



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

43rd PARLIAMENT, 2nd SESSION

Standing Committee on National Defence

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 003

Monday, November 2, 2020

Chair: Mrs. Karen McCrimmon



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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mrs. Karen McCrimmon (Kanata—Carleton, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number three of the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence. Pursuant to Standing Order 81(4) and the motion adopted by the committee on Wednesday, October 14, we are meeting today to study the main estimates for 2020-21.

Before we get going, I would respectfully request a moment of silence for Corporal Choi, who was killed in a training accident this past weekend.

[A moment of silence observed]

The Chair: I would now like to welcome our witnesses.

Today we have with us the Honourable Harjit Sajjan, P.C., MP, Minister of National Defence.

From the Department of National Defence we have Jody Thomas, deputy minister; Lieutenant General Mike Rouleau, vice chief of the defence staff; Cheri Crosby, ADM, finance and chief financial officer; Troy Crosby, ADM, materiel; Geneviève Bernatchez, judge advocate general, Canadian Armed Forces; and from the Communications Security Establishment, we have Shelly Bruce, its chief.

I'd like to invite the witnesses to begin with their statements.

Thank you very much.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of National Defence): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank everyone for the moment of silence.

Before I begin I too want to acknowledge the profound loss of Corporal James Choi during a training exercise in Wainwright, Alberta. My heartfelt condolences go out to his family, and our entire defence team will be there for them during this difficult time. We have begun an investigation to look into how this tragedy took place and to see what we can do to prevent it from ever happening again.

Madam Chair, since you've already introduced my entire team, I'll just move forward here. We are all here to answer your questions.

As you know, the defence team must be ready to anticipate, adapt and act in today's security context. That is why we began a historic investment in National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces through our defence policy, "Strong, Secure, Engaged", which will increase defence spending by over 70% from 2016-17. The \$23.3 billion we are requesting will support our people while advancing Canada's broader objectives for security, and while supporting the Canadian economy, which is critical as Canada continues its fight against COVID-19.

In fiscal year 2020-21, the economic impact of the defence budget will generate \$15.2 billion in GDP and approximately 283,000 jobs.

When we first tabled these estimates in February, COVID-19 was still emerging. While there is no specific COVID-related funding in these estimates, the pandemic has added a new layer of complexity to an already challenging threat environment.

From the beginning, the defence team has contributed greatly to Canada's whole-of-government response. The Communications Security Establishment has worked with government, businesses and our health care institutions to secure our networks and cyber infrastructure as the world has moved to working remotely. This spring, when Canadians were stuck overseas because of COVID-19, the Canadian Armed Forces' Operation Globe supported bringing them home to Canada, keeping them healthy and keeping them safe.

Through Operation Laser thousands of Canadian Armed Forces members supported Canadians, including 1,700 who put themselves at risk to help care for the vulnerable in 54 long-term care facilities in Quebec and Ontario, all this while meeting Canada's security needs, both at home and abroad.

We are committed to being a reliable partner and good global citizen. That is why these estimates include \$160.3 million in NATO contributions. However, security at home and abroad can be achieved only with a diverse, inclusive and robust defence team. That's why we're taking deliberate and decisive action to eliminate hateful and harmful conduct.

In June, defence leadership and I met with our advisory groups and networks for an anti-racism and anti-discrimination round table to better understand their experiences and how we can eliminate barriers and biases. These barriers and biases form systemic racism in our institution, which needs to be addressed, and we are doing so. In July, the Canadian Armed Forces released a “hateful conduct” policy. The army, navy and air force followed with orders to help members identify and deal with hateful conduct within their ranks as well. These orders reinforce the message that intolerance and hate have no place within the Canadian Armed Forces. If you harbour hateful views, I can assure you that we will find you, and you will be dealt with.

We also recognize that we have more to do to ensure the Canadian Armed Forces becomes more inclusive to women and eliminates gender discrimination, harassment and sexual misconduct. The entire defence team will continue to invest in creating a safe, inclusive and welcoming space for all of our members. This is why these estimates include nearly \$10.5 billion in funding and statutory authorities that will help compensate and take care of our people throughout their employment and beyond.

Building a robust and diverse defence team also helps keep Canada on the cutting edge of innovation. Our scientists and researchers have worked to develop solutions to Canada’s COVID-19 challenges, helping to develop a COVID-19 risk calculator, which has now been shared with our federal, provincial and territorial partners, as well as the World Health Organization. Also, under the innovation for defence excellence and security program, commonly known as the IDEaS program, innovators across Canada are working to help us solve some of the key COVID-19 challenges that we face.

• (1110)

These investments in innovation go well beyond supporting not only the Department of National Defence but also the Canadian Armed Forces. They are critical to helping grow the Canadian economy and helping to support middle-class jobs across our country. The Canadian Armed Forces alone employ close to 100,000 regular force and reserve members, and continue recruiting today.

We also have about 25,000 National Defence employees in communities across the country. Our defence policy—“Strong, Secure, Engaged”—generates billions of dollars in economic benefits that will support millions of Canadians and their families for years to come. The investments outlined in SSE will contribute \$108.6 billion to projects and programs between 2021 and 2024-25, investments that will generate more than \$85 billion in GDP, helping us support good, stable, middle-class jobs for Canadians, investments that will also help support hundreds of thousands of jobs per year on average over the next five years. The \$5 billion in these investments for our ships, aircraft, and land vehicles benefit more than just the companies that get the bids. These contracts create and sustain thousands of jobs and reinvest dollar for dollar back into our communities across our country.

For example, one year after we awarded the armoured combat support vehicle contract, the project has resulted in subcontracts to more than 30 Canadian businesses and supported more than 400 jobs. A strong economy of the twenty-first century must include in-

vestments in fighting the other greatest threat of this generation: climate change. That is why we are making substantial efforts to green defence.

As the department with the greatest infrastructure portfolio and over 20,000 buildings, National Defence produces nearly half of the federal government’s greenhouse gas emissions. Thanks to our investments in green initiatives, we’ve already reduced our emissions by over 30% from 2005 levels. We are on track to get to 40% reductions by 2025, five years ahead of our initial goal.

Greening defence is also about maintaining a competitive edge and contributing to economic growth. In Halifax, we recently completed a new naval training facility that will yield energy savings for years to come through its modern green design. The local community benefited from the 160 jobs that were created during its construction. The \$26.1 million in these estimates will help continue our modernization of critical national defence infrastructure while creating jobs and contributing to government’s efforts to reach net zero emissions by 2050. These estimates will continue supporting the important work of the defence teams to help Canadians build our economy back better. These defence investments will let us defend Canadians while driving our economy and propelling our society forward.

By approving these investments, you are helping the defence team continue their critical work to advance our collective peace and prosperity.

Thank you very much. I would be pleased to take your questions.

• (1115)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister. It’s much appreciated.

The first round of questions will go to Mr. Bezan for six minutes.

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake—Eastman, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank the minister and all of the departmental officials who are attending committee today.

I too want to add my condolences on behalf of all Conservative members of this committee to Corporal James Choi's family, his friends, and of course the entire Canadian Armed Forces family for this tragic loss.

Minister, I'm glad you talked about Operation Laser and the response of the Canadian Armed Forces to COVID-19.

My question is whether you're getting prepared to deploy again, especially as a second wave continues to pick up steam, and whether you're having any requests from provinces looking at requiring the support of the Canadian Armed Forces during this pandemic.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Thank you, Mr. Bezan, for that question. It's a really important one.

This is one thing that we have looked at from the start of this pandemic: not only did we need to be prepared early, but we also looked at the various stages that were coming up. Given that there was a potential for a second wave—and we are in it now—we did plan our response accordingly.

We felt that we didn't need to go to the levels we had initially, but currently we have the response in place across the country to be able to meet the needs we had outlined before by making sure that we prevent the spread of this horrible disease, making sure that we support vulnerable communities and at the same time making sure that we can provide logistical support where it's needed.

We haven't had a direct support just yet when it comes to COVID-related environments, but we are ready to provide not only that support but also support in case there are any other types of emergencies.

Mr. James Bezan: Minister, how is COVID affecting the operations of the Canadian Armed Forces, not just domestically but our international obligations as well?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: This is something that we have been extremely mindful of, knowing that in this pandemic, even though we talk about it, it is difficult to prepare for. It did impact us overseas. I tried to keep you and the other critics up to date as time went on.

Some of the training that we would normally do—for example, in Ukraine or Operation Impact—obviously wasn't going to go any further because of COVID-19 itself. There weren't going to be people coming in, so there was no reason to actually continue the training. We basically based it on the situation on the ground, not only how COVID-19 was impacting but whether we were able to conduct training in a safe manner.

In Ukraine we have restarted our training. Even though some of the COVID numbers have increased in Ukraine, in the areas we're operating in those numbers have not been as high, as has been reported. The training has started there, which is a good thing, because the—

Mr. James Bezan: But I think we have to be concerned, even though I'm a big supporter of Ukraine and Operation Unifier, about the health care facilities and the discrepancy, I guess, in health care in Ukraine versus what we have here in Canada, and the safety of the troops especially as COVID numbers in Ukraine go up. I want to move on, because I know this is something that you're on top of.

I appreciate that you and all staff are making sure our troops are staying as safe as possible and staying healthy during these times.

As you're aware, Minister, in the last Parliament we had a report from Foreign Affairs that showed that the quick reaction force for the United Nations was never registered. In the Vancouver pledges that we made, you suggested that we were going to get up to 600 troops deployed. The top number we ever saw, under the current government's mandate, was only 192. That's the number I see in front of me.

As it stands today, the UN peacekeeping number is below 40, and has been consistently over the last several months. We know that when you take out staff officers and military experts, we are down to zero troops actually wearing blue helmets on mission. So the quick reaction force never came about. Minister Champagne officially apologized, even though the Liberal members tried to block that apology. He officially apologized for the misleading of the committee.

Have you given up completely on the UN? We're not seeing troops deployed. We're not seeing a quick reaction force registered. Have you reached the same conclusion as many Canadians, that the UN just isn't effective anymore?

● (1120)

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: On the contrary, actually, we're committed to the United Nations and other multilateral organizations. When it comes to our support for peace support operations, we are committed to this.

Sometimes when it comes to how the UN system works, it is quite complex. When I had to learn how the system worked, it was quite fascinating to me. It's about not only making the pledge but also then registering in the system and how you kind of go through it. We've been able to gain some experience on this. I can see how, if somebody doesn't fully understand the system, somebody could ask the question about—

Mr. James Bezan: All you have to do is look at the hard data. I mean, I don't see the numbers there. We've always been off base with the government on the Mali mission. I think the military coup proved that it was the wrong mission for Canada.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Well, let's step back a bit, Mr. Bezan. First of all, you talked about how we shouldn't be going to Mali. Then you talked about how, when you visited, you saw the tremendous work everybody did there. This is not about numbers when it comes to UN missions. We have to be extremely mindful of what type of capabilities we provide.

Plus, let's not forget one thing that I said from the beginning, that we will not commit troops unless we feel it's an appropriate mission that will have an impact. But this takes collaboration and work, making sure that what we provide will have the impact. Currently, as you know, we've finished the mission in Mali. Right now we're providing episodic support through logistics, that is, tactical airlift support, from Uganda. I'll tell you why this is extremely important. When I visited the African Union nations, especially the African Union headquarters, one of the things they asked for was high-level capability. They have the troops to be able to carry out the missions, but they need the support to be able to carry them out. For example, the tactical airlift is not only providing logistical support to many missions now; it's also moving troops to the various areas. On the additional support that we have also outlined, we are still working with the UN to determine not only which mission would be appropriate but also what the actual timeline would be.

As you know, the "smart pledge" concept is extremely important. If we do strictly what we've done before, then we're not improving the mission. The smart pledge concept is about making sure that nations do contribute, but are not burdened with taking this on for an extended period. That's why it's important to do a yearly rotation. That's what we're currently working on. This doesn't happen over time. This isn't something we can't personally do ourselves. This has to be done with the United Nations and many other countries. We're proud of the work we've done. We demonstrated that in Mali, and we'll continue to do the same type of work as we move forward.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll go on to Mr. Baker, please.

Mr. Yvan Baker (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here today to speak with us.

I'd also like to start by expressing my condolences on behalf of my community to the family, friends and all the members of the Canadian Armed Forces on the passing of Corporal James Choi.

Minister, in my community of Etobicoke Centre, we're mourning the loss of 42 residents to COVID-19 at the Eatonville Care Centre. As devastating as this is, the death toll would have been much higher had it not been for the members of the Canadian Armed Forces who were deployed there at a very difficult time to care for my constituents.

On behalf of my community, I'd like to take this opportunity, through you, Minister, to thank the Canadian Armed Forces, and particularly the Canadian Armed Forces members who cared for and saved the lives of my constituents in Etobicoke Centre.

Minister, my question to you is, could you tell us more about the Canadian Armed Forces response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Ontario?

• (1125)

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: This is an unprecedented time for Canadians.

We knew that it was not easy, and neither could anyone anticipate what was going to take place, especially when it came to our long-term care facilities. As you know, 80% of the deaths that have

occurred in Canada have been in long-term care facilities. As we've always stated, when the Canadian Armed Forces are needed, regardless of the task, we will be there.

This was unprecedented for the Canadian Armed Forces members, but they quickly learned about what they needed to do, put the appropriate training measures in and provided the appropriate support. One of the things I want to highlight is that I was extremely impressed with the leadership and how they were able to do this. They brought in clear guidelines and measures, not only on how they would be going in, but also on how they were going to be able to assess and make an improvement to the long-term care facilities so that they could then help the facilities themselves get back on their own feet. Then they were able to hand it off. That's one of the things I was extremely proud of: how they accomplished that.

Mr. Yvan Baker: Thank you, Minister.

As you mentioned, I think that report will be very important in helping us to, as you say, better understand what some of the challenges are in our long-term care system and to help us address some of those challenges.

[*Translation*]

Minister, we have heard troubling reports on the military justice system.

Can you enlighten us on the issue, focusing on the best way to proceed if we, as parliamentarians....

[*English*]

Mr. James Bezan: We have no interpretation.

Mr. Yvan Baker: I'm sorry. Does it work now?

The Chair: Please start again.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Yvan Baker: Minister, we have heard troubling reports on the military justice system.

Can you enlighten us on the issue, focusing on the best way to proceed if we, as parliamentarians, had to participate in a military justice review?

[*English*]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: As you know, our military justice system is absolutely critical to the functioning of the Canadian Armed Forces and, as you know, we ask our Canadian Armed Forces members to do extraordinary things both here in Canada.... The military justice system is set up in such a way to make sure they provide the appropriate ability for us to have the discipline and a code ourselves when it comes to operations.

Currently, as you know, in the National Defence Act, a judicial review is conducted, and an independent judicial review will be conducted this year to make sure that I get the appropriate advice on any potential changes that need to be done. One thing that is absolutely critical is having a system that functions well. That is extremely important.

Our JAG is here. She may have remarks to offer.

Commodore Geneviève Bernatchez (Judge Advocate General, Canadian Armed Forces, Department of National Defence): Yes. Thank you.

Good morning.

What I would like to emphasize this morning is that the Canadian Armed Forces members and Canadians can rest assured that the military justice system is indeed meeting its purpose of maintaining discipline, efficiency and morale in the Canadian Armed Forces.

You will recall that last year, the Supreme Court of Canada in its *R v Stillman* landmark decision confirmed that the military justice system is a system that is necessary, a system that is legitimate and a system that is constitutional. In saying so, the Supreme Court of Canada reminded us that this is so because that system regularly receives scrutiny from parliamentarians, scrutiny from the courts and also scrutiny from independent reviews.

I believe that these three venues by which the system regularly receives reviews in order to ensure that it continues to evolve are extremely important to ensuring that the system continues to evolve with Canadian law, and also in accordance with Canadian values.

• (1130)

The Chair: We have time for one more quick question.

Mr. Yvan Baker: Thank you very much. Those are my questions.

Thank you, Minister, and to everyone, for being here today.

The Chair: All right.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, go ahead.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

First, I want to sadly acknowledge the death of Corporal James Choi. On behalf of the Bloc Québécois and myself, I want to offer my deepest condolences to his family, his loved ones, his friends and to all the members of the Canadian Armed Forces.

I thank all the witnesses for joining us today.

Minister, I also thank you for being with us.

As you know, I am very interested in the Canadian Armed Forces reserves. I would like to know what the government objectives are in reserve recruitment.

[*English*]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: The Canadian Armed Forces Reserve Force, when we conducted our defence policy review—

Can you hear the interpretation?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: There is unfortunately no interpretation.

[*English*]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I want to make sure that you have the interpretation on.

Are you properly set up for it?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I have already activated the interpretation channel toward French, but there seem to be no interpretation. It appears to be now resolved.

[*English*]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Okay.

Thank you very much for the question on the reserves.

When we conducted our defence policy review with Canadians, 50% of the conversation was about the need to support the reserves. One of the most important things we did was to bring their pay in line. The reserves before were not paid at the same level as the regular force. The base pay was brought up to the same level as the regular force's, and now reservists are paid at the same level.

We also wanted to look at improving their infrastructure. Just over a year ago, we announced \$250 million for reserve infrastructure across the country. That was something that I announced in Montreal. We also have additional money for the procurement of equipment.

As we look at aligning their pay, their infrastructure and their support, one of the things that the Canadian Armed Forces has also done is to look at bringing back some of the tasks that the reserves used to do. For example, bringing in a task like mortar platoons, and making sure that the reserves have the ability to go out—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Madam Chair, there are unfortunately minor interpretation issues.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay.

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Michael MacPherson): Actually, Minister Sajjan, please approach your laptop a little bit closer. The interpreters are having difficulty hearing you clearly.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Okay.

The Clerk: If you move it a little bit closer to your laptop, that should help.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Great. Okay.

How is this? Good.

I'll continue.

We're absolutely committed, not only to supporting the reserves but also to making sure that they have the appropriate training, equipment and tasks to be better supported. The reserves also provide tremendous support when it comes to domestic operations, whether it's floods or fires.

I'll pass it over to the vice chief for any comment.

During Operation Laser we activated the reserves or offered up anybody who wanted to be on full-time employment. Thousands of them answered the call, and they were ready to provide support for COVID.

Vice Chief, do you have any more comments about the reserves?

Lieutenant-General Mike Rouleau (Vice Chief of the Defence Staff, Department of National Defence): Thank you, Minister.

I would just add that it is true that the reserves form an integral part of any operation that we do in a domestic context. It was true for Operation Laser and true for operations before that. The nature and character of conflict is adapting, so General MacKenzie is looking carefully at the strategy relative to the money for the reserves in "Strong, Secure, Engaged" to make sure that we have a fit-for-purpose plan to spend those funds.

That's all I have, Minister. Thank you.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: My initial question was about the government recruitment objective. I know that the idea was to increase the staff by about 21.5% by 2027. What are the current figures? Does the pandemic have a negative impact on recruitment?

• (1135)

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: The recruiting is continually ongoing, and I'll let the vice answer this. Obviously, we did have a slowdown initially in our recruiting and also in our training, but the military has now worked very hard to make sure that we start the training in an appropriate COVID environment.

Vice, do you want to take that?

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much.

Am I wrong in saying that the distance between population pools in rural areas and reserve units is a determining factor in recruitment? Would you agree with that? Could you elaborate?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I have a bit of experience with this. It depends on the region in Canada. For example, distance is always dependent on the type of transportation corridor structures that provinces have in those cities.

Yes, obviously distance does play a role, but having said so, I'll say that there are many units in rural communities that recruit from

a longer distance, whether it's in Quebec or here in British Columbia.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: According to the recruitment plan, do you prioritize increasing the staff in existing infrastructure or are you hoping to create new reserve units?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: On what we're doing right now when it comes to the reserves, I have a study currently going on across the country to determine where we are going to make the appropriate investment. We need to increase the size of the reserves, but we also need to focus on retention.

One of the things that's extremely important—and I've said this from the beginning—is that we're going to make investments in areas where the demographics can actually support the recruitment, not just for the short term but for the long term as well. We need to do a lot more work on this, but we need to look at the reserves very differently than we have done in the past. Those types of investments will be made based on, as you stated, population density and where we can actually recruit the members.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Madam Chair, do I have any time left?

[English]

The Chair: You have time for a quick question.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I will ask a quick question.

It appears that a number of brigades are currently decreasing their recruitment quotas. Is that the case?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I don't know the exact numbers on how it's being done, but one thing I can assure you is that as the Minister of National Defence, I look at the reserves very closely, and there are certain briefings that I get on a regular basis when it comes to the reserves—on their infrastructure, their equipment—because I want to make sure that they get the appropriate support. There will be decisions made across Canada based on where the numbers are of each unit, because every unit has a certain mission task. Within a mission task, they look at the number of people they have. They have to make decisions based on that.

It's difficult to say "give me an exact answer exactly where that's happening", but one thing I can assure you of is that in its totality, we are actually increasing the size of the reserves. The one thing I do want to note is that we are moving forward, given this pandemic, in looking at what type of role the reserves can play.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Garrison.

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

I too want to start by expressing the condolences of the New Democrats to the family of Corporal James Choi, the B.C. reservist, who was lost in the tragic training accident at Wainwright.

I also want to take a moment to thank the more than 1,700 members of the Canadian Armed Forces who pitched in at the long-term care homes during the COVID crisis, something I know none of us ever expected to see happen.

Thank you, Minister, for being here today. I also want to thank you for keeping the lines of communication open during these very strange times we're in.

Given that we're going to have to vote in the House, there are some things I am not going to be able to talk about today, things like the measures to combat racism and extremism in the Canadian Armed Forces, and the measures to improve mental health services and, I guess, the general question of how we keep expecting the Canadian Forces to do more and more every year when their operations budget doesn't increase.

That said, I'm going to take my one set of questions and focus on the role of women in the Canadian military.

Mr. Minister, you probably know that last week we heard that the Canadian Forces is struggling to meet its targets for women in the Canadian military. Four years into the program when the percentage should have increased, according to your goals, from 15% to 19%, we have had an increase of less than 1% more women in the military.

To reach the goal of 25% by 2026, we would have to double our intake of women every year, and we would have to have about half of new recruits every year be women.

What special measures are being taken to increase the number of women being recruited into the Canadian military, because if we don't have some special measures, we're not going to reach those goals?

• (1140)

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Mr. Garrison, thank you very much for the question.

On your point about the operational budget, one thing I can assure you is that when it comes to any type of operations, they are separately funded. Any time the Canadian Armed Forces are needed, we always make sure that they have the appropriate support to be able to do their work.

When it comes recruiting women, you are absolutely right. We need to do more, and we are doing more. The baseline we set of 25% is not just a certain timeline, or where we are going to stop. We want to keep going.

We have made significant progress. We're at 16.1% women in the Canadian Armed Forces now. We have actually had increases in numbers since 2015-16, when we had about 979 to having over 1,300 in 2016-17, over 1,400 in the year afterwards, and then 1,700 more, and we're on to about 1,800 this year.

Improvement is happening. We're not happy either. We would like to have far more increases, but as you also know—you have highlighted this in the past—we also need to take a look at retention. How do we look at making those supports?

We are providing the appropriate support, but getting one aspect of that is extremely important. Operation Honour and the Path To Dignity were just one way of looking at how we can make culture change inside the Canadian Armed Forces.

Great work is happening. We're not happy with the progress, nor should we be until we actually meet the mission objective. I recently had a briefing from the army commander who was looking at a new uniform and making sure that it had a gender-based analysis plus on it, to make sure it had the appropriate fit.

Let's put it this way: We're putting the science behind the work we're doing. In terms of the recruitment, there was an IDEaS project that we funded to look at how we could analyze our data to improve the way we not only do the recruitment but also align the women to the various trades so we can focus on retention.

We're putting all the support and resources on this to make sure we improve. Yes, we're not happy with exactly where we are, but I also want to commend the tremendous efforts that have been made by the leadership in the Canadian Armed Forces.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Thank you, Mr. Minister.

You know me well enough to know where I'm going next in my question, and that question is about retention. One of the things that are key to retaining women in the military is dealing with the problem of sexual harassment and sexual assault in the military.

I was a big supporter of Operation Honour, but I have to say, Mr. Minister, we have had two reports, one internal report and one by the Auditor General, and now we have another 2020 internal report that says that with regard to victims who make complaints about sexual harassment or sexual assault, the vast, overwhelming majority still feel they are dismissed or disregarded.

I want to know what special measures you are going to put in place to change this. Obviously, what we're doing here is not making the difference it has to make.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'm going to pass it over to the vice chief after making some comments.

Some of the reports you see are actually by us internally making sure that we stay up to date on how we are progressing. Having this accurate information allows us to be able to make the appropriate adjustments, and the current path that has been launched is about our efforts on how to make cultural changes inside the Canadian Armed Forces.

A lot of great work has been done, but, as I mentioned before, we can't just make a decision and think that things are finished. We have to create an organization that evolves with current changes and make improvements, and that's exactly what we are doing, making sure that we talk to the experts like Dr. Preston, who is now independently able to provide that work for the Canadian Armed Forces.

A lot of the great work is done. I'd just like to pass off to the vice—

• (1145)

Mr. Randall Garrison: Mr. Minister, time is short here, and I would just ask one specific thing. We passed Bill C-77, a major part of which would put victims' rights as a primary focus in the Canadian military justice system.

That was proclaimed in June 2019. We still don't have the regulations in place to implement victims' rights in the military justice system.

Can you tell us when those regulations will be done, and “soon” is not a good enough answer. We've been waiting a year for these regulations, so what is the holdup?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I wish these regulations could be done almost immediately, but we also committed to consulting with the victims so that the regulations are done appropriately. This is actually something we committed to and we need to make sure that we do that well.

But when it comes to Bill C-77, it's important to note that even though the law was just passed, we actually started taking those measures even before the law was passed. And now that the law has been passed, we will continue to improve upon everything we have passed so that the appropriate support and mechanisms are there even while we are looking at drafting the regulations.

We are working, I can assure you, as quickly as possible. I've spoken to the JAG many times about this, but it's probably the most critical piece to this and it has to be done.

We just can't make a regulation saying the regulations are complete. The regulations have to be written in a way that actually creates the impact, and that impact can only happen if we continually consult the victims themselves so we get this right.

When it comes to the timeline piece, I can't give you an exact answer on this, but one thing I can assure you is that we are going to get this right.

The Chair: Thanks very much.

Madam Gallant, for five minutes.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Minister, what types of PPE were issued to the Canadian Armed Forces personnel deployed to long-term care facilities in Ontario and Quebec?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Vice, do you want to take that?

LGen Mike Rouleau: I can't give you the names of the specific companies, but the PPE that was issued to people in long-term care

facilities was of a medical grade, and we paid particular attention to make sure that we weren't putting any Canadian Armed Forces troops into any positions in the long-term care facilities unless they received medical protection that was to the same standard as what the medical folks were using.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Were all the Canadian Armed Forces personnel issued the same PPE?

LGen Mike Rouleau: I can't answer specifically if there was uniform distribution. There were a number of suppliers that were in play at the time. It was a very dynamic environment, so it is possible there were variances across the country, Madam.

We could get that back to you in writing with a little more examination.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Was the PPE used from a stockpile, or was it purchased new in 2020?

LGen Mike Rouleau: So—

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: We had a stockpile that we have always kept for situations like this, but during that time there were a lot of discussions on not only having to use the stockpile but also on making sure that we ordered the appropriate PPE, so that not only could we fill it up for us, but also how we could actually distribute it.

I have certain numbers if you'd like to have some of the numbers for surgical masks, the N95s. I'm happy to provide that to you separately as well.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: That would be lovely.

When were these supplies in the stockpile purchased? What was the expiration date on the PPE?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: When it comes to this matter, this is where the surgeon general takes particular care in making sure that we have the appropriate supplies, because we're an organization that can be called upon for any type of situation. So we make sure that our supplies are ready to go.

One thing I can assure you of is that there is a certain timeline—and the vice can go into this—on how many weeks or days we need to have supplies ready by if we're ever called upon.

LGen Mike Rouleau: Minister, all I would add is that we pay particular attention in wave two, so that we have 30-, 60- and 90-day supplies based on the number of troops that we think we'll have to employ in different areas.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: What was the expiration date on the PPE for the people deployed in Operation Laser?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: On the expiration date, the equipment that we're going to be providing for our troops—

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: No, no. It's what was already used. I want to know what was used in Operation Laser.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: We'll have to get you—

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Was the PPE expired?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Of course not. With any equipment that we provide to our troops, we're going to be making sure that it's not only the appropriate equipment—this is something that was assured by the surgeon general—but also making sure that we assess exactly where they're going, and do they have the appropriate equipment for where they're going?

For example, somebody who's going into a long-term care facility has to have not only the appropriate equipment, but there are certain measures that need to take place, versus somebody who's going to be working outside of long-term care.

• (1150)

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Thank you.

Are CAF personnel still deployed via Operation Laser, and if yes, where are they deployed?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Currently, we don't have any folks inside any long-term care facilities, but we are poised to be able to provide that appropriate support. There has been a request for supporting some indigenous communities, but not directly for Operation Laser.

Has anything changed on that, Vice?

LGen Mike Rouleau: Minister, I would only add the small numbers of people who are helping some of our other government department friends in relation to go-forward planning and logistics work.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Was there a staging area outside the facilities, a place where the armed forces personnel could don their PPE before going in and then doff it after coming out, so that it was kept separate from the regular clothes they wore?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Vice, do you want to take that?

LGen Mike Rouleau: Yes, Minister.

Madam Chair, thank you for the question.

Yes, JTF Central and FOI (Est) had their own tactics, techniques and procedures they were using. There absolutely were areas that as you got progressively closer to them, the quote, unquote, “affected zones”, people would stage out of the dress of the day, out of their current uniform, and transition progressively into the medical piece.

In fact, that's one of the biggest things that we brought to the chaotic situation. It was this sense of tactics, techniques and normalizing a very frenetic environment.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Okay, and—

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

Go ahead, Mr. Robillard.

Mr. Yves Robillard (Marc-Aurèle-Fortin, Lib.): Minister, thank you for joining us this morning.

I would first like to thank the Canadian Armed Forces, on behalf of Quebec, for the work they have done in long-term care facilities. I have a number of questions about that.

How exactly did their training and preparation on entering long-term care facilities go?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'm going to let the vice take this question, but I want to add to it first and say just how impressed I was with how the Canadian Armed Forces took something that they have never done before and prepared themselves with the appropriate training and the right level of training, because it was about saving lives but also about treating the elderly with the dignity and respect that they deserved. That's exactly what they did, and the systems that they put into place, the training that they put into place and the support that they got from the Red Cross for that training were absolutely immense.

Vice, do you want to give the details of that?

[Translation]

LGen Mike Rouleau: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The only thing I would add is that this was certainly a non-traditional deployment. The medical staff of the Canadian Armed Forces worked closely with each facility's coordinators to create formal courses. So all deployed troops had to participate in training of two or three days, I think. In other words, not a single military member was sent without having taken that training.

Mr. Yves Robillard: Thank you.

After the departure of most of the Canadian Armed Forces members, some specialized units remained on site.

Can you tell us a bit about their work?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Vice, I'll let you take that.

[Translation]

LGen Mike Rouleau: Thank you for your question on specialized staff, but I am not sure I understand it.

When the mission was completed, in late June, Canadian Armed Forces troops that were sent to long-term care facilities were brought back. Of course, the Montreal headquarters has remained in contact with provincial authorities. At the time, I was commanding the operation, and I don't remember that actual specialized forces were left in the facilities.

• (1155)

Mr. Yves Robillard: Can you also tell us about the transition to Red Cross?

LGen Mike Rouleau: Thank you for your question.

I don't have much to give you on that because, obviously, that was not a task that came under the Canadian Armed Forces. We worked in collaboration with provincial authorities. I have made recommendations to the chief of the defence staff concerning how long we should stay, given all the other tasks that we have to fulfill.

Finally, federal and provincial authorities had the task to work with Red Cross to train a team within it. It is not up to the Canadian Armed Forces to train those people.

Mr. Yves Robillard: Okay, thank you.

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Mr. Robillard, if I could just add to that, on the transition that took place, in the measures that the Canadian Armed Forces put into place to make sure that the long-term care facility was able to carry out its task, we were able to set up a structure and give confidence that it could be handed over....

When the Red Cross had to come in and hand back full responsibilities to the facilities, it's those measures that the Canadian Armed Forces put in—which were probably a little more stringent than by the provinces themselves—that gave confidence to the long-term care facilities that things could carry on. When the Red Cross came in, this allowed them to provide that support and they were able to transition much more smoothly.

[Translation]

Mr. Yves Robillard: Overall, the Canadian Armed Forces services have been very appreciated across Canada, but especially in Quebec, since we are talking about Quebec.

The Chair: Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, go ahead.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Madam Chair.

In December 2017, the Government of Canada solicited competitive bids to permanently replace 76 Royal Canadian Airforce CF-18 Hornet fighter jets.

Minister, how much money has been put into the interim fighter capability project and the future fighter capability project to date?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: The replacement of the F-18 has been extremely important to our government. As you know, this project has been going on for a long time—even before our government—and we committed to a competition to replace the current F-18s.

One of the problems we had was that we also had mission supply: We had our NORAD commitments and we had our NATO commitments. That's why it was important for us to be able to invest in our current F-18 fleet. We also bought additional aircraft of the same type from Australia, some of which are ready.

The total project is costing approximately \$339 million for the upgrade. The upgrades we're doing are to the defensive suite and also to combat capability of the fighters. This will allow us to continue to be able to fly our missions and meet our commitments while we replace our future fighter capability.

There are currently three companies in the mix. Obviously, I can't talk more about that because they're in a very sensitive stage of that competition.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: How do you explain the decision to purchase 88 new fighter jets instead of a different number of aircraft?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: The number we based it on is.... When I became the Minister of National Defence, it was initially to buy 65. I asked the same question, why is the number 65?

We had to take a look at our current responsibilities, our NORAD commitments plus our NATO commitments, were. Based on those two main commitments, plus the training we had to do, that is how we came up with the number of 88 aircraft.

The Chair: Mr. Garrison.

Mr. Randall Garrison: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

I would like, Mr. Minister, to return to the question of the role of women in the Canadian military. I am disappointed with the rate of progress. I want to point out that on recruitment, if we continue at the current rate of one percentage point improvement every four years, it means that it would take us another 30 years before the Canadian Armed Forces reaches its 25% goal, and closer to 60 years before it reaches 30% women in the military. That level is generally acknowledged: you need about 30% of women to change the culture in any institution.

I'm also disappointed with the progress on the regulations; it's been more than a year. It shouldn't take more than a year to consult those victims. I want to return to another disturbing part of this, namely, that if we're going to change these attitudes in the Canadian military, it's necessary to train future leaders. Statistics Canada just released a report covering cadets at the Royal Military College in Kingston and the Royal Military College in Saint-Jean for the year 2019. Those statistics showed that 15% of women at the colleges experienced sexual harassment or assault in the previous year. Seven in 10 of the military college students experienced or witnessed directly that sexualized behaviour. Of those who witnessed that behaviour, over 90% said they did not intervene because they weren't comfortable to intervene.

In speaking to the media, Mr. Minister, you said that you would take all actions necessary to deal with this problem at the Royal Military Colleges. Can you tell us today what those actions are and when they will be taken?

• (1200)

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Mr. Garrison, I'm glad you raised these points. This is one area that we have devoted much effort to and will continue to devote it to until we make sure that we don't have any of these types of behaviours. One instance is too many. When it comes to our Royal Military Colleges and institutions, they are extremely precious organizations that we need to make sure we protect and we need to make sure that we look at how we support our women who are joining there. A lot of measures have been taken. We have made the initial appropriate investments into the colleges.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Madam Chair, I have a point of order.

There are interpretation issues. Unfortunately, the interpreters are struggling to hear the minister, so they cannot do their job and help us, francophones, understand what is happening.

[*English*]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: My apologies. The microphone that was given to me does not work, so I had to use the one in the laptop. Is it better now? I'll try to speak as loudly as I can.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Dowdall, please.

Mr. Terry Dowdall (Simcoe—Grey, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I thank the minister for being here today.

I want to take an opportunity to mention something quickly. I'm just over a year into my mandate here and I'm very thankful to be here, but two parts have disappointed me so far. Certainly from my perspective, it's only our third meeting here, and I would like to have had more opportunity to speak. The other one is that even now with our discussion today, I'm yet to see a budget tabled since I've been elected. Those are probably two of the disappointments I've had.

I would like to follow up. I had a discussion on this at our meeting in March this year, and as you know, National Defence and Veterans Affairs Canada built a suicide prevention strategy late in 2017. In 2018 we had 15 suicides. In April your department revealed there had been 20 suicides in 2019, the highest number since 2014. For perspective, 175 Canadian military personnel have died by suicide since 2010, which is more than the 158 Canadians who were lost during the war in Afghanistan from 2001 to 2014. We know that we want to invest. We think it's so important for mental health, probably more than ever, especially now since COVID is an issue all across Canada, but certainly it's a huge issue in my riding at Base Borden in Simcoe—Grey. Minister, where are we in 2020?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: This hits all Canadian Armed Forces members extremely hard and all of us who work and support the Canadian Armed Forces. Every time we have an instance like this, it is extremely hurtful and forces us to ask the question: do we have the appropriate support and are we doing the right thing? One thing I can assure you of is that we don't leave any stone unturned. Every type of support is required to make sure that we try to prevent and try to learn from every instance. Even during this pandemic, we knew it was going to be an even a greater challenge for members. We were making sure programs like Soldier On had the right support so they can actually take their support—

• (1205)

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Minister, I just want to say that they're great initiatives, and I think everyone in the House supports those initia-

tives, but I'm just asking if we have definitive numbers. Are we seeing that? We're making investments, but you always have to have your checks and balances, and that's the part that I'm kind of confused about, and that's the question that I'm asked constantly in my riding.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: If you're asking for the exact numbers, I don't have them today, but one of the things we've seen is that sometimes we have to take a look to see if we are providing the appropriate support for our members and their families. That's one thing I can assure you that we are doing, but sometimes we need to continually learn from every single incident so we can prevent it. This is hurtful for all of us.

One thing I can assure you of is that we're not leaving any stone unturned to provide the appropriate support. I can have more information sent to you and have a more discussion on this, because it does require a far greater amount of time for this level of conversation on this, on the type of work that we're doing, not only to prevent this, but also at how we at members who have come and gone through it to provide that peer support. I can give many examples like this, but at the end of the day, we need to continue to strive to provide all of the necessary support to our members.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Thank you, Minister.

I know I probably don't have much time—

The Chair: You have one minute remaining, Mr. Dowdall, but the bells have begun to ring, so we need unanimous consent to continue for another 10 minutes. Are we good for that?

Mr. Randall Garrison: No.

Mr. James Bezan: Let's continue, please. I think all of us can log in virtually. We don't need to go to the House physically.

Mr. Randall Garrison: There is no unanimous consent.

The Chair: If there's no unanimous consent, I'm afraid we need to adjourn.

Mr. Terry Dowdall: Can I at least ask my last question quickly?

The Chair: No, I'm sorry, because there's no unanimous consent and the committee therefore needs to adjourn.

Thank you to all of our witnesses.

[*Translation*]

Minister, thank you for giving us time by joining us today. This is very important for us, and we appreciate your presence.

[*English*]

With this, the meeting is adjourned.

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