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Chair

Mr. Michael Levitt

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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•(1305)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): Good afternoon, everyone.

We have one witness today. I want to welcome him here and thank him for travelling from Windsor, Ontario. I also want to thank MP Hardcastle for proposing Mr. Nsabiyumva as a witness for us today.

Let me give you a little background. Mr. Nsabiyumva is a Burundian refugee who has lived in Windsor, Ontario, since 2007. He is actively involved in community organizations, such as the Association socioculturelle burundaise de Windsor as vice-president, and the African Community Organization of Windsor as public relations officer.

Mr. Nsabiyumva also helps newcomers and immigrants in the Windsor area from settlement to employment. He has an engineering degree from the University of Burundi and an MBA in electronic business from Laval University in Quebec City.

Mr. Nsabiyumva still has siblings in Burundi, and along with his church, has applied to privately sponsor his sister and her five children who live in a refugee camp in Uganda.

He is following the situation in Burundi from Canada and is in touch with Burundi citizens who fled the country.

He shared his story with the *Windsor Star* on January 22, and I think many of you read the article in advance of this session.

With that, Mr. Nsabiyumva, I give you the floor for your statement.

Mr. Albert Nsabiyumva (As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, honourable members of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights for taking the time to consider the situation of human rights in Burundi.

Today is a sad day because just a few minutes ago, I learned that the President of Burundi has ratified the decision to leave the International Criminal Court forever and definitively. That said, let me come back to some background.

[Translation]

On October 12, 2016, the lower chamber of Burundi's parliament voted, by a wide majority, to withdraw Burundi from the Rome Statute creating the International Criminal Court. A few hours later,

that legislation was adopted unanimously by all 37 members of the country's senate.

•(1310)

[English]

Bujumbura believes that the International Criminal Court prosecutor's decision to intervene in the ongoing political conflict in Burundi under the pressure of its founders, the European Union, by starting a preliminary examination constitutes a serious and flagrant violation of both its national security and its sovereignty.

The bill was adopted by the council of ministers a week ago. The decision was taken after the publication of the UN experts' damning report on grave violations of human rights by state organs on September 20. The United Nations experts prepared a list of 12 individuals deemed responsible for serious crimes committed with impunity throughout the country and which may fall under the International Criminal Court's jurisdiction. The report also warned against possible crimes against humanity and the serious danger of genocide.

On April 25, 2016, the International Criminal Court prosecutor herself launched a preliminary investigation, particularly on murder, torture, and rape perpetrated in Burundi, which Bujumbura decided to block.

When we talk about human rights and its consequences, most of the time people talk about numbers, but they forget the people. Right now Burundi has spread more than 350,000 refugees over neighbouring countries: Tanzania, Rwanda, Uganda, and a small part in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The number 350,000 is the one recognized by the UN agencies, but we know it is more than that, because many people will never get in touch with those organizations.

What is the interpretation of the move that Burundi's government has made?

[Translation]

The Bujumbura government is being condemned in reports published by a variety of organizations. The authors of these reports all agree that human rights are being violated on a massive scale in Burundi.

[English]

The strategy of the plot and the national sovereignty are the only arguments of the regime. Obviously, denying the commission of inquiry only confirms its guilt to the world. That is where we have to highlight what I will propose later on.

The International Criminal Courts certainly cannot investigate on its own initiative on non-member countries, but may do so if the UN Security Council authorizes it to.

[Translation]

The Rome Statute, the treaty that founded the International Criminal Court, states that the withdrawal "shall take effect one year after the date of receipt of the notification, unless the notification specifies a later date...nor shall it prejudice in any way the continued consideration of any matter which was already under consideration by the Court prior to the date on which the withdrawal became effective."

I have special knowledge of these massive human rights violations in Burundi. Although I've just spent eight years in Canada, members of my family are still in camps, along with other refugees. As said earlier, I am convinced that I can help, and that's what I'm trying, as best I can, to do.

The issue before us is what Canada can do.

Canada has a reputation for speaking out on human rights. For this, you have our gratitude. That said, there are three things that I will ask, but before I do, I'd like to briefly describe the situation that certain families and individuals I know, and speak with regularly, are experiencing. I will withhold their names and use only their initials. You have their names before you.

Let me tell you about J.N. and her five children. Her case number is G00102657. She left Burundi in May 2015 when her husband went missing. She had no specific destination, but she wanted to leave Bujumbura because she lived in a neighbourhood where the police—the militia—killed people.

• (1315)

[English]

After five days she reached Rwanda, and from there she got a ride that brought her to Uganda in July 2015. The situation there was not clear regarding where to go and what to request. It took her several weeks before knowing that there was a refugee camp in Nakivale, Uganda, and she went there to get registered.

Documents stating that she is registered as a refugee were provided to her in September 2015 by the government officials from Uganda. She could not survive living in that camp and she managed to find a rental apartment near the camp. It had one bedroom. Imagine, one bedroom for six people.

Two recognized organizations from Canada, the Diocese of London Refugee Ministries and the Grace Baptist Church, both in Windsor, committed to sponsor the family in September 2015. An estimated amount of \$32,500 was required to be put in trust to cover any need that would arise during their first year in Canada. There was some back and forth for two months. All the required documents

were filed with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada on November 25, 2015.

The processing of the application started officially on March 22, 2016, and up to now, there has been no indication of when the process will be completed. The source status that you can see on the website mentions "In Progress". Here, the Government of Canada can do something.

From the statistics that we have available on the immigration website, it is stated that 2,050 refugee claimants from Burundi have sought asylum from 2005 to 2014. Among them, 653 Burundians who currently are staying in Canada are subject to a removal order.

I personally know more than six cases that have been denied convention refugee status and they are among the 653 Burundians subject to removal. Again, I will come up with what Canada can do.

At the country level, I may say two or three things, because this doesn't require any kind of permission. It is a decision that can be made politically and it is the sole decision of Canada.

The first thing that may be done and which I urge the Canadian government to do is to alleviate the stress of all Burundians who are subject to a removal order, and those who are still refugee claimants, by granting them a steady status, by which I mean permanent resident status.

[Translation]

When someone has been tortured, they stay tortured, even if no physical trace of the torture can be seen.

• (1320)

[English]

Second, Canada can instruct Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada officials to speed up case processing for the sponsorship of Burundian refugees who are in Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Basically, it is estimated that it will take between three years and five years to get the processing done. By that time, all the people who have been sponsored may have passed away.

Third, make a political decision to take in a considerable number of Burundian refugees. This will be an unforgettable humanitarian act, the same way it was in the past for different countries. I will recall some of them.

In 2015, Canada pledged to bring in 25,000 Syrian refugees by February 2016, and this was done.

In 2008, Canada began the process of resettling more than 5,000 Bhutanese refugees over five years. This was done.

In 2006, Canada resettled over 3,900 Karen refugees from refugee camps in Thailand. This has been done.

In 1999, Canada airlifted to safety more than 5,000 Kosovars, most of whom were Muslim.

In 1992, 5,000 Bosnian Muslims were admitted to Canada to escape the ethnic cleansing in the Yugoslav civil war.

This is the same case we have in Burundi today. I will spare you the whole list. I have it.

This is something that may be done with a political decision.

At the international level, Canada can co-operate with other countries and join them in deploring the intentions expressed by the Burundian authorities to withdraw from the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. It can be reversed, even though it has been ratified.

Canada can deplore and condemn the decision of the Burundian authorities to suspend co-operation with the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Burundi. Canada can call on Burundi to reverse those decisions and co-operate fully with the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and its action within the framework of Resolution 2303 (2016), of the United Nations Security Council. It calls for the rejection of violence and for respect for human rights and many other things, which we have in the document.

Next, Canada can press the Government of Burundi to stick with the resolution of the Human Rights Council of the United Nations of September 27.

Honourable Chairman, honourable members of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights, please forward this request to the Canadian government so that it may alleviate the suffering of Burundian refugees and the Burundian people.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you very much for your statement.

I'm going to open the floor now for the first round of questions.

We are going to begin with MP Sweet.

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Nsabiyumva, for coming and giving your testimony. I share with you the same grave concerns regarding Burundi with respect to the International Criminal Court and the expulsion of United Nations personnel who supervise or observe what's going on in Burundi and keep records on the human rights violations.

I don't know if I share all your concerns with regard to the nature of the conflict. With your list of some of the actions that have been taken in the past by the Canadian government with regard to the approval of refugees from different areas, are you suggesting that the conflict has escalated to the point that there is a civil war right now?

• (1325)

Mr. Albert Nsabiyumva: We are very close to that.

[Translation]

It's clear that the government of Burundi has defied all calls for restraint—all calls from international organizations to produce reports or counter-reports that could clarify the situation on a number of points. The government has just taken a step that seems irreversible. It has turned its back on the International Criminal Court, leaving it for good. It has turned its back on the Human Rights Council. This means the government is preparing something that it alone can know about.

One thing is certain: there is not a single day, not a single night, when no dead are mourned. What I'm saying here, I could not say in Burundi. I have to admit that the people who are there—journalists and civil society first and foremost—are required to keep their mouths shut. If a person tells the truth, they are immediately marked for execution.

[English]

Mr. David Sweet: So you're concerned right now by the fact that this move by the president signing into law...the move to remove themselves from the International Criminal Court and the move against the United Nations is the next step to a big escalation in what's happening there right now.

[Translation]

Mr. Albert Nsabiyumva: That's my concern, and that's my understanding. Many observers feel the same way. The idea is to shut the doors so they can do whatever they want. In any event, Burundi is on the verge of imploding. The situation was already bad, but, at this stage, we don't even know what it will become tomorrow or the day after.

[English]

Mr. David Sweet: Mr. Nsabiyumva, previous witnesses have said that this is not an ethnic clash, that it is a political clash, but they mentioned in different ways in their testimony that the government would like to use that as a tool, in other words, inflame it into an ethnic clash. Would you concur with those previous witnesses in that regard?

[Translation]

Mr. Albert Nsabiyumva: The different expert reports have clearly shown that the conflict in Burundi has not just been political—it's been degenerating into an ethnic conflict. It could also become a genocide problem very soon.

Our country is right next to Rwanda, which is about five hours to the north of us. We know what genocide is like. We don't take those words and reports lightly. When the government doesn't even manage to produce a counter-report, and is content to say the country's sovereignty is being violated, and the like... I don't think that's sufficient.

Canada—and the other countries that make up the international community—should follow what's happening, because the world has become a global village. Everything happening on the other side of the world, even in a small country, has repercussions as far away as Canada. Obviously, the neighbouring countries are experiencing effects. Specifically, Tanzania, Rwanda, Uganda and Congo are experiencing massive refugee flows.

I must add that the Imbonerakure, the militia belonging to the party in power, is known to be in cahoots with the former inter-services Rwandan armed forces, whose sinister reputation brings back sinister memories. They can do in Burundi what they did in Rwanda. This is why we're calling on Canada to join other countries in the international community to ensure the situation does not degenerate.

•(1330)

[English]

Mr. David Sweet: I suspect my time has vaporized, but I want to assure Mr. Nsabiyumva that we don't take any of these reports lightly either. That's why we are seized with this. We're very, very concerned.

The Chair: I share the comment from my colleague.

Up next is MP Tabbara.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you for being here and for sharing your testimony with us. I do feel for you that your family is still in Burundi, and I hope for their safety and that they will be able to be on safe ground in the near future.

My first question is about political tensions. I want to go back a bit in the history of Burundi. There have been political tensions before in the mid-1970s and mid-1980s. Are there political tensions within the regime right now similar to what we witnessed in 1976 with Jean-Baptiste Bagaza and in 1987 with Pierre Buyoya? Has there been any indication that in the current regime right now there is some opposition? Maybe it might not be outright spoken, but is there any sense that we know of certain opposition groups within the regime that haven't really been voiced?

[Translation]

Mr. Albert Nsabiyumva: Thank you very much for the question.

I was saying that the situation in Burundi is evolving in such a way that a person who tells the truth will immediately be marked for execution.

I must acknowledge that, according to our information, there are discordant opinions within the regime. But those views cannot be expressed out loud.

Six days ago, on Wednesday, October 12, the parliament held a vote on withdrawal from the Rome Statute. Some members of parliament stood up to ask whether leaving would improve the situation. Some even asked if people who had lost their loved ones would feel any sense of relief with such a vote.

What I'm saying is that some voices within the party are criticizing what's being done, but those voices are in the minority, and arrangements are made to shut them up.

[English]

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Have any of these individuals that do somewhat oppose the government not had a chance to voice that in fear of repression from the regime or fear of torture? Do they have a history dating back of any type of groundwork that they've used to help bring in democracy previous to the accords? What I'm trying to get at is, has anyone in the regime had a history of being more of a moderate and supporting democracy?

[Translation]

Mr. Albert Nsabiyumva: Based on the way it's operating, the party in power in Burundi seems to be evolving toward a one-party state. The party wants complete control, and it's becoming authoritarianism, which is what a system is called when the leader

decides and the rest follow. Any voice that diverges from the leader's is to be silenced permanently. If the person isn't killed, they flee.

If you consult the statistics in Canada, you will see that even among the most ardent servants of the Burundian government, such as diplomats and their staff, many have left the country and have requested asylum in Canada. Even some former ministers have done so.

We won't get into their story, because it's personal, but you will see that discordant voices do exist. If they aren't killed, they have to find a way out of the country.

•(1335)

[English]

The Chair: I want to focus for a second on mass displacement and refugee camps. We've heard testimony in this committee about women in camps outside of Burundi, in Tanzania and Rwanda being raped and facing significant physical and sexual assault.

In the article you wrote for the *Windsor Star* and the story that appeared in the *Star*, you talked about your sister's experience in Uganda at the camp. I'm wondering if you could give us some details about the type of security risks she faced and if you've had any more reports on the situation there.

[Translation]

Mr. Albert Nsabiyumva: Thank you for that question, Mr. Chair.

First of all, when Burundian refugees—especially in the case discussed here—leave Burundi and arrive in another country, there is no logistical support for them. It's a struggle just to know where to go. It took the person in question more than two months to know who was in charge of what.

Secondly, upon arriving in the Nakivale refugee camp, they found the situation untenable. To begin with, the militia attached to the party in power—the Imbonerakure—were already there. They fled with the others, to take a general survey and see what was happening. There were even incidents where people were stabbed or injured. There were even some deaths.

That is when most refugees decide, with the few resources they have, or based on the assumption that a benefactor somewhere will give them \$50 or \$100, to rent a one-room apartment just to get out of the situation. What you are saying is true: it has happened, and the report exists. Yes, there have been instances of rape, there have been instances of persecution, and the situation in these camps is problematic.

What needs to be understood is that the situation for refugees in Africa is totally different from the situation here. First of all, they get no help from the government. Secondly, if the UN Refugee Agency lends them assistance, it's just a ration to help them survive. The people are in a country where they don't speak the language, can't get work, and can't go to school because most schools are private. Obviously, if you allow three to five years for the process to take its course, the people, assuming they're still alive, are probably in a shambles, and unable to do anything constructive because their self-confidence has been shattered.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

MP Hardcastle, your question, please.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle (Windsor—Tecumseh, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Nsabiyumva. It's very important to hear you give us some first-hand information with regard to your recollections and your own family.

You told the story of your sister in a refugee camp. In a story that was published in a newspaper about shootings, you talked about why she had to escape. I know that you have other contacts and family and friends whom you love and care about in other refugee camps. I don't know if you can give us a little more detail about that or if there are different conditions in different countries that you might like to point out to us as well. I think we need to hear a bit more about the refugee camp situation and how you understand it first-hand.

• (1340)

[Translation]

Mr. Albert Nsabiyumva: Thank you for the question.

The situation in the refugee camps is practically the same. In the camps run by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, people live in tents of questionable longevity that can be destroyed by the wind, a tornado or something else. Moreover, the crowding is unparalleled. In general, a family tent is five square metres, regardless of the family's size. Such cramped conditions cause other problems, such as sickness, hunger, unwanted pregnancies, and sexual violence.

I should repeat that these people were not expecting to wind up in these camps. People don't plan their flight; they flee to survive, and once they're in the camps, they might be without food, health care, or even a tarp above their heads. If statistics about the deaths in these refugee camps were compiled, they would be alarming.

I reiterate what I said at the beginning of my testimony. When we discuss Burundian refugees, we have figures, but we don't consider the human lives behind those figures. Honourable members, the situation is dramatic.

We Burundians who live in Canada, and have family in Burundi, are sometimes up all night, talking on the phone. There's a six-hour time difference. When we have to talk to someone who is in Burundi, we need to wait until two in the morning, which is roughly 8 a.m. in Burundi. When someone tells us a harrowing story, we get no sleep.

Although the situation in Burundi is happening several thousand kilometres away, I experience it personally. I must support my refugee relatives financially. I must also give them moral support, and it has an effect on me. The situation is not just painful for me; it's painful for other Burundians who live here.

I am fortunate to have been invited to come before you, and I appreciate it. If you invite another Burundian, he will say the same thing as me: the situation is truly alarming. The people in refugee camps can't return home. From the way the government is acting, it's clear they think they can do whatever they want, now that the people are in camps. And even if those people are sponsored, they don't

know when they will be admitted. They are waiting for some country to step forward and give them relief. Otherwise, in a few years, I think it will be a humanitarian catastrophe.

We're not talking about seniors; we're talking about young people and children. They are the planet's future—the future for our countries. That's why I reiterate that Canada can do something to reverse some of the suffering those people are experiencing.

[English]

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: You just told us that the first person who tells the truth will be executed, Mr. Nsabiyumva.

Mr. Albert Nsabiyumva: Yes.

Ms. Cheryl Hardcastle: Are you nervous about what you're doing here today? Looking back now, do you think there were warning signs about the government and human rights abuses escalating?

• (1345)

[Translation]

Mr. Albert Nsabiyumva: Many thanks for the question.

Yes, I'm nervous, but I also have the courage to say what I see, what I think, and what I share with most people. What I am saying here could be broadcast on the internet within an hour. The Burundian government will get wind of it, and I know that, tomorrow, the newspapers, government and spokespersons in Burundi will attack what I've said here. I don't know what will happen to my family. In any event, I bear personal responsibility for it. Since this is a case of human rights violations, I don't know what the future holds. Yes, I'm nervous, but I also have a lot of courage, and I'm glad I can say that.

[English]

The Chair: Next is going to be MP Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): You talked a bit earlier about the fact that we're heading towards probably a one party state or government. I noticed on the vote to pull out of the ICC, that I think there were only two MPs who had the courage to vote against the government, and none of the senators, so it was unanimous in the senate.

Do you know the two MPs who had the courage to vote against that? I'm wondering if you have any idea of what their fate might be for having done that.

[Translation]

Mr. Albert Nsabiyumva: Thank you very much. I don't personally know the two parliamentarians who voted against the withdrawal, but since they're politicians, I've familiarized myself with their positions. As I mentioned, I've been in Canada for some time. The only election that took place in Burundi while I was there was held in 2005. I think it was the only transparent election.

The members who voted against it are with the opposition. The others—those who abstained—wanted to say what they thought without voting no. They didn't want to go along with the presidential party. The saying is that "silence is consent." That should send an eloquent message to the international community that even though the assembly's functioning has been stymied, voices can still be raised to say that what's happening isn't right.

[English]

Mr. David Anderson: Are they big enough personalities that they will be able to survive this?

Mr. Albert Nsabyumva: I am not sure of what will happen tomorrow.

What I know is that one of them who came out warning them about the move they were making...the president of the assembly was mocking him. He taunted him widely and openly that what he had declared was suicidal.

[Translation]

He told him it was suicidal. You understand. When that kind of thing is said by someone so senior—the second most senior person in the state's apparatus—it should serve as a warning for the international community. A person is told that if he died tomorrow, it would be considered a suicide. I don't know what's going to happen. I am not a prophet of doom, but they are not in a good situation.

[English]

Mr. David Anderson: This would be a good place for us to keep an eye on our colleague, then.

Mr. Albert Nsabyumva: For sure.

Mr. David Anderson: I have another question for you.

The African Union tried to move in last year. The commission made some decisions that the member states didn't want to honour, and basically they had to back down.

What do you see as the role of the African Union in resolving this situation? Do they have the credibility or the unity to be able to move ahead here, or are they going to be stuck on the sidelines, as they have been recently?

[Translation]

Mr. Albert Nsabyumva: Thank you very much for the question.

Last year, the African Union decided to send 5,000 soldiers to Burundi. However, that decision was never brought into effect, firstly, because Burundi opposed it, but also, in my view, because the country got support from a presidents' club. These presidents came to support the Burundian government's position, and as a result, the measure was never implemented.

To be honest, yes, the African Union exists, and can help, but I don't see how it can succeed without a push from the other members of the international community, led by the UN Security Council, and the other countries, speaking out. After all, as I said earlier, the world has become a global village; it's become so small that information gets around very quickly. This means that if there's a way to do something good and speak out, the message can be heard by receptive ears somewhere, and can bring about change.

To answer your question, the African Union has dragged its feet for too long. I don't know if it will ever manage to get something done. Moreover, for a year and a half, the president of Burundi has not attended any meetings outside the country. How do you think the African Union will arrive at a decision in the president's absence? It's a boycott. I think the negative solidarity will keep the African Union bogged down. In the meantime, human lives will continue to be snuffed out, with no end in sight.

• (1350)

[English]

Mr. David Anderson: Your solutions were primarily geared towards dealing with the refugees who were already in the camps outside the country. You did make one suggestion about the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Do you see the final answer to this being things like trade restrictions, economic sanctions, and those kinds of punishments that can be placed from outside, or is it going to come down to military force and having to deal directly with the present Government of Burundi in that way?

[Translation]

Mr. Albert Nsabyumva: Thank you very much for that question.

When I specified what I was expecting from Canada, those were not my personal ideas. I needed to consult Canada's Burundian community, because this is a very serious matter. It's the first time that Canadians of Burundian origin have had the opportunity to speak with parliamentarians about an important issue in Burundi. I consulted the community, and what I said is from the community.

I spoke about two levels of intervention.

The first concerns Canada. I spoke about the situation of refugees, and of people in Canada who seek refugee protection. I spoke about the refugees outside Burundi and Canada, but also about refugee claimants in Canada who are threatened with expulsion.

I acknowledge that in December 2015, the Canadian government decided to stay the removal of some Burundians. But that makes no difference, because once the diplomatic machine is put in place, and says that things are getting better and better, the 650-plus refugees in Canada will be boarded on the first available plane.

So the first level of intervention concerns Canada. The situation of refugee claimants who are in Canada, and are about to be removed, must be made easier, because they have nowhere to go. Their country is now scorched earth.

The suffering of refugees who live in camps must be alleviated as well. I gave a few examples, but could give at least 20. This isn't something I've made up. It's from the Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada website, so it's in the public domain.

At the international level, I said that Canada can join voices with other countries. Yes, economic sanctions can be effective: more than 60% of Burundi's budget depends on outside assistance. In other countries, it has always produced effects.

It's true that when economic sanctions are taken against the government, it's the people who ultimately suffer. That needs to be clear. However, when the government is deprived of its livelihood, and the major lenders and donors speak out, I'm sure it can make a difference.

I'm very happy that the European Union has already taken a measure in that regard. Instead of supporting the soldiers who are taking part in various peacekeeping missions, and instead of the money flowing through government accounts, the money goes there directly. I think that measure will be effective. I think it would be good if Canada did the same thing.

I need to add one thing.

I've learned that Canada is one of the main backers of the inter-Burundian talks. Canada can use its voice to compel Burundi's government to talk with the opposition and everyone affected by the Burundi question. The government has, in effect, adopted an empty chair policy, but lenders and donors always have a say.

•(1355)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

MP Di Iorio.

[Translation]

Mr. Nicola Di Iorio (Saint-Léonard—Saint-Michel, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Nsabiyumva, thank you for the quality of your presentation, and for your efforts to raise the committee's awareness, and Canadian citizens' awareness, of this issue.

I'd like to mention a fact. According to Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, some 1,400 Burundians have permanent resident status, and had access, in 2015-2016, to settlement services—that is to say, occupational or language training.

Could you tell us whether there are other services Burundians need when they arrive in Canada?

Mr. Albert Nsabiyumva: Thank you very much.

It is my pleasure to answer that question.

Before I do so, I'd like to let you know about the different categories of refugees we have here in Canada. This will help you understand their specificities.

Let's start by what we call the

[English]

“refugee claimant”. A refugee claimant is a person who has made the claim for protection as a refugee. This term is more or less equivalent to an asylum seeker, and is standard in Canada, while “asylum seeker” is the term more often used internationally.

[Translation]

This category of refugee claimant is not entitled to go to school.

The only thing they can do is to benefit from English courses and settlement services, with certain restrictions as to funding. I'm an employment advisor and a job developer. I know the limitations we

have in relation to refugees or refugee claimants. We are told that everything concerning

[English]

what we call “incentives” for employers. When a new employee is hired, we take him as being in a kind of training. This is bringing a kind of loss to the employer who is hiring, and the government, especially the provincial government, has set up a kind of incentive to offset any kind of loss that the employer would be facing during the training.

[Translation]

Refugees, and refugee claimants, are not entitled to these services.

The second category involves

•(1400)

[English]

protected persons. According to Canada's Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, these are persons who have been determined by Canada to be either convention refugees or persons in need of protection.

[Translation]

It takes six to thirteen months to become a permanent resident. In more specific terms, the person will always be considered a temporary resident because his social insurance number will always start with a 9. Each time the number is seen, the thing that comes to mind is that there are services to which he will not be entitled.

And then there is the third category of refugees, the

[English]

refugees landed in Canada.

[Translation]

Those people are Convention refugees.

[English]

They are the persons who meet the “refugee” definition in the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the status of refugees. These definitions are used in Canadian law and are widely accepted internationally.

[Translation]

I will stop there. I don't want to get into the definitions further.

I will come back to your question about the needs of Burundian refugees.

First of all, they need permanent status. That's the first thing. Secondly, they need the settlement services that are there. I can tell you that the English I speak was learned at an English school. I thank the Canadian government for it.

In short, the refugees need material and financial support.

[English]

The Chair: We have literally 30 seconds left. I want to be able to thank you, and we have to get back into the House for question period, so if you could just wrap up the final point, that would be fantastic.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Albert Nsabiyumva: The refugees need permanent status. They need financial support. They also need moral support so they can feel like everyone else.

We have to acknowledge that refugees go through different phases. They start with denial, which leads to depression, and eventually acceptance of their status. It's axiomatic that changing countries is a challenge in itself, but being a refugee is an additional challenge.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I want to thank you for your courage in speaking out. We get a sense of the kind of risk that you and other members of the Burundian community here in Canada and around the world face for speaking out, so it's of critical importance for us to hear from you directly. I also thank you for all the work you do in your community in Windsor in helping Burundians and other immigrants and refugees. We really appreciate having you here today to speak to us.

Mr. Albert Nsabiyumva: Thank you very much.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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