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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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• (1320)
[English]

The Chair (Mr. Michael Levitt (York Centre, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Before we begin, I want to note that we are undertaking the second of two days of hearings as part of this subcommittee's annual Iran Accountability Week.

The past year has seen an intensification of human rights abuses and repression in Iran, including execution and torture, and the further diminishment of political and civil rights. As Iran prepares for presidential elections on May 19, the list of human rights abuses keeps growing.

On Tuesday, we heard from distinguished human rights activist and lawyer Irwin Cotler, who told us of the “fivefold threat” presented by Khamenei's regime in Iran and the mass repression faced by the Iranian people, in particular the impunity with which the regime abuses Iranians and imprisons its opposition, and the important value that an occasion like today's hearing has in supporting the Iranian people and pressuring Khamenei's regime.

We also heard from Corrine Box of the Baha'i Community of Canada, who described the institutionalized and socially accepted discrimination and persecution faced by the Baha'i in Iran, including economic, political, social, and educational exclusion, and the great resilience the Baha'i in Iran have shown in persevering through these abuses.

The criminalization of dissent has intensified, and the persistent oppression of minority communities, including members of Iran's LGBTQ community and Iranian women, continues unabated. We, the human rights subcommittee, want to be on record as saying that human rights abuses in Iran are always top of mind. We want to express our solidarity with the people of Iran, including political prisoners, prisoners of conscience, and the human rights defenders who tirelessly work in Iran and abroad, and at great personal cost, for the promotion, protection, and respect of human rights in their country.

During today's hearing, part of our focus will be on the grave human rights abuses faced by LGBTQ individuals and communities in Iran. On today's panel, we have Arsham Parsi, executive director of the Iranian Railroad for Queer Refugees, by video conference from Toronto; Kimahli Powell, executive director of the Rainbow

Railroad; and as a last-minute addition, someone to whom we are very grateful for appearing by video conference from Lahore, Pakistan, Asma Jahangir, UN special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran.

I'll ask the witnesses to please keep their opening remarks to five minutes each so that we have enough time for members' questions.

Mr. Parsi, if you'd like, you can start with your opening remarks. Then we'll move to Mr. Powell, and finish with Ms. Jahangir.

Thank you very much for being here with us today.

Mr. Arsham Parsi (Executive Director, Iranian Railroad for Queer Refugees): Thank you so much.

Thank you for having me. We're talking about human rights in Iran, and I don't think there's much to say: we have a lot of violations of human rights in Iran.

I'm executive director of the Iranian Railroad for Queer Refugees, a registered charity based in Toronto, Canada. We operate internationally. We are in contact with a lot of members of the Iranian LGBTQ society inside and outside of Iran.

Many of them have no option but to escape Iran in order to be alive. It's not about their rights; it's a matter of life and death. According to sharia law, an Islamic punishment code, in Iran homosexuality is punishable by death. There is agreement among all the clergy. The only disagreement among the clergy and the lawmakers is how to kill the person. Some of them believe that they have to be hanged. Some of them believe that they have to be stoned to death. Some of them believe that they have to be cut in half by a sword or thrown from a big cliff. As a result, Iranian LGBTs experience a lot of punishment and a lot of torture and imprisonment.

Recently, for example, in April 2017, a private party in the city of Isfahan in Iran was raided by police. A number of guests were LGBT, but a number were non-LGBT. All of them were arrested. They were taken to the detention centre. They were at the detention centre for a couple of days and then were sent to Dastgerd prison in Isfahan for the crime of homosexuality. Some of them were released on bail and are now awaiting their hearing. When they go to court—for obvious reasons—there will be a minimum of 100 lashes for homosexuality, but they might be accused of drinking alcohol or doing something against national security. In the justice system in Iran, they always create labels.

On July 19, 2005, as everyone knows, two teenagers were executed in the city of Mashhad for homosexuality. Several times the Iranian judiciary system changed their story. Many times in Shiraz and in Tehran, people have been arrested at gay parties and gay birthday parties and sentenced to 100 lashes. When the court order was issued, it was 100 lashes for drinking alcohol. But there was no alcohol. In the Iranian judicial system, they want to have another reason in order to avoid international pressure.

We know that people are being arrested. They are being mislabelled and are receiving mistrials. They don't have access to legal representation. A lot of lawyers in Iran are reluctant to take these cases, because there's a big stigma. They don't want to jeopardize their situation or even their other clients.

As a result, there is a lot of pressure, not only from the government but also from society, on Iranian LGBTs. They have no way to escape it in Iran. There are no publications either. The media is usually reluctant to report these issues and to investigate them. They don't want to lose their licence. It's not even "don't ask, don't tell". It's more "just don't do anything."

It took us several years, but we came up with a report that's around 50 pages long. I have submitted it to the committee. I know that it's with the translation department, which will prepare the French version. Then you will be provided with it. We looked into the judiciary system, the law, and the punishment code for homosexuality in Iran. There is a lot of documentation. It might be helpful for you to look into it and see how we as Canada or as an international government can address the issue in Iran. As I've always said, the issue with Iran is not only the nuclear deal; it is human rights.

● (1325)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll now move to Mr. Powell.

Mr. Kimahli Powell (Executive Director, Rainbow Railroad): Good afternoon, and thanks for having me.

I'll just step back and let you know a bit about Rainbow Railroad and how we're affected by Iran and the situation facing individuals in Iran, and other countries around the world.

Rainbow Railroad was established in 2006, although we became an official charitable organization in 2013. Our mission is to help LGBTQI2-S individuals around the world who are facing persecution find a pathway to safety.

Unfortunately, the amount of work we do has been increasing significantly over the years as more individuals have found out about

our organization and how we can help. In 2015, we helped 29 individuals find a pathway to safety. That number rose to 81 people in 2016, and since January we've already helped and moved about 60 individuals, with another 10 on the way.

If you're following the news, you might also know that we are a point organization with the Russian LGBT Network, which is the organization helping people who have fled Chechnya to find refuge in safe houses.

Rainbow Railroad works directly with organizations on the ground to help individuals find a pathway to safety, whether it's through the UNHCR process or with a visa of some sort into a country. However, we will, through any legal means, provide transportation to individuals where there's access to a country without a visa requirement.

In Iran, we're faced with a situation where, while we're very thankful for groups like the Iranian Railroad for Queer Refugees, there is a very limited amount of civil society on the ground that can actually help us. Civil society and these organizations are key for us to establish connections and verify cases and to help the traumatized individuals actually move to a pathway to safety.

In Iran, we're finding ourselves stuck for a couple of reasons. Individuals, in order to receive Canadian support, need to leave the country. Determining a safe place for those individuals to go, whether it be Bolivia or another country, is taxing and dangerous for the individual. Most importantly, it's finding a mechanism for safety once they arrive in that country. They can receive visa-free access to another country like Argentina, but ideally they would be able to get either a facilitation visa or a temporary resident permit to gain entry into Canada.

The challenge we're facing right now from our stakeholders is that we have wonderful declarations from the Canadian government about being welcome to LGBTQI2-S individuals, but we're actually limited in the number of individuals we're able to bring into Canada. We're really concerned about what the Iranian individuals are facing. Arsham laid out very clearly that they're in very dire situations. We've had at least 20 requests from individuals this year. We are open to facilitating an opportunity to provide access to a safe haven for any of those individuals.

Thank you.

● (1330)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Powell.

We're going to move straight into questions, with the hope that if we can actually get connected with the rapporteur, we'll take a pause, hear from her, and then move on.

With that, MP Sweet, are you leading off?

Mr. David Sweet (Flamborough—Glanbrook, CPC): Yes, thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you very much for your testimony. We greatly appreciate it, and thank you for relieving the suffering of so many.

Mr. Powell, you mentioned specific numbers of people you've been able to rescue. Is there somebody, either you or somebody you partner with, who has a database of those who have been arrested and executed? Do we have their names? Do we know the numbers? Is somebody keeping that record?

Mr. Kimahli Powell: The International Lesbian and Gay Association is probably the best source for keeping a tally on states that criminalize same-sex behaviours. Their 2016 report mentions 73 states, and I believe there are 13, including Iran, in which it's punishable by death.

I don't know if they go into specific details of names, but they do a robust survey of countries. That's probably a good resource to start with.

Mr. David Sweet: Thank you.

Mr. Arsham Parsi: I would like to add that regarding execution, I know that the Homan group, based in Stockholm, Sweden, came out with a report that between 1979, which was the time of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, and 2000, there were 4,000 people executed for homosexuality.

Our stand is that we don't know if all those 4,000 people were actually members of the LGBT community, but it was a way for the new regime to get rid of opposition by labelling them as gay men. No one wanted to touch them, and they were executed. We emphasize that this is in a country where even heterosexual individuals could be punished by death for homosexuality, simply by speaking in conversation about real LGBT individuals, and it's very obvious.

Mr. David Sweet: With the kind of judicial system that's there, just the allegation is certainly enough to get you incarcerated, if not killed.

Is the death sentence being carried out in 100% of the cases? Have you been able to rescue some that have been arrested and been able to flee before they're incarcerated?

Mr. Arsham Parsi: Yes, as I said, there are not a lot of legal representatives in Iran who would like to take these cases. We had some lawyers who took these cases and tried to challenge the government. People deny their sexual orientation, saying they are not gay, because one of the methods of proving sexual orientation is for people to admit that they are gay men or lesbians. Those lawyers have a different methods of...tricks to protect their clients. Also they need at least two witnesses who should be men, not women; they don't rely on women to be witnesses. There have to be witnesses to prove that these individuals are gay.

In a lot of European courts, refugee tribunals challenge that, but in Iran, there is the death penalty for homosexuality, but it is very difficult to prove it. Therefore, they don't carry out these executions. There are many incidents in which Iranian regimes attacked a lot of private parties with cameras, and they filmed the incident and everything. In that case, they don't need any kind of vivid evidence.

According to Article 120 of the punishment code, the judge can sentence someone on the basis of his own knowledge. For example, if a judge says, "I know you look gay" or "I know you're gay", that's enough for him to proceed.

• (1335)

Mr. David Sweet: "You look gay." That's interesting.

There's a difference, or maybe there isn't, so let me pose this question to you. The transgender community in Iran is treated differently. Is that correct? If so, how do they explain that under sharia law?

Mr. Arsham Parsi: Thank you so much for asking this question, because a lot of people believe Iran is a paradise for transgenders because according to Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa, a transgender can go through sexual reassignment surgery.

It is not about the transgenders' rights. It is actually a violation of their rights, because the Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa was based on the idea that we have two acceptable norms, male or female. If you are anything in between, go fix yourself, you're sick. The sexual reassignment surgeries in Iran are kind of forcing gay people to go through sexual reassignment surgery.

In a research study from 2004, 45% of those people who went through sexual reassignment surgery were not transgendered individuals. They were homosexuals. They had no option. I say it's better than being killed and arrested; at least they can survive. After going through this sexual reassignment surgery, they cannot go back. That is why a lot of them committed suicide after several years, and there was a high rate of suicide among transgenders.

We had a lot of people who escaped Iran because they wanted to have surgery, and they wanted to live free. I remember in Turkey, one of my friends was even on hormone therapy. She wanted to have sexual reassignment surgery and become a woman. Then she resettled in Vancouver, and after two years, she called me and said, "You know what? I think I'm gay. I'm not trans, because here I can be who I am."

There was an indirect pressure on the people. As soon as you go to a psychologist or doctor and say, "I have a special feeling. I think I'm attracted to my same sex gender", usually they don't tell you that you might be homosexual. They say there is another gender within you, and through the operation, they'll take it out.

I remember when I was in Iran, I went to one of the psychologists who was the head of the department in the city of Shiraz, Dr. Haghshenas. I explained to him that I was a gay activist and that I wanted to follow up with this question and collect the question from people.

He gave me a very interesting response. He told me to tell all of my friends not to go to his office because as long as he's sitting in that chair, he's a government employee. He said he has to sit there, and the person on the other side of the table is the patient. He has to prescribe medication to that person and send him or her to shock therapy. He said to tell my friends not to go into his office because basically they don't need to go in."

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Khalid, go ahead, please.

Ms. Iqra Khalid (Mississauga—Erin Mills, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, gentlemen, for your testimony today.

Mr. Powell, I will start with you. You mentioned that your organization helps members of the LGBTQ2 communities from across the world. Can you give us some numbers concerning where you see the majority of the people who are seeking help?

• (1340)

Mr. Kimahli Powell: The majority of the people who request our help and who we manage to move to safety come from the Caribbean. Jamaica, in particular, is well documented for having LGBTQ2-S human rights abuses, where you see just horrific examples of brutality against that community.

Our ties in that community, along with a clearly organized civil society on the ground, allows us to move individuals with a good degree of success.

Other areas of concern for us are countries in Africa, such as Uganda and Nigeria, the Middle East of course, and northern Africa. We receive a number of requests from Syria, but, of course, it's very challenging to help those individuals. We have had some success when they have gone to countries like Lebanon. Of course, we helped four individuals from Syria through the Rainbow Refugee assistance program that allowed private sponsorship for those individuals.

We've always had a challenge in Iran and in eastern Europe, which has shifted remarkably in the past few months through organizing the community there to find access to individuals.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: I understand that the LGBTQ2 issues are big, even in countries like Canada where we have established democracies. It took a while within our own Charter of Rights and Freedoms to really accept the rights of all individuals, regardless of their orientation.

It's my understanding that in Iran a charter of citizens rights was established in late 2016. Do you know if that charter addressed the rights of LGBTQ2 communities and if there is any enforcement of those rights at all or any improvement along those lines?

Mr. Kimahli Powell: To my knowledge, there is not.

My colleague Arsham will be able to speak to that with more detail, but from my understanding, the answer is no.

Mr. Arsham Parsi: As my friend said, no, but I would like to add that most of these things in Iran are a kind of political show. I usually tell my friends not to believe what they see or hear from the Iranian government because the Iranian supreme leader has absolute power. Even if the president signed the contract or an agreement with another country, if the supreme leader wanted to void it, he could.

Those civil rights codes or things like the human rights charter are all based on an Islamic version. For example, they said that we have human rights, but they talk about Islamic human rights, which do not include LGBTQs and a lot of other controversial issues that you are dealing with in a very progressive country.

Ms. Iqra Khalid: Thank you.

I will share my time with Mr. Tabbara.

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

Thank you to both the witnesses for being here.

I want to get a bit more information on the LGBT community in Iran and on the ground. We know the Iranian government does not allow such non-governmental organizations as Human Rights Watch to enter the country and take certain data into consideration about human rights abuses. Those in the LGBT community inside Iran are not comfortable having long conversations over the telephone, and they're wary of putting things online. How does that community organize and get word out to other members of the LGBT community inside Iran?

If I may, I'll first ask Mr. Parsi.

Mr. Arsham Parsi: As a result of your question, all of my hair became grey, because it is very difficult. The Internet is being censored and monitored by the government, as are telephones—all communications. It is very tough to collect the information from people, but there are a lot of brave Iranian LGBTQs who take a risk in order to send information out.

I remember several years ago in the city of Isfahan connecting an Iranian LGBTQ to Human Rights Watch. They had a 10- or 15-minute interview. He told me that just 10 minutes after the telephone call ended, he received a call from the intelligence service saying, "You had a conversation with Human Rights Watch and you have to come to explain."

There is a lot of monitoring. People come up with...[*Technical Difficulty—Editor*] Thanks to the Internet and a lot of social apps such as Telegram and Viber and similar new platforms that people can use to communicate, they can send information. That is why the Iranian regime actively tries to block Twitter, Facebook, Telegram, and such apps in Iran, because it's very difficult for them to monitor them.

• (1345)

The Chair: Mr. Tabbara, I'm going to just interject for a second while we have Ms. Jahangir on the line.

Are you there, Ms. Jahangir?

Ms. Asma Jahangir (Special Rapporteur on Iran, United Nations): Yes.

The Chair: Good. We're thrilled to be able to connect with you. I know you've been trying to get online with us for awhile now.

Can we please have you deliver your remarks for our committee? We would be thrilled to have them on the record.

Ms. Asma Jahangir: I don't know in what area you want me to deliver my remarks on Iran. I'm afraid I'm poorly assisted in this way; I did not have the agenda of what area you want me to address. Generally speaking, I know that's it's human rights, but if you want me to address you in the sense of what my priority area is, I'd be happy to do that.

The Chair: Sure. We have two witnesses who have given us an in-depth review of LGBTQ rights. Maybe you can focus your remarks a little bit on women's rights and also on what you're finding in terms of the occurrence of torture and execution this year.

I know you're new to this role. We heard from Dr. Shaheed last year at our Iran Accountability Week. If you can take five or seven minutes to just give us a bit of an overview, I think that would be most valuable for this committee.

Ms. Asma Jahangir: Thank you very much.

My first statement would be that I am extremely concerned about the upsurge in arrests of people who are people political activists. When I say "political activists" that doesn't mean they belong to political parties, but they are people who are politically aware. Obviously women are among those people who are under arrest, and they are political prisoners.

If you want me to focus just on women's rights, I am happy to do that, but I think it goes hand in hand with the overall political and human rights situation in Iran. You can't just pluck it out and say, "Yes, women's rights are suffering deplorably." So are minority rights. So are ethnic rights.

It is the whole atmosphere of fear that prevails there, and as the May election comes nearer and nearer, dissenting voices are being thwarted and people are being tortured. People are being harassed. People are being picked up. But if you want me to focus purely on women's rights, I'm happy to do that too.

This is a story that is not just about current affairs. This has been going on for some time, and the latest thing is that women who want to contest the election for President are obviously not allowed.

This is only symbolic of what is happening to the vast majority of women in Iran, where you cannot even decide what kind of dress to wear, and interaction between women and men is very restricted. There is not just a glass ceiling; there is an iron ceiling for women's upward mobility.

In every field of life women are controlled. Family laws are very controlling. I can give you many examples of how women are being harassed and how women are being persecuted in many ways, simply because they happen to be women.

The Chair: Ms. Jahangir, I'm happy for you to provide us again with just a bit of an overview of the issues you feel are most important in terms of the human rights abuses and what you've found and identified in your first number of months in office. I'll leave it to you to select a couple of illustrative areas to relate to this committee. Obviously, we're concerned about human rights writ large in Iran.

Ms. Asma Jahangir: Sorry, I can't hear you properly.

• (1350)

The Chair: I leave it to you. If you would like to pick a couple of areas and give us some examples, that would be fine. They don't have to relate just to women. You may choose whichever areas you feel are going to best reflect the issues of human rights in Iran, which is what we are clearly seized with during this Iran Accountability Week.

Ms. Asma Jahangir: Thank you very much.

Let me, for example, start with the aspect that if you are dissenting and you're a man, you're treated badly, but if you're a woman, you are treated even worse. That is a distinction that I would draw there. Women lawyers who dissent, for example, will be reprimanded much more. I'm not saying that men are spared this, and don't take

me as saying that they're spared, but there is an extra, awful, and very devious way of dealing with women there in terms of trying to torture them.

You don't have to even physically torture them. There are reports of cases in which you are humiliated, in which your sexual organs are being discussed in public, if you are in prison. You are asked personal questions that are unrelated to what your life is all about, and tough personal questions, which are socially unacceptable. There's a lot of talk about tradition and social norms in Iran, but when they want to persecute women, it all disappears.

Then there's the fact that women prisoners are tortured in the sense that they're kept away from their children. They will be told that their child is going to see them, but then the meeting is cancelled. It's a very insidious kind of torture for a mother. Then it's put off until a week later that the child is coming to see them, and the child doesn't turn up. What is happening to the child? The mother is not being told what is happening.

Many women have also written to me from prison about hearing children crying when they come to see their mothers and they have been separated from their mothers. Also there is the fact that in universities and educational departments, women are sexually harassed and there is impunity for it, but if a woman wants to sit with a man according to her own wishes, she is not allowed to do it. There is a kind of sexual control over them in that sense.

It's all very well to say, all we want is for you to wear a head scarf and you can do whatever you want. It's not correct. Even politically women cannot contest certain elections; women cannot get to certain polls; and if you look at the family law for women, they're very much subjugated and under the control of the male partner. A woman needs permission from her male partner about how she behaves, where she travels, and where she goes.

If the example is given to me that women are great entrepreneurs in Iran, it may be true, but it's no thanks to the Government of Iran.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Jahangir. We will move on.

Mr. Tabbara, I think you have a couple of minutes left, and then we're going to move to MP Garrison.

Please continue.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Yes. One second here....

Mr. Kimahli Powell: I wonder if I could help finish the question that was asked.

The Chair: Sure.

Mr. Kimahli Powell: It's about civil society.

I think it's important to understand how exactly we are able to help individuals who request our help and who need a pathway to safety. We have to do three things. We have to be able to verify the case through any means necessary. We have an army of volunteers around the world who help us do that, but an important piece of it is to connect the individual with an organization of some sort that can give immediate support.

We're usually talking about individuals who are facing immediate persecution of some sort, and they're facing an immediate threat. Arsham laid it out very clearly. There is a limited number of mechanisms. Sometimes Facebook and social media are key drivers. WhatsApp is a means of communication; sometimes they'll find my own personal information and I get requests. The linkage to civil society is crucial.

I think it's important to know that the crackdown on civil society in Iran is not just limited to LGBTQI-2 spirit organizations. We would be happy to work with any human rights organization that is able to assist these individuals, but if the civil society there does not, or even if the human rights organizations do not accept LGBTQI2-S individuals in that space, then it's impossible to get the individual the support they need to ultimately leave the country.

Those are the unique challenges that these Iranians face.

• (1355)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Powell.

Mr. Tabbara, do you have any last questions?

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: I just want to ask Ms. Asma Jahangir something if she is still on the line.

You mentioned a lot about women and their rights. In the case of rape or other incidents that conflict with women's rights, a lot of women are hesitant to come forward in places like Iran. Even in our North American society, there is a lot of pressure for women to come out, because they may feel that certain authorities may not listen to them or may not believe them, or there is embarrassment. But particularly in Iran, what are some of the challenges that women face when they're faced with these types of situations?

Ms. Asma Jahangir: Can I take your last question first?

As a woman, you don't have to be raped to feel violated. There are many ways of raping a woman, psychologically and emotionally. I think this is what some governments have learned to do. When you talk about a woman's body in her presence and in the presence of her family in a traditional society like Iran's, it is like raping her. When you talk about a woman as being very promiscuous and have social media campaigns against her, it is more or less raping her.

This is not to say that I do not have reports of raping of women, but I am not going that far. It is the whole attitude towards women.

You don't have to kill people, but you can subjugate them; you can kill their spirit. The dictatorships of the world are learning very fast how to kill people's spirits without physically killing them, and this is what we need to learn about.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Jahangir.

Ms. Asma Jahangir: As far as social media is concerned, I don't depend on every report I get from social media. I verify my reports from inside Iran, most of the time. I salute the people inside Iran who have, despite everything, fought hard to communicate to the outside world. This emphasizes how resilient they are.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're running low on time. I want to pass the floor over to MP Garrison.

Mr. Randall Garrison (Esquimalt—Saanich—Sooke, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to return to Mr. Powell and Mr. Parsi.

First of all, I want to say thanks for the work that you and your organizations do every day.

As you do, I welcome the new government's statement that LGBTQ refugees would be a high priority, based on risk. I met immediately with the new immigration minister, and then I met with his successor, to ask what the government would do to make that promise a reality, to recognize that risk and make things happen. I cited both your organizations as examples of success, of how Canada might go about doing this.

I met with what I would call "institutional misunderstanding", which was that LGBTQ refugees had the same access to the Canadian refugee system abroad as any other refugee would have. They could simply go into a camp and claim refugee status, as that would be easy, and if they were accepted and came here, they should get the same services and be settled with their community, just like any other refugee.

Maybe I'll start with Mr. Powell and ask him to talk about why that is or is not the case. I worry that the government will fold these pilots into general private sponsorship programs.

• (1400)

Mr. Kimahli Powell: I can answer that.

In response to the specific question of whether the situation is the same for an LGBTQI2-spirit individual as it is for another refugee, the answer is no. I think it's really important to understand that when people make an asylum claim or go through the system through private sponsorship, they are usually doing it as a family, in consultation with their community, or in a group of communities.

The people who request our help—over 700 last year—come to us as individuals. They are usually shunned by their families, or it's even the families that are inflicting violence.

To isolate those individuals going through the system is traumatic for them and puts them at risk. We have had instances of individuals going to camps in other countries—for example, Frankfurt—and finding real challenges within the population of refugees there.

Especially as Canada labels the LGBTQ2 community as a vulnerable population, that also needs to be reflected in immigration policy.

Mr. Arsham Parsi: Thank you so much for this question. It's very important. I have mentioned this several times. The last time I mentioned it was with the chairman. We had a meeting in Toronto with the Prime Minister's special adviser on LGBTQ.

In Turkey, we process mostly LGBT refugees, not only Iranian, but non-Iranian as well, since we are a charitable organization operating outside Canada. According to the UNHCR office in Ankara, Turkey, as of May 2016, they had 1,172 LGBTQ cases, of which 1,046 were from Iran. The next country was Iraq, with 62 people. In total, there are 1,200 LGBTQ refugees in Turkey out of a total of two million refugees. They are a very small group of people who are being discriminated against, not only by Turkish society—with homophobia and everything—but even by the other refugee groups. Migration doesn't mean that people change their mentality and values. They bring their values with them. They just pick up their luggage and bring what they believe. If someone is homophobic, it doesn't matter whether they live in Iran or in Canada.

My response is that they need to be prioritized as the most vulnerable refugees however the UNHCR prioritizes them. Canada, in the last several years, prioritized them in order for them to be resettled in Canada, but unfortunately it's been a while since they've been coming to Canada. They were put on hold.

A group of people are in a very bad situation. I don't want to give bad information, but last week two people committed suicide in

Turkey because they couldn't wait, especially with the Trump administration's travel ban. It's a very tough situation for LG—*[Technical difficulty—Editor]*.

The Chair: Our time is up, actually. This concludes our testimony.

To our three witnesses, we faced technical challenges today, which I apologize for, but we did get your testimony on the record. I'm glad we got to engage with you. You brought an important message to our Iran Accountability Week. It will be part of the comments we make in our concluding statement, which will go out later today or tomorrow.

Mr. Parsi, I just want to thank you as well for bearing with us through the technological challenges we faced this afternoon. Your testimony was valuable, and we appreciate it.

Mr. Arsham Parsi: Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

The meeting is adjourned.

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