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Chair: Mr. Peter Fonseca

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• (1840)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Peter Fonseca (Mississauga East—Cooksville, Lib.)): We're going to get this started.

Welcome to all our witnesses, of course, and welcome, colleagues. This is meeting number 25 of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights. Today we meet for a briefing on the persecution of religious and ethnic minorities in Afghanistan.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would encourage all participants to mute their microphones when they're not speaking and to address all comments through the chair. When you have 30 seconds left in your questioning time, I'll raise a 30-second note, just so you're aware. Interpretation is available to everyone through the globe icon at the bottom of your screen. It's available in English or French, and you can select one. If you are bilingual, you don't have to do anything. If you're not, select the one that would work best for you.

Our witnesses for the two hours are the following.

We have, from the World Sikh Organization of Canada, Balpreet Singh, legal counsel. From the United Sikhs, we have Sukhwinder Singh, national director, and Gurvinder Singh, director, international humanitarian aid. From the Manmeet Singh Bhullar Foundation, we have Tarjinder Kaur Bhullar, director, and Jasjeet S. Ajimal, co-chair of the Save Afghan Minorities project. From the Canadian Hazara Humanitarian Services, we have Ali Mirzad, senior adviser; Niamatullah Ibrahim, lecturer, international relations, La Trobe University, Australia; Melissa Kerr Chioyenda, assistant professor, anthropology, Zayed University, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates; and finally, William Maley, emeritus professor at Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

Witnesses, each of your particular groups will have up to six minutes to make opening statements or remarks.

We are going to start with the World Sikh Organization of Canada.

I'd ask you to please go ahead for six minutes. Thank you.

Mr. Balpreet Singh (Legal Counsel, World Sikh Organization of Canada): Good evening. Thank you.

I'm a legal counsel with the World Sikh Organization of Canada. We're a non-profit human rights organization established in 1984 with a mandate to promote and protect the interests of Canadian Sikhs as well as to protect the human rights of all individuals.

Almost exactly five years ago, I testified in front of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration on a similar topic to this, and I reported that Sikhs and Hindus are communities under siege in Afghanistan and face an immediate threat to their lives. They numbered approximately 2,000 at that time, from an original population that was estimated to be in the tens of thousands prior to 1992.

Today, as a result of ongoing persecution and several deadly attacks, the number has dwindled to approximately 200. Those who remain in Afghanistan are in constant danger, and those who have fled live in precarious and troubled conditions in India, with no real prospects of permanent settlement.

As a matter of background, my experience with the Afghan Sikh community began in November 2014 when I received a desperate series of messages from a remote Afghan Sikh community in Helmand province who were facing imminent danger. Their homes had been stoned, and their businesses had been publicly boycotted. At that time, Manmeet Singh Bhullar was a friend of mine, and I spoke to him about the situation. He made it his life's work to save that community until his tragic death in November 2015.

The current situation for Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan is one of fear, persecution and imminent threat. They are unable to freely leave their homes, find employment or attend schools. Women are unable to leave their homes unaccompanied and are in constant fear of kidnapping. The remaining Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan live collectively in gurdwara, as much of their property has been taken by others. These conditions also existed in 2016. What's changed is that the situation has gotten much worse with the community being actively targeted with attacks by Daesh, who vowed to drive them out of Afghanistan.

On July 1, 2018, the entire leadership of the Sikh and Hindu community was killed in a suicide bombing. Fifteen Sikhs and four Hindus, who were on their way to a meeting with Afghan president Ashraf Ghani, lost their lives. Daesh took responsibility for that attack.

On March 25, 2020, just a little over a year ago, in another Daesh suicide attack, Gurdwara Har Rai Sahib was attacked in Kabul, where 25 Sikhs lost their lives, including four-year-old Tanya Kaur. The funeral for the victims of this attack the following day was also targeted with a bombing attack.

In June 2020, Nidan Singh was abducted from a gurdwara and held for almost a month until his rescue. On July 18, 2020, 13-year-old Salmeet Kaur, who lost her father in the March attack, was kidnapped from another gurdwara in Kabul. On February 2, 2021, a series of bomb attacks killed one Sikh and injured two others in an area with several Sikh shops. The victim, Sunny Singh, never got to see his newborn son in India, and his wife watched his funeral on a video call.

With the U.S. pullout from Afghanistan being imminent, the situation promises to get much worse for minorities. A member of the Hazara minority community said it best when he said: "To be a member of minority in Afghanistan is hell; but to be a Sikh means to be in the innermost circle of hell".

In July 2020, 429 Sikhs and Hindus fled Afghanistan for India on a special visa valid for six months. Those who fled may not face an immediate threat to their lives, but they're still suffering. There are no real permanent settlement prospects for these refugees in India, despite the claims of the Indian government. India's Hindu nationalist BJP government is playing politics as it tries to project itself as a saviour of minorities fleeing Muslim countries but, in actuality, provides no assistance to them or any options for settlement.

Families that fled last July continue to be supported by Sikh organizations and private donors. There is no access to basic services such as health care and education or even vaccination for COVID. Very few of them have found employment. Eight Afghan Sikh families recently returned to Afghanistan out of desperation, a move that was celebrated by the Afghanistan government. Most of them have now returned once again back to India. One family reported that they couldn't find a hospital to care for their daughter in New Delhi, and after receiving treatment in Kabul, they returned because they felt unsafe remaining there.

Since 2015, we've repeatedly called on the Canadian government to create a special program for Afghan Sikhs and Hindus so that they can come to safety in Canada. In July 2020, 25 Canadian MPs from the CPC, NDP and Greens wrote to the Minister of Immigration for this special program, but I'm not aware of a reply to this letter, let alone any progress in this regard.

After the March attack, there was a weekly call set up with a representative of CIC, which was then reduced to biweekly and then cancelled altogether, with no reply to our emails since August 2020.

- (1845)

The question isn't whether there will be another attack. The question is when the next attack will be. These are extremely vulnerable individuals who do not have a future in Afghanistan or in India. They're looking desperately to Canada to save their lives.

It's been frustrating to advocate without real results on their behalf for this long. The Sikh community is willing and able to pay for all the resettlement costs, and has done so for the small number of Sikh refugee families who have arrived from the Helmand group. We just need the government to give us the permission to bring them here.

Those are my comments for now.

The Chair: That was great. You were ahead of time. Thank you very much.

We'll move now to United Sikhs for six minutes.

Mr. Sukhwinder Singh (National Director, United Sikhs): Hello, respected members of the committee. Thank you for allowing United Sikhs to speak for Afghan minorities.

We are a United Nations-affiliated international non-profit NGO to empower those in need, especially disadvantaged and minority communities around the world, with humanitarian aid, advocacy and education programs. We have 10 chapters in Asia, Europe and North America. We also have an office in Peshawar, Afghanistan.

Ghazni, Jalalabad and Kabul are the three major cities in Afghanistan where minority families are concentrated in large numbers. United Sikhs has been providing legal assistance and humanitarian aid in these cities for the past many years. Our first case in Afghanistan started in 2010 with Harender Kaur and her daughter, to whom we provided help in taking asylum in Canada with the help of the Canadian government, because her husband was kidnapped and then beheaded.

After that, so many times minorities were attacked brutally. They were forced to pay jeziah. They had verbal and written threats, including ultimatums to leave the country, and social boycotts, not even drinking the water from the fountains in front of their shops and in front of their houses. They were called Kafirs. Kids couldn't go to school. Women and young girls couldn't go out because of kidnapping threats. This was the life they were living in Afghanistan.

Then there was the gurdwara attack in 2020. That was the day when all the NGOs and Afghan Sikhs and Hindus decided to move temporarily to India so that we could bring them to safe places like Canada and the U.S.A. As Balpreet said, a total of 95 families have reached New Delhi, India, from different parts of Afghanistan. United Sikhs and other NGOs are the only help for them. They have no help from the Indian government, and not even their IDs.

Last year United Sikhs started a helpdesk in New Delhi for these families. They getting medical treatment, including special tests as needed; the urgent assistance needed by pregnant mothers in government hospitals; assistance with the life-sustaining needs of newborn babies, including immunization; emergency medical procedures; the facilitation of UNHCR-related issues, such as the issuing of refugee cards and the renewal of cards for previously Afghan nationals in New Delhi; ration distribution to needy Afghan families; COVID-19 rapid tests; and assistance with temporary settlement of Afghan families in India.

What are the challenges they have now? They do not have any identification. If they make any identification, then they cannot get their refugee cards and refugee status. They are just in between. The UNHCR says they came to India on a visa, which is not suitable to get refugee status. These are their challenges. Their kids cannot get education. They have no jobs. They're not getting proper medical treatment.

Their only hope is us—the Canadian government—so I will make this request of the Canadian government: Please stop a cultural genocide.

I will ask Gurbinder Singh to add a few more points, please, and then wrap it up.

Thank you.

• (1850)

Mr. Gurbinder Singh (Director, International Humanitarian Aid, United Sikhs): First and foremost, we thank everyone for allowing us this gathering and for listening to this testimony about what is happening and what has transpired over the past many years.

There are a few numbers that I think are striking. Over 100,000 Sikhs and Hindus resided in Afghanistan just a few decades ago. That number dwindled down to 626 prior to the Kabul attack. That number is now below 100. This goes to show that a vibrant, robust community, which has its cultural heritage, which has its religious heritage and which has its economic structure embedded in the nation, is gone. It has been dismantled. It has had a genocide perpetrated against it.

We're concerned about our religious institutions and about our cultural institutions, which are hundreds of years old, and the caretaking of those. We're concerned about the safety and security of the community. If the Canadian government does not step up, then this will be known in history as a time when a minority was forcefully evicted, eradicated, killed and completely decimated from the map of a nation. I think it inherently behooves us to step up and really provide assistance to those who—literally—have no one else to turn to.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we will hear from the Manmeet Singh Bhullar Foundation for six minutes.

Ms. Tarjinder Kaur Bhullar (Director, Manmeet Singh Bhullar Foundation): Thank you to all of you.

Thank you to the witnesses who spoke before me.

The invitation to appear before this committee is important for us. I appreciate the efforts made to have us a part of this.

For some of you this may be the first time that you are hearing about the Manmeet Singh Bhullar Foundation. Ours is an existence that is equally filled with pride and with pain. This foundation is in honour of a man whose presence is missed by his community, and most of all by his family. Not a single day goes by when we do not wish that he was still here with us, that he was speaking to you. What we do carry with us are his values and his work, and they are a guiding force for us.

In late 2014 Manmeet began the Save Afghan Minorities project, as Balpreet mentioned. As his sister, I was used to his bold ideas, his chicken scratches on a notepad that made no sense to anyone else but gave him the clarity that he needed in order to get something done. I knew his ability to engross others in his plans and his perseverance. Every single step back for him was a reminder to fight harder, think bigger. Most of all, I was used to his singular focus on serving others. It was his mantra, his faith, his purpose.

He took meetings across cities in Canada. He travelled to India. He went to countries in Europe, relentless in his pursuit to find a viable solution for Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan who lived a daily reality void of religious freedom, having no access to education, no safety and definitely no peace. The only constant for them was danger. Time and time again, no matter what solution he pursued, no matter where he went, he knew that the country best-suited to help these children, men and women, and elderly was his own country. Canada was the place that could and should serve as a beacon of hope for these families, as it has for my own family, his family, and for countless others who have shown that, through the course of time, Canada is the place where you can make a life that allows you to thrive.

Calling it his life's most important work and making it his primary focus every waking moment, Manmeet charted a path for these families. First, the goal was to get them out of Afghanistan and imminent danger, and then to find them a way to get refugee status granted and, eventually, a new home and a new life here in Canada.

The first handful of families were guided out of Afghanistan through his coordination of every small or big logistical detail that needed to be done. Then Manmeet's own life was taken in his final act of kindness toward another human being.

For anyone who has experienced the sudden and traumatic loss of a loved one, my heart holds your pain and shares your grief. In losing Manmeet it became clear that while our lives would never be the same again, the lives of others were in jeopardy, complete strangers who were relying on him to survive. The profound responsibility he felt was now the responsibility that we had to carry on for him and because of him.

Since Manmeet's passing, this work has been all-consuming, with daily phone calls from families in India and Afghanistan, individuals who speak about an existence that so many of us are oblivious to or are too privileged to ever know anything about. A visit by someone to the market in Afghanistan leads to hot oil being spilled on their body. A death of a family member means funeral rites cannot be performed as per their faith. A woman walking with her child must hide her own identity and conform to the religious identity of others. Families are in dire need of basic medical attention for their elderly parents.

We have worked with the Canadian government since 2015, after Manmeet's passing, to settle 74 individuals here in Canada, with 111 in the queue. These people have come from the Helmand province. At that point, they were the most in danger and in dire need of assistance. This is not a task we have done alone. It is because of community members, organizations, donors and volunteers that we have been able to do this. We have been focused on the approach that first we make sure these individuals survive, and then we enable them to thrive.

Each arrival of a family renews our commitments to Manmeet's vision of giving these families and these children a fighting chance. We see them attending school, getting a driver's licence, taking English classes and volunteering themselves. It provides us with the solid belief that we must continue this work and we must help the families that are remaining.

At every turn I have worked with ministers in this government. I advocate to them, they advocate for us and we have made progress. I've been raised to give credit where credit is due, and so Minister Sajjan, Minister Mendicino and Minister Bains as well as many other people across the aisle and within the Liberal caucus have championed this.

• (1855)

Soon the remaining families that first went to India will be eligible to settle here in Canada. The last [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] pandemic has brought with it its own challenges, many beyond anyone's control. Through it all, we have had a steady and consistent communication with the government, finding a viable way through this all, and we will make sure that this work is done.

We owe it to fellow members of humanity and I owe it to my brother.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for those remarks.

We are going to hear now from the Canadian Hazara Humanitarian Services for up to six minutes.

I believe Ali Mirzad is going to be speaking.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Ali Mirzad (Senior Advisor, Canadian Hazara Humanitarian Services): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

On behalf of the Canadian Hazara Humanitarian Services, I thank this committee and the Canadian Parliament for granting us this opportunity to raise the voices of the many thousands of Haz-

ara victims who have perished in Afghanistan and the many thousands more who continue—

Mr. Maninder Sidhu (Brampton East, Lib.): I have a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I think the channels are crossed.

The Chair: We have some challenges with the interpretation. The English and the French are crossed over.

I apologize to our witness. Could we just start from the beginning once again?

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Mr. Chair, it might be the setting at the bottom. He may have it in French.

The Chair: Mr. Mirzad, if you could just check your settings on the globe icon at the bottom. You have to select the language that you are comfortable with and that you prefer: English, French or, if you're bilingual, you can leave it without selecting either.

Mr. Ali Mirzad: Yes, I have it as neither. It's off.

The Chair: It's off. Okay. Are you bilingual? Do you speak French?

Mr. Ali Mirzad: Yes.

The Chair: Okay. Let's try that one more time.

Thank you, MP Sidhu, for that. We'll take it from the start, please.

Mr. Ali Mirzad: It's no problem. Give me two minutes extra, please.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

On behalf of the Canadian Hazara Humanitarian Services, I thank this committee and the Canadian Parliament for granting us the opportunity to raise the voices of the many thousands of Hazara victims who have perished in Afghanistan and the many thousands more who continue to suffer systemic persecution.

[*Translation*]

The Hazara people have suffered more than a century of constant persecution because of their religious beliefs, their ethnicity and their—

[*English*]

The Chair: Excuse me, I...

Oh, now I'm hearing it. I wasn't getting the interpretation either.

Mr. Ali Mirzad: Should I continue? Okay.

[*Translation*]

The Hazara people have suffered more than a century of constant persecution because of their religious beliefs, their ethnicity and their physical and facial characteristics.

At the end of the 19th century, thousands, if not millions, of Hazara were massacred, forcibly uprooted and sold into slavery by the Emir of Afghanistan, Abdur Rahman Khan.

• (1900)

[*English*]

Through royal decrees, he openly labelled Hazaras as “heretic foreigners”. This paved the way for persecution that continues to this day.

In 1998, the Taliban issued a similar decree continuing that campaign by killing thousands of Hazaras in the cities of Mazar-e-Sharif and Bamian alone.

In post-9/11 Afghanistan, Hazaras continue to be the subject of daily attacks, be it within the sanctuary of religious places, in gymnasiums, in the streets or on public buses. Attacks such as the May 2020 assault on the Médecins sans frontières maternity ward in Kabul's Dasht-e-Barchi, where infants still in incubators were targeted, or the May 2021 attack on the Sayed Al-Shuhada, all-girls school where as many as 94 young girls died, have proven that Hazaras are a target regardless of age or gender.

To put it simply, the life of a Hazara in Afghanistan is that of a death row inmate living on borrowed time, awaiting an impending execution.

For years around the globe and indeed across this nation, coast to coast, Hazaras have cried for help. We humbly request to this committee, and through it, the Canadian Parliament, to, first, formally recognize the 1891-93 ethnic cleansing perpetrated against the Hazara as a genocide; second, designate September 25 as a Hazara genocide memorial day; and, third, support Bill C-287 to ensure that all development assistance sent from Canada to Afghanistan is contributing to the peace and security of the region for all peoples.

[*Translation*]

At this point, Mr. Chair, I would like to thank the committee once more for giving me the opportunity to testify before you today.

My thanks also go to the three highly distinguished individuals representing our association. We have with us Dr. Melissa Kerr Chioventa, assistant professor of anthropology, Zayed University, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates and Dr. William Maley, emeritus professor of diplomacy at the Australian National University.

[*English*]

We also have Dr. Niamatullah Ibrahim, lecturer in international relations at La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you to the organizations and your spokespersons who made the opening statements and to all the witnesses who are with us here today.

We are now going to move to the members' question time. We'll start with the first round. The first round will be seven minutes for each member who will be questioning.

We are going to start with MP Sidhu for seven minutes.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I was fortunate enough to know Manmeet Singh Bhullar before he passed. His dedication to service is a model for all of us here who are working to make Canada and the world a better place. In light of that, I want to talk about the success that the Manmeet Singh Bhullar Foundation has achieved in his memory.

Of those Afghan Sikhs who have so far arrived in Canada, can you please outline how they are doing?

Mr. Chair, through you, this question is for the Manmeet Singh Bhullar Foundation.

Ms. Tarjinder Kaur Bhullar: Thank you, MP Sidhu.

I would be remiss if I gave up this opportunity to say that Manmeet would be incredibly overjoyed to see you as a member of Parliament. I think he would want to answer this question himself.

The families are thriving. That is the ultimate goal that guides us through this work.

It is not easy work. It is not work that we can shy away from.

Many of them have long-term full-time jobs. These are families who now have children going to school for the first time. They are taking English classes. They have a robust connection to the gurdwara in northeast Calgary, as well as the gurdwaras in Surrey, where they are residing. They constantly keep in contact and talk about what they can do next, about what is their future. It sounds simple to us, but it's remarkable when you think about where they came from.

The biggest thing, I think, is that you see the measure of this project and the measure of the lifelong impact we will have from the young children we are looking at. Some of them started off completely shy, too shy to even say hello. Now they are reading in English and speaking English, and genuinely, when you see them, they're coming up to you to say hello and talk to you about what their life here is all about. As cliché as it sounds, they are living a normal Canadian life. That is absolutely amazing when you think of where they were just a few short years ago.

• (1905)

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you for that answer, Ms. Bhullar. Definitely, I really appreciate all your hard work. It's great to hear that the Afghan Sikh community is settling in well.

Ms. Bhullar, over the past year, I think we can all understand that the COVID-19 crisis has slowed down your work to welcome members of the Afghan Sikh community to Canada. I would like to get a better understanding of what work the Manmeet Singh Bhullar Foundation has done in partnership with the Government of Canada over the past year. In your opening statement, you mentioned that there will be a path forward once conditions allow for it.

First, I want to thank you again for your advocacy, as well as all the work over the past number of years that the Manmeet Singh Bhullar Foundation has done to help Afghan Sikhs resettle, and for your support here in Canada.

For this program, are you the sole partner with the government? Will it be an effective path for you to continue welcoming members of the Afghan Sikh community to Canada?

Ms. Tarjinder Kaur Bhullar: Yes, there's no doubt that every single part of our lives has been impacted by COVID. This project is no different.

When we look at what is happening in India and when we see that people are fighting for even the basics such as access to oxygen, we understand that offices can't work like they used to, but make no mistake: There has been work done behind the scenes, between us as the foundation and the Government of Canada, to make sure we are in a place such that when those restrictions for travel are lifted and when India is in a better place to process these applications and it is safe to do so, we will see an influx of the remaining families from the cohort that arrived from Helmand making their way into Canada.

That has involved our not stopping our pursuit of constantly being in touch and making sure that we have a process in place that allows us to have, basically, everything done besides getting these individuals on a plane when it is safe to do so. We also have to keep in mind that a lot of the challenges we face are from a government or a country that is... India is dealing with its own challenges at the moment. All of these factor in.

In no way have we stalled or said that we are on pause. In fact, what we have made very clear is how we can work together to make sure that we get everything set in motion so that really the only thing left, once we are in a better place with the pandemic, is to be at the airport, meeting these people as they arrive.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you, Ms. Bhullar.

It would be interesting to learn more about the process of how you support members of the Afghan Sikh community. Could you provide us some insights into that as well?

Ms. Tarjinder Kaur Bhullar: Absolutely. As I mentioned in my opening statement, these families are people we are in constant contact with. They have many conduits within the community, and the foundation is definitely one of them. As a family, we support them when they are in India. As recently as about a month and a half ago, the concern was that they did not have an adequate supply of food because of the pandemic. Of course, it is everyone's responsibility to make sure that we help each other.

From a sponsorship point of view, we really work closely with our sponsors and donors who have come on board with us. We have the primary responsibility to ensure that when these families arrive in Canada, we are providing them with every basic need that they have as well as setting them up for success. That means providing them with housing, providing them with every single supply they need in that house and setting them up with settlement agencies to make sure they receive their health care cards, get proper medical attention—as you can imagine, many of them have never seen a doctor for so long—and enrol the children in school.

Once the children are in school, it can be something as simple as... When the pandemic hit, it was all about making sure they had access to tablets and laptops to make sure they were able to continue their education. That's a responsibility we have based on the principles that are set out through the private sponsorship agreement.

My dad often says that these are people who have become extended family. Whether it's the birth of a new child or a school milestone, it's something we take part in.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you for that very detailed answer, Ms. Bhullar. We're all Canadians. We wear our hearts on our sleeves. That's what we're known for. It's great that you mentioned that it's not just your foundation. It's with partnerships with the community and other organizations and associations. They've all stepped up and come together to support the Afghan Sikh community.

Mr. Chair, I have five seconds left, so I may not have time for another question, but I do want to take this moment to thank all the other witnesses for being here as well.

• (1910)

The Chair: Thank you, MP Sidhu. Your time has just come to an end.

We're moving now to MP Chiu for seven minutes.

Mr. Kenny Chiu (Steveston—Richmond East, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The questions I have are for representatives from both the Sikh and Hazara communities. I have questions for each, so I'll begin with the Sikh community.

The two communities, unfortunately, have similar backgrounds in that they're being persecuted and rejected by the native Afghanistan population. Therefore, they're facing persecution and imminent danger of being wiped out.

My first question is this: Could you comment on the home country's advocacy?

I heard, through you guys, for example, that India has been posturing to receive refugees from Afghanistan, but what about Iran? Is it helping the Hazara community? In the case of India, what prevents them from settling in the Punjab province area?

The second question would go through post-COVID Canada support. I will talk about that later in the interest of time.

With regard to the first question, I'd like you to comment on the home country, what I call the home country's advocacy on their behalf. Let's go with the Punjab province and also the Sikh community.

Mr. Balpreet Singh: Yes, I can comment on that.

Like I said, the Indian government is currently a right-wing Hindu government. It postures itself as being a protector of minorities that have fled Muslim countries. In fact, the protection it provides is, essentially, just a visitor's visa. It's a six-month visitor's visa. In terms of actual steps, there's nothing. There's no path to permanent settlement in India. India is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention.

There have been some glimpses of hope, but they are not for the recent refugee arrivals. For example, there's a controversial citizenship amendment act that was passed. It excludes Muslim refugees, but it opens the door to non-Muslim refugees. However, it only applies to refugees who arrived before December 31, 2014. After being passed over a year ago, the rules for it still haven't been framed. There have been certain districts for which the government announced applications would be accepted for refugees, but it's a completely random process and it's only certain districts, at random, from the Indian map.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Thank you.

Mr. Jasjeet S. Ajimal (Co-Chair, Save Afghan Minorities Project, Manmeet Singh Bhullar Foundation): May I add? Like Mr. Singh mentioned, in India's situation, the population is extremely precarious. The local populations are well aware that the Afghans arriving are precarious, so these Afghans have been the target of consistent crime. Their houses have been broken into. Local authorities harass them when they try to use public transportation. When they try to go to the hospitals in a public setting, they're not able to do so. Local organizations and organizations abroad are helping the families with medical care.

The precarious situation continues to get worse. As scarcity hits India, this population is targeted further. They are then isolated by locals, harassed, persecuted and the cycle continues.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Okay. I'd like to—

The Chair: I just saw Mr. Maley's hand up and I believe I also see Ms. Kerr's hand up.

Mr. Chiu, I don't know if you'd like them to also answer, but they do have their hands up.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Yes, I'd also like to hear witnesses from the Hazara community. Why don't we spend the next 30 seconds on further comment from the Sikh community, please?

Mr. Balpreet Singh: I can just say that Sikh refugees initially left Afghanistan en masse in 1992. They tried to settle in India at that time. They returned en masse again because there were no prospects for them there.

The situation has seriously deteriorated since 1992. Currently, there are no prospects for them. For example, the family I mentioned can't get health care for their daughter, so they have to go back to Afghanistan to go to a hospital. They don't feel safe there, so they have to come back to Delhi. It's just a really bad situation.

• (1915)

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Thank you.

In the interest of time, let's switch over to the Hazara community.

Mr. Maley.

Dr. William Maley (Emeritus Professor, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia, Canadian Hazara Humanitarian Services): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I think we should be wary of seeing Iran as a protective player with respect to Hazaras from Afghanistan.

Firstly, Hazaras are often located in vulnerable places that are quite remote from the territory of Iran, but more seriously, Iran has historically not been a particularly generous host to Hazara refugees. In recent times, there's been plenty of evidence of Hazaras being forcibly deported from Iran to Afghanistan. There's also been evidence of Hazaras being press-ganged by Iranian agencies for use in other areas where Iran finds itself involved in proxy combat.

It's actually quite a dangerous environment for Hazaras in Iran, who have long experienced quite a lot of discrimination at the hands of the Iranian state.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): A point of order, Mr. Chair.

Unfortunately, the interpreter cannot translate what Mr. Maley is saying.

[*English*]

The Chair: Okay. I don't know if we checked that.

I've stopped the time, so we still have a little while.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: The interpreter is telling me that there is a problem with the sound.

[*English*]

The Chair: It's a technical issue. Did that not come up during the testing, Clerk?

Mr. Maley, could you just say a couple of sentences?

Dr. William Maley: Yes. The situation for Hazaras is dangerous.

The Chair: I don't know if that's any better. Did you change something on your computer or on your headset from when you got tested to when you started answering the question?

Dr. William Maley: No. If your team wants to identify a particular setting in the interpretation button, I'm happy to go to that. I'm on "off" at the moment.

The Chair: Okay. They say it's technical. It's not....

Clerk, do you have any thoughts?

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Erica Pereira): Yes, and could you speak a little bit slower, please? Try that.

Dr. William Maley: Okay.

Mr. Chair, should I repeat the points that I made earlier for the benefit of your colleague?

The Chair: We're just trying to fix whatever technical issues we have. I don't know if it's the Aussie accent, but we'll see how that goes.

The Clerk: Mr. Chair, when he was speaking slowly and asking to repeat, the interpreter was able to follow.

The Chair: Mr. Maley, we'd ask that you just slow your cadence in terms of your speaking.

I stopped the time, so I think we have, I'd say, a minute left, MP Chiu. Then we'll go to the next member.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Mr. Chair, I would like to give 15 seconds for Professor Maley to finish his comment. After that, I'd like to have Ms. Kerr comment.

Thank you.

The Chair: Go ahead.

Dr. William Maley: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My broad point is that Iran is not a reliable source of protection for Hazaras who are vulnerable within Afghanistan. It really falls in the lap of the wider world to perform some protective responsibilities with respect to those people.

Ms. Melissa Kerr Chioyenda (Assistant Professor of Anthropology, Zayed University, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, Canadian Hazara Humanitarian Services): I would like to add that I'm in full agreement with everything that Professor Maley said. In addition to not being a reliable source of protection and being quite abusive towards Hazaras, Iran...

There is not really any mechanism for Hazaras to gain permanent asylum in Iran, despite the fact that they have the same Shia religion. People, refugees who have been in Iran even for generations, Hazaras who have been born in Iran, often find themselves just depending on the whim of the government. All of a sudden they are in the same situation where they might be facing deportation or might be facing something else. You find that not only are Hazara refugees fleeing Afghanistan but also there are a number of Hazara refugees who are fleeing the situation in Iran, which they may have actually been born into, so Iran definitely can't be counted on.

• (1920)

The Chair: Thank you. That does conclude the time.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Chiu.

We are moving to MP Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe. For those who are not bilingual, you may want to select "English" or "French", whatever you may need, if you need interpretation.

Alexis, you're on.

[*Translation*]

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

I would like to thank the House interpreters. They are doing an exceptional job in these times of pandemic, allowing us to hold these meetings with no problem.

I also want to thank the witnesses; they are teaching us as well as shedding light on current events. For that, I am very grateful to them.

This question is for all the witnesses, and I would like the floor to be open to anyone who wants to respond, because each one of you has your own experiences.

My question is quite general. Our research tells us that Afghanistan's constitution states that followers of religions other than Islam are free to exercise their faith and perform their religious rites within the limits of the law. Can you tell us what those limits are?

[*English*]

Dr. Niamatullah Ibrahim (Lecturer in International Relations, La Trobe University, Australia, Canadian Hazara Humanitarian Services): Thank you, Mr. Chairman and honourable members of the committee.

With regard to this question, as you mentioned, in Afghanistan, it's another foreign constitution and an extended set of provisos that—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I am sorry to have to raise a point of order.

The interpreter apologizes, but she is unfortunately unable to do her job.

[*English*]

The Clerk: Mr. Ibrahim, could you please unplug your headset and then plug it in again to make sure that it is properly selected?

Dr. Niamatullah Ibrahim: Okay

I was trying to say that in the 2004 constitution there is an extended set of rights granted to Afghan citizens that includes the right to practise their religion.

The Clerk: Mr. Chair, the sound is not adequate.

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Ibrahim. We're going to have to move to another witness until...

Dr. Niamatullah Ibrahim: Okay.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Chair, this is the committee's final meeting. We can talk about it later...

[*English*]

The Chair: I am not receiving interpretation.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: This is the committee's final meeting before the break.

I certainly do not want Mr. Ibrahim to have no opportunity to speak. I think we have a technical difficulty. I would let Mr. Ibrahim...

[*English*]

The Chair: I think we'll have to fix his headset.

Do you want to hear from another witness besides Mr. Ibrahimi?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: No, I would like to hear what Mr. Ibrahimi has to say anyway.

[*English*]

Dr. Niamatullah Ibrahimi: Would you like me to try one more time?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I will go onto the floor channel and listen in English.

Our interpreters are unfortunately unable to do their work because of the technical difficulties. I am prepared to get this done before the break. So, despite the Official Languages Act—

• (1925)

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Ibrahimi, you will have to wear a headset.

Dr. Niamatullah Ibrahimi: I'll try to be slow and brief.

Afghanistan's 2004 constitution provides an extensive set of rights for citizens of Afghanistan. That includes the right to practise religion, including for non-Muslims, but in practice, people of various religious backgrounds, including many Muslims, face daily discrimination and persecution at different levels. I would like to echo what members of the Sikh community have shared today, because as an Afghan human rights worker, I have also researched the Afghan Sikh community situation in Afghanistan.

I would also like to remind you of the fact that behind me are the images of the young girls who died on May 8 at the Sayed Al-Shuhada high school in the Dasht-e-Barchi area of Kabul. This is an area that is populated by Shia Hazara Muslims. That attack took 85 young people. Many were students in years 7 and 11. These were typical teenagers that you would find anywhere around the world, and they would have dreams to live a normal life.

As we can see, the Taliban is stepping up its attacks in Afghanistan. In many ways, that is a reversal of some of those rights that were provided to different groups in Afghanistan. While Hazaras are the primary targets of the escalation of violence and attacks across Afghanistan and Kabul, there are also increasing attacks and restrictions placed on other groups. It is difficult to be in Afghanistan if you are, let us say, a liberal Afghan. We have seen a series of targeted assassinations directed towards Afghan journalists, society groups and people who hold different views that are incompatible with those of the Taliban.

At the centre of all of this is the fact that these attacks are directed at Hazaras in Dasht-e-Barchi, this area in Kabul. For these Hazaras, this area represents much of what has been achieved over the past 20 years of international intervention in Afghanistan. Now, all of those gains are under threat. You see young women going to schools—

The Chair: I apologize. I am going to have to interject.

I understand that the way that this is working for the interpreters would be in contravention of the Official Languages Act. It is not

possible. We cannot continue this. We are going to move to another witness due to these issues. I apologize.

Mr. Jasjeet S. Ajimal: Mr. Chair, I'm happy to speak to the matter.

The Chair: Yes, Mr. Ajimal.

I saw Mr. Ajimal's hand go up first and then Mr. Singh's.

Mr. Jasjeet S. Ajimal: Carrying on from what Mr. Ibrahimi was saying, these aren't isolated incidents. From the Sikh community, we had a member who went from Helmand to Kabul, and before travelling to India, he was shot in a populated marketplace. These are targeted attacks on religious minorities. Although laws may be in place, these laws are not enforced. Afghanistan does not have a stable grip on the situation. They're not able to protect members of the Sikh community nor, as colleagues have stated, members of the Hazara community.

Although laws may be in place, they're not practised. These are policies that are just on paper. In reality, these folks are targeted. They are killed in populated markets. They are kidnapped. They are not able to practice their faith whatsoever. There are targeted bombing attacks, and if they try to assemble in any shape or form, they are attacked. A number of cases have occurred and have been widely reported.

What we fear are future attacks, which as my colleague Mr. Singh stated, are imminent. It's just a matter of time.

The Chair: Just so everybody is aware, the clerk did inform me that we were in contravention and that's why we had to move away from Mr. Ibrahimi. I've added a couple of extra minutes to your time, Alexis, so you still have another two and half minutes.

• (1930)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Chair, I think that Mr. Singh wanted to add something. I would be curious to hear what he has to say.

[*English*]

Mr. Gurbinder Singh: Yes, sir. First of all, thank you for the question. There are two things. One thing is the law in written format, and then the law in practice.

It's completely different when you go to practice. Sikhs, Hindus and minorities have actually had to pay the *jeziah*, which is a tax for all non-Muslims living in Afghanistan. That's first and foremost.

Second, the targeting and wanton destruction of minorities is at such a state that after the Kabul bomb blast, Sikhs were not even allowed to have a funeral procession in peace. The procession was targeted. There were bombs placed along the route. There were bombs placed in front of Sikh homes and gurdwaras. Then, after the procession actually got to the funeral pyre to do the funeral, another bomb went off. This is continued targeting and continued assassination.

In short form, it's a complete genocide of minorities who are at any odds with those who do not profess their faith. Again, even to live, you are just trying to breathe. It's difficult because [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] simply to exist. You have to live in inferiority and you have to live in fear.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Singh.

I would now like to hear from Ms. Chioyenda, if we have any time left.

[*English*]

Ms. Melissa Kerr Chioyenda: I would just like to add, in response to this question about whether laws are enforced, that yes, this is part of the constitution. In some instances, the Afghan government has in fact contradicted this. There was, for example, a Hazara who was placed in jail for blasphemy because of something he wrote regarding Buddhism and the Bamiyan Buddha statues, which you guys might know had been exploded by the Taliban in 2001.

A lot of these actions, events and bombings, in the case of Hazaras, of mosques and Shia mosques and centres, or the attacks on the Sikh community as well, are not carried out by the Afghan government, of course. The Afghan government is not, however, providing adequate protection. We don't know for sure if they're unable or unwilling, but at this point it doesn't really matter. They're either unable or unwilling.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Chioyenda.

Now we're moving to MP McPherson for seven minutes.

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank all of our witnesses today. This is incredibly compelling testimony and very important information for us to be gathering from you. The question that I really want to understand and maybe get quite a bit of clarity on if I could, is the current context we're in.

Of course, we know right now that we are in the middle of a COVID-19 pandemic. Different places around the world are responding differently and are at different points in recovery from that, but we also know that the United States is pulling out and that Canada's pulling out after spending a significant investment in Afghanistan, after spending significant time talking about the importance of ensuring that rights for women and girls are protected, for example.

I'm just wondering. Has this violence against both the Hazara and the Sikh populations...? What does it look like? Has it gone up significantly? Has the increase been significant? How much of that is related to COVID? The challenges around COVID, is that providing cover for what's being done by the Taliban? How much of that is because of the withdrawal? I would like to get an understanding of the context in terms of the withdrawal and COVID-19, the global pandemic.

Mr. Maley, if I could start with you that would be wonderful.

Dr. William Maley: Thank you very much.

There has been a very significant escalation in violence against minorities in the period since the signing on the 29th of February 2020 of the bilateral agreement between the United States and the Taliban. That's not to suggest that there wasn't significant violence before that, indeed there was, but there's been an escalation.

The reason I think is that the agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban provided for, as it were, a moratorium on Taliban attacks on the forces of the United States and its allies, but the effect in practice has been to channel attacks by the Taliban against targets within the Afghan community. It inadvertently incentivized those kinds of attacks. If the aim of enemies of the Afghan state is to put on display, symbolically, the incapacity of the state to provide protection to the general public and, in a sense, discharge a key state function, then killing minorities is a very effective way of sending the signal that the government is impotent because in this kind of situation, as Hobbes once said, the "Reputation of power is power".

The Americans with their agreement boosted the reputation of the Taliban and undermined the reputation of the Afghan government. Attacks on minorities since then have aggravated that particular problem. In a sense it's likely that in any situation of similar dimensions minorities will find themselves significantly under attack and for that reason I don't see any likelihood that we're going to witness a diminution of such attacks in the near future.

• (1935)

Ms. Heather McPherson: Mr. Ajimal, would you perhaps like to jump in?

Mr. Jasjeet S. Ajimal: To add to that, before the troops were leaving the Sikh and Hindu communities in Afghanistan had to pay a jeziah tax, a special tax to the Taliban, in order to survive. When ISIS came in different parts of Afghanistan, they had to pay ISIS. The tax is utilized by these terrorist organizations to not only persecute these minorities, but under their law determine a way to kill them, as in they will raise the tax to a point where these people cannot pay and then in their eyes it's okay to go and target these people for killing. It's also a way to fund their crime and continue to fund their terrorism.

As the troops are departing the situation is going to escalate. These folks, just like the professor mentioned, will continue to get a larger amount of tax. They will continue to be persecuted not only for symbolic reasons that they're maintaining control but also to finance the terrorism.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you very much for that.

What I'm also hearing from you, and that we've heard from all of the witnesses today, is that the urgency for Canada and other international bodies to act is very pressing because of course it is not a matter of if. It is a matter of when. At the point that we're right now, does Canada have a role to play in terms of the peace process, in terms of what's happening on the ground, in terms of protecting minorities in Afghanistan as part of that?

We have heard that Canada needs to do more, particularly once COVID is done, in terms of bringing people to Canada and allowing people to settle in Canada and make their homes here. Do we have a role to play in Afghanistan during this peace process, and what is that role?

Mr. Ajimal, maybe you would have something you could present on that?

Mr. Jasjeet S. Ajimal: Yes, I can absolutely respond.

At this point in time, it's essential that these people flee. At this point in time, there is no viable solution in Afghanistan for these religious minorities. They continue to be persecuted. The government is unstable at the moment, and as the troops leave, the stability... Although it may stabilize over time, any religious population or religious minorities residing in rural areas absolutely will be targeted immediately.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

Mr. Ibrahimi, do you want to add anything to that? I know that I'm running out of time.

Dr. Niamatullah Ibrahimi: I will be very quick. I hope the sound is working this time.

I think Canada can do two things immediately. One is to support a UN-led commission of inquiry into the recent incidents of violence in Afghanistan. This is a move that is called for by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission in an investigation into [*Technical difficulty—Editor*].

The Chair: I apologize. I have just been informed by the clerk that it's not possible. He can't speak. There's no interpretation.

You have 10 seconds left, Heather. Do you want to just conclude?

Ms. Heather McPherson: Yes. I'll cede my time.

The Chair: Thank you very much, MP McPherson.

Now we are moving to our second round of questions. This is going to be a five-minute round from members.

Members, I also want to let you know that we're going to have a vote shortly. When the bells start, I'm looking for unanimous consent from everybody such that whoever is on that question will let that questioner finish up. Then we will have to conclude the session.

Is that an okay from everybody? Okay. Thank you very much.

For the second round, we have MP Zuberi for five minutes.

● (1940)

Mr. Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): I would like to thank all of the witnesses for coming here and educating us. It's

not that we were unaware of a lot of the concerns you're raising, but I think it's really bringing this into sharper focus for some of us.

For me, at the beginning of COVID, I have friends in the World Sikh Organization who reached out to me to let me know about the urgency of the situation for Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan. I'm just letting you know that it's something that I personally and many of my colleagues are highly sensitive to.

I would like to pick up on what Heather was asking about with respect to that. We do know that Afghanistan is not safe for minorities and that there are continuous bomb blasts and targeted attacks, although if there could be some exposé by those who have some solutions as to what we can do as a country to help bolster the position of minorities over there in Afghanistan and to do our part to try to protect minorities over there.... If there are any other suggestions, I would like to open up the floor, please, along those lines.

Could we have Balpreet and Mr. Maley, please?

Mr. Balpreet Singh: I will just say that there is really no trust left amongst the Sikh community in what the government can do. It's not that the government is necessarily targeting or wants to drive out these minorities. It's just that they're unable to provide protection. For example, in the individual suicide attack on the Kabul gurdwara in March, he was dressed in a security uniform, so when they posted more security officers to the gurdwara, the community was actually afraid. They've done token things like announcing that there will be a cultural day to celebrate the Afghan Hindu and Sikh contributions. That doesn't really mean anything.

In terms of protections, the government is able to offer limited protection in Kabul and no protection in the other areas. On my own watch, we have seen the three communities—Kabul, Jalalabad and Ghazni—be reduced to just Jalalabad and Kabul. The entire population of Sikhs and Hindus in Ghazni has left. The options available to the community are to flee. The government isn't able to help.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Thank you, Balpreet.

Mr. Maley.

Dr. William Maley: Thank you.

I think several things are important at this point. One is to recognize that there is not a working peace process in Afghanistan at the moment. Lots of people are going through the motions, but essentially the agreement that the Americans signed with the Taliban was an exit agreement for the United States, rather than a peace agreement for Afghanistan. Because the U.S., at that point, gave the Taliban everything that they really wanted, the Taliban have been engaged in strategic stalling since then, but that is no longer the main game.

Really, a crisis management approach is a much better one for the Canadian government and like-minded governments to take, recognizing that two things are very important.

One is to maintain support, not so much for any given government, but for a republican and pluralist system in Afghanistan, as opposed to the totalitarian order that the Taliban would like to impose. One way of doing that is to seek every diplomatic channel available to send a signal that those who attempt to impose a totalitarian order can expect to be marginalized and isolated internationally.

The other is with respect to vulnerable individuals to recognize that, at a certain point, millions of refugees may be flowing out of Afghanistan despite all of the constraints on people's movement that COVID has imposed. The numbers could well overwhelm the capacity of governments, such as those in Iran and Turkey, to prevent onward movement towards Europe. There will be demands for a range of countries in the world to step up to provide resettlement for people who will really have no realistic option of going safely back to Afghanistan in the foreseeable future.

Canada, which has a very long history of humanitarian contributions in this respect, I think has a role to play there too.

• (1945)

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Thank you.

Mr. G. Singh—I'm sorry, I don't know your first name—please go ahead.

Mr. Gurvinder Singh: Our request is that perhaps a commission be instituted, especially for our heritage sites for how those can be preserved in conjunction and working in collaboration with the Afghan government. The United States would love to help and assist. That's something that really tugs at the hearts. We have historical shrines that are hundreds of years old where Guru Nanak Sahib Ji himself came and visited. Many Afghan families are not only interlinked there, but they're risking their lives because they refuse to leave them unguarded.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: That you for underscoring the cultural importance of protection of cultural sites.

Thank you, everybody.

The Chair: Thank you, MP Zuberi.

Now we're moving to MP Genuis for five minutes.

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses.

As I was listening to the testimony at the beginning, I was thinking about the case of the *MS St. Louis*, which was a ship of Jewish Holocaust refugees who were turned away from Canada. In my time as a parliamentarian, we had an official apology delivered by the Prime Minister for Canada's lack of willingness to receive these fleeing refugees.

At the same time, we've been talking about this issue of the need for a special program to help vulnerable Afghan minorities for the entirety of the time I've been a parliamentarian—since 2015. I think there is a significant frustration among many people, as we've heard tonight, about the lack of action.

I gave my first member's statement in the House in December of 2015 on this very issue, calling for the creation of a special program under section 25 of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act. I think it's important to underscore that the letter Balpreet Singh mentioned that was signed by MPs in support of a special program under section 25 was also signed by our leader.

Our immigration shadow minister Jasraj Singh Hallan has personally been involved in sponsoring an Afghan Sikh family and did so before being an elected official. It's been a long time, though. Although some families from India have been helped, as we've heard tonight, we know the mechanism—a special program under section 25 of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act—would allow direct sponsorship from Afghanistan to Canada, yet it just hasn't happened. We continue to call for that to take place. It's so necessary. I don't know why it hasn't happened.

I want to start with a question for Balpreet Singh.

Could you clarify whether the government has given you an outright “no” to the possibility of a section 25 program or whether they simply haven't answered the question?

Secondly, could you just speak to other precedents you're aware of where special programs under section 25 have been used successfully for other communities?

Mr. Balpreet Singh: We've been making this call for many years now.

After the March 2020 incident there was, of course, dialogue with CIC. The answer we got was that this isn't possible at this time. It wasn't a vehement “no”, but it was “no for now”. The problem here is that “no for now” puts these people at risk, and it's been so long.

When I made this first presentation there were 2,006 left. After 2016, five years later, we have all these deaths. We have all this evacuation. They have no future in India. I've already talked about the fact that there is no legislative mechanism to settle them there. India is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention.

This special program is a unique situation. It's a unique program that has been created for Syrian refugees. It's been created for, as I understand, Tibetan refugees who had gone to India and for Ismaili refugees.

These are vulnerable individuals who are easily identified by their appearance. As I said, Daesh has already vowed to drive them out of Afghanistan or kill them, so—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you for that very specific answer, mentioning other communities that have benefited from a special program. The Sikh and Hindi community in Afghanistan, as well as other minorities, should also benefit from it.

I'm going to give the balance of my time to Ms. Sahota.

• (1950)

The Chair: Just so you're aware, you have one minute.

Ms. Jag Sahota (Calgary Skyview, CPC): Thank you, Garnett. I'd like to thank all the witnesses for being here.

Balpreet, I'm going to build on what my colleague said. What can the government do right now to help Afghan Sikhs, to basically save their lives?

Mr. Balpreet Singh: The process to create the special program, even if we aren't able to bring them immediately, is something we've been asking for, for a long time. The entire costs for the refugees who have settled here have been borne by the Sikh community. The sad thing is that, after six years, of the Helmand group we're talking about, less than half have arrived here.

I appreciate the efforts of the government, and certainly the efforts of the Bhullar Foundation, but if these folks are going to be in India for the next I don't know how many years, they are going to continue to suffer, and those who are in Afghanistan will die.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Singh.

We are now moving to MP Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

We have heard a lot about the government in Afghanistan and about the laws in Afghanistan, but we have not heard as much about the social situation in Afghanistan. I would be curious to hear what the witnesses have to say about it.

Earlier, I asked you what the government could do, but I would also like to know about the social attitudes of the people in Afghanistan towards religions other than Islam. For me, that's important too.

Are any of the witnesses ready to answer that question?

Can you answer it, Mr. Maley?

[*English*]

Dr. William Maley: Civil society in Afghanistan is a significant actor, but it is a very vulnerable actor as well. Something like three-quarters of the Afghan population is under the age of 30. These people have very often been influenced by forces of globalization

that no previous generation had encountered. The positive sign is that one meets many people right across the board who don't carry the baggage of prejudices that some earlier generations carry with them.

At the same time, there has been something of a disposition in recent months for people in western countries to say that because civil society is so vibrant in Afghanistan, this will provide a bulwark against the worst kind of policy setting that the Taliban might seek to implement if it were to return to power.

I think this is a misconception that's actually shoved civil society activists right to the front line, where they are now being assassinated by the Taliban. Civil society, of course, was extremely vibrant in the Weimar Republic in the late 1920s and early 1930s, but a vibrant civil society is also vulnerable and subject to decapitation.

In Afghanistan, for example, civil society thrives on the basis of social media, which provides connections between different people. It would be relatively easy for a repressively minded state to shut down communications of that sort. Civil society is, certainly, something to support in Afghanistan, but it is not a magic bullet that can be used to address the problems of repression that other kinds of groups are putting on the agenda at the moment.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Maley.

I am wondering about another question. The conflicts and the armed struggles in Afghanistan have been going on for decades. We can mention the ones with the Soviets, of course, then with the Americans, the internal intertribal wars, and so on. What impacts have those conflicts had on religious minorities in Afghanistan? My question is for all the witnesses.

Mr. Ajimal, do you want to start? Mr. Singh, do you want to follow on?

[*English*]

Mr. Jasjeet S. Ajimal: The consequences, when a military leader comes in as different governments change and as the Taliban or ISIS take a role, are that each and every one persecutes religious minorities first. It's a matter of control, just like the professor mentioned in his earlier statements. The religious minorities are controlled. If anyone tries to assist the religious minorities, they are then targeted themselves.

Civil society has unfortunately been put in a position where they are not able to help any religious minorities, because they themselves will become a target. This isn't a matter of a new government coming in or a matter of a warlord being overthrown. This is a matter of each and every power broker who has come in continuing to persecute religious minorities.

• (1955)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Singh, you can add a quick comment.

Afterwards, if we are lucky, maybe we can hear what Ms. Chiovenda has to say.

[*English*]

Mr. Gurvinder Singh: I can sum it up really quickly. The results of this internecine warfare and these different warlords coming to power have been a mass exodus for religious minorities and a genocide of the religious minorities. Those are the two results: mass exodus and mass killings.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Singh.

Thank you, Alexis.

Now we're moving to MP McPherson for five minutes.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

This is not new information, of course, that we're receiving, but I am just really struggling to understand, particularly when we hear that the Canadian government has been able to implement some of these immigration policies for other groups, why they are so reluctant to do so for Afghani minorities. It's deeply concerning and something that we need to continue to push them on.

As the NDP member of this committee, I think this will probably be our last opportunity. I wondered whether or not it would make sense for us to just go through and have people.

Is there anything that we have not covered in the meeting today that you would like to share with the committee, that you would like to make sure gets on record, or anything that we haven't asked you that you'd like to share with us? I'd be happy to open up the microphone for you to do that.

Go ahead, Mr. Maley.

Dr. William Maley: Thank you very much.

I think one issue that needs to be kept in mind is that there is a risk of genocide in Afghanistan. This may seem to be a foreign proposition, but I think, unfortunately, that it's historically grounded.

The substantial outflow of Hazaras from Afghanistan began in August 1998, following a massacre that took place in Mazar-e-Sharif, which the Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid in his Yale University Press book on the Taliban described as "genocidal in its ferocity". If one looks at article II on the genocide convention, one can match that up with various practices that have surfaced recently in Afghanistan that suggest that genocidal intent is there on the part of at least some groups within the country.

There has, of course, historically been a great deal of legitimate attention paid to the vulnerabilities of women in Afghanistan, because the Taliban are the world's least feminist movement, but the Taliban are not going to try to kill all of the women in Afghanistan. They are, however, capable of trying to kill all of the Sikhs, all the Hindus or all of the Hazaras.

Given that's the case, I think the whole thrust of the genocide convention that Raphael Lemkin struggled so hard to have adopted is that one should not simply be waiting until it has happened. One needs to be alert to the real dangers of this materializing, and one needs to be poised to do something. That, I think, is probably the gravest danger that haunts the situation in Afghanistan.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you very much.

I have a few more seconds. I will now hand it over to Ms. Bhullar.

Ms. Tarjinder Kaur Bhullar: Thank you.

It would be important for me to mention that we are actively working on a program that will settle the current population. It has been a long process, but it is also one that has to take into account that we are also dealing with a population that has arrived in India and the way they are deemed refugees or not.

It's important for us to note that the partnership we are creating is a model that we will advocate for in terms of being used for other populations, as well as the continuous assistance of Afghan populations that still remain in Afghanistan or are within other displaced areas around the world.

• (2000)

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you, Ms. Bhullar.

Finally, we'll go to Ms. Chiovenda.

Ms. Melissa Kerr Chiovenda: I will build on Professor Maley's comments. It's key that we look at this as something that might be headed towards genocide.

It's important when we look at some of the attacks that have happened, in particular the attack on the maternity hospital where labouring mothers and newborns were killed or the other attack on girls, that this was often interpreted as an attack on women, but I think symbolically this can be interpreted as an attack on future generations and on those people who are bringing future generations of Hazaras into the world.

That symbolic aspect needs to be kept in mind when we're thinking about genocide and the attacks that are going on right now.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you very much.

The Chair: I don't think the bells have gone yet, so we're now moving to the third round. We have MP Baker for five minutes or whatever times remains.

Mr. Yvan Baker (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.): Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

I thank all the witnesses for being here. I'm learning a tremendous amount from all of you and I wish I could ask questions to all of you.

We heard some testimony—

Mr. Kenny Chiu: On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I'm sorry, but I had my hand up asking to speak.

The Chair: I apologize, Mr. Chiu.

Mr. Kenny Chiu: That's okay. I'm sorry to interrupt our friend here.

I wonder if we could provide four minutes per party. Four times four parties equals 16 minutes, and that should be more than enough. I hate to have to cut short the witnesses. They have been so genuine and willing to come to our meeting.

I propose that, with unanimous consent, we extend the meeting by 16 minutes so that every party has four minutes.

The Chair: It depends on how long the bells will go for. I don't know if they're going to walk it in or not, or how that will happen.

Ms. Heather McPherson: I'm sorry to interrupt, but I believe it's a 15-minute bell.

The Chair: Has it gone off yet?

I'm looking around, but I don't know if we have unanimous consent. I don't know if we can do it either. The time just will not allow.

Ms. Heather McPherson: The bells have not gone off yet, but they will likely go any minute now.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: I would suggest that we continue until the bells go off.

The Chair: MP Baker.

Mr. Yvan Baker: Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

Again, I thank all the witnesses for being here. I'm learning a tremendous amount from all of you.

We heard some testimony from one of my MP colleagues suggesting that Canada is not responding to the crisis facing Afghan Sikhs, or not doing so with urgency. My understanding is that this government has doubled the number of refugees from the previous government, and we've been a leader in refugee resettlement for the last three years. I know we've been working with the Manmeet Singh Bhullar Foundation to resettle Afghan Sikh families.

My question is to the Manmeet Singh Bhullar Foundation.

With respect to the statement that Canada is not responding to the crisis facing Afghan Sikhs, or not doing so with urgency, is this correct? How would you characterize Canada's response?

Ms. Tarjinder Kaur Bhullar: Thank you for the question.

The Government of Canada, as I said in my opening remarks, is the most viable option for this population, so that is essentially the foundation through which we have continued to have conversations with the members of government, as well as government departments.

I think it's important to remember—and I make no bones about it—that we need to get this work done. We have support from across the aisle and within the Liberal caucus. I have always said that this is not a partisan issue; this is a humanitarian issue. The responsibility lies with every single one of us.

We have had success, and I want to continue to have success.

We are in the process of settling the initial families who arrived in India from the province of Helmand, and we continue to say to the government, during our discussions, that we are creating a model that needs to apply to the families who have arrived since, who are part of the attacks that took place at the gurdwara. We also want to make sure that the lessons learned here are applied to humanitarian concerns regardless of where they occur across the world.

The thing is that we have to be able to learn and then apply, and as some of the other witnesses mentioned, always focus on a proactive approach versus a reactive approach. In a situation like this, reactive is too late, and proactive is what we want to see. How can we assist these communities before the inevitable happens and we lose lives?

I will say that we have had support from the government, and we continue to make sure that we press them on making this work a reality.

• (2005)

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm going to apologize to everyone, to the witnesses. Of course the members know that the bells have started ringing, and we have a vote in the House.

On behalf of the committee—all the members, all the staff, the interpreters, the clerk—we want to thank you for your testimony and for your answers to the many questions. We truly appreciate it.

Thank you very much, everyone.

That will conclude our meeting. We're adjourned.

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