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Chair: Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal



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• (1835)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Surrey—Newton, Lib.)): [Technical difficulty—Editor] measures in place to bring relief to the Afghan people.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of November 25, 2021. I would like to remind all meeting participants that screenshots or taking photos of your screen is not permitted.

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

Members and witnesses may speak in the official language of their choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of floor, English or French. If interpretation is lost, please inform me immediately and we will ensure that interpretation is properly restored before resuming the proceedings. The “raise hand” feature at the bottom of the screen can be used at any time if you wish to speak or alert the chair.

For members participating in person, proceed as you usually would when the whole committee is meeting in person in the committee room. Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. If you are on the video conference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself. For those in the room, your microphones will be controlled as normal by the proceedings and verification officer. When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

As a reminder, all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair. Please keep all proceedings within the time allocated in order to have equal and fair participation among us all.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses and express our appreciation to them for being here with us this evening. Witnesses have five minutes per organization for opening statements.

From Doctors Without Borders, we have Martine Flokstra, operations manager; and Jason Nickerson, humanitarian representative to Canada. From UNICEF, we have Manuel Fontaine, director of the office of emergency programmes. Shortly, from CARE Canada, we will have Barbara Grantham, president and chief executive officer.

We will start with Doctors Without Borders.

Please go ahead. You have five minutes.

Dr. Jason Nickerson (Humanitarian Representative to Canada, Doctors Without Borders): Thank you for having us at tonight's hearing.

Doctors Without Borders, or Médecins Sans Frontières, MSF, is an international medical and humanitarian organization that has provided exclusively independent, impartial and neutral humanitarian assistance since 1971 in a manner consistent with international humanitarian law and principles.

MSF first worked in Afghanistan in 1980. In Afghanistan, as elsewhere, MSF negotiates our access and our protections with all parties to the conflict, and at all levels, from the most local to the most international, and everyone in between. It is this model of principled humanitarian action that today, and throughout the worst of the fighting, has allowed MSF teams to continue to deliver medical services, free of charge, in five projects throughout Afghanistan, in Herat, Kandahar, Khost, Kunduz and Lashkar Gah, while also retaining a coordination team in Kabul.

MSF runs its activities with 2,350 Afghan and 75 international staff, with a budget of \$46.7 million in 2021. We rely solely on private donations and do not accept funding from governments for our work in Afghanistan. Our medical operations address significant unmet needs among the Afghan population. For example, we assist, on average, 4,000 births per month in Khost and Lashkar Gah, provide consultations to 20,000 people per month in our emergency departments and admit more than 170 babies per month to our neonatal ward in Khost.

The key focus and driver of our presence are the medical needs of people like you and me. The Afghan population has been chronically exposed to conflict for decades. Additionally, they are affected by the consequences of drought, the direct and side effects of COVID-19 and the transition of power in August 2021. For many years, the budget of the Afghan government was largely dependent on foreign donor money. This also included the health system, which has been chronically fragile and weak. Following the abrupt stop of structural development money and the freezing of assets in August 2021, the country has tumbled into an economic, banking and liquidity crisis, which has led to increased needs amongst the population.

We want to draw the committee's attention to the deteriorating health situation in Afghanistan and the reasons for this. Most health structures in the country are under great pressure with staff and equipment shortages, and many are closed or poorly functioning. This means that many patients cannot access the care they need, with private health care unaffordable for millions. "These days, you have to be rich to provide your family with a meal per day," a patient told us recently. A doctor of a public hospital, who had not received a salary for five months, told us that they had to perform a Caesarean section with the light of a flashlight app on their mobile phone since the hospital could not pay for fuel for the generator anymore.

Recent funding announcements still leave the health system with far fewer funds than before, and will not improve a health system that was already failing. Short-term band-aids are being handed out while longer-term solutions are unknown. For months, MSF has seen increasingly higher numbers of malnourished children in its in-patient feeding centres in Helmand and Herat. This is likely due to a combination of factors—persistent drought, food scarcity, an economic and cash crisis, and a health system in a state of disarray.

September was the first month in years when Afghans could move freely without fear of being caught up in conflict, and this led to a significant increase in patient numbers in MSF's facilities. This period also coincided with the suspension of funding to the health system in August, meaning that many facilities closed or stopped functioning due to a shortage of staff, supplies and funds, leading to a further influx of patients coming to the few functional hospitals and health centres.

Malnutrition is a big concern. Although admissions have decreased since September, MSF's intensive therapeutic feeding centres in Herat and Helmand are extremely busy. Children who experience malnutrition have weakened immune systems, making them more vulnerable to the effects of other health conditions. Today, in addition to the failing health system, the country now faces recorded outbreaks of cholera, measles, COVID-19 and other infectious diseases that all necessitate their own response while placing a further strain on health systems.

The ripple effect of pre-existing sanctions and the financial measures against Afghanistan's new de facto government are being felt deeply nationwide. The country faces near economic and institutional collapse, including an inability to provide most basic services and pay civil servant salaries. The population is between a rock and a hard place. The banking sector is paralyzed, which bars people from accessing their savings and also makes it harder for organizations providing health care, like MSF, to pay salaries and cover the running cost of hospitals. In the places where MSF works, we see humanitarian needs are increasing while the humanitarian response is being made more complex as a result of interconnected factors, such as international sanctions, the cash flow crisis, disruptions to the banking system and others.

● (1840)

We are extremely concerned about a further deterioration of the current crisis faced by the people in Afghanistan. It is essential that this committee examine the impacts of Canadian anti-terror legisla-

tion, not only on the Afghanistan crisis, but more broadly on humanitarian assistance provided inside armed conflicts.

We thank the committee for the opportunity to speak with you today, and we're happy to provide answers to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Nickerson.

Now we'll go to UNICEF and Manuel Fontaine, please, for five minutes.

Mr. Manuel Fontaine (Director, Office of Emergency Programmes, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the committee for convening this meeting, which comes at a crucial time for the people of Afghanistan.

I want to take this opportunity to thank Canada for being an important partner for Afghanistan and a force for good for years. Together, we've made a lot of progress over the past few years.

Right now, however, we're facing a very dire humanitarian situation. I've been a humanitarian for 30 years, and I can assure you that these are some of the largest numbers I've seen in my career. The country is currently facing the worst drought in 27 years, while at the same time suffering from the impacts of years of conflict and insecurity; the collapsing economy; multiple disease outbreaks, such as measles and diarrhea; natural disasters, such as the recent earthquake; the bank liquidity crisis; and COVID-19.

As a result of this, the needs of children and families are unprecedented in Afghanistan. More than 24 million people, including 13 million children, are in need of urgent humanitarian assistance. For UNICEF, what this means is millions of children in Afghanistan whose outlook for 2022 is not good. [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] of all children under five are facing acute malnutrition, and 1.1 million will face severe acute malnutrition this year. Four million children are out of school, 60% of them girls, and an estimated 8.8 million children are at risk of dropping out if schools don't start back and are not able to welcome them.

An estimated four million children are in need of protection. Nearly a quarter of the country lacks safe drinking water. Close to 35,000 cases of measles were reported in 2021, plus the issues we are facing with acute watery diarrhea, polio, dengue and COVID-19.

UNICEF is on the ground, just as MSF and other colleagues are. We're on the ground, and we've launched our largest appeal to reach 15 million people, including eight million children, in 2022. We really have, together, to avert what is the imminent collapse of critical social services, including health, nutrition, sanitation and education services for families.

Our priorities are the following. We have to prevent a collapse of basic services. We really [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] frontline workers, such as health workers, as part of the [*Inaudible—Editor*] program. We also need to start payments now to teachers to make sure they can remain in schools and welcome children when winter is over, which will be quite soon. To do this, we need the support of the international community for the long term as well.

It is about education. It is about making sure that children are not dropping out and that girls are going back to school. An important element will be the payment of teachers, including women teachers of course. However, in addition to the formal schools, we have community-based education, which is also quite important at the moment. We all know that children who are out of school are at risk of not going back, but they're also at risk of other protection risks, such as child marriage or child labour, and the potential risk of trafficking.

There is also health. UNICEF is aiming to provide 15 million people with life-saving care by supporting the health system through payments, community capacity and vaccination, and having the mobile health services that we've been running for quite some time. Bringing back and keeping health workers, nurses and doctors in health facilities is crucial.

We also have a cash program, which will allow us to help families meet their basic needs. We're expanding the use of humanitarian cash transfers and have so far reached about 35,000 households—a bit more than 250,000 people—since mid-December, just to get them through the winter. We need to accelerate that.

I want to thank Canada for the strong support over the years. I urge you to stay really engaged in Afghanistan over the next few months—I'm sure this committee is proof that this is the case—and work with us to make sure we avert the human disaster that we're about to see.

Thank you.

• (1845)

The Chair: That was under five minutes.

We still don't have Ms. Grantham, so we'll wait for her to come later. In the meantime, I'm going to go to the members, first and foremost my own member of Parliament, Madame Findlay.

Please, go ahead for six minutes.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay (South Surrey—White Rock, CPC): Thank you.

Do not ask the chair whom he voted for. You don't have to. He voted for himself in his own riding.

Thank you very much for being here this evening, especially Ms. Flokstra, who is here from Amsterdam, I think. That's above and beyond. Thank you very much.

I'm interested to know at what level the Canadian government engaged with your organization during the collapse and the evacuation from Afghanistan. I realize you represent two different organizations, so maybe each one could respond.

• (1850)

The Chair: Who wants to go first?

Mr. Nickerson, go ahead, please.

Dr. Jason Nickerson: I'm happy to answer the question.

We maintain a line of dialogue with the Canadian government through Global Affairs Canada on a variety of different humanitarian crises, including in Afghanistan. As part of our mandate, we share information on unmet humanitarian needs and try to relay what we're seeing in the field. We've maintained an open line of dialogue on the Afghanistan crisis, specifically focused on the health system and unmet health needs, for many years and that's been ongoing throughout.

Thank you.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: I understand you've been involved there since 1980.

My question was, at the time of the collapse and the evacuation from Afghanistan, what was the level of your ability to engage with the Canadian government?

Dr. Jason Nickerson: As I said, it's a very standard open dialogue with the sharing of press releases, the sharing of information on unmet humanitarian needs, on realities that we were seeing on the ground. There was dialogue with Global Affairs throughout the summer and the fall, and that's ongoing.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Were you provided enough early warning and support by Canadian government departments on their departure? What was the impact on your relief operations?

Dr. Jason Nickerson: I'll ask my colleague to answer that question, please.

Ms. Martine Flokstra (Operations Manager, Doctors Without Borders): What I do know is that we—I also have Canadian colleagues who were with us in Afghanistan—had warnings on the situation. We as an organization stand next to the population. Throughout the violence, which started in May, we have been able to continue to run our activities with our international and national teams.

This we can only do by being in contact with all the armed actors in the conflict, and that's what we did, leading also to a situation where we had 300 staff members living for two and a half weeks with 500 patients in the Boost hospital in Lashkar Gah, and where all actors involved in the fighting ensured to avoid the hospital at that time. That was last summer.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Do you have any comments, Mr. Fontaine?

Mr. Manuel Fontaine: For UNICEF—just like the rest of the UN, but the humanitarian side of the UN—we made the decision that we would stay and deliver inside Afghanistan. I was, myself, actually in Kabul at the time, and so we stayed there. We did share, just like our colleagues from MSF, of course, information about humanitarian needs on a regular basis, but didn't necessarily have more regular contact on the actual issues around evacuation.

UNICEF did take part in the protection of children at the airport during the evacuations of children from Kabul, together with the people who were at the airport at the time, particularly the unaccompanied children, making sure they got reunited with their families. We did make our own decisions. The UN, of course, has our own decision-making process when it comes to security and whether we stay or don't stay, which we followed and decided to stay.

General information about what was happening was regular, yes, but that's pretty much it. For the rest, we went on with our own mission.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: I'm very interested in your experience with getting to the Kabul airport and the evacuation at the airport. Can you talk more about that and what level of assistance you had or whether you were dealing directly...? We know that it was pretty chaotic, but perhaps you could give us the benefit of your experience.

Mr. Manuel Fontaine: Well, we were basically asked, particularly by the U.S., which was managing the airport at that time last year, as you know.... We were told that they had a number of children who were unaccompanied and on their own and needed some assistance, so we did place a number of child protection officers inside the airport to make sure that the children were identified and registered, and that if they could be reunited with their families in Kabul, that happened, or if they were to be evacuated, that we did not lose track of them and they could be followed after that in Doha or other places and be reunited after that.

This is what a number of organizations do in situations like that, which is to keep track of children, making sure they do not get abandoned or forgotten and making sure that we reunite them, which is what we've done.

• (1855)

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: How am I doing for time, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have 10 seconds.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Is there any country other than the U.S that you turned to in Canada's absence to help you out?

Mr. Manuel Fontaine: We did work with countries like Qatar, for example. Some of the children went to Qatar, so we had to be in touch with them, but the main issue was around the Kabul airport. We did not get involved in the rest.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'm going to go to Mr. Sidhu for six minutes, please.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu (Brampton East, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good evening, everyone. Thanks for joining us today. It's quite a time and an experience to hear from you guys on your real journey and adventure on the ground there.

I want to turn to Ms. Flokstra and Mr. Nickerson in my question.

You mentioned some of the work that you're doing on the ground. You mentioned I think over 70 international team members in Afghanistan and hundreds of local individuals who are support-

ing your work on the ground. Can you speak more about how many of your members are there on the ground now? I don't know if that's past tense or current.

Have the Taliban allowed you to continue your operations in the five provinces that I think you mentioned you're operating in?

Ms. Martine Flokstra: We still have around 75 international staff on the ground and, in total, we have 2,300 local colleagues, so we are continuing to function. Since August 15, this has partially changed. On the one hand, we are able to move around more for the first time in decades. That was impossible before August 15. We can provide our health care exactly as before, with women and female staff working with us. As well, female patients are able to come to our facilities. In some areas, like the south, it was the situation already a year ago that women needed to be accompanied to come to the hospital, but we are fully accepted to deliver our impartial and principled medical care, which we've provided for decades in Afghanistan.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you for all your hard work. It's a tremendous undertaking, so I really appreciate everything that you're doing.

Your organization and Mr. Fontaine's organization may have been in touch with local Canadian organizations on the ground or organizations from other countries. Have you heard from the other organizations that are still on the ground whether the Taliban are directing where some of the aid or your help flows? I think Mr. Fontaine mentioned that you're in touch with some of the frontline teachers on the ground. Could you speak more about that?

Mr. Manuel Fontaine: First of all, we also have about 400 people in Afghanistan at the moment. We have five small offices—one main office in Kabul and five other offices—and a number of posts as well. Our colleagues can function and can move. Frankly, we've been able to access more territory over the past few months than we've been able to before, because the security has improved to some extent and it's been easier for colleagues to move around. I think we need to say that. It's not always easy, but it has been fairly feasible to move around.

The NGOs may have different experiences. One thing we know is that it also depends a bit on the regions. In some regions it seems to be easier. In others it seems to be a bit more complicated. It varies. We need to keep track, and we need to be engaging and careful, of course, but I want to say that so far, at the moment, it has been easier for us to move around and assess needs and see the reality of the needs on the ground.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you for that.

Mr. Chair, how much time do I have left?

The Chair: You have two and a half minutes left.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Okay.

I wanted to hear from Ms. Grantham, but I will let my colleagues ask those questions then.

I want to hear more from Mr. Fontaine.

I think you mentioned that four million children are out of school right now, and a large majority of them are girls. I really want to learn more about the education aspect. Is the Taliban allowing girls to attend school? Are they allowing the female teachers to work? Can you speak more on that angle as well?

• (1900)

Mr. Manuel Fontaine: Just very rapidly, 20 years ago, when the Taliban left, we had one million children in school. As of last year, we had 10 million children in school, so we had managed to actually increase the participation in school by a factor of 10. There are still four million children out of school. There were children, even before the Taliban got back into Kabul, who were not in school and those were the four million. What we're worried about now is losing the 10 million, or even eight million of those, who were in school until August.

What we know at the moment.... It's winter. In the winter, two-thirds of the schools actually close because it's winter, so we will see better in March what this is going to look like. It seems that for primary school it's not going to really be a problem to get girls back into school. Secondary school might be a little bit more difficult. So far we're getting some form of assurances that girls will be allowed to attend school as long as some guarantees are given in terms of separation of classes and making sure that women teachers teach girls, while boys are being taught by male teachers, but we will see how that goes. We will see when we get into March whether this is actually happening. Primary school shouldn't be too much of a problem and we've seen girls going back to school fairly rapidly.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: I want to ask Mr. Nickerson if he has anything else to add.

I know you were rushed in your remarks at the end there, but I think I have 30 seconds and I just want to make sure I hear some of the important aspects of your opening remarks as well.

Dr. Jason Nickerson: Certainly. We will make a written submission to the committee, but we want to emphasize—and I think several witnesses have spoken about this—the impact of sanctions and anti-terror laws and how these sanctions and anti-terror laws, as they apply in Afghanistan, need to be placed in the broader context of their impact on humanitarian assistance, and in other areas of armed conflict as well.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you for that.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sidhu.

Before I go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, I will say that Ms. Barbara Grantham, president and chief executive officer from CARE Canada, is here.

On behalf of all members of Parliament, I welcome you, Ms. Grantham. You have five minutes to make your presentation to the committee. Please go ahead.

Ms. Barbara Grantham (President and Chief Executive Officer, CARE Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I am very sorry. I had one of those horrible technological nightmares signing on. I am here; I am going to proceed and I ask for your patience. Please accept my very sincere apologies.

[*Translation*]

I'm speaking to you from our offices located on the unceded and unabandoned territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe nation. I thank the committee for inviting us to appear as part of this study.

CARE has been working in Afghanistan since 1961, and has received generous Canadian funding since 2001.

[*English*]

I have two key messages for this committee this evening.

First, as Mr. Nickerson has already alluded, the Canadian anti-terror legislation currently bars humanitarian organizations from implementing Canadian-funded programs in Afghanistan, and this must be addressed immediately. The humanitarian imperative to respond is clear, with concurrent crises leading up to the takeover and escalating dramatically since then. Yet humanitarian organizations like CARE are unable to respond. The Taliban is on Canada's Anti-terrorism Act list of terrorist entities, and it is the country's de facto government. The view is that paying ordinary taxes on rent, salaries, imports, etc. would violate Canada's Criminal Code, which makes it a criminal offence to make available resources and services “knowing that...they will be used by or will benefit a terrorist group”.

The intent of this legislation was never to impede life-saving humanitarian support from reaching the most vulnerable people in Afghanistan, but this is the result. CARE has been unable to implement Canadian-funded programs in Afghanistan since August 2021. Our mobile health teams cannot travel to remote areas, purchase medicine or provide protection or nutrition services—in a country in which one million children are at risk of dying of malnutrition.

• (1905)

[*Translation*]

Canada is the only institutional donor to the CARE confederation whose funding has not resumed.

[*English*]

This interpretation of the law also does not align with the vision and objectives of Canada's feminist international assistance policy, which acknowledges that “[w]e need to be willing to take responsible risks, with decisions based on evidence and learning”. The policy itself acknowledges that delivering responsive and accountable assistance for meaningful social change cannot be achieved without this.

We urge the Government of Canada to pursue all innovative solutions that ensure that Canadian humanitarian organizations can resume operations without exposure to criminal liability, as per the UNHCR, in the short and the long term.

My second message to you this evening is that gender equality and the response efforts of women, humanitarian and civil society leaders must be prioritized in Canada's support to Afghanistan. Principled humanitarian action must reach all people in need, and it's necessary to acknowledge that gender inequality persists and leads women, girls and marginalized people to be disproportionately affected by crises like this one. Of the 22.8 million people facing acute food insecurity, half are women and girls. Of the more than 500,000 people displaced in 2021, at least 80% are women and children. For this reason, local women's leadership is critical to delivering humanitarian aid, especially in marginalized communities, and it must be prioritized in the response efforts.

Women-led NGOs' own ability to deliver [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] communities is severely constrained by the ongoing economic and liquidity crisis, as you have learned, and they are unable to access funds to run their operations. While it's possible in some provinces, the full participation of women humanitarian staff remains limited, which risks marginalizing women and girls even further.

To conclude, first we urge Canada to pursue all innovative solutions that allow Canadian humanitarian organizations to resume programming in Afghanistan in the short and long term. Second, Canada must prioritize the leadership of women humanitarian staff and civil society organizations in our response. Flexible, predictable funding must reach these local responders, and the newly established Afghan women advisory group, which informs the humanitarian country team's engagement with the Taliban, must also be supported by Canada.

[*Translation*]

I look forward to interacting with committee members in the discussion to follow.

[*English*]

Thank you to the committee. I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Grantham.

Now I will go to the honourable member Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for six minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

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

I'm very grateful to all of the witnesses here this evening.

Mr. Fontaine pointed out that he was very pleased that we struck this committee. I want to remind my hon. colleagues from all parties of this committee's mandate. The wording is very clear. In fact, my party had moved an amendment to the original motion to have this committee focus on the current humanitarian crisis and the situation in Afghanistan in the short-term future. I would like everyone to remember what we passed in the House of Commons: This committee was created to help people on the ground right now and to find solutions in short order.

Ms. Grantham, I would like to ask you about something you just mentioned in your remarks. In fact, other witnesses talked about this last week, in terms of what is happening in Afghanistan right

now. They said that the Criminal Code might need to be amended so that NGOs on the ground could operate in Afghanistan without fear of being accused of funding terrorism. In my opinion, this is a very important subject that we need to address.

What are your thoughts on this, Ms. Grantham?

Mr. Nickerson and Mr. Fontaine can also answer the question.

Ms. Barbara Grantham: Thank you for the question, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*English*]

Let me make it clear that CARE Canada's Canadian funding is effectively not operational on the ground in Afghanistan, because of the restrictions of the Criminal Code.

The current framing of the Criminal Code, as interpreted by the government, is that the risk of prosecution under the code would be entirely borne by humanitarian organizations like CARE if we were to proceed without an exemption or some form of workaround, or a change to the legislation as the current Criminal Code sits. All of those are options. We have been working actively with counterparts inside the Government of Canada to endeavour to bring those options to bear, but the reality is that the timeline here does not jive with the timeline you have heard from Monsieur Fontaine in terms of the short-term acute nature of this crisis.

I really want to emphasize that Canada is the only significant donor/funder, sovereign funder, to Afghanistan that has not provided some form of exemption or change to its Criminal Code framework that enables the humanitarian organizations from those countries to operate. In the case of CARE, all of our CARE compatriots, across the confederation globally, are able to operate in Afghanistan, with the exception of CARE Canada.

• (1910)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Fontaine, maybe you have an opinion on this, because you are from UNICEF and you work with a lot of NGOs.

Are you seeing the same thing on the ground?

Mr. Manuel Fontaine: Yes, it's an issue for us, although it's a different one, since we're part of the United Nations system and we have a slightly different system of privileges and immunities. Having said that, it's certainly an issue for NGOs.

It's also a problem for us in terms of Canadian funding and how it is spent, since it can only be used for expenses outside of Afghanistan. In other words, you can buy equipment from abroad and bring it in, or pay the staff. However, if you want to try to work with NGOs or civil society locally, you cannot do it with Canadian funding, and that's a problem. Obviously, it's even more complicated for NGOs since they do not have those guarantees associated with the UN system of privileges and immunities.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Nickerson, it's your turn to respond. Since you represent an NGO, you are directly affected.

Should the Criminal Code be amended? Would that help you on the ground?

[English]

Dr. Jason Nickerson: I want to reiterate that our activities in Afghanistan are privately funded, so our perspective on this is slightly different from organizations that are receiving Canadian government funding. MSF is unique in that situation and slightly different. However, with regard to Canada's anti-terror legislation, the short answer is, yes, there is a problem that needs to be fixed here. At the moment, there is no humanitarian defence, or humanitarian exemption, that exists in Canadian law.

We would agree that there is a problem here, and the potential for humanitarian activities to become encumbered in some way by these laws. As I said, that is not a problem specific to Afghanistan. It's a problem that needs to be addressed to ensure that Canadian laws do not interfere with the ability of humanitarian organizations to provide humanitarian assistance inside all armed conflicts.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I'd like to ask Ms. Grantham a question.

The Taliban is attacking many segments of the population, of course, but they are mostly targeting LGBTQ+ people directly.

Are you seeing that on the ground? If so, what options do these individuals have?

Can you shed some light for the committee on their situation on the ground and what can be done to help them?

[English]

The Chair: Time is almost up, but go ahead, Ms. Grantham.

Ms. Barbara Grantham: I would reiterate, Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe, my comments that women and girls—and marginalized communities, in which I would include LGBTQ Afghans—are significantly disproportionately negatively impacted by the current nature of the crisis.

While Canadian funding is not currently activated in Afghanistan, as we've made clear in this presentation already, we're in very close and regular touch with our other CARE colleagues on the ground in Afghanistan.

• (1915)

The programs we're providing are largely in the area of health care, nutrition and protection services, particularly for women who are victims of gender-based violence and girls who are victims of violence. These are largely delivered through mobile health teams in a number of provinces across the country.

We also do a lot of primary health care in the whole area of COVID-19 response, vaccinations, first aid, trauma support, sexual and reproductive health services and so on. We do a lot of work in the whole area of nutrition, infant and child feeding and nutrition—

The Chair: Ms. Grantham, please wrap up. You are already two and a half minutes over.

Ms. Barbara Grantham: Okay. I apologize.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you for having been so indulgent, Mr. Chair.

[English]

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

Now I will go to the honourable member of Parliament Ms. Kwan, for six minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I just want to say thank you to all the witnesses for your presentations today, and in addition to that, for the ongoing work you do in the global community. There are many humanitarian crises and you've always been there. I very much appreciate that.

I'd like to first turn my question to Ms. Grantham to carry on with the issue around Canadian organizations' inability to provide aid on the ground. You're not the only one. Last week we heard from other organizations as well. This has been going on since August 2021, as you have indicated. When was the last time you had a substantive discussion about this with the government? When did you bring this to their attention? What was their response?

Ms. Barbara Grantham: We are in contact with the government every week, frankly, trying to find various approaches to resolve the issue. We have been since probably October or November. We're in very regular touch with colleagues across a number of departments. It's chiefly Global Affairs Canada because that's the funder and the holder of the contracts, obviously, in the first place. I know they're working with other departments to try to find a solution to this.

I do believe there is clear understanding and acknowledgement of the issue and the imperative of the issue. The unfortunate thing is that the sense of urgency that we feel is not aligned with the timeline the government seems to feel is possible. We're running against a clock of weather, famine and malnutrition.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

I fully understand the urgency of the situation. Children are starving now, and they need the aid now. While we talk about it, it does not help them at this point. Other jurisdictions have managed to find a workaround or an exemption, but Canada still has not been able to do so. That's mystifying to me.

I'm gathering from you that the urgency is utmost and that your recommendation to the government is to act forthwith to provide either an exemption or a workaround similar to that of other jurisdictions. Am I correct?

Ms. Barbara Grantham: That's correct.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

With the other two organizations, your stature may be a little bit different, but you're seeing that on the ground as well, with the NGOs. Could I just quickly ask both Mr. Fontaine and Mr. Nickerson if you would agree that the government needs to act forthwith to provide either an exemption or a workaround to Canadian organizations so that they can provide aid on the ground in Afghanistan now?

Mr. Fontaine, go ahead.

• (1920)

Mr. Manuel Fontaine: Anything that at the moment is an obstacle to providing the needed urgent humanitarian assistance needs to be looked at very carefully and worked on.

As you know, the Security Council has adopted a resolution bringing exemptions to the sanctions regime for the UN, but it is important that all countries absolutely move on that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Mr. Nickerson, go ahead.

Dr. Jason Nickerson: Yes, we would agree. Obstacles need to be removed to ensure that humanitarian organizations are able to do their work and respond to needs on the ground.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you. I gather from your comments that it's not just for Afghanistan—obviously, we have to deal with that—but for other countries as well.

Mr. Nickerson, in terms of Doctors Without Borders, I'm sure on the ground you're working day and night to provide assistance and support to people who face persecution or who have been attacked because of persecution from the Taliban. Are you able to provide aid to them as well, particularly to those in hiding—women and girls who may be in hiding? How do they go about getting aid?

Dr. Jason Nickerson: I will ask my colleague Ms. Flokstra to respond, please.

Ms. Martine Flokstra: What we see is basically a steep increase in patients. Of course, as a consequence, a large part of the health system is not functioning and has collapsed. It is now somehow kept afloat, because that is what is currently happening with the humanitarian assistance and the humanitarian funding reaching the country. Systems are kept afloat, but they are still extremely fragile. As we have done for the past decades in our hospitals, we are treating patients who are also victims of violence. That can be domestic violence or other violence.

I would like to reiterate that there is a structural problem. The humanitarian assistance that's now given is so required, but it is very unclear what the future will bring. As we said, it's a band-aid for the current situation while the future is unknown. Humanitarian need is about the need of a person. It's a disease, and a disease does not have a political preference. I think that should be crucial in humanitarian assistance.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Time is up.

Ms. Grantham, I see that you have a hand raised. Do you want to say something in 10 or 15 seconds?

Ms. Barbara Grantham: I will say it in 10 seconds. I just wanted to specifically answer Ms. Kwan's question.

I want to reiterate what I said earlier about the importance of local women-led NGOs within the Afghan context. They are absolutely critical to creating safe environments for women and girls. In creating the cohort of women leaders in Afghanistan, with Canadian support, to build up those women-led women's rights organizations, we as Canada can play a very critical and instrumental role.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

We will now go to the second round, beginning with the Conservative Party.

Honourable Member Ruff, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Alex Ruff (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

I'd like to thank the witnesses for coming today and thank all the members of your organizations. I will get into a bit more detail, but having spent time in Afghanistan, I know how difficult a theatre country it is and the risk that so many NGOs take.

I have a couple of quick questions that should require quick answers.

Ms. Grantham, you talked about a specific women's program. Could you spell that out or repeat it? I missed the whole title there.

Ms. Barbara Grantham: Sure. As a Canadian humanitarian organization operating in Afghanistan until August, one of the key roles we were able to undertake, with support from the Government of Canada, was to build up the cadre, or the cohort, if you like, of local women's organizations in Afghanistan led by Afghan women.

• (1925)

Mr. Alex Ruff: What's the name of that program?

Ms. Barbara Grantham: I don't have.... There were a number of programs—

Mr. Alex Ruff: You gave one in your opening five minutes, right at the end. It was one of the last things you said.

Ms. Barbara Grantham: Oh, okay. I will go back and check my notes.

Mr. Alex Ruff: All right. Thanks.

My next question for all three organizations is really simple. You have all sort of stated that you've been in communication with the Liberal government. When was the last time any of your organizations met with any Liberal government minister, and who?

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Nickerson.

Dr. Jason Nickerson: Just so I understand your question, are you asking when was the last time we met with a minister?

Mr. Alex Ruff: When was the last time Doctors Without Borders met with any of the ministers?

Dr. Jason Nickerson: We haven't met with a minister, I don't believe, since the election. It would have been sometime in late 2021.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Thank you.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Fontaine.

Mr. Manuel Fontaine: I'm sorry; I honestly don't know. I'm not in charge of our relationship with Canada and the regular contact with them. I wouldn't be able to tell you that.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Thank you, Mr. Fontaine. Could you follow up with the committee to get that information and send it back to the committee, please?

Mr. Manuel Fontaine: Sure.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Grantham.

Ms. Barbara Grantham: On behalf of CARE Canada, I can inform this committee that we have met with Minister Sajjan as part of larger round tables within the family of organizations in the broader international NGO ecosystem in Canada. We've met with him, I believe, three times on issues that have ranged from the broad international humanitarian imperative to Afghanistan specifically, the issue of sexual and reproductive rights, and [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. They've been issue-specific or geography-specific in a broader round table with a number of organizations.

Mr. Alex Ruff: When was that?

Ms. Barbara Grantham: The most recent one was last week. There have probably been three or four since the beginning of January.

Mr. Alex Ruff: That's great.

I know I only have about a minute and a half left. As I mentioned, I spent a year and a bit of my life in Afghanistan. I know how difficult it is to work with or deal with the Taliban.

To build upon what Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe and Ms. Kwan brought forward, it's very difficult to ensure that this aid is getting there. If I understand correctly, I think part of the challenge is the anti-terror laws that the government has failed to take any action on in a timely manner, much like what we saw leading up to last summer in the Taliban takeover. I'm just trying to understand why they're failing to do this, but at the same time, how can your NGOs ensure that the money, once it could flow again, is going to get to those minorities—girls in particular, whom the Taliban have no time for, and the other minority groups in Afghanistan?

Ms. Barbara Grantham: As I said, we have, in the broader confederation of CARE, I believe, six or eight members within the CARE confederation that all support a variety of programs across Afghanistan. We have long-established relationships with various departments that deliver services across the country, along with literally dozens of women's, youth's and girls' rights organizations across the country. The full, complete and appropriate accounting and auditing of all those finances over the years has frankly not been in any way brought into question over time.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ruff.

Now we'll go to Mr. Baker. After Mr. Baker, we'll go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Mr. Baker, you have five minutes, please.

• (1930)

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

Thank you very much to all our witnesses for being here and for the incredible work that you do on the ground.

I'd like to start on the issue of the anti-terror legislation that you raised, Ms. Grantham, and that others have spoken about. My understanding is that this is being treated urgently. My understanding of the situation—Ms. Grantham, please correct me if this is incorrect—is that this Canadian anti-terror legislation you're talking about was brought in by the prior government at the time under Prime Minister Stephen Harper and that it is unique in the international context.

That is my understanding of the situation, that it is being treated urgently but also that the legislation is unique and that the challenges are difficult to overcome. Is that correct? Am I right in understanding that?

Ms. Barbara Grantham: I will be honest with you; the finer points of the legislation are beyond my remit for this evening.

What I can say is that Canada's legislation is unique relative to our OECD peers, if I can put it that way—in that, I would include the U.S., the EU, Australia, and the U.K.—in that we don't provide an explicit provision within the legislation for humanitarian exemptions. We do not provide an explicit override of some kind, provision or capability within the legislation. We're trying to do that in a post-legislative environment, which is imminently more challenging.

Mr. Yvan Baker: Fair enough. I'm not professing to be an expert on it, but it sounds like we need a legislative fix to fix a legislation that doesn't permit you to do your work.

I'd like to ask a question about how your non-Canadians partners operate. Do you know how your non-Canadian partners operate to ensure that funds go where they're supposed to go, to the women and girls, and not to the Taliban, for example, or other places they shouldn't go?

Ms. Barbara Grantham: CARE has been in Afghanistan since 1961. I believe we are the longest-serving or certainly one of the longest-serving international NGOs working in the country. We have deep historical trusted relationships with partners and leaders—local and provincial leaders and supporters all over the country—of many years' standing. With that, we also have extensive monitoring systems, which we've had in place, in many cases, for 20, 50 or 60 years.

As I mentioned at the end of my prepared remarks, we've recently established the Afghan women advisory group, which is advising our humanitarian country team's engagement with the Taliban, so we have an interlocutor, if you like, between ourselves as civil society organizations and the Taliban to ensure that the intent of what we're there to achieve and the monitoring systems in place are working to our satisfaction and in a way that fulfills the commitments we have made to the people of Afghanistan.

The Chair: Mr. Baker, you have 30 seconds.

Mr. Yvan Baker: Ms. Grantham, I've taken your point about the importance of local women-based NGOs. Many years ago, I was a volunteer in Rwanda, working with women social entrepreneurs and NGOs. I completely appreciate the importance of what you're saying there. I just wanted to say that.

Lastly, if this legislative challenge was overcome, where would you dedicate your resources? Where would your help go first?

Ms. Barbara Grantham: Our help would go first to the immediate health services, the mobile health services, and the services that women and girls need from the perspective of safety: first and foremost, their physical and emotional safety; second, their health; and third, their ability to earn a livelihood, in that order.

• (1935)

The Chair: Thank you.

Even though time is up, I want to be fair and equitable, so I'll give Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe, and then Ms. Kwan, two and a half minutes to finish off the round.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

I want to immediately thank witnesses for taking part in tonight's meeting. This study is extremely important. I'm very sorry that they had to deal with the political attacks between Conservatives and Liberals. They will not have to go through that with me because I'm going to get right to the point. I want to clearly understand the reality that witnesses are experiencing on the ground, and I want that in the committee's report.

According to some reports, up to last year, at least 36 humanitarian workers had been killed, while 111 had been injured and 59 had been abducted.

Have these numbers remained constant or has the work become more dangerous since August? This is an open question to all witnesses.

Mr. Manuel Fontaine: I can answer very quickly that since August we've had better access to Afghan territory and have been able to circulate more easily around the country. At least that's the case for U.N. aid workers, but I believe it's the same for most NGOs. Well, my colleagues can confirm that. However, we don't think it will last. In any case, it really gave us a sense of just how much humanitarian aid is needed on the ground and showed us that we now need to move quickly.

So we've seen some improvement, in my opinion, but the situation could deteriorate quickly.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Do Doctors Without Borders and CARE Canada concur?

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, your time is up.

Mr. Nickerson, do you want to say something?

Ms. Martine Flokstra: I would like to take this one.

The last time we lost a lot of colleagues in Afghanistan was when the Kunduz hospital was bombarded in an aerial bombardment by the U.S. Army. That was the last time that we really had a major loss. Of course, there was also an attack on the Dasht-e-Barchi maternity ward one and a half years ago.

Currently the situation is very fluid, but as we said in our presentation, the security situation is such that we can continue our activities at times more easily than before the transition of power.

Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Kwan, go ahead, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

I'd like to follow up with Ms. Grantham. I understand the idea is that we need legislative changes, but in light of the urgency of the situation, would a proposal such as...? If the government came to your organization, which is well established for many years in terms of your humanitarian aid work, and they offered a memorandum of agreement, a legal document, to exempt your organization and your aid workers from prosecution and to also exempt any approach to...potentially putting your organization in jeopardy in terms of your charitable status, would that suffice as a workaround, an idea such as that?

Somebody who's a lawyer, much brighter than me, can actually propose these ideas and come up with the documentation.

Ms. Barbara Grantham: Well, I wouldn't say lawyers are necessarily brighter than you.

What I would say is that this is one of the options that we have been actively pursuing. If, in a real-time situation, we were presented with an option along those lines, and our legal counsel assured us as an organization that it removed the risk to a tolerable level for us, then we would respond very positively to that.

That's exactly the kind of scenario we are hoping for.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you so much. It's about finding a workaround and also being innovative, because if we think legislation is the only way to go, we will never get there and people will continue to die.

Ms. Grantham, in the on-the-ground organizations, the women's and girls' organizations on the ground... Many of them, of course, are in hiding, fearing for their life. I would expect that some of them would be looking to see how they can leave Afghanistan. The stance right now is that the Canadian government does not allow refugee status for those in Afghanistan. They have to get to a third country.

Are you hearing those concerns on the ground with people who are fearing for their lives?

• (1940)

Ms. Barbara Grantham: I should be very clear. Our current programs are paused, so we are not in a position to hear that level of detailed information in a day-to-day way. I think it is fair to say that for women in Afghanistan, their full participation in civic life is very limited and highly variable across the country.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kwan. Your time is up now.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Mr. Chair, if I could just interject, on that question, I wonder if the witnesses can send in their written response.

The Chair: Sure.

Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

On behalf of all members of Parliament, I would like to thank all the witnesses for their participation in this important work. If you have anything to add, you are welcome to submit it to the committee clerk. We would really appreciate it.

I'm going to suspend the meeting for a few minutes so we can do the sound check for the next panel.

Thank you.

- (1940) _____ (Pause) _____
- (1945)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

Because I gave everyone a fair chance in the last round, I would like to see if we have consensus from committee members to extend this session by 15 minutes in order to be fair to the witnesses.

Do I have unanimous consent?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the new witnesses.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. When you are ready to speak, you can click on the microphone icon to activate your mike. I would remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair. Interpretation in this video conference will work very much like in a regular committee meeting. You have the choice, at the bottom of your screen, of floor, English or French. When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your microphone should be on mute.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses and express our appreciation for their being with us this evening. Witnesses, you have five minutes for opening statements per organization.

With us, from the Afghan Youth Engagement and Development Initiative, we have Ms. Khalidha Nasiri. From the Canadian Hazara Humanitarian Services, we have Mr. Ali Mirzad and Mr. William Maley. Finally, from Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan, we have Dr. Lauryn Oates.

Now we can start with the witnesses.

We'll go to Ms. Nasiri for five minutes, please.

Ms. Khalidha Nasiri (Executive Director, Afghan Youth Engagement and Development Initiative): Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you to the honourable members of the Special Committee on Afghanistan.

The Afghan Youth Engagement and Development Initiative, known as AYEDI, is a not-for-profit organization that builds civic engagement and social development among Afghan Canadian youth. While we do not have a presence in Afghanistan, we work with refugee youth and families within Canada and have been actively engaged in advocacy around the crisis. Our group is led by Afghan youth who have family members both within and outside of Afghanistan impacted by the crisis.

It's important to set the context for Canada's role in Afghanistan, because the scope of our response so far has unfortunately been insufficient. While Canada has contributed to important gains with respect to the rights of women and girls and other development progress, it was also involved in a combat mission and a war. About 48,000 Afghan civilian lives were lost, and that's according to conservative estimates; 159 Canadian Armed Forces members, Canadian accountants, a Canadian journalist and other Canadians working there lost their lives. We have a moral obligation to those who died—and to those still there doing everything they can to prevent mass death and economic collapse—to take on a much bigger and vocal role in the response to the crisis.

Afghanistan is in a full-blown crisis as its economy free-falls. Millions of children and youth are losing their formative years for development. Young Afghans have known nothing but conflict and instability their entire lives. Children do not know the definition of home.

According to the UN, 4.2 million young Afghans are out of school and 60% of those are girls. Without interventions, this number will increase to 7.9 million. Children and youth cannot study if their stomachs are empty. According to UNICEF, in 2022, 1.1 million children will be in need of treatment for acute malnutrition. Afghanistan is marching towards famine. This means that Afghan children and youth are at heightened risk of child labour, early marriage, recruitment by insurgency and a bleak future.

According to first-hand accounts we've heard from humanitarian partners and families on the ground, girls are not going to school. Families have lost breadwinners to hunger. Mothers are making impossible decisions between selling their daughters and selling their kidneys to feed their families. Young women are being forced to hide for wanting to participate in society, be it through protesting for their rights or showcasing talents like singing.

Canadian charitable organizations with operations in Afghanistan are facing restrictions from their banks, presumably because of the grey area in Canada's Criminal Code section 83.03.

Canada has an opportunity for leadership. In line with Canada's feminist international assistance policy and standing in the world as a human rights advocate, we must act. We have several recommendations to the committee.

First, we acknowledge the \$66.5 million in aid that Canada has committed to since August 2021, but more is needed in the short term and more is needed now. As previous colleagues have noted, without urgent stabilization of the hunger crisis and the economy, a disaster is approaching in mid-2022, which could include mass displacement into countries beyond the neighbouring ones.

Second, the humanitarian crisis response must include a refugee response component. We need to waive bureaucratic documentation and anything else needed to expedite resettlement. Luckily in Canada, we have [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] where prima facie status was designated to Syrian refugees during the Syrian crisis. In fact, since 2003, we have assigned prima facie status to Bhutanese, Karen and Somali Madhiban refugees. We also cannot forget those at heightened risk who are internally displaced within Afghanistan, to whom we should assign temporary resident permits, a call echoed by the Canadian Bar Association. We must commit to an accelerated timeline within 2022 to meet the commitment for 40,000 refugees. We should accept more. We should not err on the side of caution. We should err on the side of generosity.

Third, Canada should make efforts to reduce the impact of sanctions and counterterrorism measures on the provision of funding and the flow of goods into the country. While concerns about money getting into the hands of insurgency groups are valid, we need to listen to what Afghans are saying, which is that they need help. In this situation, there is no perfect decision. There is only the right one.

Finally, we want to ensure that the [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] and all parties uphold their obligations under international human rights law and ensure respect for the rights of all Afghans, including children's right to education.

• (1950)

Mr. Chair, Canada's position as an international advocate for human rights and justice depends on our response to this crisis. We urge Canada to act today, not tomorrow.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much. You're right on time.

Now we'll go to Canadian Hazara Humanitarian Services for five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

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

First, I want to thank you and your colleagues for the opportunity to participate in this very important discussion.

[*English*]

Mr. Chair, I'm not going to repeat here today what we had already conveyed to the House of Commons human rights subcommittee in June 2021, less than seven months ago: that I am a Hazara Canadian; that Hazaras have suffered over a century and a half of perpetual persecution; and that our people have been the victim of genocidal atrocities during the Taliban's previous rule in the 1990s, when we were hunted, singled out, labelled, and slaughtered simply for being a Hazara.

Mr. Chair, today I stand before you as a Canadian Afghanistani, because the pain and suffering that has been inflicted upon my native homeland is hurting all of us, regardless of our ethnicity, whether we are Hazara, Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, Aimaq or any of the

other ethnicities that form the rich fabric of Afghanistan. We are all hurting. We're all in this together.

By Friday, August 13, 2021, as the Taliban were advancing towards Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan, Canada announced that it would resettle 20,000 vulnerable and at-risk Afghanistans, which would have included women leaders, human rights defenders, journalists, persecuted minorities, LGBTQI members and families of resettled interpreters.

Two days later, on Sunday, August 15, the Taliban [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] Kabul, the previous Afghan government fled away in helicopters, effectively surrendering the country and abandoning its roughly 38 million people. Unfortunately, on that very same day, the Canadian Parliament was dissolved, and, along with it, any hope that Afghanistans had to be rescued simultaneously evaporated.

• (1955)

[*Translation*]

We're extremely grateful for the initiative and leadership Canada has shown on the international stage in making its great and hopeful commitments to securing the future of Afghans.

[*English*]

In September 2021, Canada further increased that bold commitment from 20,000 to 40,000, yet to this day scores of desperate Afghanistans remain stranded within Afghanistan, while thousands more who fled to neighbouring countries now live as illegal aliens and must face the daily fear of deportation back to the Taliban's gulags.

The land mass of Canada is 3.8 million square miles, compared to the U.S.'s 3.7 million square miles. This quite simply means that Canada is a bigger country than the United States—specifically, 1.6% larger—but with only one-eighth of the population that the U.S. has. Canada has resettled only one-tenth of the Afghanistans that our southern neighbours have thus far done. It is reported that the U.S. has evacuated 76,000, as opposed to Canada's 7,200.

Meanwhile, as the cold, unforgiving winter weather besieges Afghanistan, hundreds—if not thousands—are homeless, sleeping in the streets and public parks, while many others fleeing danger who have taken refuge in the mountains are freezing. According to the World Food Programme, 60% of Afghanistans are now food-insecure, and the United Nations Development Programme reports that 97% of the population could fall into poverty by spring 2022.

Children and young girls are openly sold by desperate parents simply because they cannot afford to feed their own children. Women activists, human rights defenders and other ethnic minorities such as Hazaras have been dragged, beaten and abducted. The fate of many of these people remains unknown to this day, while the remains of some have been returned to their families.

[Translation]

That's unacceptable. How can any of us sleep at night having witnessed all this suffering? The good news is that we can change all of this.

[English]

Yes, Mr. Chair, we can and we must do everything in our power to change that. Canada has not only a big land mass, but also a big heart. Canada's goodwill and generosity can in fact ensure that no other girl is ever sold for food. Time and again, we have demonstrated that to the world, be it with the Vietnam boat people of the 1970s or more recently, in 2015, with the Syrian crisis, and we can do it again.

Across this vast country, Canadian Afghanistans are extremely grateful for the enduring commitment that Canada has had to our people and our native homeland. Canadians have fought with tears and sweat, and even bled for the betterment of Afghanistan, but [Technical difficulty—Editor] Chair, will not get us there. We need concrete actions that must be executed immediately, while there's still time.

Therefore, we call upon the Canadian government to, one, appoint an ambassador at large for Afghanistan to ensure that Afghanistan's crisis is addressed through a timely and effective multipronged approach rooted in human rights, humanitarian aid, resettlement and diplomacy; two, work with the international community in utilizing all available tools to pressure the Taliban in immediately releasing all those who remain in captivity; three, engage with countries neighbouring Afghanistan to open their borders to Afghanistani refugees and uphold the right of refugees, including honouring the principle of non-refoulement; four—

• (2000)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Mirzad.

Can you quickly wrap up? You're already 45 seconds over.

Mr. Ali Mirzad: Absolutely.

Mr. Chair, the last two points would be these: first, on the 40,000 refugees that Canada has committed to, to increase that and to have a more precise approach on how it intends to accomplish that; and finally, to remove any impediment on private sponsorship and the sponsorship agreement holder to allow people to bring people to Canada.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Mirzad.

Now we'll go to Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan, with Ms. Oates, for five minutes, please.

Dr. Lauryn Oates (Executive Director, Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan): Mr. Chair and committee members, thank you for having me this evening.

My name is Lauryn Oates. I represent the Canadian charity Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan, which was established during the first Taliban regime. We've operated in Afghanistan for two decades, planning and implementing education programming in the areas of teacher education, literacy and technology for education, besides advocating for the equal right to education. Various projects under our purview over the years have been

funded by the Government of Canada, and for this we are most grateful.

I'll describe some of the issues and challenges that we're observing within the sector as a whole, as well as specific issues facing our operations in Afghanistan, which may also represent the situation of other organizations like ours.

We hold the view that the fall of the previous Afghan government and its replacement by the Taliban was not inevitable. The response of the international community, led by the U.S. and including Canada and other governments that followed suit, played a role in enabling this outcome, when governments rather should have united to prevent it.

Governments and civil society organizations alike now face the quagmire of continuing programs and delivering aid to Afghanistan while avoiding recognizing, and therefore legitimizing, the de facto authorities, which are categorized as a terrorist entity, and rightfully so. The reality is that these terrorists now govern close to 40 million people who are trapped in Afghanistan.

Assuming the regime is there to stay—and it appears that this is what the international community has chosen to accept—as many of these people as possible need to be supported to leave. This requires thinking creatively to develop multiple avenues for Afghans to resettle in places where they will be safe, using partnerships with countries in the region and beyond, and supporting other governments to permanently resettle groups of Afghans. We strongly urge Canada to take this approach in order to assist more Afghans to reach safety.

In addition to robust support for those wishing to leave, Canada should also do what it can to meet the humanitarian and human rights needs of those left behind. To be clear, these two things—human rights and humanitarian needs—are inseparable. Women breadwinners have lost their employment due to Taliban policies. The stories of families selling children or women selling their organs are not urban myths. These are true stories and we hear them every single day. People are starving now. The human rights and humanitarian crises can only be understood together, and they can only be resolved together. This will require observing the fine balance of delivering meaningful assistance on the ground while not recognizing a regime that is not legitimate and is based on an ideology of violence and nihilism. Canada must at every turn vocally demand that the rights of women be upheld.

If a centrepiece of Canadian foreign policy is the feminist international assistance policy, then there is no place in the world where such a policy is more relevant than in the current situation in Afghanistan. Despite this, and despite the hundreds of millions of dollars invested in Afghanistan, at this time it is not coming across that Afghanistan is a priority foreign policy issue for Canada. A Canadian moral stance is missing.

Besides courageous and outspoken diplomacy, we call for development assistance for both displaced Afghans and Afghans in Afghanistan. Our position remains that despite current conditions—in fact, because of them—the best place to invest is in human capital, like support programs that deliver education, build skills, increase employability and therefore reduce poverty and vulnerability, and ultimately, down the road, contribute to rebuilding peace and pluralism.

Despite the significant adaptations required, it is our intent to stay and deliver. As we contend with the challenges of operating in Afghanistan, ironically, one of the greatest barriers we face at this time originates from our own government.

Our most critical challenge at this time is having staff on the ground whose departure from Afghanistan has not, or at least not yet, been facilitated by Canada. They cannot leave—yet, as you've already heard, given Justice Canada's classification of the Taliban as a terrorist entity, it has become complicated, to say the least, for foreign NGOs to pay personnel in Afghanistan. Stuck where they are, people who were contracted to work on Canadian government programming, but who can no longer be paid through these programs, are there and in danger at this very moment.

I trust that my government will not leave behind my Afghan colleagues who worked to deliver programming arising from our feminist international foreign policy based on principles that are fundamentally antithetical to the Taliban system of gender apartheid.

• (2005)

We therefore urge the Government of Canada immediately to prioritize the processing and acceptance of special immigration measures applicants. In support of SIM and other Afghans headed for Canada, we further urge that the government provide an alternative to visa documents for Afghans who do not have passports, and that Canada engage with countries in the region to ensure that the right to safe passage of Afghans is upheld, which is not the case currently.

The Chair: Thank you.

Dr. Lauryn Oates: I know well that my colleagues are few among many. Most Afghans want to leave. No one deserves to live under tyranny, but our government holds the highest moral responsibility to Afghans who worked with us, who worked on Canadian programs funded by Canadian taxpayers reflecting Canadian values.

We need to get them out, and we need to do it soon. At the same time—

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Oates. You're a minute over, so I have to stop you here. You can add this during your time a bit later on.

Now I will go to the honourable members. First we will start with Mr. Hallan, and then we'll go to Mrs. Zahid.

We have Mr. Hallan for six minutes, please.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan (Calgary Forest Lawn, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses.

Mr. Mirzad, I want to applaud what your organization has been doing—actually, all the witnesses. I applaud all the great work that's going on.

Mr. Mirzad, your organization has been raising awareness of the persecution of religious minorities. Given your organization's expertise and contacts within the Hazara community, did IRCC ever reach out to you to seek assistance with the refugee situation, whether it was during August 2021, before or after?

Mr. Ali Mirzad: We reached out to IRCC and the minister in the early stages of the crisis. We've had some conversations with them, and we had one meeting with former minister Mendicino, but beyond that, we haven't had any interactions ever since.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: What was the outcome of that meeting? Were there any requests put forward?

Mr. Ali Mirzad: We certainly had a very productive meeting with the minister at the time. We made some recommendations to them in terms of how we could move forward: how we could, as an organization that has ears on the ground and eyewitness accounts, be useful, and also how to improve the processing of immigration, especially with *prima facie* and helping people who are outside of the border.

We've had a number of recommendations. Unfortunately, up to this day, we haven't heard back from the government on any of those.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: I would suspect that it was probably in part due to the election and the switch of ministers. On top of that, we see record numbers of backlogs in immigration. We're almost at two million, which I would say is affecting a lot of these people who are trying to get here.

Out of those recommendations that you made, I believe there was one about removing the restrictions on current sponsorship programs and exempting some of those people so they could get here faster and not provide proof of refugee status. Did the IRCC ever get back to you guys on that?

Mr. Ali Mirzad: No.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Moving on, again talking about the backlogs that we see, you raised the point—and that's something I hear in my office all the time as well—that there are refugees who are stuck in other countries right now, and their status is running out in those countries. They then have to go back into the hands of the Taliban, because they're sitting there waiting. We heard about the case of the 10-year-old girl who was killed just waiting. They had to wait because of the backlog that this Canadian government has caused on the immigration system, this Liberal-made backlog.

Can you speak a bit further to that?

• (2010)

Mr. Ali Mirzad: I will defer to my colleague, Professor Maley, who can better answer that question, if you wouldn't mind.

The Chair: Sure, go ahead.

Dr. William Maley (Emeritus Professor, Australian National University, and Representative, Canadian Hazara Humanitarian Services): Thank you.

The management of immigration and refugee crises has been a challenge for bureaucracies worldwide for a very long period of time, but the lesson of history is that it is exceedingly dangerous to allow an increase of bureaucratic requirements to interfere with emergency rescue when circumstances dictate that it's required.

The classic example was in 1939, when a vessel called the *St. Louis*, containing over 800 people of Jewish background, set out for North America in the hope of escaping from the tyranny in Nazi Germany. They were turned away from Miami because they didn't fit within a quota system that had been put in place by a 1924 piece of legislation. They were then returned to Europe, disembarked in the Low Countries, and over a quarter of them were then killed in the Holocaust.

The lesson that flows from that is that bureaucracy can be life-threatening in these sorts of circumstances. It often takes strong leadership within an individual state to recognize the need to cut through red tape expeditiously so that circumstances that are quite beyond the mindsets of those who are operating in normal circumstances don't end up having lethal consequences.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Thank you for that.

Look, some of the stuff we're hearing about—forced marriages, forced conversions and rapes that are happening to the young women there—was happening pre-2021. I remember this was happening even in 2015. The Sikh, the Hazara and the Hindu communities were all facing this persecution.

Ms. Oates, prior to August 2021, were you hearing any of these things, and did your organization ever reach out to the Liberal government to give them a heads-up?

Dr. Lauryn Oates: Yes, these certainly existed prior to 2021. In a sense, pluralism is not well protected in Afghanistan, and that was the case under the previous government as well. That's very well documented by organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. We have brought these human rights violations, and the issues faced by minorities in particular, to the attention of this government and previous governments over the years, basically for as long as we've existed.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: I'll keep this—

The Chair: Mr. Hallan, you only have five to 10 seconds. You're already out of time.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: I'll just keep it open.

The speeding up of the processing is not going to happen. What can this government do?

The Chair: Ms. Oates, I have to go to the next person—

Dr. Lauryn Oates: We've seen the bureaucratic challenges as well, up close and personal. My own position is that the main measure, above any others—security, privacy of information, etc.—has to be human life. We have to find ways to get people out, and our government institutions have to find ways to operate as if it is an emergency. This is not business as normal; it's an emergency, and we should know that because of the historical examples like the one Dr. Maley raised.

We have to think completely differently from the way we are right now, find multiple avenues and accept some level of risk in trying a few things that we've never done before that—

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Oates. I have to cut you off now.

I will go to our honourable member Mrs. Zahid, please.

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thanks to all the witnesses for appearing before the committee today.

I would like to focus my questioning on the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan, because they are clearly the most vulnerable with the return of the Taliban. Particularly, I'm concerned about the households with no male members, which can make it difficult or impossible for that household to access the humanitarian aid needed for their survival.

I will ask Ms. Nasiri to go first, and then Ms. Oates. Can you both speak to the situation of women and girls, especially the situation of those households without males, please? What specific recommendations do you have for Canada to help those young girls and women?

• (2015)

Ms. Khalidha Nasiri: Thank you to the honourable member for the question.

As you said, women and girls are at especially heightened risk as a result of the Taliban takeover, and the households without male guardians are even more so. As we've seen, the Taliban have imposed strict measures in certain provinces and areas. Women cannot travel or go out without a male companion, for example, or a woman cannot go to school or to a university class taught by a male professor. These are valid reports and concerns that we're seeing.

In terms of what the Canadian government can do, the first thing is to increase investment in humanitarian aid groups that are focused on helping women and girls. In this crisis, as I mentioned, there are predictions that up to 97% of Afghanistan will be in poverty by mid-2022, so in that situation, we have to prioritize the people most at risk. Groups that prioritize women and girls should be prioritized in that funding.

The second and final thing I will say is that in negotiations or in diplomatic interactions or engagements with the Taliban, we need to use every opportunity we get to bring up things that are happening to women, such as the disappearances of women and girls we've recently heard about, and the Taliban being surprised that the international community is holding them to that. That pressure does work, and it did result in changes recently where we've seen the Taliban allow women to return to university in some provinces.

So, essentially, it's funding and diplomacy.

The Chair: Dr. Oates, go ahead, please.

Dr. Lauryn Oates: I would add that it's important to try the strategy of combining humanitarian and development assistance. There's obviously a need for emergency assistance, like food aid, at a time when people are on the brink of starvation, but also for the kind of assistance that can transform people's situations: access to schools, to university, to work. Afghans need jobs right now; they need incomes, as unemployment rates have skyrocketed. People can work remotely, so there are creative options out there.

We need Canadian legislation to enable these forms of assistance, rather than restrict them, and to make sure that measures intended not to empower the Taliban don't victimize ordinary people who are trying to stay alive. In any case, it's too late; the Taliban are empowered.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: For both of you, do you have any estimate of the number of women-headed households in Afghanistan?

Dr. Lauryn Oates: I don't have recent data. I don't think there is recent data, but there's probably some older data that can be extrapolated from. I can look that up and get it to you.

I would just say it's very high and it has always been high. Due to the previous chapters of war in the country, there's been an unusually high number of women-headed households compared to other countries.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: If we could get that, that would be good.

While Canada has made a strong commitment on resettlement, we know that resettlements alone cannot solve this crisis. How can we ensure that Afghans displaced in the country and those who have fled to neighbouring countries, especially women, are cared for? How can we work to develop the conditions to allow them to return safely to Afghanistan?

I will ask Ms. Nasiri to comment on that, and then Ms. Oates.

Ms. Khalidha Nasiri: I think the big issue here is preventing the crisis in Afghanistan from getting worse, to the point where there is a need for managing the increased number of Afghans who will inevitably exit if the crisis gets worse. It's the things that we're calling for, such as removing barriers for humanitarian aid groups to get funding and goods and services to the people of Afghanistan. If Afghans feel like they're receiving the services they need—like health care, food and shelter—then this incentivizes them from leaving their country. Of course, no one wants to leave unless they have to. Canada can play a major role there.

With resettlement, Canada has made commitments but so far has fallen short of upholding them. Resettlement is part of a temporary solution for those who aren't able to wait for the international community to respond.

• (2020)

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Zahid. Your time is up now.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Okay, thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Now I will go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, and then Ms. Kwan, for six minutes each, please.

[Translation]

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

First and foremost, I want to thank all of the witnesses here with us tonight on this important study, which we all care about.

Mr. Mirzad, thank you for coming back to testify before the committee. I recall that you testified in June 2021 before the Subcommittee on International Human Rights. I was vice-chair at the time. Your testimony made an impression on me. One sentence in particular struck me, and that was when you stated that “the life of a Hazara in Afghanistan is that of a death row inmate living on borrowed time, awaiting an impending execution”.

That statement is even more true today. Moreover, it now describes the lives of the majority of Afghans, both Hazara and non-Hazara, who are fleeing the country.

Do these individuals turn to organizations like yours when they cross the border and seek refuge elsewhere?

Mr. Ali Mirzad: Thank you for that very valid and important question.

Truth be told, all Afghans are suffering now, yes. The Taliban are an enemy and a danger to all Afghan people.

When people leave the country to go to Iran or Pakistan, for example, just all that travelling and crossing the border are a danger in themselves. Once they arrive in Pakistan, in refugee camps like Quetta or elsewhere, they face many sad realities and dangers all around them. For instance, right now the U.N. has no official presence. They have representation under contract with agencies mandated by the Pakistani government and the U.N. They have to go to these offices to get some kind of registration documents, but the documents don't give them legal status. So they run the risk of being arrested at any time and deported to Afghanistan.

Even crossing the border is no easy task. First of all, there's a crowd. I don't know if you remember the crowds at the Kabul airport, but it's three or four times worse than that.

In addition, people sometimes have to pay Pakistani soldiers to let them cross.

On top of all these risks and perils, once they cross the border they are not out of the woods because they can be caught at any time by the Pakistani authorities and sent back to Afghanistan.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: What I understand from this is that Canada also does not have representatives on the ground to help these people apply for the special programs we have set up.

Mr. Ali Mirzad: That is true, unfortunately. That was one of the suggestions we made in a number of open letters to the Canadian government. We need official representation in Pakistan, Iran and all other neighbouring countries to engage in a dialogue and set up a process, much like our friends the Germans have done.

The Germans have set up a process and established a dialogue with the Pakistani government. They can inform the Pakistani government that certain individuals are German nationals whose cases they are processing, for example, in which case the Pakistani government is asked not to deport them to Afghanistan.

We would like to see the Canadian government more actively engaging in this kind of dialogue and process or coming to an agreement with Pakistan, Iran and other neighbouring countries.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: So our allies have solutions that could guide us. I'd like to remind everyone that we are here to find solutions.

I will go back now to your appearance before the Subcommittee on International Human Rights in June 2021, Mr. Mirzad. Among other things, you called for support for Bill C-287, which aimed to ensure that all development assistance Canada sends to Afghanistan contributes to peace and security in the region for all people. However, an election was called and that bill died on the order paper.

Are you still calling for that?

• (2025)

Mr. Ali Mirzad: I absolutely am, yes.

I feel this bill is even more important in today's environment and more timely than ever. Before the election and before Afghanistan fell to the Taliban, the purpose of the bill was to ensure that financial aid sent to Afghanistan was distributed equally throughout the country, and not concentrated in certain communities or regions. Now that the Taliban is back, it's crucial to ensure that aid sent to Afghanistan doesn't fall into the hands of the Taliban, but instead gets to the people who desperately need it.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: So, you're asking members of our committee to be sure to include a recommendation to reinstate Bill C-287 in the report. It will be assigned a new number, but it will need to be passed.

Mr. Ali Mirzad: Yes, absolutely.

I'd like to add one last comment. Over the past few months, we've noticed that when aid provided to Afghanistan by the U.N. or other international agencies has fallen into the hands of the Taliban, it has forced the Afghan people to work for it to gain access to the funds or the food programs that get wheat or rice to the people, for example.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

Do I have any time left, Mr. Chair?

[English]

The Chair: You're over your time. Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: That's what I thought.

Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: Now we'll go to Ms. Kwan for six minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all of the witnesses for their presentations and, of course, for their ongoing work in providing assistance to those who are faced with a humanitarian crisis.

My first question is for Ms. Nasiri and Dr. Oates. It centres around the comments you made about the need to ensure that Canadian organizations that are in Afghanistan right now would be able to provide assistance, whether that be aid to children who are dying of malnutrition or to women's and girls' local organizations on the ground. They're unable to do so because of Canada's anti-terrorism laws.

In the previous panel, I asked the organizations if they would support this. If a legal agreement were to be entered into by the Canadian government and those organizations that are long-established here in providing humanitarian aid, would that be sufficient for them to provide humanitarian aid in Afghanistan? That is to say, the Canadian government would provide some sort of measure outside of legislative changes to ensure that staff would not be prosecuted and the organization would not face repercussions in relation to any potential violation of the Criminal Code.

Ms. Nasiri can answer first, and then I'll go to Dr. Oates.

Ms. Khalidha Nasiri: As I mentioned, we've heard concerning reports directly from smaller humanitarian charities working on the ground that they're receiving resistance from banks here domestically and having problems in Afghanistan with getting aid and goods there because of this law.

We think an MOU would be an acceptable temporary measure, although we need to make sure that some explicit guidance is publicly provided as well, so that banks, for example, can be reassured that it wouldn't count as criminal activity and smaller charity groups that have been operating for a long time would not be excluded from such measures.

Dr. Lauryn Oates: I would echo that. There are models we can look to, like the exemptions or licences that are issued to organizations by the U.S. government to be able to continue their work on the ground.

We make our own agreements with the vendors and partners we work with to ensure that no funds of ours end up in the hands of the Taliban. That would be a very important measure.

In addition, I'd echo that the challenges from the Canadian banks are very significant in terms of being able to move funds. If that could be alleviated at all, it would go a long way as well.

• (2030)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'd like to turn to another question, related to the situation on the ground. We've heard from presenters about refugee or immigration measures, how it's almost impossible—in fact, in many cases it is impossible—for people who are still in Afghanistan to get to safety. The suggestion was to ensure that the Canadian government brings in special immigration measures, such as issuing temporary residence permits to those who need to get to safety immediately, as well as waiving the requirements for documentation.

I'd like to hear from the organizations about this. Is this something you would call on the government to enact immediately?

Go ahead, Ms. Nasiri.

Ms. Khalidha Nasiri: The short answer is, absolutely. One of the members mentioned that a 10-year-old girl who was eligible to come under one of these programs died because her application was delayed. Last week, we heard of an unnamed brother of a Canadian embassy worker who was killed, presumably by the Taliban in Afghanistan, and whose application was delayed because of paperwork.

Absolutely, we think these measures would work.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I'd like to go to Dr. Oates and then to Mr. Mirzad on the same question, please.

Dr. Lauryn Oates: Absolutely, we need to forge agreements with other governments. Again, this is something the U.S. has done. We have followed suit in so many U.S.-driven policies in Afghanistan that had bad outcomes for Afghans, so it would be good if we also emulated some that could have good outcomes.

I would emphasize that the danger is not in leaving Afghanistan; it's in staying in Afghanistan. That was tragically exemplified in the case of the girl in Kandahar who was killed while waiting to come to Canada.

We, as a small NGO, have been able to get eight families out on our own, without any assistance from the government. I can't say it was easy, but we did it, and many other organizations have done the same. If we had the government supporting us to do the same, we could do so much more. We could get people out.

Mr. Ali Mirzad: Absolutely. I would echo what our friends Ms. Nasiri and Ms. Oates said. There needs to be a dialogue. I said earlier that the presence of Canada on the ground in Pakistan is, in its way, one form of dialogue that Canada must have with Pakistan. In a similar fashion, Canada can have a dialogue not directly with the Taliban but through an intermediary, such as Qatar or the UAE, to forge an alliance that can help people get out, like the programs the Americans have established.

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

I will go to Mr. Ruff and then Ms. Damoff, for four minutes each. I'll then come back to Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe and Ms. Kwan, for two minutes each.

Mr. Ruff, you have four minutes, please.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Thanks, Chair.

Thanks to all the witnesses for coming. Your testimony is phenomenal, and I really like that you have all provided some great recommendations on the way ahead.

As I told the previous panel, if you're not aware, I spent a year-plus of my life over there in uniform. I left six of my own soldiers over there. What keeps me up and still has me so concerned is the future, especially for the women and children in that country under the Taliban. For those who need to get out, we need to do what we can to get them out now. That's the key focus. Again, the strong

leadership that's required by our current government to make decisions and to work around this is essential in all aspects.

I'd like all the groups to weigh in quickly, in particular, on the need to utilize international organizations and other groups that have boots on the ground to get feedback to the Canadian government in order to get these people in need out as quickly as possible, as well as the need to streamline the whole refugee process in this case and to have some exceptions.

We can go to the Afghan Youth Engagement first. Ms. Nasiri, go ahead, please.

Ms. Khalidha Nasiri: I wasn't clear on what the question was, but I believe you're asking about measures to accelerate the exit of women and girls.

The quickest and most impactful thing would be to waive documentation requirements. That's the number one reason we're hearing about delays. Refugee status determination cards, passports, *tazkiras*, which are the official ID cards in Afghanistan, biometrics and medical exams, all those things should be waived. They should be worked on once individuals and groups are evacuated and have arrived in Canada.

In short, that's the main measure we think can make a big impact.

• (2035)

Mr. Alex Ruff: Thanks, that's perfect.

Mr. Mirzad or Professor Maley, go ahead.

Mr. Ali Mirzad: I'll add a comment, and then I'll let my colleague Dr. Maley answer.

Thank you so much, honourable member, for your question, and for your service to my country. We owe you a debt of gratitude. It's unfortunate that despite your sacrifices, the country has come to the state and shape it is in today.

To answer your question, I'll echo what my friend Ms. Nasiri said. It's the documentation, and the nuances of the processes. We're dealing with a country that's surrounded by the Taliban, governed by the Taliban. There's no electricity. There's no Internet. We're expecting people to fill out forms, and do this with the lack of technology.

People are using WhatsApp, which is very risky, because the Taliban's intelligence units are now cracking down on people. We've heard horror stories of people fleeing the country and having their phones confiscated and hacked. The Taliban 2.0 is not the Taliban of the 1990s. They are smarter [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] the technology to be a threat. We need to remove those nuances and get people out of danger.

The Chair: Mr. Maley, answer very briefly, please.

Dr. William Maley: There are a couple of points I would make.

One is that diplomacy is important in this respect, with Pakistan but also with Iran. Iran is a very significant destination for people exiting Afghanistan at the moment. Three days ago, there was an article published in The New York Times that suggested that up to a million people were on the move in southwestern Afghanistan in the direction of Iran, just in the last four months. That means it's highly likely that there will be a number of extremely vulnerable people there who would probably need resettling, not least because Iran is not a party to the 1951 refugee convention and knows no duties under that convention to those who are within its borders.

The other point I'd like to emphasize is an emphatic endorsement of the point that Ms. Oates was making about the status of the Taliban as a terrorist group. If one looks at it not from an emotional point of view but purely from an analytical point of view, they tick every box that you need to tick in defining a group as a terrorist group. Under the circumstances, it's very important that diplomacy not be conducted in a way that normalizes their participation in international society. That would have wider ramifications for other groups that see that kind of thing happening. That's—

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Maley. We are over time.

Thank you, Mr. Ruff.

I will go now to Ms. Damoff for four minutes, please.

Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Dr. Oates, first I want to thank you for everything you've been doing in Afghanistan.

I have been attending the dinner party in Oakville for about 15 years, starting long before I was a member of Parliament. I think it was in March 2012, one of the last things we did in the “before” times, when you expressed concerns at the dinner party about the negotiations the United States was in with the Taliban. You expressed concerns about the direction the country was going and the challenges you were facing at the time. I remember feeling sick hearing what you were talking about.

Not all people can leave Afghanistan. You've talked a lot about the importance of getting women out, but they can't all leave. You've been doing work on the ground for 20 years. Fixing legislation is a priority for the government, but I guess my question is, assuming that we are able to get around the issue of getting aid directly to the folks you're supporting in Afghanistan, are you going to be able to deliver your education programs, and is there anything else we should flag in order for you to deliver the programs you're delivering in Afghanistan?

• (2040)

Dr. Lauryn Oates: Yes, we have not stopped delivering programs. We've continued to do it, but in a much adapted format. We've had to be creative and pivot things, but we are still delivering. We are fortunate to benefit from an ICT infrastructure that allows us to do that right now. Many people can still access the Internet, and we have other tools for those who can't, where we can use technology as a shortcut to get to people and make sure they can still get education.

We are a bit exhausted because, on top of that, we're also trying to respond to the emergency and the fact that people still need very basic things like food, as well as education. We're also trying to evacuate and protect the lives of our staff. If the government lifted that off our shoulders, that would allow us to do even more, so that's one of my key priorities. Then we could get back to our core business of focusing on the rights of women and girls and making sure they're protected.

Just to come to your first point about the negotiations, and to build on something Dr. Maley said as well, this is not just an issue about Afghanistan and the security of that region. The moment the U.S. started negotiating with the Taliban, this was a signal to groups like the Taliban, like ISIS, like Boko Haram, and this was very encouraging for them.

Even for people who perhaps don't really care about the fate of women and girls or the moral perspective here, they should care from a pragmatic perspective what this means for like-minded organizations in the world that are watching carefully how we're responding to the Taliban, and the risk of normalizing them.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Afghanistan has one of the highest rates in the world of people living with disabilities. About 80% of Afghans have a disability. That impacts the number of women who are heading up households, because their husbands have lost their legs from a land mine, for example, so they're the sole supporter. You touched on that a bit in your opening comments, about the number of women supporting households.

We know there's a crisis in Afghanistan right now, but I'm hoping that we can put a focus on the people with disabilities and the impact on women and girls being able to provide a livelihood and support their families.

The Chair: Thank you, but your time is up.

Now I have Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for two minutes, and then Ms. Kwan for two minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Two minutes is not a lot of time.

First and foremost, I would like to thank all the witnesses who took part in this meeting tonight. Their participation is key.

I will be quick. I'm going to ask an open question for all the witnesses.

What is your top recommendation, the one you'd like to see in the committee's report as a top priority?

Mr. Ali Mirzad: Thank you for giving us the opportunity to answer this very important question.

In my opinion, the two most important suggestions we could make have already been brought up during the meeting.

The first would be to eliminate all requirements around documents that must be provided, which are really just technical procedures. For example, you can't expect someone in Afghanistan to be able to fill out immigration forms if they have no electricity or Internet access or they are under fire or being whipped by the Taliban. So those procedures need to be waived.

Also, it would be a great help if people were not required to have refugee status without exception. Many Canadians would like to get people out of Afghanistan and bring them here, but they can't do that because it's not possible to get refugee status in this case. That's the second suggestion.

As for the third, I'd say that we need to have a diplomatic relationship with neighbouring countries, such as Pakistan, and use our relationships with our allies to maintain a presence on the ground and be able to provide a way out for Afghans.

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

Do you have—

[*English*]

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

Your time is up. I'm sorry.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thanks to all the witnesses.

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Ms. Kwan, you have two minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

Actually, I just want to build on that. The requirement of a UNHCR refugee determination is prohibitive. People cannot get access to that. Should the government waive this requirement?

I will go to Ms. Oates, Mr. Maley and then Ms. Nasiri.

Dr. Lauryn Oates: Yes, it needs to be waived.

I have heard first-hand accounts of people who have been attempting to get that status for months. They've reached a safe country—or a relatively safe country, in any case—like Pakistan and

they can't get that. Their visas will run out and they'll be back. That's very important.

• (2045)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Let's have Mr. Maley, quickly, and then Ms. Nasiri.

Dr. William Maley: I totally agree with that.

It becomes a theatre of the absurd if Canadian or Australian resettlement, or whatever, is hostage to the bureaucratic efficiency and the resource endowments that some third agency may or may not manifest. I think that should be replaced with a much more efficient system.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Ms. Nasiri, go ahead.

Ms. Khalidha Nasiri: I agree with my two colleagues, absolutely. It would be very impactful if instituted immediately. The immigration minister is certainly empowered by legislation—I believe it's section 25.2 of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act—to make exemptions and essentially fast-track people at high risk based on his judgment.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: We've done it before, as you presented. We can do it again. It is certainly required for this situation.

Mr. Mirzad, you raised the issue of the government in private sponsorships. The limitations related to the group of five.... It is impossible, because people have to get refugee determination to even apply. Should the government open up the privately sponsored refugees for all the streams and waive the requirement?

The Chair: Ms. Kwan, your time is up. I appreciate that, but I have to be very strict on this one.

On behalf of all members of Parliament, I would like to thank the witnesses for the excellent input they provided. If you want to submit anything in writing, you are welcome to do so.

Also, on behalf of all the members, I would like to thank the clerk, the analysts, the interpreters and of course the technical team for staying overtime for 15 minutes to help us.

Thank you. All the best.

The meeting is adjourned.

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