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• (1105)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield (Guelph, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number eight of the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. The committee is meeting in public and is being televised today.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(3)(g), the committee is meeting today to study “Report 1—Immigration Removals” of the 2020 spring reports of the Auditor General of Canada.

I would like to take this opportunity to remind members that the subject of this study is an audit by the Auditor General of Canada and the recommendations of that audit. This isn't a study of policy or looking at future events; this is looking at the audit by the Auditor General.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of September 23. The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. So that you are aware, the webcast will show only the person speaking, rather than the entire committee.

I reiterate that we're focusing on the study today, which is the audit by the Auditor General of Canada and the recommendations in that audit. For people who are subbing in or who haven't gone through the orientation, that's something unique to this committee. We really look at the functioning of the audit and the recommendations from that audit.

To ensure that an orderly meeting proceeds, I would like to outline a few rules to follow.

First of all, you may speak in the official language of your choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of selecting either the floor, or English or French. For those participating via Zoom, before speaking click on the microphone icon to activate your own mike. When you are done speaking, please put your mike on mute to minimize any interference.

Should any members need to request the floor outside of the time that's being given to them by me, they should activate their mike and state that they have a point of order. If a member wishes to intervene on a point of order that has been raised by another member, they should use the “raise hand” function. This will signal to the chair your interest to speak and create a speakers list. In order to do so, you should click on “participants”, and at the bottom of the

screen you will then see popping up on the right side next to your name the “raise hand” feature. This function creates a list of speakers by the same token.

Unless there are exceptional circumstances, the use of headsets with a boom microphone provided by the House of Commons is mandatory for everyone participating remotely who needs to speak.

Thank you to the interpreters for working through this technology with us.

If you have any technical challenges, please advise me, and we'll do our best to help.

I'd like now to welcome our witnesses.

Joining us today from the Office of the Auditor General are the Auditor General of Canada, Karen Hogan; Carol McCalla, principal; and Erin Jellinek, director. From the Canada Border Services Agency, I'd like to welcome back John Ossowski, president, and Scott Harris, vice-president, intelligence and enforcement branch. We also have with us today, from the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, Deputy Minister Catrina Tapley, and Nicole Giles, associate assistant deputy minister, operations. Also, from the Immigration and Refugee Board, we have Richard Wex, chairperson, and Greg Kipling, deputy chair, immigration division.

You will each have five minutes to make your opening statements.

We'll begin with you, Ms. Hogan. You have the floor. Welcome back. It's great to have you with us this morning.

[Translation]

Ms. Karen Hogan (Auditor General of Canada, Office of the Auditor General): Mr. Chair, thank you for this opportunity to present the results of our audit report on immigration removals. Joining me is Carol McCalla, the principal who was responsible for the audit, and Erin Jellinek, who led the audit team.

The audit examined whether the Canada Border Services Agency removed foreign nationals found inadmissible to Canada. Examples include failed asylum claimants, visitors who overstay their visas, or those with criminality. Timely removal supports the fairness of Canada's immigration system and may deter those who might seek to abuse it. In the case of criminals, their timely removal is important to protect public safety.

Overall, we found that the agency's approach to managing removal cases had not resulted in the timely removal of inadmissible foreign nationals. The accumulation of enforceable removal orders has been a long-standing issue for the agency. We determined that in April 2019, about 50,000 had accumulated, and many had been enforceable for years. Also, the agency had not known the whereabouts of about two thirds of the individuals ordered to leave.

We found two key issues that were affecting the timely removal of foreign nationals. First, the agency's efforts were hindered by poor data quality, which meant that the agency did not have the information it needed to track enforceable removal orders. For example, orders that the agency should have been monitoring were missing from the inventory. Some orders were delayed because of the poor flow of information between Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, or IRCC, and the agency, while others were filed in the wrong inventory. This meant that the agency did not always know which orders to enforce.

[English]

Second, poor case management led to significant periods of inactivity for thousands of cases. The agency did not have an effective system that pushed it to act on removal cases—even high-priority and time sensitive ones. For example, we estimated that in its working inventory of enforceable removal orders, the agency had not acted on about 1,500 cases for at least two years simply because they had overlooked them.

The agency aims to remove failed claimants within a year of a final negative decision. We found that most of these cases had, on average, still been in the working inventory after four years and in the wanted inventory of arrest warrants after 10 years.

The agency's inability to effectively prioritize removal cases is concerning for the small number of criminal cases that may pose a risk to public safety. Criminal cases had been in the agency's working inventory for an average of five years. We estimated that almost 150 cases involving serious criminals had not been worked on—either because they had not been assigned to an officer or because the officer had not taken any action on the case.

Further, we found significant periods of inactivity among the 34,700 cases of foreign nationals whose whereabouts were unknown. These included 2,800 high-priority criminal cases, about 70% of which were not being investigated to determine whether the individuals could be located. Agency officials confirmed that, in general, cases in the wanted inventory are not a priority.

We made three recommendations. The agency agreed with all of them and has shared its action plan with us.

Mr. Chair, this concludes my opening remarks. We would be pleased to answer any questions the committee may have.

Thank you.

• (1110)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Thank you, Ms. Hogan, for your presentation.

Now, who is up next? Mr. Harris?

Mr. John Ossowski (President, Canada Border Services Agency): I can go, Mr. Chair, if that suits you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Sure. Thank you very much.

Mr. John Ossowski: Good morning, Mr. Chair, and members of the committee.

[Translation]

Thank you for inviting me to participate in today's discussion on the Auditor General's recent performance audit on immigration removals.

[English]

With me today is my vice-president of intelligence and enforcement, Scott Harris.

I would like to thank the OAG for its report, and can confirm that the public safety minister has accepted all of the findings and recommendations.

The removals process plays a critical role in supporting Canada's immigration and refugee determination continuum, and contributes to the Government of Canada's public safety and security priorities. These processes are complex and not linear. As a result, the inventories that the CBS maintains are constantly changing to reflect the fact that individuals are at different stages of these processes, given the recourse available in our Canadian system of determination.

The various recourse mechanisms available to some or all applicants include the Immigration Refugee Board, judicial review, humanitarian and compassionate relief, ministerial relief and the intervention of United Nations bodies, such as the United Nations Committee Against Torture.

The Auditor General's report focused on the various CBSA inventories of foreign nationals involved in these processes. As of November 2020, about 217,000 people were in our inventory. Of those, about 149,000 were in the monitoring inventory, meaning that they were not eligible to be removed for various reasons. There were 165,000 in the monitoring and stayed inventory, and not eligible to be removed.

Of the 217,000 in total, just over 18,000 are in our working inventory, but have impediments to their removal. I will speak to some of those impediments in a moment.

This leaves a total of 4,175 individuals who could be removed right now.

I want to assure this committee that everyone who comes to the border is screened by our border service officers. Our BSOs have the authority, under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, to deal with potentially inadmissible visitors. No one leaves the border until and unless we are confident that they do not pose a risk to Canadians. Otherwise, we pursue other options, including detention.

Our efforts aren't just at the border. We assess and reassess risk throughout the process and have the ability to detain those who present an unacceptable danger to the public.

When it comes to removals, CBSA prioritizes the cases in its inventory. However, as indicated, there are variables in our immigration and refugee determination process that require us to constantly prioritize and remove individuals from our inventories. Another significant factor that presents a challenge for removals is our dependence on other countries to provide the travel documents required to have their foreign nationals returned. We depend on the co-operation and coordination with these countries, for example, on the specific requirement for the ID documents so that a removal can take place.

The agency is working with partners on making enhancements to systems to improve our ability to manage data related to removals.

The COVID-19 pandemic's effect on international travel has allowed us to focus our efforts on reviewing our inventories of cases and conducting business that requires a desk investigation or is more administrative in nature—all in support of the program.

As part of its overall case management strategy, the CBSA employs a number of electronic resources to track files along the immigration continuum. The CBSA also uses an inventory management system to help guide the monitoring of files along with the associated resource allocation.

In addition, with the new entry-exit controls in place, we have much greater access to information about travellers who leave Canada—either by land or air—which has had a positive impact on our ability to keep on top of warrants for removals.

Mr. Chair, let me assure you that the CBSA is focused on the recommendations coming out of the Auditor General's report, so that Canada maintains its strong reputation as a fair and welcoming country that is also governed by the rule of law.

[*Translation*]

I'll be pleased to answer any questions committee members may have.

[*English*]

Thank you.

• (1115)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Thank you for your presentation.

Now I'd like to call on Catrina Tapley, please.

Ms. Catrina Tapley (Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for inviting me to participate in today's discussion on the subject of the Auditor General's recent performance audit on immigration removals.

I'm accompanied by one of my colleagues, Nicole Giles, who is the associate assistant deputy minister of Operations at IRCC.

IRCC welcomes the Auditor General's report and agrees with its recommendations, which offer valuable insights that support ongoing efforts to improve the immigration and asylum system.

[*English*]

Canada is fundamentally an open and welcoming society. We are recognized as having one of the best immigration systems in the world, which was premised on a well-managed migration. In order to preserve that tradition, we must remain alert to those who do not qualify under existing pathways and mechanisms to remain in Canada or those who are otherwise deemed inadmissible.

Equally, however, we must guard against faults in our own processes, and this is what brings us here today, how we can improve.

In budget 2019, the Government of Canada invested \$1.18 billion over five years to increase the capacity of Canada's asylum system to process about 50,000 claims a year. This funding will strengthen processes at the border and accelerate the processing of claims and removals in a timely manner. In support of this investment, the departments who share responsibility for these processes have a duty to co-operate as effectively as possible.

A key part of any well-managed system is good and timely data. Our department is committed to working with the Canada Border Services Agency to ensure accurate and timely data entry to assist the agency in managing its removal programs as well as to ensure IRCC's program integrity and quality assurance.

One of the concerns raised in the Auditor General's report was the number of delays in certain removals, which were the result of deficiencies in information sharing between the CBSA and IRCC. In response, IRCC is building on the monitoring, oversight and compliance regimes that we put in place to focus on asylum and related enforcement processes.

Since September 2019, this monitoring regime has allowed us on a monthly basis to identify delayed or improper data entry and to take corrective action.

Over the last year, a section on incomplete removal orders has been incorporated into the report to ensure that any issues are quickly addressed by the appropriate organization. In addition, we are developing a systems-based solution to ensure litigation data entry is completed in a timely manner. We have committed to implement the solution in conjunction with the Department of Justice and the Canada Border Services Agency by September 30th of next year.

In the more immediate term, we have taken action in recognizing that the ability to co-operate effectively with fellow departments is crucial to delivering the many programs and services Canadians rely on to maintain public safety.

To this end, the Asylum System Management Board was established as a deputy minister-level forum in spring 2018 to improve horizontal coordination among IRCC, the Immigration and Refugee Board and the Canada Border Services Agency, the organizations responsible for the administration and operation of Canada's asylum system.

• (1120)

[*Translation*]

Further, in 2019, the government established a whole-of-government strategy for increasing removals co-operation.

Under this strategy, IRCC received \$21 million over six years to deliver capacity-building programming to increase engagement and co-operation with targeted countries.

[*English*]

The strategy also aligns with key findings and recommendations of the spring OAG report, including the need to increase engagement on removal co-operation.

In conclusion, Mr. Chair, coordinated efforts on any scale rely on communication and co-operation to succeed. The Auditor General's study of immigration removals has revealed opportunities to strengthen links between departments that are collectively responsible for immigration removals.

[*Translation*]

We have made progress, and I know my colleagues here today share my resolve to further strengthen our efforts in accordance with the recommendations contained in the report.

I look forward to answering the committee's questions.

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Thank you.

The final five-minute presentation is by the Immigration and Refugee Board, Richard Wex, chairperson.

Mr. Richard Wex (Chairperson, Immigration and Refugee Board): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and members of the committee.

[*Translation*]

I am accompanied today by Greg Kipling, deputy chair of the Immigration Division.

I'd like to begin by thanking the Office of the Auditor General of Canada for its report and the information it provides.

While none of the recommendations in the report are directed to the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, we are pleased to be able to tell you about our organization and the relationship between the board's work and the Canada Border Services Agency's removals program. We will also be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

Before getting to the heart of the matter, I'd like to give you an overview of our mandate, our current operating context and the board's strategic directions.

[*English*]

The IRB is Canada's largest independent administrative tribunal, with a mandate to resolve immigration and refugee cases fairly, efficiently and in accordance with the law.

We have a staff of some 2,000 across the country, including some 500 adjudicators, and a current budget of approximately \$300 million a year. As well, we're a high-volume administrative tribunal issuing some 60,000 cases a year across our four separate divisions.

The board's decisions are almost always life-changing, from deciding whether someone is granted refugee protection from the country against which they are alleging persecution, to deciding whether an individual is inadmissible to and, therefore, removable from Canada, to whether someone detained by CBSA for immigration-related reasons should continue to have their liberty restricted or be released into the community.

The board's mandate is important both at an individual level by virtue of the nature of its decisions, but also at a broader level in playing an important role in upholding Canadians' confidence in our immigration and refugee determination systems.

As many of you are no doubt aware, our operating context has been quite challenging over the past few years. Much like elsewhere around the world, Canada's asylum system has faced significant pressure, with refugee claims growing exponentially and far exceeding the funded capacity to process such claims. This has resulted in evergrowing inventories and longer wait times, raising questions around access to justice and public confidence in the system as a whole.

In response to these and other challenges, in early 2019 the IRB developed and implemented a fairly ambitious multi-year growth and transformation agenda. In terms of growth, budget 2019 provided some \$200 million in additional temporary funding over two years for the IRB to address the recent surge in asylum claims and slow the growth of the refugee claims inventory and wait times from where they would otherwise be.

As we work to grow the organization and maximize the use of these temporary investments, we're also focused on transformation, as defined by three strategic directions. First, we're focused on improved productivity characterized by a culture of increased operational awareness and results.

Second, we're focused on enhanced quality in decision-making, and third, we're focused on strength in management, including, as my colleague Ms. Tapley just mentioned, improved governance through the Asylum System Management Board with IRCC and the CBSA, which allows us to work through common issues requiring coordinated responses.

I'm pleased to report that results to date across all four divisions have met or exceeded ambitious performance targets, including those associated with the recent investments in budget 2019. At the refugee protection division, for example, the board finalized over 42,000 refugee claims last year, some 10,000 more claims than in 2018-19. The board finalized some 11,000 refugee appeals, more than double the number of appeals finalized at the refugee appeal division the previous year. Of course, these gains represent better access to justice for tens of thousands of people waiting for certainty in their lives.

The audit under consideration deals with immigration removals. Removal orders or decisions that impact whether removal orders are brought into effect are issued by each of the IRB divisions. They cover a range of potential circumstances, including those where the board finds someone to be inadmissible, or where refugee claimants are ultimately found not to be in need of protection.

The effectiveness of CBSA's removals program is based in part on the timely sharing of such IRB decisions. The audit examined the sharing of such IRB decisions with the CBSA in the context of their removal program, and I was reassured that the OAG found no issues with the information shared by the IRB. That said, we are committed to and are currently taking steps to further strengthen our information sharing practices with both IRCC and the CBSA across the immigration and refugee determination system.

Mr. Chair, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. My colleague, Mr. Kipling, and I are available for your questions.

Thank you.

• (1125)

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Thank you, all, for your presentations this morning. We're right on time.

Speaking of time, I'd just like to remind the committee members that in the last 10 minutes of today's meeting, we're going to deal with committee business to look at the road ahead for us.

With that, we'll start our first round of questions with Raquel Dancho from the Conservative Party.

Welcome to the committee, Raquel, for being a sub. It's great to have you here. You have six minutes.

Ms. Raquel Dancho (Kildonan—St. Paul, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to be here and to question the witnesses.

I looked over this report in detail and have a number of questions. I just want to reiterate the crux of the report and many of the remarks by the Auditor General. My understanding of the report is that the goal was "to determine whether the Canada Border Services Agency, in coordination with [the department of immigration] and the Immigration and Refugee Board...removed individuals ordered to leave Canada as soon as possible to protect the integrity of the immigration system and maintain public safety." Further, the AG had found that "[f]ailed asylum claimants make up the largest share of those ordered to leave".

I just want to reiterate some of the highlights from the AG's remarks in English—she gave them in French. She said, "[W]e found that the agency's approach to managing removal cases had not resulted in the timely removal of inadmissible foreign nationals" and, further, that "in April 2019, about 50,000 had accumulated, and many had not been enforceable for years."

That, in particular, I found very concerning.

"[T]he agency had not known the whereabouts of about two thirds of the individuals ordered to leave", and she found two main issues with this. "First, the agency's efforts were hindered by poor data quality, which meant that the agency did not have the information it needed to track enforceable removal orders." They didn't even have the technology to sort of know and find where these individuals were. There were 50,000 at the time. She also mentioned that there was a "poor flow of information between Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada and the agency".

The second one, in particular, I found quite concerning. "[P]oor case management led to significant periods of inactivity for thousands of cases. The agency did not have an effective system that pushed it to act on removal cases, even high-priority cases" that were time-sensitive. She said that "the agency had not acted on about 1,500 cases for about 2 years" and that more "of these cases had, on average, still been in the working inventory [for] four years and in the wanted inventory of arrest warrants" for a decade.

What I think the public will be particularly concerned about is “the agency's inability to effectively prioritize removal cases”, which “is concerning for the small number of criminal cases that may pose a risk to public safety. Criminal cases had been in the agency's working inventory for an average of 5 years.”

Now in her report, she mentions that criminal cases, particularly the serious ones, were with regard to “those convicted of crimes punishable by a maximum sentence of 10 years or more” and “who, in the opinion of the [border] officer, [would] pose a threat to the public or individuals.”

I did find that concerning. She specified that there were “150 cases involving serious criminals [that] had not been worked on”.

So, what I was hearing in her remarks and in her report was that there were 150 known criminals that they weren't sure where they were and that they weren't working on finding. Further, there were 2,800 other criminal cases, as well, that they didn't know where they were and that they weren't working on.

Now we know that this report is from data from a year and a half ago—April 2019—so I'm hoping today to hear an update with progress for the Canadian people who are concerned about criminals who, essentially, have illegally entered our country and that we're not able to find and are not working on finding, at least at the time of this report.

Mr. Ossowski, how many of the 2,800 criminals that were identified for removal have now been removed in the past year and a half, and how many warrants for the arrest of failed asylum claimants who are individuals who are criminals exist in Canada right now?

• (1130)

Mr. John Ossowski: I'm happy to report that one of the silver linings of the COVID experience is that I've been able to reallocate some resources to a warrant review process. We're about 80% done that review process right now. I'm happy to report that the number of people in the wanted inventory that the Auditor General identified is now down to 800 people with criminality.

I would just like to expand for a second on that, though. I think it's important for the committee to understand that people, when they come to the border, might have criminality in their pasts. It might have been serious at some point in time. The person might have served a sentence. As I said in my opening remarks, no one leaves our control if we feel that there is any risk to the public. We will go to the IRB. We will detain them. There's a hearing process where the IRB will review those detentions.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I just have to continue. I only have a minute and a half left.

My understanding of her report is that she said that there were many of these criminal cases where no one was looking for them. They were, I guess, on somebody's desk, collecting dust, which I found concerning.

But just now in French for our French colleagues....

[*Translation*]

How do you explain the fact that the average processing time for removal orders for criminals we are able to locate is five years? How do you explain the fact that 150 serious criminal files have been inactive for years, often with no officer assigned to the file?

[*English*]

Mr. John Ossowski: It is complicated. We might find someone we know about who has a criminal past, but we can't get travel documents for them. That represents about 60% of our challenge. We have an enforceable removal order in place, but we can't get the travel documents to send them back to where they came from.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: The crux of the problem is that they don't have a passport and so you can't deport them, so to speak.

I want to know as well—just to wrap up—how many have been convicted or charged with crimes while they were in Canada.

Mr. John Ossowski: My vice-president might have that information.

Scott.

Mr. Scott Harris (Vice-President, Intelligence and Enforcement Branch, Canada Border Services Agency): Thank you very much for that.

It's probably in the neighbourhood of 60% who have been charged in Canada, of our total criminal cases.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: To be clear, you're not able to find them, but they have been charged.

Mr. Scott Harris: Yes. They have been charged and/or convicted of crimes in Canada.

As part of the process, people who are convicted of crimes in Canada complete their sentences in Canada. During the serving of their sentence, their removal orders are stayed. Once their sentence is complete or they're granted parole, they come into CBSA care in custody. We review those cases to determine if they present a risk to the public, and we move forward with the removal order.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Thank you very much.

Now it's over to Mr. Blois from the Liberal Party.

Mr. Kody Blois (Kings—Hants, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for your testimony today. It's certainly an important subject.

I'm going to start with Ms. McCalla, who was the principal on this particular report.

The information is obviously helpful, but it's a snapshot in time. As Mr. Wex was talking about, the IRB has basically increased the number of asylum cases it has processed, and I think he suggested that it might have doubled in the last year.

Was there any type of analysis—this is obviously a snapshot in time—about where we were in years past and where we are today basically? Is there any continuum there that we looked at?

• (1135)

Ms. Carol McCalla (Principal, Office of the Auditor General): With regard to the number of removals that CBSA effected each year, we found that over the past decade, since our last report in 2008 when there were about 12,000 removals, the number had steadily gone down. However, it had recently increased, in the last year that we looked at, to close to 10,000 removal orders.

Mr. Kody Blois: Obviously, some of this is predicated.... I went through your report that was prepared, and some of that is not tied to.... There wasn't much of a connection in terms of the number of processed cases that are going through IRB and the number of removals that are taking place. Obviously that has some impact on the ability to get removals out. Is that correct?

Ms. Carol McCalla: We found there were a large number of cases of enforceable removal orders that had accumulated and that existed, regardless of the number of new removals that came into force each year.

Based on the surge in asylum claims over the past three years, the CBSA expects there to be a significant increase in the number of removal orders it will have to enforce. That is indeed why we undertook this audit, to see how the CBSA is situated in terms of the information it has on which removal orders to enforce so that the accumulation of removal orders won't worsen.

Mr. Kody Blois: I'd like to go to Ms. Tapley.

One of the findings in the report was talking about data management. It was mentioned throughout the witness testimony about the nuances of different due processes that individuals are afforded under a system which I don't think anyone calls into question.

How are we working to improve that data management, such that the nuances and the different areas in which asylum seekers or other individuals have their due process are being calculated and shared among agencies?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thanks for that, Mr. Chair.

We have changed our existing quality assurance and data monitoring to ensure that all removal orders are entered correctly in the system to allow the CBSA to better manage its inventory. Over the past six months, all removal orders issued were finalized correctly.

We take this report seriously. We are working for a longer term.

These are interim solutions. The longer-term solution is to modify the IRCC system, or the global case management system, to include the tracking of these decisions.

There are two other things, if I may, that I would note are very important. One is called the Asylum System Management Board, which I mentioned in my opening remarks. It is an opportunity for the three of us, Mr. Wex, Mr. Ossowski and me, as heads of the three organizations, to share information, to work collaboratively on priorities and to track our decisions on how we're building different processes that are there.

That, I think, has been tremendously helpful in terms of better horizontal co-operation and better meeting the needs of the three organizations in play.

Mr. Kody Blois: Thank you very much.

I'd like to go to Mr. Ossowski. When I read through the report, obviously, we have principles in place that if it's unsafe to remove certain foreign nationals because of war, conflict or extreme weather events, basically we have a bit of a stop-gate in that regard. How has COVID-19 impacted that? You mentioned that you have had some ability as a result to reallocate resources towards this, but have there been challenges in being able to get foreign nationals out because of the global pandemic?

Mr. John Ossowski: Yes, in fact, obviously, with reduced air travel, it's harder to get those flights to move people back to where they came from. The countries that we have deferrals of removals to have stayed relatively stable. We have around 14 countries right now that are not suitable to return people back to, for whatever reason, because of war or particular situations. That accounts for roughly 6,000 people whom we could otherwise remove. For sure, the logistics of the entire process in working with countries, making arrangements with them, have been hampered as a result of the COVID pandemic.

• (1140)

Mr. Kody Blois: Can I ask about the voluntary return program? It's one of the recommendations in the report. Other jurisdictions—perhaps Europe was mentioned—as a way to be able to try to get more individuals back out of the country that can perhaps do it on a voluntary basis.... Where are we at with that recommendation?

Mr. John Ossowski: I'm pleased to report that we're working on that. We've reviewed our previous experience with a program that we had a few years back, and we've looked at other countries to see if there are ways to finetune it. We're hoping to have something up and running by Q3 in 2021-22.

Mr. Kody Blois: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to my witnesses.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Thank you both.

We go over to Mr. Blanchette-Joncas, who's in person, I take it.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas (Rimouski-Neigette—Témiscouata—Les Basques, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First of all, I'd like to say hello to my colleagues and all the witnesses present today.

Ms. Hogan, it's a pleasure to see you again. We're going to make it a habit. My first questions will be for you.

Your report is quite overwhelming. Once again, you've produced an extensive report, which is also disturbing to ordinary Canadians. The government had provided funding for the voluntary return assistance programs announced in 2019 and funds for its operation directly from 2020.

Do you think this program that is now in place has been delayed by the pandemic?

Ms. Karen Hogan: Thank you for the question.

I should point out that if the agency is aware of any delays with respect to this program, the agency is the one that can tell you. During our audit, we noted that the program was underutilized. I encourage you to ask agency officials this question.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: We'll be able to do that at a later date, Ms. Hogan. Thank you for the clarification.

In the case of applications for voluntary return assistance, the situation of the individuals involved is delicate. Some of them leave a country under tragic conditions or circumstances.

Isn't it utopian to ask these people to turn themselves in?

Ms. Karen Hogan: It is my understanding that all cases in the inventory of removals are those where all legal avenues have been exhausted. The issue is not whether they'll have to leave the country—they will have to, as Mr. Ossowski mentioned earlier. If they are from countries where there is war, for example, they are not included in this inventory, and their case is not among those we have examined.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: These aren't necessarily refugee protection claimants who have been rejected under other types of programs or removal orders. Is that correct?

Ms. Karen Hogan: I'm sorry, but could you repeat the question?

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: In the situation you mentioned, which involves people who aren't subject to removal orders, these aren't applications that involve other types of programs, which could be related to criminals, for instance.

Ms. Karen Hogan: All the cases in the inventory are related either to rejected refugee protection claims, criminality cases, or cases where visas have expired. These individuals must leave the country, and this is a legal fact.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you very much.

I'll now move on to another topic. You say the following in the report:

Poor data quality and case management weaknesses resulted in avoidable delays for thousands of cases. Deficiencies in information sharing with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada also delayed cases.

Of course, I've analyzed the entire action plan. It's clear that processes should be implemented and accountability mechanisms put in place to more appropriately guide case management.

Ms. Hogan, do you think there are any other problems? Having processes is good, but is the root of the problem a lack of IT tools, a lack of human resources, or something else?

Ms. Karen Hogan: We did not examine whether it was under-resourced. I think the agency mentioned that it received a little

more money. The problem is probably caused by human error or a delay in the exchange of information.

The system did not assist the agency in setting priorities and there was no alert when a change was made or new information was available. It was a combination of several elements.

The action plan submitted by the agency is good, but the agency will also need continued support once the measures are in place.

• (1145)

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you, Ms. Hogan.

When you talk about the system, are you talking about an out-of-date computer system or faulty processes?

Ms. Karen Hogan: It's a bit of both. Case management was deficient and the system didn't help the agency in prioritizing or triaging files.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: In terms of resources, over the past 10 years there have been major investments to improve the efficiency of the asylum system, particularly in the case of enforceable removal orders. We know that the Canada Border Services Agency is responsible for this.

As of April 2019, approximately 50,000 people were covered by the measures. In two-thirds of the cases, it was people we had lost track of. That was precisely 34,700 individuals, representing 70% of the files.

Do you think this is acceptable for the Government of Canada?

Ms. Karen Hogan: The cases are different. It's also important to know that, if the agency can't find an individual, it's likely that the person has already left the country.

In the case of criminals, it's very important to follow up more rigorously to ensure public safety.

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Apparently, 70% of cases elude us, which means that the system only works in 30% of cases. If I make an analogy with the school, that 30% isn't even a passing grade.

In addition, in order to improve these processes, there has been major investment to manage, among other things, enforceable removal orders. We are investing more money, but the number of removals has remained virtually unchanged in recent years, even for priority cases.

We invest more money to be more efficient, but we're handling almost the same number of cases. How can we explain this?

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): You have five seconds.

[Translation]

Ms. Karen Hogan: The purpose of our audit was to examine the cases included in the inventory. The question of what the agency did with the surplus money should be asked directly to the agency.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Thank you. Maybe we can pick up on that in the later part of the meeting, if there's more on that topic.

Mr. Green, the next six minutes is yours.

Mr. Matthew Green (Hamilton Centre, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Longfield.

I certainly appreciate the opportunity to have heard the comments, and I want an opportunity to learn more. This audit has certainly brought to light some pretty significant and challenging conversations around our immigration system.

There were earlier assertions, through you, Mr. Chair, that somehow people with extreme criminality who are here in an unauthorized way are kind of roaming the streets. One of the answers was in fact that when people serve their time, they're taken into the custody of the CBSA, of our immigration system. Currently, how many people do we have incarcerated for immigration-related issues? How many people are within the custody of the CBSA, just to give me a better understanding here?

Mr. John Ossowski: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

On any given day, we would have about 350 or so people in our three holding centres. We have immigration holding centres in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver. For someone whose situation is beyond our ability, we would work with our provincial colleagues, and that person would be put into a provincial correctional facility.

Mr. Matthew Green: Then there are things like the facility in Lindsay, for instance, which, I believe, houses people in immigration cases. Currently, how many immigrants do we have in jail simply based on their immigration cases?

Mr. John Ossowski: They are detained for primarily three reasons: they are a danger to the public; they are unlikely to appear for a detention hearing and/or we're not able to resolve their identity. Those are the three primary reasons we would detain somebody. As I said, on average in our custody we would have about 350 people at any given time. That number has obviously dropped dramatically with last year's travel volumes being down as much as they were, but those are, *grosso modo*, the numbers we're talking about.

Mr. Matthew Green: "*Grosso modo*" is a new expression I just learned. Thank you for that.

I'm trying to get an understanding. There are just 350 within CBSA. Are there other avenues through which our immigration system detains people? I recall that Lindsay, Ontario, for instance, has people on indefinite detainment perhaps for what you call the unlikelihood that they would appear or their unresolved identity. Certainly the possibility of being a danger to the public I can completely understand, but I'm just trying to better understand through this audit where the systems are failing and therefore resulting in the symptoms of the deficiencies that were brought up in this audit.

• (1150)

Mr. John Ossowski: I think it's important to understand that when somebody is detained, every 30 days—first after 48 hours, then seven days and then every 30 days—they are brought before the IRB for a detention review hearing. We always hope to try to

resolve whatever the matter is at the time when those hearings take place. If we're not able to resolve that, the person goes back into detention until we can figure things out.

If it's an identity thing.... Some people have done this for a very long time, and we work very hard try to figure out who they are. I would say that recent changes to capturing biometrics on entry of foreign nationals is something that will change this over the next couple of years, but there still are some people for whom we're just not satisfied that we know who they are, and if we don't know who they are, we don't know what risk they represent, so we will continue to detain them.

Mr. Matthew Green: I just want to make sure that I'm not missing something. When you say there are 350 in holding centres, I'm assuming that's in airports and at points of entry. Is that correct or is that all—

Mr. John Ossowski: No. I have three dedicated facilities where we detain people. There are transitory set-ups at airports to hold somebody while we're waiting to board a flight, but we don't hold people there for any lengthy period of time.

Mr. Matthew Green: Got it, so I guess as a more general question, we're talking about the delays in the Immigration and Refugee Board hearings. In your opinion, what impact do those delays have on your ability to keep track of refugee claimants throughout the process?

Mr. John Ossowski: I think certainly what we've seen from the irregular asylum and inland claim side, from people claiming asylum either when they get off an airplane or people who have claimed irregularly—the most famous example is Roxham Road in Lacolle, Quebec—is that as those volumes have grown, the system has had to adjust.

We were baseline-funded to deal with around 26,000 cases a year. The government has provided us funding to have us set up for the next few years to deliver around 50,000 cases a year. We've ramped up in response to that sort of supply side, if you will, but it will take time to resolve.

Mr. Matthew Green: Right, and have you done any research on the impact that the delays in completing removals is having on the lives of foreign nationals and their families? I can imagine somebody who comes here. They're perhaps following an international refugee protocol. They are presenting themselves. They're setting up their families here. We're hearing that there's a process through which they engage. Maybe they move. Ten years down the line, all of a sudden, they're caught in a situation where, after having built a life in Canada, they're being removed.

I'm wondering if you've done any of that work to figure that out.

Mr. John Ossowski: That's probably more of a policy research question that I would defer to my colleague at Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada to answer, but I would say that we've done a lot of work together with our colleagues at IRB and IRCC to assess these claims as quickly as possible.

We've had a pilot going for a little while now in Montreal that's shown some promise in terms of expediting the process and getting those decisions faster. You've probably heard ministers in the past talk about the desire for a "fair, fast and final" system, and we're working towards that.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you so much for your answers.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Thank you for your questions. That was a good line of questioning by all. Thank you.

We'll be moving into our five-minute round now with Mr. Berthold from the Conservative Party.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold (Mégantic—L'Érable, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I'll give the floor to Ms. Dancho.

[English]

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I just want to talk a bit about the cost to taxpayers of the recent influx over the last couple of years. We know that in 2017, 2018 and 2019, 169,000 people illegally or, as others have said—the federal government in particular—irregularly crossed the border into Canada, most of which claimed asylum, for most of which we found their asylum claims were not valid and many of which we now cannot find to remove.

My understanding is that the agency in 2018-19 spent \$34 million on this removal program. The year following, the federal government more than doubled that, adding \$36 million for a total of \$70 million for our removal program. Further, the Department of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship committed in 2019 \$1.18 billion over a five-year period to increase the capacity of Canada's asylum system to process 50,000 asylum claims per year.

For the deputy minister of immigration, can you confirm that this \$1.18 billion does not include welfare payments like food, lodging, travel and others?

Hello?

Deputy Minister, can you confirm that this \$1.1 billion does not include the welfare payments to those asylum-seeking claimants?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: You are correct.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Okay. I—

Ms. Catrina Tapley: If I may, Mr. Chair, I'll just take one moment to say congratulations.

It's my first opportunity to congratulate you on your appointment as our critic. We look forward to that.

• (1155)

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

Now that we're talking about the money for the Quebec context, we know that most of the influx has been into Quebec at Roxham Road.

[Translation]

The Government of Canada has reimbursed Quebec for the costs it incurred as a result of the tens of thousands of refugee claimants

who entered Quebec via Roxham Road. How much was Quebec reimbursed in 2017 and 2018?

[English]

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I assume we're talking about additional monies the federal government has provided to the Government of Quebec—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: That's correct.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: —for lodging, and for the increases in lodging related to irregular asylum claimants. We're still discussing with the Government of Quebec for 2019 and 2020. Those discussions are under way and ongoing. We have not—

Ms. Raquel Dancho: I'm sorry to cut you off, Deputy Minister, but my understanding was that it was \$250 million over 2017-18, is that correct?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: That's right.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Do you know what the payment was for 2019, or is that still being worked on?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: No. We're still discussing it with Quebec.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: This is likely my last question. I want to talk about the incentive program. In one section of the Auditor General's report, it said that few people have incentive to voluntarily leave, essentially. People are not willing to go. We have to arrest them, and have them leave. That's my understanding from the report.

The agency's response was:

While the immigration continuum is predicated on the expectation that individuals who no longer have status in the country, or who have been found inadmissible, will abide by our laws and leave Canada voluntarily, the reality is that a significant number of people fail to do so.

In response, the agency has proposed, or is implementing, a departure incentive program pilot, and will implement these initiatives by the fourth quarter of the 2020-21 fiscal year.

What is the budget for this pilot project, and how many people will it service?

Mr. John Ossowski: We were given an initial allotment to develop the program for two years.

Scott, do you have the exact number?

The next step would be for us to go to Treasury Board, and get the right authorities to actually launch the program. I don't actually have that number handy.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Do you have an estimate? Are we talking \$10 million or \$20 million?

Mr. Scott Harris: It is in the neighbourhood of \$10 million over a number of years.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Just so I'm clear, this departure incentive program pilot is because folks who are supposed to leave are not leaving. Their claims have been denied, their appeals to those denials have been denied again, and now they're supposed to leave, but they are not leaving. We're going to pay them to leave, is that correct?

Mr. John Ossowski: It's to incentivize them to leave within the period before it becomes a deportation order.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: It's before you have to issue a deportation order.

Mr. John Ossowski: We would initially have a departure order. The process is that they would have a negative decision.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: What would the average payment be?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): We're at the end of the time.

Ms. Raquel Dancho: Can you just answer my last question?

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): We'll see if we can pick that up later.

Ms. Yip, it's over to you.

Ms. Jean Yip (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): Thank you all for coming.

I would like to follow-up Ms. Dancho's line of questioning. How successful is this incentivization program? Do you have any preliminary data on this program?

Mr. John Ossowski: We're still at the design phase of the program. We haven't actually implemented it yet. It will take a bit of time to get the authorities lined up for use to be able to provide that payment to people, which would be based on some sort of a scale. I don't have the amounts and how we would do that. We've looked at the experience of other countries to help us design a program that will work better than the one we had in the past, which didn't work so well.

Ms. Jean Yip: What was the experience in other countries? Were they successful in removing a greater number of people?

Mr. John Ossowski: Some countries have had more success than others. It's fairly uneven, and I think it's important to understand that it would depend on the situation. Each person, as I like to say, is a rational economic actor, so they'll look at where they are and ask, is this my best choice?

It might be different if you're in an EU country from what it is in Canada. It really depends on the situation, so I think it's very hard to compare apples to oranges here.

• (1200)

Ms. Jean Yip: In the sample of cases that were not removed within one year, it was found that about one in five cases was delayed because it was not assigned to an officer. In the agency's response, it mentioned that the new multi-year removal strategy being developed by the agency would allow for an "enhanced triage method to improve case identification and ensure cases are processed in a timely...manner".

Can you brief us on the rollout of the strategy and whether this enhanced triage method has been implemented yet?

Mr. John Ossowski: Yes, we are rolling this out as we speak.

Part of that, as I mentioned, is the warrant review process. There are still going to be lots of complications, as I mentioned before, with getting travel documents. But certainly in terms of the data, the quality assurance program, the triaging process, these are all things that we're actively working on to make sure that we're better positioned so that these files get the attention they deserve.

Ms. Jean Yip: The OAG found that there were a lot of system interface failures in receiving data, which delayed the enforcement of removal orders. It also found cases filed in the wrong inventories and others that contained inaccurate information, and also that information from paper files was not updated in the electronic files.

Have the system interface problems been resolved, or are they still an issue?

Mr. John Ossowski: We're actively working on that. Fortunately, in budget 2019, the three of us, ourselves, my colleagues at the the Immigration and Refugee Board, and Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, got money for an asylum interoperability program. We all have different case management systems and this was allowing them to interact together so we had better fidelity on all of the hand-offs that happen back and forth. I think that's really one of the most challenging parts of this process, the hand-offs back and forth as people avail themselves of the due process that we have in our determination system.

Ms. Jean Yip: Yes, there seems to be a need for better coordination between the departments. I'm hoping that the technology will ease that.

What checks are going to be in place to ensure better data quality?

Mr. John Ossowski: As I mentioned, we've put in a quality assurance program to really make sure that the data, right from the very beginning when we interact with somebody at the border, is captured properly in a system of record. We tend to use, at first, the global case management system, which is the system of the IRCC. It's only when it becomes a removal order and we start to work on it that it would come into our national case management system.

Right now we have about 216,000 people in that system, and this number is constantly changing, all the time, because people are coming through and getting processed. Those volumes have remained, I would say, fairly stable over the last number of years.

Ms. Jean Yip: Why is it advisable to have both paper and the electronic files? This could be contributing to missing information. Why not just move the digital files?

Mr. John Ossowski: That would be the goal, for sure, at the end of the day, but when people come from a lot of countries it's a very paper-heavy process, and a lot of the legal processes that we have, including going to the Federal Court, are still paper-based. Getting those hand-offs, as I say, between us all is something that we're working on to make sure that we can improve our timeliness.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Thank you.

Mr. Blanchette-Joncas, you have two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll address Mr. Harris and Mr. Ossowski of the Canada Border Services Agency.

I can say that the Auditor General's report is quite damning for your organization. I want to focus primarily on the removal of refused immigrants. It's this alarming situation that is the main focus of the report.

In recent years, much more investment has been made in this area. I read an article from *La Presse*, dated July 8, 2020, written by Jim Bronskill. In that article, he says that in recent years, the government has made much more investment to improve the processing of enforceable removal orders. The Canada Border Services Agency is responsible for enforcing removal orders issued against foreign nationals who have been inadmissible to Canada.

Gentlemen, can you tell us how much money was allocated to this particular program in the last budget?

• (1205)

[English]

Mr. John Ossowski: I can give you some highlights from past years. In 2010, for a program called refugee reform, the agency received \$95 million for five years and \$19 million ongoing.

There was another injection of funds in 2016 for the Mexican visa lift program. That's when we stopped requiring visas for Mexican travellers coming into Canada. That was \$20 million for five years and \$5 million ongoing.

Budget 2018 received \$7.45 million for one year and nothing ongoing.

In budget 2019 the agency received \$77 million for three years.

When you look at those numbers, it's important to understand that a lot of that was for us to deal with what we call the "border management" side of things. This was to process people, either through immigration levels or volumes of asylum claimants we were seeing, and it wasn't focused specifically on removals.

As we recognize this process, removals tend to be at the later edges of those things. Typically when somebody starts a process—maybe three years later if everything works well in the appeal processes and due process is afforded to people—we would be in a position to remove somebody.

[Translation]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Great, Mr. Ossowski. Thank you for this clarification.

Can you clarify some information? According to the figures I have for the fiscal year 2018-19, \$34 million is dedicated to the removal of foreign nationals program.

I would like a written response from the department.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Be very brief, please.

Yes, if we could get a written response, that would be excellent.

M. John Ossowski: Okay, I'm happy to do that.

[Translation]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Mr. Green, over to you for two and a half minutes, please.

Mr. Matthew Green: Thank you very much, Mr. Longfield.

Respecting time, I'd like to go ahead and give notice of motion. I'm not going to move the motion, but read the notice, and we will have a translated copy sent out through the clerk to all members of committee.

The notice of motion reads:

That the committee invite the Auditor General of Canada and the Commissioner of Environment and Sustainable Development to appear before the committee to discuss the mandate of the Commissioner of Environment and Sustainable Development, the role of the Commissioner of Environment and Sustainable Development within the office of the Auditor General, the budget of the Commissioner of Environment and Sustainable Development, the number of permanent fulltime equivalent staff assigned to the Commissioner of Environment and Sustainable Development, the prioritization of Commissioner of Environment and Sustainable Development audits within the Office of the Auditor General work-plan for 2021 and 2022, and that the committee report its finding back to the House.

You can feel free to continue to run the time. I don't want to take away from anybody else's time, so I'll go into my general question, which—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): You have about a minute and a half.

Mr. Matthew Green: That works.

In paragraph 1.43, the OAG explains that the CBSA experiences significant periods of inactivity for cases needing travel documents. The specialized unit charged to obtain the travel documents does not receive referral requests.

Why are very few cases referred to that unit? I can think of people who are stuck here, stateless, and unable to move.

Mr. John Ossowski: What we tend to do when we're approaching countries to get travel documents is that we go with lists of people. It's not done on a case-by-case basis—it might be, it depends on the circumstances—but generally we would go with a list of people that we have in order to see if we can find the appropriate documentation for people on that list.

That's one of the data problems, unfortunately, that doesn't sync back necessarily with the case management system, but we're going to do a better job at matching those efforts.

Over the last couple of years, we have documented over 300 interactions with foreign governments to try to get them to give us the documents we need.

Mr. Matthew Green: Were those instances where they have refused or were not co-operative, to put it plainly?

Mr. John Ossowski: Yes.

Mr. Matthew Green: Okay. Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): That's super. Thank you very much.

The next five minutes is for Mr. Berthold.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and congratulations on the work you're doing today.

Ms. Hogan, first of all, thank you very much for your report. Indeed, it's a damning report.

It seems that you had difficulty in getting consistent figures from the different agencies. Did I understand you correctly?

• (1210)

Ms. Karen Hogan: During our audit, we had no difficulty in finding figures that matched. We reviewed the inventory of enforceable removal orders. It should be understood that depending on where an individual's case is filed in the legal system, the individual's case can move in and out of the inventory. For example, the case may have been processed or the individual may be a wanted person. This is a point in time that we looked at, and it was with respect to the cases in the inventory.

Mr. Luc Berthold: After hearing the answers of the witnesses, I have a little difficulty in finding my way around the figures provided by IRCC and the different agencies. However, I've made an astonishing observation.

On the one hand, we're told at the Canada Border Services Agency that the pandemic was an opportunity to catch up. On the other hand, at IRCC, the time it takes to process each application and case is getting longer and longer. As members of Parliament, we are well placed to know this.

If it wasn't for the pandemic, where would we be at the Canada Border Services Agency?

Would you have been able to meet the commitments made in the action plan that was presented to the Auditor General?

Ms. Karen Hogan: Was the question for me?

Mr. Luc Berthold: No. I was talking to the representatives of the Canada Border Services Agency.

[*English*]

Mr. John Ossowski: We are on track for everything that's in our action plan, which has been sent to the committee.

These are important actions and [*Inaudible—Editor*].

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Ossowski, without the pandemic, would you have been able to meet your recommendations?

[*English*]

Mr. John Ossowski: Well, no.

I said that one of the silver linings of the pandemic is that I've had some officers that I can reallocate to do the cleanup of the warrant part of the system. That's where we've made some big progress.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Is it possible to have an overview of the situation from the agency and from IRCC? I don't know if those figures exist, but if they do, could you share them with us? It's important to have a more general, more complete view of the situation. So I'm going to ask you a series of questions.

Currently, in which provinces of Canada do we find the people who are under removal orders that have not been enforced, in your opinion?

Where do those people come from? How did they get to Canada and where did they come in?

What are your action plans, province by province, to resolve the situation?

Earlier, you mentioned visas to Mexicans. How many of these removal orders come subsequent to the government's decision to no longer issue visas?

[*English*]

Mr. John Ossowski: That's a very complicated picture to paint, but we can do our best to give you some sort of a broad overview.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: With regard to IRCC, could someone provide us with an overview of the situation and tell us where the people waiting for a decision on removal are to be found?

I can name some people in my constituency who are still waiting, and others who have received decisions but are still here, because we are not enforcing the removal orders at the moment.

[*English*]

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Most of this falls within the purview of our colleagues at the Canada Border Services Agency, but we will work with them to make sure you have as complete a picture as possible.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Thank you very much.

The figures I asked you for would actually have let me establish a link with the illegal entries on Roxham Road. That would have told us what the status is.

Have the illegal entries on Roxham Road decreased a little, a lot, or by a huge amount?

Do you have statistics on those entries since the pandemic began last March?

• (1215)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): I'm sorry, but we're over time.

Please make your response very brief.

Mr. John Ossowski: On average we get one claimant a day at Roxham Road, down from about 50 per day last year.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Thank you.

We go now to Mr. Sorbara.

Go ahead, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara (Vaughan—Woodbridge, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, everyone.

On this report by the Auditor General and the team, I just want to say thank you. Obviously, it's very, very important to the integrity of our immigration system and border. We know that in a normal time, we would have approximately 500,000 people crossing the border back and forth almost every day between Canada and the U.S. We know that millions of people travel to Canada. They obtain their ETAs. They travel here. They leave and go back. There are tourists and so forth. Hundreds of thousands of people come to Canada every year to study, to work, to move here, to live and to create a better future. We know that our system for the majority part, I would argue, is very robust and remains very robust, but we can always do better with certain aspects.

When I read the report, one thing that stood out for me was on page 13, conclusion 1.47. I do wish to read it into the record:

We concluded that the [CBSA] did not remove the majority of individuals who were subject to enforceable removal orders as soon as possible to protect the integrity of the immigration system and maintain public safety.

We've gone over that point today. There are some action plans and improvements happening, which is great to see. It continues—

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: A point of order, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The interpretation is having some difficulty right now.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): I've stopped the clock on a point of order.

I couldn't hear you, Mr. Berthold.

Mr. Luc Berthold: In French, the interpreter said she had a problem with the interpreting.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: I'll slow down.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Okay. Thank you.

I'll start the clock up again.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The conclusion continues:

Poor data quality and case management weaknesses resulted in avoidable delays for thousands of cases. Deficiencies in information sharing with [IRCC] also de-

layed cases. We did not find issues with the information shared by the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada.

I found that last sentence very interesting.

As I read this paragraph, Auditor General, between the silos, or between the departments, once the information is transmitted from IRCC to CBSA, the information is accurate, but there's something going on in between for the information to be either not transmitted or to be not transmitted on a timely basis. Is that a proper interpretation of this conclusion 1.47?

Ms. Karen Hogan: Yes, it is a proper interpretation of the conclusion, but many factors contributed to the removals not being done in a timely way.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Do the folks who are here today from CBSA or IRCC wish to comment on this?

Mr. John Ossowski: Yes. I would say, on the casework we get from IRB generally, we have no problem ingesting that. I would just say, though, that it could go backwards as well. Somebody could get denied, for example, at their first refugee protection division hearing. They could choose then to appeal that decision, and then it goes back to them.

So there is this back and forth. The challenge is with all the hand-offs that we were referring to earlier in our remarks. If we had one integrated system, which is what we're working towards and that was funded in budget 2019, we would have better capture of that at one point in time where somebody is in the process.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Yes. On that point, budget 2019 did allocate significant funds for that integration to occur. I think if we continue along that path, we should definitely get to a better place.

Finally, to CBSA, this may be more generally a compliment, I would say, in terms of being able to meet the 2018 target of 10,000 removals for the fiscal year 2018-19, which in fact came out close, but it seems to be that we're still playing catch-up from prior years. That's the interpretation I received and also understood. Is that an accurate interpretation, or am I missing something there?

• (1220)

Mr. John Ossowski: No, I think for sure we set that as a macro-level target as we saw the volumes of claimants increasing over the last three years. Obviously, travel has slowed down, so there's an opportunity for us to try to catch up a little bit.

The point is that once all the due process has happened, it's often several years before we can get into the removals part of it. At the very beginning, we're dealing with the border management, the security screening up front, and making sure that people are not a danger to the public when they come into the country. Then we play out the process that we have in Canada.

Mr. Francesco Sorbara: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll stop there. I believe my time is now up, if I'm not mistaken.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Yes, you're just about right on time. Thank you for all of those questions.

We have time for another six minutes for each of the parties.

We'll start with Mr. Green—sorry, Mr. Lawrence. I found you.

Mr. Philip Lawrence (Northumberland—Peterborough South, CPC): That's the compliment of the year, being called "Mr. Green".

The Chair: Separated at birth.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: Thank you for that, Chair.

I have quick question, just to follow up on my colleague's question. I believe this is to Mr. Ossowski.

How much is each individual who is volunteering to leave being paid in the volunteer program?

Mr. John Ossowski: I don't have a fixed number yet in terms of that. It would probably be on a scale in terms of the incentives that we would see as appropriate at that particular point in time, but that level of detail has not yet been established.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: Perfect. We'll follow up on that, I suppose.

I have a quick question for the AG as well.

I just wanted to know if you've received the funding yet. We had a unanimous motion for you to have the funding you need to do your job.

Ms. Karen Hogan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I always appreciate the support of the committee, and I appreciate the all-party motion to support us in our funding request.

I continue my dialogue with the government. We are hopeful that we'll be included in the supplementary estimates (C) process. We won't get our funding until Parliament has an opportunity to vote on those funding mechanisms.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: Thank you. We'll follow up on that going forward.

I just want to quickly go through some numbers with you, Mr. Ossowski. You used slightly different nomenclature than was used in the report. For clarity, I'm hoping you can rattle off the numbers quickly, as my time is short.

What's the total amount of enforceable removal orders now outstanding?

Mr. Scott Harris: I'll answer the question.

We currently have 18,000 in our working inventory that we would consider workable, but 4,000 of those are currently actionable, for which we're actively towards removal.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: Of those 18,000, how many are "whereabouts unknown"?

Mr. Scott Harris: In addition to the 18,000, there are currently 33,000 that are "whereabouts unknown" that are part of the warrants review the president has spoken about, which will be under-

taken and completed. It's mostly completed now, but it will be completed by the end of the calendar year.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: Of all of the enforceable orders that are outstanding, how many have criminality?

Mr. Scott Harris: In the "wanted" inventory, it's about 800 of those cases. Of the 33,000 we just spoke about, 800 have some level of criminality.

I would use this opportunity to clarify that there are two standards for criminality in the IRPA. They're not all serious criminality by definition. There's a variance in terms of the quality of criminality that's involved.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: How many crimes were committed by people who had enforceable orders outstanding?

Mr. Scott Harris: Criminality is the trigger for the removal order—

Mr. Philip Lawrence: No, no, no. Sorry, sir, I don't mean to be rude, but my time is short.

How many crimes were committed by people who had enforceable orders?

Mr. Scott Harris: I don't have that information.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: Can you get that order? I think that's an important piece of information.

Mr. Scott Harris: We will do our best.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: I think the best way to avoid removing people is to not allow people into the country who are undesirable, as it were, to begin with.

How many asylum seekers are coming in a day, on average, now?

Mr. John Ossowski: On average now, one, irregularly because of reduced airline travel. I would say we've probably had about 300 inland, at ports of entry, and about 1,800 at airports. It depends.

People could have arrived in the country with no intention of making an asylum claim, and then make a claim after several months. We would call that an "inland claim".

Mr. Philip Lawrence: Okay. Thank you for that.

How many is that? Is it per month or...?

Mr. John Ossowski: That's since January 1.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: Okay. Thank you for that.

Are all the asylum seekers screened intensively for criminality?

• (1225)

Mr. John Ossowski: Yes, certainly at the port of entry. Upon arrival, the first thing we establish is your criminality and your admissibility to Canada, and then your eligibility to make a claim.

Right now, we have an order in council. For example, if somebody's claiming asylum under the safe third country agreement, we direct them back to the United States. We don't want unnecessary movement of people while we're dealing with the pandemic.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: If they are screened, how then do we get people who have criminality and whom we later find out have to be removed?

Mr. John Ossowski: What happens is that we do this initial screening based on what the RCMP or we, ourselves, might know. As people progress through the system and go through the determination process, we also work with our national security partners to do security screening. That ensures that, as a file is ready for a determination by the Immigration and Refugee Board, we have a complete picture. We might discover in the intervening period that there are some concerns, and that's often when some of these other things are brought to our attention.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: Once again, my apologies for being rude here. We don't, then, have a complete screening, because we have people who get through who walk into Canada and who have criminality that we are unaware of—at least for some time—and then we see that we lose their whereabouts.

Mr. John Ossowski: I would say this. People who come from the United States have also been screened by the United States government first, before they cross the border into Canada, so we're pretty confident that we have a good sense of their serious criminality, for sure, at that point. There may, however, be other things in their past that won't come up until we do more research with our national security partners.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): You still have 40 seconds, if you wish.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: Perfect. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Are all the asylum seekers screened for COVID when they enter the country?

Mr. John Ossowski: Yes...well, not necessarily. It depends on whether or not they're symptomatic.

I will double-check that with Scott, though.

Mr. Scott Harris: Yes, screening depends upon whether you're symptomatic, but we do require people to self-isolate for the 14 days, and we have arrangements with IRCC to ensure that self-isolation occurs.

Mr. Philip Lawrence: What are those arrangements? What prevents someone from saying they are going to self-isolate and then not doing so?

Mr. Scott Harris: It's similar to the case with any Canadian or anybody returning to the country. We do, obviously, have lookouts put on individuals to ensure, and there's follow-up by public health agencies of those who self-isolate in private residences.

In addition, IRCC has a number of spots for those who have no place to self-isolate. In that case, IRCC can monitor those cases.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Thank you. I'm glad we got that in.

We go over to Mr. Fergus, please, for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Greg Fergus (Hull—Aylmer, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Welcome to all the witnesses here. Let me also point out that Mr. Ossowski and Ms. Hogan are regulars at the Standing Committee on Public Accounts.

The members of this committee received some training behind closed doors. The training emphasized the point that, when we are examining reports from the Auditor General, it is important to recognize the good work that has been done in order to encourage other departments and agencies to follow the example of those organizations who achieve a good mark.

My question goes to Mr. Wex and Mr. Kipling, from the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada.

The Office of the Auditor General of Canada reported that: "We found no errors with the agency's entry of removal orders issued by the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada".

In your view, Mr. Wex and Mr. Kipling, what are the practices used that result in no errors with the entry of removal orders issued by the board, in terms of the inventory of cases that the agency has to deal with? For example, is it because of the training of the officers or the regular checking of the input?

[*English*]

Mr. Richard Wex: Mr. Chair, we have a strong system interface with IRCC, which is also shared with CBSA, with respect to decisions issued on the refugee side—refugee decisions that are issued every night. There's a run on the system, and the disposition of the decisions is uploaded on a nightly basis.

That information is shared with IRCC through their GCMS database. Our case management system is connected with theirs, and CBSA has access to it.

Those decisions are also shared, either through encrypted email or regular mail, with CBSA within five days after the decision has been issued.

On the immigration side, it's more manual, actually. We don't yet have a systems interface. As Mr. Ossowski mentioned, we are working with IRCC and CBSA to strengthen that area as a result in part of the 2019 audit. All parties, however, receive decisions that are issued through the immigration division or the immigration appeal division.

CBSA is a party with respect to any removal orders that are issued by those two divisions. Those decisions are issued, again by email or mail, within two to five business days. That has been the practice for a significant amount of time.

That said, as you can see, it's fairly manual; it's not yet automated. While it's working very well, and we were reassured by the OAG's report that the information management practice is working well, we want to strengthen it. As Mr. Ossowski said, we're looking at ways of doing so.

One way we are doing it is that the IRB is moving forward with its digital strategy. We are implementing a portal whereby we are pushing information, including decisions, out to counsel and other parties.

Decisions have not yet been pushed out through that portal, but that is the next stage of the implementation. It is something we're working on that will take the current manual process and make it more digital and more automated.

We're doing fine, according to the OAG, but we want to continue to advance our efforts on this front, and we have a strategy to do so. We are reassured by the OAG's report.

• (1230)

[Translation]

Mr. Greg Fergus: Thank you very much for that answer.

I now have some questions for Mr. Ossowski and his colleagues.

The Auditor General's report describes delays in the enforcement of removal orders because of failures in receiving data because of the system interface. The report also mentions that: "We found cases filed in the wrong inventories and others that contained inaccurate information".

Mr. Ossowski, are you confident in your computer system, the global case management system, GCMS, or should it be replaced?

[English]

Mr. John Ossowski: The GCMS system is in the IRCC system—

[Translation]

Mr. Greg Fergus: Oh, my apologies.

[English]

Mr. John Ossowski: —but we rely on it. It's a legacy system for sure. It's something that we could see some improvements in, and we would certainly support any investments to do so.

Absolutely, the way we interact with these systems is critical to us. I have confidence that we have a strategy to move forward to improve our data quality [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] and the triaging and attention required for these files.

[Translation]

Mr. Greg Fergus: I'm sorry I interrupted you; I thought that you finished your answer.

Are those interface problems resolved, or do they keep occurring?

[English]

Mr. John Ossowski: As I mentioned, we have funding from budget 2019 that we're working with our colleagues in the other departments to improve interoperability with. It's not done yet.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Mr. Blanchette-Joncas, for six minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am going to continue talking about the removal program.

I am talking to the witnesses from the Canada Border Services Agency.

I have been doing some research of my own, still using Report 1 from the Office of the Auditor General, which is about removing immigrants who were refused entry. Paragraph 1.2 reads:

In the 2018-2019 fiscal year, the agency spent about \$34 million on its removal program.

We are talking about \$34 million for a program that works 30% of the time.

More specifically, of the 50,000 people who are subject to enforceable removal orders and who have exhausted or waived all legal recourses to stay in Canada, two thirds, about 34,700, according to the report, are in the wanted inventory, and 2,800 of those were individuals with criminality.

Does the Canada Border Services Agency find that acceptable?

• (1235)

[English]

Mr. John Ossowski: We've accepted the Auditor General's findings. We have an action plan to move forward on this. I am convinced and I am committed, along with my partners in other departments, to improve this situation. We will achieve better results.

[Translation]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: I sense a real will on your part to move forward in this matter. The government has also contributed by providing more money. But, the end of the day, the results are still that 30% of the cases are resolved in a program that costs \$34 million.

I am trying to understand. How can we give you more help? I am even wondering whether any recommendations have been implemented, in terms of having managers or different teams in place, so that more than 30% of the cases in a \$34 million program can be resolved.

[English]

Mr. John Ossowski: The process is complicated, and it's not completely dependent on us. We require the co-operation of foreign countries. You are looking at a very small subset of the 216,000 people who are currently being monitored in our system right now. In fact, and Scott can correct me if I'm wrong, of the people eligible to be removed last year, 93% of them were removed. There are people out there whom we're looking for, and we will do our best to find them, along with our law enforcement partners. When we do so, we will remove them.

[Translation]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you for those clarifications, Mr. Ossowski.

I am now going to turn to the witnesses from the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada.

As you know, the pandemic has affected everyone, particularly the board. Hearings were cancelled up until approximately July. What is the situation now in terms of processing delays?

Questions have been sent directly to the department. We have been told that cases are going to be dealt with, but all the cases have been prepared for the fall. If nothing has been processed for several months, I have a hard time believing that working at double speed will be a success, and all those cases will be processed by the fall.

I am trying to look forward a little, to see what will happen in the coming months. Because hearings have been cancelled, will there be unacceptable processing delays, meaning that, basically, you will not even manage to process only 30% of the cases in the removal program for immigrants who have been refused entry?

Can you clarify that for us?

[English]

Mr. Richard Wex: Mr. Chair, I'd like to inform the committee that for the year to date, the board has processed and rendered over 18,000 decisions across the four divisions. In fact, the board resumed operations as of June, when in-person hearings began. Most in-person hearings were suspended as a result of the pandemic, with the exception of the immigration division. However, within a few months after that, in-person hearings did resume. I believe it was actually in July. We were also able to shift to hear remote hearings. It's been a tremendous success for the board.

The board has traditionally been a very manual and paper-based organization. We wanted the silver lining—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Mr. Wex, sorry, if you could just hold up your microphone a little bit for the interpreters, please.

Mr. Richard Wex: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I hope this is better.

One of the silver linings of the pandemic, in fact, has been that we've been able to accelerate our ability to become a remote organization. We launched a pilot to hold remote hearings in the latter months of the summer, which ended up being very successful for working with counsel, claimants and various national stakeholders, to the point where during the month of October over 50% of all of our hearings were held remotely.

[Translation]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you for those clarifications, Mr. Wex.

I'm sorry for interrupting you, but I just want to clarify some things and go back to the basic issue.

[English]

Mr. Richard Wex: Going forward, for the balance of the year, the majority of the hearings will be held remotely such that, to answer your question with respect to the number of claimants that we expect to finalize at the refugee protection division—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Sorry, but we have two people talking at the same time.

[Translation]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Wex, I did not want to interrupt you, but I just wanted to get back to basics. Will there be additional delays because hearings were cancelled?

You said that you resumed hearings in June, but online. However, the pandemic struck in March. No hearings were held in April and May. Are we to expect delays?

I am trying to find out what you did between the middle of March and June. The House of Commons was closed in the middle of March and we resumed our work virtually in April, with two months then to make up for.

At the board, what did you do during that time?

• (1240)

[English]

Mr. Richard Wex: With respect to the immigration division, immigration detention reviews continue to take place.

With respect to the refugee protection division, less complex claims were considered. These are claims that can be considered and resolved without a hearing in certain cases. That task force was up and running and a number of decisions were triaged into that task force. Various training and policy efforts were taking place as well.

As I said, we resumed our operations within a matter of a few months.

With respect to the other divisions, there has been a delay as a result of the pandemic and that will have an impact in terms of wait times.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Thank you, Mr. Wex. We're over time, but I appreciate your answer.

Mr. Green, you have your final six minutes, please.

Mr. Matthew Green: I do appreciate Mr. Wex's commitment to the comprehensive answer in response to the previous question.

Some information has come up. There's been a lot of talk about criminality. There's been a lot of talk about the irregular entries of folks who are seeking refuge in Canada and in reference to Roxham Road. We know that at the peak of asylum seekers, I think there were 50,000 unofficial border crossings in just two years. Roxham Road is certainly a focal point of that.

I'm wondering what has been discussed should Canada lose its appeal in the Federal Court on the safe third country agreement. In your opinion, how much of that is correlated with the very aggressive, almost draconian, way in which ICE has tracked down and persecuted folks who were in the U.S. irregularly?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Mr. Chair, if it's okay, I think I'll lead on the response to that question.

As the honourable member is aware, and as you are aware, the Federal Court struck down the safe third country agreement. It's been appealed, and we expect the court to hear that appeal. We don't have an exact date, but we think it will be sometime toward the end of February.

Just to take the question in parts, first, are we planning for eventualities around that? How would we stand up resources and what would they look like? The answer is absolutely. We're working closely with our colleagues at the Canada Border Services Agency, as well as the Department of Justice and other departments, on what this would look like and how we would make sure that we would continue operations in a safe and orderly manner that respects the safety and security of Canadians as we do that.

We continue to watch developments in the U.S. and any potential changes with a new administration and what that might involve.

I'm just trying to make sure I have a thorough answer to the question.

Mr. Matthew Green: You're doing a great job, and for folks who are tuning in, I'm bringing this up because oftentimes immigration is reduced to a very small minority of highly criminal cases. We haven't, in this discussion, delved into what criminality looks like, whether it's summary convictions or indictable offences, whether they're violent offences or mere missteps of the law.

I want to peel back what the average experience is like for people seeking refuge in Canada. We know, for instance, that the United States under Donald Trump's regime was horrific in its treatment of refugees, with the separation of children, the caging people and inadequate conditions. I think that there is a reasonable understanding now, perhaps not four years ago, but certainly now that we can argue why the safe third party agreement is likely to fail in this appeal.

For lack of a better term, I want to make sure that we have systems and principles in place so that this new flow of people who may be escaping.... Maybe they won't under a new regime. I don't know if there's going to be a difference, but I want to make sure that we're really focused on what the general experience is like for refugees who cross at places like Roxham Road.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I think what Mr. Ossowski said earlier about others calling for a fast, fair and final system remains one of the overall priorities, whether it's with or without a safe third country agreement with the U.S.

There are a couple of things that, as partners, we're working on together but haven't highlighted yet. One of the big issues is the complexity of the asylum system. How do we simplify or de-complexify that system?

As part of the work toward an asylum interoperability project, one of the things we've been working on is the integrated claims analysis centre. This is where we've come together in Toronto to make sure that files are as complete as they possibly can be so that we can reduce the back and forth. If I'm at the IRB, I can't make a decision because I don't see the information, so I send it back, then I get it back, and it goes back and forth.

The goal of the integrated claims analysis centre is to really streamline that processing, define deficiency in the current in-Canada asylum system and ensure that the decision-makers have all relevant information in a timely manner. That helps to maintain the integrity of the system.

We're optimistic about the results of this. It has been through three phases. The third and final phase was just implemented this month, and I'm happy that we've been able to do that throughout the COVID period. Now we will be analyzing how effective it is, but I can tell you that it looks pretty promising.

● (1245)

Mr. Matthew Green: Lastly, what would you consider to be the cause of the drop in cases at Roxham Road from 50 cases a day to one? In your view, why would that have happened?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I think there are a number of factors. First, overall, the situation with COVID-19 has had a big impact on that. Moreover, additional orders in council were put in place to help to control the flow at the border and to look at that.

Mr. Matthew Green: That suffices. I'll just share this with committee as my last statement.

My people came here through the underground railroad. I think about people who are fleeing war and famine all round the world trying to seek this. I just encourage people not to always reduce immigration to this idea of high criminality and fear.

Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Thank you.

You do fight for every second, don't you?

Mr. Matthew Green: I'm a New Democrat. That's what we have to do.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): That's great.

It's a very good discussion this morning.

I have one very brief question, if I may, because we have a few minutes before we go into committee business. It's in terms of the audit and something that maybe Mr. Green was alluding to. The system that we use to pre-screen people before they even get to our border, looking at criminality, health care and references, was that part of the audit? Working with the Five Eyes system, we have some agreements internationally on how we do our work to allow people into the system.

Ms. Karen Hogan: No, the audit really focused on individuals who had exhausted all of their legal recourse and there wasn't enforceable action to remove them from the country.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Thank you for clarifying that—

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Chair, since we have a little time left, I would like to ask the Auditor General a question.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Actually, we have a pretty clean break.

Okay, we can have one question each, then. We'll have one from the Conservatives. I've asked one—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Chair, may I point out that it's my time anyway, according to the speaking order. So I'm going to take the two minutes I have left.

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): No, just a very brief question....

[*Translation*]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Ms. Hogan, are you satisfied with the answers we received today?

In the coming months, do you believe that you will have to follow up on the Canada Border Services Agency's action plan?

Ms. Karen Hogan: Yes, we are satisfied with the action plans that we received before the appearance today. I am satisfied with the answers I have heard.

We try to follow up on almost all our audits. Clearly, because of the pressure on our employees, we cannot do all the follow-up that we would like to do. If the subject is extremely important, we will do a more exhaustive follow-up in a few years. As we mentioned earlier, I believe that this is the second time that we have looked at the removal order system and the issue of removing immigrants who have been refused entry.

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Chair, I have one last comment to make.

Against the background of the pandemic, when our meetings are held virtually, the francophone members are very grateful when we receive the written opening remarks from each of the witnesses in advance, not just while they are making their speeches. Today, we had speaking notes from Ms. Tapley, from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, and from the Auditor General, Ms. Hogan.

Thank you very much, Ms. Tapley and Ms. Hogan.

However, I would like to have had the notes from all the witnesses, because the notes contain important information. It allows us to be better prepared for the meetings, especially when we don't have the opportunity to be there in person.

• (1250)

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Thank you.

That's a fair comment, Mr. Berthold.

Thank you for all the preparatory work and the presentations this morning.

We've had a very fruitful discussion after a very intense audit and it looks like we have some action items that will be ongoing.

Congratulations to everybody for the work you've done to get to the committee, and prior to getting here as well.

We'll suspend now and go into committee business. I would kindly ask our visitors to leave, and then we'll go in camera for committee business.

Thank you.

The Clerk: We're not going in camera.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Oh, yes, it's because we have to do different logins. It's just amongst us.

Okay, we've had some modifications to our schedule.

We sent out a new calendar because the public accounts were delayed until November 30, which has opened up an opportunity this Thursday to have the Auditor General come to speak to us about her plans for the next series of audits. That would be in camera with a separate login. We could have a chance to discuss her priorities then.

Then we would have a follow-up workshop on the questions that we're asking, how the committee is doing, from the agency that we used earlier.

I want to open that part of it up for discussion of our schedule of people. Have people had a chance to look at it?

There is one open item on the schedule, and that's our December 10 meeting. There's a choice of either looking at workplace harassment or the spending of money by the Government of Canada on advertising.

That's an open question. Are there any other comments from the floor?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: With regard to the session a week on Thursday, December 3, we had agreed last week on my motion, which was to have more time for additional study on Report 3 entitled "Taxation of E-Commerce" from the 2019 spring reports.

In my motion, it is clear that we must have up-to-date action plans, so that we have more precise data. I just want to check with the clerk that we will have them for sure. If not, we may have to push that meeting back and revise the schedule, if we do not have the information that is crucial for the meeting.

[*English*]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Maybe I could turn that over to our clerk with regard to what's being asked for.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Angela Crandall): Thank you for the question, Mr. Chair.

Yes, the invitation was sent once the motion was adopted by the committee. Within the invitation and motion, an updated action plan was requested as well.

I haven't received them yet, but as soon as I do, they will be distributed to the committee.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Maxime Blanchette-Joncas: Mr. Chair, I just want to make sure that we will not be caught short. If we do not have up-to-date action plans next Thursday, we will be in a kind of spot. Can the clerk make a formal guarantee to me that we will have that information, so that we can sit in the way we are supposed to at the meeting on Thursday, December 3?

[English]

The Clerk: I can certainly follow up with the departments today and advise them of the requirement and insist that they act as quickly as possible.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Thank you.

● (1255)

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Chair, I have some questions about the meeting on November 26. During the first hour, we will be hearing from the Auditor General about the upcoming audits. We had one meeting where she explained very clearly to us the audits scheduled for March. So we will be talking for an hour about things that we've already gathered from her when we had the opportunity to meet her behind closed doors.

I would like to know why that one-hour meeting with the Auditor General on upcoming audits was planned. It's not really needed. I don't feel the need for her to come and talk to us for an hour about the audits coming up in the next meetings. We are already aware of the spring program, because she showed it to us last time.

[English]

The Clerk: Mr. Chair, this was at the request of the Auditor General. That's why it's a proposed calendar. If the committee doesn't wish to proceed in this manner, it certainly does not have to.

I assume that she felt she had more that she would like to convey to the committee. I don't have any further information about that, but definitely she has a plan to provide the committee with more information on Thursday if the committee wishes to receive it.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): I think what she presented to us initially was that she wanted to make sure that she was available and accessible to us. Now that we've had a few meetings together, we may also have some different thoughts.

It's up to the committee what the committee wants to do.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Mr. Chair, if the Auditor General wants to meet with us, it is perfectly legitimate to have her here. We could also ask her questions on the committee's work since it has been newly constituted, for example, whether she considers that we are equipped to answer her questions and identify failings in the various reports and action plans submitted to us. If that is the situation, I have no objection to our inviting the Auditor General on Thursday.

Madam Clerk, with regard to our training scheduled in the second hour, does one hour seem enough to you? I feel that we really need it so that we can establish a basis for the upcoming studies.

[English]

The Clerk: If I may, Mr. Chair, I would say that originally—

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): We discussed this on Monday with the chair of the committee, as well. We thought that

the training we could receive would focus on our questioning, on the mandate of the committee, and even having the audit agency give us an evaluation of how well we're doing so far in relation to our mandate and maybe suggest any areas for improvement.

There's a second type of training, and I'll turn that over to the clerk on how that training is separated.

The Clerk: Originally, the meeting was going to be for two hours. One hour would be the training session on questioning and reviewing the Auditor General's report, and the second hour would be on reviewing the public accounts.

Since the committee would probably put that off until after Christmas, it would be more appropriate to have that training closer to the time that the committee would be studying the public accounts. I believe that one hour was sufficient in the planning for the workshop on questioning.

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: That is a very good answer, Ms. Crandall.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Does anybody else have questions on this?

Mr. Theckedath.

[Translation]

Mr. Dillan Theckedath (Committee Researcher): I agree with the clerk. One hour, which will essentially be about the way in which to question witnesses and analyze the Auditor General's reports, will be sufficient for that kind of work.

Another hour will be for you to study the public accounts, once they are tabled in the House of Commons

● (1300)

[English]

I wanted to support Angela's analysis on that one hour.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): Could we have approval for the revised schedule that we have in front of us? Can we go ahead with that?

[Translation]

Mr. Luc Berthold: Yes, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Lloyd Longfield): It looks like we've got a consensus on that.

That was an excellent meeting. The team did a great job, and got some really good information, so congratulations to everybody.

We'll see you Thursday.

The meeting is adjourned.

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