

I would like to expand a bit on the safe third country agreement. I know that the government's perspective and the minister's perspective is that we should keep the safe third country agreement in place.

However, the minister must know that we had a situation where an asylum seeker, Mr. Seidu Mohammed, came through in the dead of winter. He crossed over and in fact advised that in the U.S. his claim was rejected. He cited immigration detention and the lack of access to legal counsel as major factors related to his claim, in how his claim was being rejected in the U.S. He came to Canada, lost digits in the dead of winter, made an application, and was successful. Canada found that he was a valid asylum seeker and granted him the status to stay.

That's one case that shows that the safe third country agreement is not working—at least not for Mr. Mohammed.

The other situation that has been brought to our attention by the IRB is that some 300 applications now have been processed. A little over 50% of the 300 successfully got an asylum claim here in Canada, so I would argue that the minister should look at this carefully and intensively. Canada has a legal obligation in the international world to play our part with respect to asylum seekers. Frankly, many people, including experts, are saying that the safe third country agreement is not working.

I'm going to park that with the minister. I'd like to get a quick response from the minister, specifically related to Mr. Mohammed's case. How can you then say that the safe third country agreement is working for people, when in fact it didn't, at least not for him?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: The challenge of taking one case and applying it to an agreement as old as the safe third country agreement, which has many components, I hope you can appreciate.

You are asking me to comment on a specific case with a specific set of circumstances, and to then apply it to a general agreement that has, quite frankly, been very good for Canada in terms of management of asylum seekers between Canada and the United States.

On the larger point, you made a really good point about expertise and international law and so on. The expert body on domestic asylum systems of countries is the UNHCR, and they continue to—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you. Sorry, but I'm going to interrupt—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Can I just finish my answer?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: No, I'm actually going to interrupt, because I understand the UNHCR argument—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: But I'm answering your question.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: —and the minister has actually advanced that argument in a lot of places. I have limited time.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: It's not an argument. It's a fact.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I have limited time, so I'm going to say this.

We also have 300 cases that have come through, and more than 50% of those applications have been approved. So it's not one case. It's more than one case. I'm going to leave that.

I do want to actually talk about the IRB and the importance of ensuring that the integrity of our system is protected. When the minister was last here, there was a backlog with the IRB, and with an additional 1,000 cases being added to the backlog—and that's 1,000 cases per month—we now have a situation in which it is 1,400 per month, and there have been no additional resources given to the IRB. The minister himself, when he was last here, said that efficiencies needed to be looked at, which is what the IRB is doing, but he also said that there needed to be additional resources, yet no additional resources have been given to the IRB.

Is the minister planning on giving the IRB additional resources to deal with this influx?

• (0925)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: You've asked a number of questions there. I'll try to answer as quickly as possible to take advantage of the time.

Number one, the IRB is an independent arm's-length adjudicatory body that makes its own decisions. However, we work closely with it to become as efficient as possible and so on.

On the issue of resources, we've launched a third-party review to make sure we can identify the best ways to invest in the IRB. It's not just a question of money. It's also a question of reforms. It's a question of doing things better and faster and more efficiently, and also with more innovation in the IRB processes. It takes a study to do that, and there's a third-party review going on now to identify those very challenges and solutions that you talk about.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Is the minister looking at changing the structure of the IRB and how asylum claims are being processed?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: The IRB third-party review will look at everything with respect to the IRB, and it will issue a report. That report will inform both you and me on the way forward for the IRB.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

The minister talked about how he felt that everything is being managed well. This is not about the staff on the ground. I have to say, and what I'm getting back from CBSA staff and, in fact, at every level, is that all of the staff are doing an exemplary job, along with the community, in a very trying situation.

However, it is interesting to note, in response to the committee member's question, that the IRCC indicates that it began tracking irregular crossings only in early April 2017. As a result, claims made by those who entered since the start of 2017 cannot be reported on. So there's a gap.

If the government had been monitoring the situation right from the get-go, anticipating what the implications of the Trump administration would be.... There is a huge gap, right? The irregular crossings began prior to April 2017, so why didn't the government get on with it right from the beginning? And what about Manitoba? Resources are being provided to Quebec, which is fantastic, but what about Manitoba? I know that the Province of Manitoba has asked for additional resources, specifically related to resettlement services. B. C. is also faced with tremendous stresses from the NGOs. They have spoken to the minister directly about those, and the minister has ignored that request and nothing has happened with respect to that.

So how can the minister say that you've managed this effectively?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'll let my official, Mike MacDonald, answer the first question with respect to the tracking of the asylum seekers.

Mr. Michael MacDonald (Director General, Operations Sector, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you, Chair.

In terms of whether or not there is a gap, there is not a gap. First, it's important to say that how an asylum seeker comes to Canada, from an IRCC perspective in terms of looking at their claim, is not important.

Now, there is no gap prior to April 2017 back to January, because we, as a federal government, can rely on the intercept data from the RCMP. Since April 1 we have combined all of our datasets in order to create a better picture overall, one that is consistent, and one that we can all work from. We have combined various data sources since April 1 to create that national picture, but we have access to all the data for the year.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'm afraid that's seven and a half minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: That's not the information that has been provided.

[Translation]

The Chair: Mr. Dubourg, you have the floor for seven minutes.

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg (Bourassa, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

First of all, greetings to my colleagues Mr. Goodale and Mr. Hussen. I also welcome the other representatives with them.

My first questions are for Mr. Hussen.

As you said in earlier, it is important on the one hand to protect Canadians, but we must also take appropriate measures to protect people who look to Canada for protection.

This summer, there was an influx of migrants into Quebec. Some people said the federal government was in crisis. According to your figures on asylum seekers, is this a crisis or simply an unusual situation that the government can easily deal with?

[English]

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: There is no doubt in my mind that the numbers we were looking at in the summer were unusual in terms of the volume of daily arrivals. We went from a daily average of between 20 and 30, and then it became 50, and then we went as high as 200 to 300 a day.

The important thing to note here is that there was planning. The satellite office of the RCMP at Lacolle, which I was able to visit, had been procured before the increase in the influx. CBSA was able to quickly expand its operations and redeploy staff.

I was able to see first-hand the professionalism and the humane way in which people were being processed. There was absolutely no downgrading of our rigorous screening processes to make sure that each and every asylum seeker who was being processed in that facility was handled in a professional manner.

In terms of IRCC, we quickly ramped up our capacity in Montreal from being able to have about 32 eligibility hearings a day to about 200 a day, as a result of procuring more space and redeploying staff from other parts of Quebec and other parts of Canada, because we recognized that this was a pressure point, and we dealt with it accordingly.

My impression of the whole situation is that it was an unusual influx. It was an increase that was not similar to the previous volumes, but the fact that we were able to work very closely with Quebec and Ontario afterwards ensured that we were able to address any pressure points and increase the capacity within our own department and other departments to ensure that we responded to the situation in a professional manner. It was not a crisis.

● (0930)

[Translation]

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg: Thank you. As you just said, it is an unusual situation. The media showed people arriving at our borders. At one point, there were 300 people or more arriving every day. That figure has now dropped to about 50 people.

I know that officials have taken various measures. You mentioned the measures taken here, in Canada, with community leaders. You yourself met with people in Montreal, and there were also trips to other countries. Your visit to the United States did not receive the same media coverage as the visits by your two colleagues.

When you visited New York City, who exactly did you meet? Did Global Affairs Canada play a role in that visit?

[English]

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes, Global Affairs Canada facilitated the meeting. We actually held it at the Canadian consulate in New York. It involved the largest legal services provider for immigrants all across New York State, and the Catholic Charities Community Services, which is the largest settlement provider. Between the two of them, they actually take phone calls from individuals all over the state of New York who were asking questions about U.S. immigration policies as well as Canadian asylum policies. They field those calls and answer questions.

What struck me was that they needed to be brought up to speed on some of the issues around Canadian asylum policies. For example, they thought that having temporary protected status in the United States somehow meant that you had some sort of access to the Canadian asylum system. I corrected that. I was able to answer a lot of their questions. They didn't know that Canada actually removes people. I had to educate them on that. I told them that we remove people and I explained how that's done. I walked them through our asylum process and made sure they understood what was at stake.

They were very happy, because they said that now that they had that information they could share it with the people who call them. The consulate then promised to give them materials on our larger immigration system, because they felt that some of the people who

call them could easily qualify under our legitimate economic immigration streams, and there was no use for them to essentially abuse the asylum system. They were very happy to receive that information from us.

● (0935)

[Translation]

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg: Thank you, Mr. Hussen.

Time is passing very quickly and I would like to ask Mr. Goodale a question.

We have heard proposals from people who want us to create official entry points, whether in Saint-Bernard-de-Lacolle or in Emerson. In your opinion, would that be advisable given that the border is more than 9,000 kilometres long? Would we go so far as to build a border wall to prevent people from entering irregularly? What are your thoughts on that, bearing Canadian values in mind?

[English]

Hon. Ralph Goodale: Obviously, Mr. Dubourg, Canadians would not support the notion of building a wall. That is not consistent with the traditions, the values, or the heritage of Canadians.

The Chair: I'm afraid I need to cut you off there, at seven and a half minutes.

Hon. Ralph Goodale: There is much more.

The Chair: There is much more. Let's hope that next time you get around to it.

Mr. Motz, welcome to the committee. You have five minutes.

Mr. Glen Motz (Medicine Hat—Cardston—Warner, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the ministers and officials for coming.

Minister Goodale, it's our understanding—and this is from front-line CBSA officers who are worried about talking to MPs for fear of losing their job—that the normal initial process—

Hon. Ralph Goodale: There's no reason at all for that fear.

Mr. Glen Motz: —in dealing with regular asylum seekers usually takes about eight hours. This is the initial process. However, these same CBSA officers are now saying that the processing time for illegal border crossing, initially, has dropped to one and a half to two hours. That drastic reduction in initial processing time leads Canadians to wonder what is being cut out of the process to deal with these illegal border crossings.

Can you provide an explanation as to what you are not doing now that you would normally do for the illegal border crossers? What have you cut?

Hon. Ralph Goodale: Mr. Chair, through this whole process over the last number of months, I have constantly sought advice from CBSA about how to handle the volume that they have to deal with in a timely way and in a way that does not in any manner short-circuit the security issues that need to be dealt with. I have been assured repeatedly by CBSA that there is no compromise on security.

They have internally reallocated resources in order to make sure that they have the personnel with the right skills and talents at the various border points that need that attention. They work seamlessly with the RCMP. The RCMP have also reallocated resources into the areas that are most affected.

CBSA, the RCMP, and the government have been absolutely vigilant in ensuring that the security process has not been compromised.

Let me just say that if you're hearing from CBSA officers who say that they are somehow reluctant to speak to a member of Parliament, they need not have any such reluctance. They're citizens of this country and are entitled to speak to their member of Parliament.

Mr. Glen Motz: I appreciate it.

Basically, what I'm hearing is that some processes have been cut and that the priority remains the security of Canadians. Could you or the CBSA department please provide to this committee in writing at your earliest convenience what processes have actually been cut? Then we can move on.

Hon. Ralph Goodale: Your question implies some degradation of services, and that implication is just not appropriate. I will provide a description of how we have coped with the volume in a way that processes that volume efficiently and does not compromise on safety and security. Any implication to the contrary is simply inaccurate.

Mr. Glen Motz: With that explanation, the difference between how illegal border crossings are being processed now and how the regular ones were done before would make a good comparison. Thank you.

It's our understanding that in the shortened process, people who cross the border illegally undergo only a basic criminal history check, a criminal records check, and fingerprinting. After that, asylum seekers are told they can go and are asked to come back for a secondary meeting at some later point.

The CBSA officer we spoke to was telling us that some of these asylum seekers, as we said, are not showing up for the secondary hearings. If that's the case, how do we know where they are and who they are? What's happening with that whole process, and how many are not attending these particular hearings? Do we have any numbers on that?

• (0940)

Hon. Ralph Goodale: By the secondary hearing, I presume you're referring to the IRCC interview that determines whether or not they are then eligible to go before the IRB.

Mr. Glen Motz: Yes. I mean the follow-up. Given the limited time, Mr. Minister, I apologize, but if you could just table those numbers for us, that would be great.

My last question is how does the government propose to deal with this serious issue of people not coming back for their secondary

interviews, and what is their plan to restore public confidence in our ability to secure our border and make sure we mitigate the concerns of public safety around those who come in through an illegal process and don't follow the process as they should?

The Chair: You have 17 seconds.

Hon. Ralph Goodale: Chair, we will examine all of these questions very carefully to make sure we provide every bit of information we possibly can in response to the inquiries from various members of Parliament.

Let me just say that the implication, in this dump of innuendoes, that somehow the border is insecure and somehow the safety of the country is being compromised is absolutely wrong.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. Tabbara, we have about four minutes.

Thank you.

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

Thank you to the ministers and departmental staff for being here today.

We just heard from the other side that processes have been cut. I want to talk about some of the false information and see if some of these processes have been cut.

Minister Hussen, you mentioned preferential treatment in your statement. You said there's false information about preferential treatment for asylum seekers and refugee claimants. These are completely separate application streams, as far as I'm aware. Can you please elaborate on that?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: That's a really important question. It deals with the implication that somehow the asylum claimants coming in are impacting or degrading our ability to meet our targets with respect to the other streams of immigration, whether it is family class, economic immigration, or the refugees resettled from overseas.

Nothing could be further from the truth, in the sense that asylum claimants are processed and then go before the IRB, so it's a different stream altogether. The rest of the immigration system consists of people who are processed, selected, and approved by the IRCC. There are two different streams, and therefore the suggestion that somehow an asylum claimant is taking the spot of an overseas resettled refugee is simply not supported by the facts.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you for clarifying that.

My second question can be to either Minister Hussein or Minister Goodale.

With regard to collaboration between the federal and provincial governments to address irregular crossings, can you elaborate on what the ad hoc intergovernmental task force on irregular migration has been co-operating on?

Hon. Ralph Goodale: It has been an effort to make sure all of the federal agencies and all of the provincial agencies that are directly engaged in dealing with crossing issues are working effectively together. It has been an unprecedented but very good exercise.

The provincial ministers are at the table with the federal ministers. They constantly review and update the most recent information. They identify where the pressure points might be that need special attention. They work collaboratively with each other to make sure the solutions are deployed.

It has been a very good process, and it's one that may be replicated in other areas of federal-provincial-territorial circumstances that involve different agencies and different levels of government. It's very useful.

Ahmed.

• (0945)

Hon. Ahmed Hussien: I will use an example of what we've been able to do together to give you a sense of how useful the ad hoc task force has been.

The Government of Quebec approached us with a concern regarding the potential impact that the number of asylum seekers could have on their social assistance program. They asked us to assist them in expediting work permits for all asylum seekers so these people could support themselves while they wait for their IRB hearings. Because they identified that pressure point, we were able to then bring that concern back to our department, and IRCC was able to quickly move to address that pressure point and expedite the processing of work permits for all asylum seekers so we could minimize the impact they have on the provincial social assistance programs.

In a concrete way, that's an example of how the task force has been able to identify pressure points and work together to solve them collectively.

The Chair: Thank you, Ministers.

Thank you, Mr. Tabbara.

That draws to a close our time with you.

As is the chair's prerogative, I want to take one minute to thank the officials and to thank the ministers for not only their time but also their work on this.

Last week I had the opportunity to go to Manitoba, and I met with 11 of the asylum seekers who had crossed the border at Emerson, including the one Ms. Kwan mentioned today. Overwhelmingly, I was extremely proud to be a Canadian.

I asked for their stories about the border crossing and about the respect that the RCMP had offered to them, including making sure that they were medically treated and that they had food to eat. One offered a coat on a very cold day in January. CBSA told me the story, and as a Canadian I felt it was overwhelmingly positive to hear about the respect they were afforded and also the due process they were given, by the IRCC as well, of course. Two of them have had their hearings already with the IRB and were successfully determined to be in need of protection in Canada, and nine are awaiting postponed hearings.

We will keep pushing you on the IRB and on having resources.

I, not as an MP but as a Canadian, was overwhelmingly proud of your forces and officials and of the work you're doing, so thank you.

We're going to suspend the meeting as we change witnesses.

• (0945)

_____ (Pause) _____

• (0950)

The Chair: Committee members, let's regroup.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order I would like to raise.

The Chair: I don't have quorum yet.

Committee members, would you please take your seats?

Go ahead.

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

I raise this as a point of order.

As we just heard from IRCC officials in response to a question that I asked, related in particular to irregular crossings being tracked by IRCC, a written response provided to us states that irregular crossings began being tracked in IRCC's systems only in early April 2017. As a result, claims made by those who entered since the start of 2017 cannot be reported on.

I asked this question about the information that needed to be provided to us from last year, because the irregular crossings began in the dead of winter. That information, in response to the question asked by a committee member, was not provided, and they said that they did not have the information.

We just heard, when I asked that question to the minister, who deferred it to his official, that they had that information.

How is it possible that we would have a written answer that's contradictory? We're not getting accurate information before us, and that, to me, is extremely troubling, Mr. Chair, so I raise this and bring this to your attention. I hope we don't have to go through these kinds of documents with inaccurate information before us, and I ask that you follow up with the official with regard to this.

The Chair: I think the committee has the right to have accurate information that is requested; however, the witnesses also have the right to present the information they want to present. Our job is then to evaluate both of them, and the committee can request additional information.

If you're requesting additional information or an explanation, I think that's fair. We can simply do that, so I would rule that your point of order is okay, and we will ask for a clarification of the discrepancies that you think are there.

That's not going to be debated. I've ruled on it.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I just want to say thank you.

The Chair: Okay.

Witnesses, thank you very much for joining us today.

We recognize that the bulk of the work on this briefing has come from IRCC and Public Safety; however, there has been a wider—not quite whole-of-government but large—approach to this issue. Thank you for joining us today to offer thoughts from both Global Affairs and the Department of National Defence.

We welcome Mr. Cronin and Director General Bourgon.

Who would like to begin?

Mr. Cronin.

• (0955)

Mr. Niall Cronin (Director, North America Advocacy, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Good morning, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee.

My name is Niall Cronin, and I am the director of the division at Global Affairs Canada responsible for coordinating advocacy and engagement on behalf of the Government of Canada in the U.S. and Mexico.

We have been working closely with IRCC, CBSA, the provinces, and others since the summer on the issue that we will discuss today. At the request of IRCC, and in order to provide correct information and gather on-the-ground insights, Canada's embassy in Washington and our network of 12 consuls general in the United States are presently engaged in outreach on this issue. Our focus has been to detect and correct inaccurate information with respect to Canada's asylum process, which has been circulating in some communities in the United States. Specifically, our embassy and consuls general have worked to build connections with local representatives, local media, and community organizations in the United States that can help correct any misinformation that may be circulating about Canada's immigration processes. We are also working to gather information and insight from representatives and community organizations about any potential movements or patterns of migration. Finally, we are supporting outreach by members of Parliament and ministers, including Minister Hussien, MP Rodriguez, and MP Dubourg.

Since Labour Day, our representatives have engaged close to 25 U.S. decision-makers, including members of Congress, governors, and lieutenant governors. They have also met with numerous diplomatic representatives, NGOs, community leaders, and municipal, county, and state-level officials in communities across the United States. This information is collected and reported back to IRCC.

I should also note that the in-person outreach in the United States is supported by way of digital engagement. The social media accounts of embassies and consuls general are sharing Government of Canada messaging in English, French, Spanish, and Creole in order to correct misinformation about Canada's immigration system.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the committee. I look forward to answering the questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cronin.

Brigadier-General.

[Translation]

BGen Lise Bourgon (Director General, Operations, Strategic Joint Staff, Department of National Defence): Hello, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee.

I am Brigadier-General Lise Bourgon, director general, operations, strategic joint staff, Canadian Armed Forces.

[English]

Operation Element is a CAF contribution to the whole-of-government response to the influx of asylum seekers crossing into Quebec from the U.S. At the height of the crisis, the Canadian Armed Forces was tasked with providing temporary accommodation and making it available to our federal and civilian partners for their use.

As a result, the Canadian Armed Forces built tentage for up to 1,200 personnel in Lacolle, Quebec, and 500 personnel at the NAV Canada Centre in Cornwall. CAF also prepared our cadet camps in Valcartier, Trenton, and Gagetown, in case interim lodging capacity in Quebec could not handle the demand.

Throughout this operation, CAF had a supporting role to CBSA and IRCC, with the Government of Canada's Public Safety operations centre as the overall coordination organization.

Those are all my words today. I thank you for my appearance. I will answer any questions.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Tabbara, you have the floor.

[English]

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for appearing before the committee today. My first question is for both of you. Feel free to respond.

In the response to and preparation for the influx of asylum seekers crossing the border, Canada is developing a national strategy on the asylum seeker influx—our national strategic response plan—as part of the contingency planning. Can you give us an update on how this planning is going, and what kind of best practices are being incorporated?

Mr. Niall Cronin: From the perspective of Global Affairs, my apologies, but I think it's probably a question better answered by IRCC and folks who are working more directly on it.

What we're focused on is trying to get the right information out to communities in the United States, to avoid the kinds of things that happened over the summer.

• (1000)

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Can you elaborate on some of the things you have been doing in the United States to address the misinformation that maybe some of the individuals there have been receiving?

Mr. Niall Cronin: For example, Minister Hussen talked a little about his trip to New York.

Events like that are being replicated across the United States. Our consul general in Minneapolis met with a number of representatives in both Minneapolis and North Dakota, who have connections into various communities, to answer their questions about the immigration process and how it should be done properly.

The goal there is that they will pass that information on to people who are coming to them.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you.

Can you maybe tell the committee how Global Affairs and National Defence have been working with the provinces, as well as with other institutions, to help asylum seekers who are coming over, and what additional resources have been provided?

Mr. Niall Cronin: Do you mean resources that have been provided at the provincial level?

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: I mean at the provincial level, and how you have been working with the provinces.

Mr. Niall Cronin: Again, with regard to resources to handle the influx, that question is probably for IRCC. They are more in touch with folks.

At Global Affairs, we have certainly been working with the provinces, keeping them updated on what we're doing in the U.S. to get the right information out. For example, every two weeks we have calls with provincial representatives. We talk about what our consuls general are doing in the United States and what they are hearing, and we just keep the provinces up to date.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Okay.

The next question is for Ms. Bourgon.

What are some of the resources the Department of National Defence have been providing at the borders?

BGen Lise Bourgon: The request for us was purely logistical and for accommodations.

We provided, as I said, tentage in Lacolle for 1,200 personnel and at the NAV Canada centre for about 500. The number of personnel allocated from CAF fluctuated. As we were setting up the camps, we had up to 116 CAF members building the tents in Lacolle, and about 130 at the NAV Canada Centre for the tent city—if I can call it that—the interim lodging site. Day to day, about 25 CAF were doing the maintenance of those tents.

To answer your question about the contingency, the CAF role was a supporting one. The Government Operations Centre asked CAF if we could provide some planning capability. We are really good planners. We lent two CAF members to the operations centre to provide some support for planning activities for the contingency.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Is there some coordination between the Department of National Defence and the United States? If there is, what type of coordination has there been across the border?

BGen Lise Bourgon: There has not been any coordination. Again, CAF's role was solely in supporting logistics, so we have not done any coordination. There was done by the other governments.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Okay. With regard to the support you've given to these asylum seekers, at the peak how many were you assisting and what has that gone down to now? How many people have been assisted? Has that been progressing? Have people been assisted and then processed through the proper streams?

● (1005)

BGen Lise Bourgon: Again, with regard to the CAF involvement, we didn't have any direct contact with the refugees. That was CBSA and IRCC. Our role was solely to assist CBSA and IRCC with the proper accommodations and the proper resources on the ground. We built tents. We also provided soldiers to help the Red Cross, because the Red Cross was responsible for the provision of the daily humanitarian services. CAF soldiers helped with the food distribution, but we didn't have any role in the processing or the handling of the refugees.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Rempel.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

Earlier this week we heard a figure for asylum claims made by Mexican nationals. It had already reached over the 900 mark, which is a significant number when you compare it to, let's say, numbers for 2015, or even for 2016 numbers prior to the visa lift being put in place. I'm wondering if Global Affairs has reached out to either the Mexican embassy or the Mexican government to ask them to put in place any sorts of processes to stop this trend from increasing, and if so, what those requested measures were.

Mr. Niall Cronin: Unfortunately, I don't know the answer, but I'm happy to go back and check both with colleagues at headquarters and also with the embassy in Mexico City to see where that stands.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Okay. And you'll table that with the committee?

Mr. Niall Cronin: Yes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

We've also heard that internal briefings to the government have shown that there are over 300,000 people in the United States that may have their TPS status revoked in the next year. I'm wondering if there has been any analysis in terms of how many of those are likely to seek asylum in Canada through legal or unofficial points of entry, and if that has started to be accounted for in next year's immigration levels plan.

Mr. Niall Cronin: I don't know the answer to the second part of the question, but certainly on the first part, that's the reason we're sending folks out to talk to the communities, to hear what they're saying and what community leaders are hearing from their own communities. Are people thinking about Canada as they're factoring in decisions about their future?

From the reporting I've seen, it's mixed. In some places, Canada is entering the conversation, and that came out in some of the conversations in Los Angeles, but in other places folks have just said, "Thank you so much for the information. If we hear anything brewing, we'll certainly let you know", which was the point of the outreach, to build a relationship that maybe hadn't existed before.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: So really there's no projection in terms of how many people or the volumes that might occur, let's say, in the next 12 months?

Mr. Niall Cronin: Out of the population that...no.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

We've heard reports, and there was the story of Nigerian asylum seekers who entered Canada through illegal border crossings and said that they had heard about this "pipeline" that would get them to our borders. I'm wondering what diplomatic efforts with our allies in the region have been ongoing in attempts to dispel the notion of a pipeline to access Canada illegally.

Mr. Niall Cronin: That's a big part of the outreach in the United States. It is really reaching out to communities directly. Also, Minister Hussen was talking about his meetings in New York, and the groups he was meeting with had links into various communities, and so it was broader than just one group. The point of that is exactly to dispel the myth that there is this pipeline or some sort of free pass into Canada.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Have any border security issues been brought up with the Americans—or the Mexicans, quite frankly—as part of the NAFTA discussions?

Mr. Niall Cronin: That's a fair question. I don't know. I'm not involved in the NAFTA negotiations.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Okay. That would be interesting to know, because the minister did say that, to date, the safe third country agreement hasn't been brought up, and we're wondering why.

I'm just wondering if in either of your departments there has been any analysis on the potential effects of Bill C-59, in terms of the availability of either of your departments to share information with CBSA or IRCC or even the IRB, with regard to people who have sought asylum protection or have received it, and to identify them as potential public safety risks.

Mr. Niall Cronin: I'm sorry. It was Bill C-59...?

Hon. Michelle Rempel: That's correct.

Mr. Niall Cronin: I can go back and check that, but again, because Global Affairs wouldn't be dealing directly with these people, there may not be. But I'll check.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Sure.

• (1010)

BGen Lise Bourgon: It's the same thing for CAF. We're not responsible. That would be CBSA, RCMP, CSIS....

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Okay. Thank you.

With that, I'll turn the microphone over to Mr. Maguire.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Thank you.

Thank you for the work you're doing with regard to this whole situation.

Mr. Cronin, you mentioned that you deal with a lot of social media. You're looking at trying to provide clarity regarding a number of the statements that have been made and that sort of thing. I'm just wondering about the Prime Minister's tweet in particular, the tweet where he said:

To those fleeing persecution, terror & war, Canadians will welcome you, regardless of your faith. Diversity is our strength #WelcomeToCanada

I'm just wondering if that statement has caused any confusion in the States, because we have seen media reports about how people coming into Canada have actually used that as a statement, saying that it is why they're seeking asylum in Canada: "We're welcome here." Have you had to clarify anything around that statement before?

Mr. Niall Cronin: In the reports I've read on outreach and in the various meetings that have taken place at the embassy and with our consuls general, that specific tweet has not come up. It's more about presenting general information about Canada's immigration system and asylum processes.

Mr. Larry Maguire: It has come up in media reports, though, when people have been interviewed, when asylum seekers in Canada have come in. It's been one of the things brought up and mentioned by them. Do you think it's caused any confusion amongst any of those people who are seeking it...? Do they understand clearly what was meant?

Mr. Niall Cronin: Again, I go back to what I've read of the reports from the outreach and the meetings that have taken place. Really, it's more about passing on the correct information. Where the misinformation is coming from, I can't speak to.

Mr. Larry Maguire: You've indicated that our consuls across the country and the teams in Washington and New York are working on this. Would it help if the Prime Minister were to tweet out something like "asylum seekers should not seek refuge by crossing illegally into Canada"?

Mr. Niall Cronin: I think the messages that have come from ministers, as we heard in the opening statements of Minister Goodale and Minister Hussen, have been quite clear, and we've been using those messages in our outreach in the United States.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Cronin and Mr. Maguire.

Ms. Kwan.

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

Thank you to our witnesses for their presentations.

Mr. Cronin, in the work you're doing to reach out to the various different groups in the United States, have you heard from people who have cited concern with the fact that the U.S. is no longer a safe country for them, for a whole variety of reasons?

Mr. Niall Cronin: I'm not sure I would characterize it that way. I think what people have heard is that there is a lot of uncertainty. It's more that what people have heard in the communities is that Canada is an open door.

What we've been really trying to stress in the meetings is that Canada is a welcoming country, but there is a process that needs to be followed.

Minister Hussen talked about his time in New York and about how folks were surprised that we even remove people from Canada, or that somehow we have a special program for those who have TPS status in the U.S. Those are the things we're trying to correct.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: In that process, has nobody indicated, for example, the threat they feel given the height of anti-immigrant or anti-refugee rhetoric that's going on in the United States with the Trump administration's overall direction, first with the travel ban and now with his general overall indication that the immigrant community or refugee community are simply not very welcome in the United States? Did none of those issues surface in this discussion with any of the persons who you are in touch with?

Mr. Niall Cronin: It's a fair question and a fair point regarding the uncertainty that exists in the United States. What our people have tried to do is really focus on how we can give them the correct information to pass along to their communities, so their communities will be better informed. If that gives a measure of security or knowledge, that's what we're looking for.

•(1015)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

It's interesting because Amnesty International did an informal study, if you will, with people who crossed over. Their interviews indicated that, in fact, people were very concerned about their safety, and that of their children, and the heightened level of discrimination that they faced, so that fear has impelled them to make that crossing. People don't cross because it's a fun thing to do. They are risking life and limb to get here, and some of them are bringing children along as well. The risks are grave. This occurred in the dead of winter. Of course, even in the summer, this is an issue as well. When I visited Manitoba, for example, the heat was unbelievable. You have both aspects of it, with the cold and the heat, that could be very detrimental to you. In any event, I'm going to leave that for now.

In terms of the work of the military—and thank you for the information—could you provide us with the amount in dollars for resources that were provided to assist in this process? It sounded to me as though it was mostly military personnel who helped provide and set up the infrastructure to help temporarily house the influx of asylum seekers. Do you have a figure you can provide us?

BGen Lise Bourgon: Indeed, the provision was more in labour, like soldiers setting up tents and loaning the tents that we had in our system. The only dollar value is for the manpower. The operation is still ongoing, so I can't give you a final tally of how much it will cost. We're looking at a very rough estimate right now. We can give you the official figures later on when the operation is done, but we're looking at about half a million dollars. This is a very rough estimate, because the work is still ongoing for erecting some of the tents. As it is, right now in Lacolle, there is capacity for 500 personnel in the tents. We are not going to take those tents down until there is a

winterized solution available in Lacolle, so we're estimating that by about mid-November all the tents will be down.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much. I would appreciate if you could provide that information to the committee, once it's available, and break it down, so that we actually have a sense of what the line items are for that expenditure. Maybe you can tell me which budget you anticipate this expenditure will come out of.

BGen Lise Bourgon: That's not something I will decide. The DM will make that decision.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: When that final figure is provided, perhaps the DM can provide you with that information on what line item this expenditure will be coming out of.

Regarding your involvement, has it been only the Lacolle situation or have you been called in to provide supports in other areas as well? I'm wondering whether or not there has been any involvement with Emerson, for example.

BGen Lise Bourgon: No. We provided the infrastructure in Lacolle and at Nav Canada in Cornwall. We also set up more tents, as an interim lodging solution. Canadian Armed Forces support for the asylum seekers has been concentrated in Lacolle and at the Nav Canada centre. As I said, we also had our three cadet camps in Valcartier, Trenton, and Gagetown on standby, and we prepped them in case there was a requirement for excess capacity that the interim lodging could not support in Montreal. Of course, since the summer season and with the cadet courses finished, we had those three camps that could have provided for excess capacity. Each of the camps could accommodate about 500 personnel with interim lodging.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: How many people can each of the tents that was set up contain?

BGen Lise Bourgon: That's a very good question. I would need to go back, but it's probably around 15 to 20 people. That would be my assumption, but I'll get back to you with the actual figure.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Then, I guess—

The Chair: I'm afraid that's the end of your time.

Thank you.

Monsieur Dubourg.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg: Ms. Bourgon and Mr. Cronin, thank you for being here and answering our questions.

I will begin with you, Mr. Cronin. With regard to asylum seekers, you said that no reference had been made to the Prime Minister's tweets. The Prime Minister said that Canada is an open and welcoming country, and that if people are fleeing persecution or if their lives are threatened, Canada will welcome them. That is part of our values.

We agree that we need to discuss these things. Things have changed a great deal in the past 10 years or prior to 2015—I do not know how long you have been with the department. The kind of information activities that you conducted with respect to asylum seekers is not a regular practice for you. Am I correct in saying that those are new practices for the department?

• (1020)

[English]

Mr. Niall Cronin: It's certainly something new for Global Affairs Canada in the United States. That's why we've been grateful for the support that's been shown from IRCC and CBSA. They have been able to provide us with information about the immigration process and the asylum process so that we can pass that along to communities in the United States.

[Translation]

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg: I would also like to thank you for all your work in organizing these missions, including mine to the United States. You were in touch with community leaders. There was a direct result at the border once these trips had begun.

Is it important for you to stay in touch with the people you met in Miami, Los Angeles, and elsewhere?

[English]

Mr. Niall Cronin: Absolutely, and I think the benefit of the outreach is in establishing relationships with these communities so that, should something happen, should the situation change, they know where they can come for correct information.

[Translation]

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg: Okay.

Some false information was reported in the media in the United States, specifically in the *Miami Herald*—I do not recall the exact date in September. It was reported that there would be a Canadian official in a church basement in New York City who would tell diaspora members how to get into Canada.

Following the visits there by MPs and ministers, what does Global Affairs Canada do when this kind of information is circulated internationally?

[English]

Mr. Niall Cronin: I think one of the first things we would do would be to have our office in the region reach out to that outlet to correct the story. We've also been using social media channels and doing outreach to local and community media, again, to correct that misinformation. We would address it directly.

[Translation]

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg: I have one last question for you, Mr. Cronin. You have contacts with various countries and partners. Do you share best practices? I am referring to Europe. Last year, Italy had 123,000 asylum seekers, and this year there have been more than 60,000 thus far.

For our part, 13,000 people have crossed the border into Quebec. What have you learned in your dealings with those countries?

[English]

Mr. Niall Cronin: That's a fair question.

I would really go back to what our remit and mandate have been. We've focused on making sure that communities in the United States have the correct information. It's a point that's worthy of follow-up in terms of what we could learn from other examples in which people have had to correct such misinformation. We do think our process of connecting with those who are serving communities in the U.S. and those who are representing communities in the U.S. is a benefit. It is one that we will continue to pursue.

• (1025)

[Translation]

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg: Ms. Bourgon, have you made any plans for the coming winter? Will your tents stay there for a long time? How do you see the situation since it is starting to get cold, although it is not freezing yet.

BGen Lise Bourgon: The winter is something we had to think about from the outset. We knew the tents were a short-term solution. In Canada and Quebec, they are not an option after October.

The Canadian Armed Forces conduct exercises all year long, but we have the necessary equipment, such as proper sleeping bags and so forth. We knew we needed a long-term solution for the winter. Since the Canadian Armed Forces were called in to help at the peak of the situation, Public Safety Canada is responsible for finding a solution for the winter.

We suggested a short-term solution to give the other federal organizations time to think ahead about an appropriate solution for the whole winter. We could buy trailers, which would be acceptable given the climate in December and the rest of the winter.

Mr. Emmanuel Dubourg: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you both.

Mr. Maguire, you have the floor.

[English]

Mr. Larry Maguire: I'm going to let my colleague take the lead right now, and I'll share that time with her.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Great. Thank you.

To follow up on your line of questioning, what has the total cost been to date on the trailers?

BGen Lise Bourgon: The trailers are not a CAF responsibility. You would have to ask Public Safety or IRCC. I'm not sure which is responsible—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Okay.

What has been CAF's involvement in that, just to clarify for the committee the whole trailer initiative?

BGen Lise Bourgon: We didn't have anything to do with the trailer initiative. We only did the provision of the tentage at the height of the emergency. They needed a solution right away, and CAF was asked to provide that temporary solution in the form of tents.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Is that being wrapped up right now?

BGen Lise Bourgon: No. Actually, the one at Nav Canada in Cornwall is being dismantled as we speak. We have dismantled one site in Lacolle, I believe, to make space for the arrival of the trailers, but there's another site that's still there to accommodate 500 people. We're waiting for the winterized solution to be provided so that we can dismantle the rest of the tents.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Has CAF been directed to do any other activities or planning for the winter months beyond what you've already stated?

BGen Lise Bourgon: The planning for the winter months is being done by Public Safety.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

Mr. Maguire.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Thank you.

Thank you for your information as well.

Mr. Cronin, you indicated in your presentation that misinformation about Canada's asylum process and that sort of thing has been circulating in some communities. We know that MPs have gone to LA and Miami. I believe Mr. Rodriguez and Minister Hussen have been there.

Have other ministers or MPs gone to the States? If so, do you know how many?

Mr. Niall Cronin: In terms of MPs, I believe MP Dubourg went to Miami; MP Rodriguez went to Los Angeles, and Minister Hussen was in New York. I don't know of further plans. Global Affairs is ready to accommodate the travel down south for sure.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Thank you.

My colleague Mr. Dubourg was asking questions earlier with regard to some of those areas. I appreciate that.

There are a number of cities, as well. Can you tell me which ones and approximately how many other communities the groups have been into?

Mr. Niall Cronin: We have 12 consuls general across the United States: Atlanta, Denver, Detroit, Chicago, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, New York, Miami, Dallas, Boston, San Francisco, and Seattle. That's where the physical offices are present, but our consuls general travel around. For example, our consul general in Minneapolis is obviously taking meetings in that city but also travelling to North Dakota—things like that.

• (1030)

Mr. Larry Maguire: Yes. I've met them many times in our area. I'm from Manitoba, so we have looked at that.

What sort of targeting have they done in Minneapolis? That seems like a "hotbed", if I can use the word, for those coming into Manitoba. We've had just under 900 in Manitoba, and it's been a burden for Manitoba. I believe the little town of Emerson got only \$30,000 with regard to payment. Ms. Kwan was there.

I know that's the value the minister announced when he was there last spring, but when I was there, I talked to the people in the community. They were very, very concerned that this was just a drop

in the bucket in terms of what it has cost them. I'm wondering if there's any further follow-up on that.

Mr. Niall Cronin: In terms of outreach done specifically in Minneapolis, our consul general has met with the Commissioner for the Minnesota Department of Public Safety. He has also met with the governor. I believe he has met with the lieutenant-governor in Minnesota, but I will have to confirm that. He's also met with some of the state representatives. In particular, there is a state representative in Minnesota from the Somali-American community. Really, this was a useful opportunity to start to build that link to see what she's hearing from the Somali-American community in Minnesota.

Mr. Larry Maguire: I have one final question. You mentioned that you're doing a lot of work in Canada to stay in touch with the U.S. and Mexico. What do you expect out of Mexico with regard to Mexicans who may be in the United States—

The Chair: We are a little over time now.

If you'd like to respond very quickly, I'll let you do that. I can give you 10 seconds.

Mr. Niall Cronin: Sure.

Sorry, I should have clarified; the division where I work is responsible for advocacy and outreach in both the U.S. and Mexico. Really, the focus on the asylum seekers and correcting the information is taking place in the U.S.

Mr. Larry Maguire: My question was about Mexicans illegally in the U.S., whether they—

The Chair: I do need to cut you off there.

I will give the witness a few more seconds to answer.

Mr. Niall Cronin: It's a fair question. What we've actually asked our consuls general to do is to reach out to Mexican diplomatic representatives in the United States who have quite close ties to the Mexican-American community, again to pass them the information. We're hearing the same things the minister was hearing, that people just don't know about our system. It's really kind of an education process.

The Chair: Very good.

I understand that the Liberal side doesn't have more questions. They are satisfied with the answers. If there are any other questions from the opposition, I'm happy to give you a few more minutes.

Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I do have a few other questions.

In terms of the work you're doing, Mr. Cronin, I'm wondering if human smuggling has emerged as a concern in this context. We have been hearing some stories about that, and I'm wondering whether or not that has surfaced as an issue.

Mr. Niall Cronin: Yes, in the discussions with some of the officials, certainly in Minnesota, the conversation—to go back to your earlier point—is around the risks involved in crossing illegally and then also the potential for criminal involvement. So that's one thing we're watching.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Can you share with us what you were able to learn in this process and what action is being undertaken by the government with respect to that?

Mr. Niall Cronin: To answer the first part of your question, in the reports I've read, it's really been raised as a concern. They haven't gone into more detail than that.

In terms of actions that the government is taking, that's probably a question that is better answered by CBSA and our intelligence services.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I see.

In terms of ongoing monitoring with respect to this, what would that look like?

Mr. Niall Cronin: Basically we've asked our embassy and consuls general to identify those organizations or influential people in their regions who have connections into this community, to make contact with them, and to maintain those conversations on a regular basis. They're reporting back to us on how those are going and what they are learning. We are passing that on to IRCC. That is being complemented by... I think it was Minister Hussen, or one of the officials from IRCC, who mentioned that they are looking at more media monitoring, especially Spanish-language media in the U.S.

So we're pulling all of that together.

• (1035)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm wondering if it's possible for your department to undertake to provide information to this committee specifically with respect to issues that have surfaced around human smuggling and what could be shared with us, so that the committee can be aware of it and can take that into consideration with respect to this study we are working on right now.

Mr. Niall Cronin: I can take that back, for sure.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: As a quick last question, aside from the staffing and the tents, in terms of the information that's been provided, are there any additional resources being provided that have not been spoken about today? I wonder if that could also be provided in the information that will be brought back to our committee.

BGen Lise Bourgon: Yes, no problem.

The Chair: Thank you. I think that draws our questioning to a close.

Thank you very much for your time with us, as well as your testimony, which is very helpful for the committee. That draws to a close our briefing period on the irregular border crossings.

I want to remind the committee that after the constituency week, we have our expedited process on Motion M-39, the Atlantic study. We have eight hours of meetings that week. We have two special or unusual or irregular meetings happening that week.

Our hope is to have seven hours of witness testimony to complete that, and then the eighth hour of that week will be on instructions for the analyst. I'm asking the committee to be as rigorous with our instructions as possible to help our analyst with the report. On your constituency week, you might want to be thinking about that—there is a summary of evidence that has been provided by the analyst—and then we can be as expeditious as possible in getting that done.

I see no other business.

The meeting is adjourned.

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