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Chair: Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal



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• (1835)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Surrey—Newton, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order. Welcome to meeting number six of the House of Commons Special Committee on Afghanistan.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the House order of November 25, 2021. I would remind all those present in the room to please follow the recommendations from public health authorities, as well as the directive of the Board of Internal Economy from October 19, 2021, to remain healthy and safe. Should any technical challenges arise, please advise me as we might need to suspend for a few minutes to ensure all members are able to participate fully.

Witnesses should be aware that translation in both English and French is available through the globe icon at the bottom of their screen.

I welcome our witnesses this evening for our first panel.

From the Canadian Refugee Sponsorship Agreement Holders Association, we have Kaylee Perez. From the Ted Rogers School of Management, we have Dr. Wendy Cukier, founder of Lifeline Afghanistan and professor at Ryerson University. From the Maria Toorpakai Foundation, we have Maria Toorpakai Wazir, president and founder.

Welcome to each of you. You will have five minutes for your opening remarks. Please respect the time so I don't need to intervene.

We will start with Ms. Perez. Go ahead, for five minutes, please.

Ms. Kaylee Perez (Chair, Canadian Refugee Sponsorship Agreement Holders Association): Thank you, Mr. Chair and honourable committee members, for the invitation to speak with you today.

I'm joining you from the traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishinabe and most recently the Haudenosaunee people.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for the work of this committee, and for being responsive to this urgent need.

[*English*]

I would first like to acknowledge those who have been impacted by the Taliban's takeover, the millions of Afghans living under Taliban rule in need of vital humanitarian relief, the thousands who

have been newly displaced as a result, and the millions of Afghan refugees whose needs predate the Taliban takeover.

I'm here in representation of the Canadian Refugee Sponsorship Agreement Holders Association. We are the national umbrella organization for 130 sponsorship agreement holders, or SAHs for short, across Canada outside of Quebec.

I imagine you're familiar with the private sponsorship of refugees program, or the PSR program as I will refer to it moving forward, but in short I will note that our organizations hold an agreement with the government that enables us to add to government resettlement commitments by facilitating the private sponsorship of refugees from around the world. Each year the government sets the total number of spaces, one space per individual refugee, that SAHs can access to submit new sponsorship applications.

SAHs and the diverse communities in which they are embedded stand ready to welcome more Afghan nationals. SAHs are eagerly awaiting an announcement on how the additional commitment of 20,000 spaces for Afghan nationals will be distributed. SAHs are receiving many inquiries from Canadians who are wanting to respond, many of whom know of Afghan refugees they would like to name to bring to Canada. Without further information, there are limits to the ways SAHs can effectively inform and mobilize our communities and effectively plan for this increased engagement.

While wanting to assist with the Afghan initiative, SAHs are concerned about the impacts this response will have on the existing inventory. I was just on a call last week with a sponsor who is supporting a 22-year-old Congolese refugee currently in Namibia. That refugee been separated from his mother and siblings for seven years and has had to literally fight for his life while awaiting for his case to be processed to come to Canada. This Congolese refugee and his sponsor were both concerned about the impacts that the Afghan and Ukrainian response could have in delaying his case further. With the historic high inventory of over 70,000 persons in the system, most of whom are in just as much need as Afghan refugees, the government needs to ensure that IRCC is funded sufficiently to process the Afghan response, the new Ukrainian response and the existing caseload.

One key recommendation that we wish to bring to the committee is for the government to develop a framework for immigration and refugee responses to emergencies that sets objective criteria. This would allow all of the actors involved to be well prepared to act quickly, and would help maintain transparency and equity in the strategic use of resettlement.

SAHs are a long-standing, reliable and risk-managed partner of the government in refugee resettlement. The PSR program can play a significant role in emergency responses by providing an avenue for family reunification and for community building. SAHs carry infrastructure that is worth investing in, not only to manage current interest but also to support the quality of post-arrival settlement and the long-term integration of newcomers. We stand well poised to help government harness public interest, but need to scale up our capacity to do so.

In December 2021, just last December, we met with the Minister of Immigration, Sean Fraser, and proposed the creation of a public/private national SAH capacity-building fund. We believe there's an opportunity to make use of this surge moment to build infrastructure for sustainability.

In summary our four key messages are that SAHs need more information on the distribution of the additional commitment of 20,000 spaces to effectively plan and engage; IRCC needs to be funded sufficiently to process the existing inventory of Afghan and Ukrainian responses; an emergency response framework with objective criteria is needed to maintain equity and transparency in the strategic use of resettlement; and we would point out that SAHs are a reliable and risk-managed partner in refugee resettlement. A private/public national SAH capacity-building fund could support our ability to work with you to meet the demand of both public interest and Afghan need.

We look forward to continuing to work toward our shared goal of assisting those displaced by the situation in Afghanistan in a timely way.

Thank you.

• (1840)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Perez. You're right on time. We appreciate that.

Now we will move to Dr. Wendy Cukier, please.

Dr. Wendy Cukier (Founder, Lifeline Afghanistan, and Professor, Ryerson University, Ted Rogers School of Management): Thank you very much. I appreciate being invited to meet with the committee in doing its important work.

I will not repeat what Kaylee talked about in terms of the humanitarian crisis or the important role that sponsorship agreement holders play.

I lead the Diversity Institute at Ryerson University. I was a private sponsor of Indo-Chinese refugees as part of Operation Lifeline in 1979. I led the Ryerson University Lifeline Syria challenge in 2015, which raised \$5 million and privately sponsored 500 Syrian refugees in a matter of months, and since then has continued to support the expansion of those refugees. In August, we created Lifeline Afghanistan to build on that experience in creating public-private

partnerships in leveraging civil society, as well as harnessing the power of post-secondary institutions, students, volunteers and others.

Although it is absolutely critical that the quotas for the SAHs be adjusted to the needs of Afghan refugees, it's also important to note that private sponsorships through the "group of five" arrangements can contribute in a very significant way.

I'll echo what Kaylee said about the outpouring of support we have from Canadians—from donors, civil society, private corporations that are ready to provide jobs as well as funds to privately sponsor Afghan refugees—and to ask you to give consideration to streamlining the processes to removing the red tape, to eliminating the need for UNHCR designation, to basically replicate what was done in 2015 to allow the Government of Canada to resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees in four months. We have the capacity. We've done it before and we can do it again.

I also wanted to flag the importance of the following. I lead the Future Skills Centre research efforts. While the humanitarian message has been delivered over and over again, I really want to reinforce the economic importance of creating pathways for newcomers generally and for refugees in particular. We have employers who have come to us and said, "We have 5,000 unfilled jobs. Can you provide Afghan refugees?" Of course, we don't have the pipeline. We've been working with small and medium enterprises that have crippling labour shortages and are prepared to offer jobs but do not have a pipeline to Afghan refugees. We have post-secondary institutions that have offered positions to Afghans. In fact, I'm sure the committee has heard of the case of one post-secondary student who completed a term while in Afghanistan and was denied a student visa because of the dual intent provisions.

Were you to do a few things, our recommendations would be, of course, to address Kaylee's concern about the numbers to help the SAH plan, but open up the opportunity for private citizens to leverage government investments to privately sponsor Afghan refugees.

We need to have the same provisions that were put in place in 2015 to streamline the Afghan effort, and think about the post-secondary pathways as another opportunity to build Canada's capacity to meet the needs of employers. I'm happy to provide more details in the Q and A.

Thank you very much.

• (1845)

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Cukier. I appreciate the time.

Now we will be going to President Wazir.

Go ahead, for five minutes, please.

Ms. Maria Toorpakai Wazir (President and Founder, Maria Toorpakai Foundation): Thank you so much for this wonderful opportunity. I am so happy to speak to all of you today, especially about my ancestral land of Afghanistan.

I come from Waziristan. As you may know, it was known as the most dangerous place on earth because of the terrorism and Talibanization there.

I grew up in that region, but I was known as “Genghis Khan” there, not as Maria. I grew up like a boy, so nobody knew, and then I eventually ended up in sports. My dad and my mom have worked in tribal areas all their life in Waziristan in educating girls. My dad believed that change had to start from our own family. He believed that sons and daughters are equal and gave me all the opportunities to be free and to excel. We didn't have schools or anything, so my mom did whatever she could do to educate the girls and ran a school there. My sister would go just encourage other girls.

Eventually, I turned professional squash player, though it was a very difficult journey on its own, because I did get threats on the way, a lot of harassment and abuse, and also threats from the Taliban. That was all part of it. I went into hiding for three years and sent emails all over the world to different colleges, universities and clubs, wherever I could find a squash court and an offer for a part-time job opportunity, asking them for time and help so that I could train myself. I came third in the world juniors and I won many international tournaments. I was 41st in the world.

All of this training was at the same time. I taught myself, because in this area and this region, the Pashtun region, in the mentality of the people there is so much patriarchy and conservatism. I know that the Taliban is one thing, but everyone there has the same mentality as the Taliban. This is the culture. They don't believe that women are equal. They don't believe that women should be going out or going to school or sports.

There are other reasons for that, because for centuries a lot of men have been shy and a lot of men cover their shyness under this umbrella of religion and culture. They say that women should not go out, but the reason is that there are no opportunities. There are no facilities where women can actually go. Also, in the schools, they can go to a certain level, but then, after that, there is again a lot of struggle. They're afraid that if something happens to their daughters on the way, it will be a big shame. There are a lot of things. I think education is needed there. A lot of awareness is needed.

I know that when I started, a lot of people were against me and my dad and my family. We had to move from area to area. Our house was attacked. My dad was put in a mental jail for educating his wife and daughters, but the thing is that now the people want him to come back, and now they want [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. They give their daughters my name and my sister's name, so things can change, and I have seen the change.

In the area where I used to be the only girl playing sports, now there are 27 girls. They come in burkas and then change into track suits, and they run, they stretch, and then they run to the ball and jump and dive. They never thought they could do those things.

For me, it is my dream to see all those girls having that freedom. I have been going back to those areas. There was a time when the Taliban was everywhere. There were bomb blasts every day, but the times change and now I see that it is quite peaceful there compared with those times.

Afghanistan is my ancestral land because my great-grandfather was second to King Amanullah and we have land in the Khost area. We are in the Wazir tribe. The Wazir are the biggest main tribe in Waziristan. The Taliban are no different from me. By blood, we are all cousins. They understand my language, and I understand them. Whenever I send them a message through social media, they watch it and they do understand it. I have the following for that.

• (1850)

I know the psychology of my people. They are Pashtuns. If you treat them with love and respect, they will die for you. If you challenge them, it's a different mentality and they die for that too. In the beginning, I had difficulties in that region, but now, the more that I speak to them with love, care and respect, they listen. They also want to tell me that—

• (1855)

The Chair: Ms. Wazir, could you wrap up, please?

Ms. Maria Toorpakai Wazir: That's all I wanted to say.

I am working on building a fourth school for these Afghan refugees who recently arrived in Pakistan. There's a lot going on.

The Chair: Thank you very much, and congratulations to you on your achievements. Thank you to your parents for taking leadership, Ms. Wazir.

Now we're going to go to our honourable members of Parliament. I'm going to start with my own member of Parliament, Madam Findlay, for six minutes.

Please go ahead.

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

Thank you to all of the witnesses for being here. I want to say thank you to Ms. Wazir's father, because he and her mom did a lot to make her who she is today.

Wendy, how do I pronounce your last name, please?

Dr. Wendy Cukier: You can call me Wendy.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: All right.

I wanted to see if you could expand a bit on how the IRCC's current measures could be streamlined. You talked about it, but I would like to give you another minute on it.

Dr. Wendy Cukier: Thank you very much for the opportunity.

I'm not a specialist in these areas, but in 2015, the IRCC made a number of changes to its normal procedures in order to meet its very ambitious targets that were established for Syrian refugees.

First and foremost, Syrians became prima facie refugees without having to have the UNHCR designation. That opened up incredible opportunities for both private sponsorship through sponsorship agreement holders, which don't require UNHCR designation generally, and for "group of five" sponsorships. That, for us, is critically important, because we know that UNHCR is not capable right now of processing the volume of applicants that would need to be processed.

Canada still addressed the health and security issues, but we did it in real time much more quickly. That's one of the things that's important.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: You segued nicely into my next question. You agree that prima facie refugee status would be very helpful.

Dr. Wendy Cukier: It's essential.

The second point is, as Kaylee mentioned, that the sponsorship agreement holders and settlement organizations do an amazing job, but they're not designed for dealing easily with spikes in volumes. One of the things that is so powerful about private sponsorship and engaging civil society, the private sector and so on is we can deal with spikes and high volumes very quickly.

In addition to addressing the quota issues with the sponsorship agreement holders, we need to facilitate a group of five formation. I think everybody agrees that the quotas for Afghans in order to meet the government's ambitious targets need to be in addition to others, so that we are not making trade-offs. We have more detailed recommendations on that.

The final thing that is incredibly important is to be innovative. The minister has talked about the EMPP program. If we continue to think about ways we can use student visas and other mechanisms to help create pathways in addition to private sponsorship, I believe that we can meet the government's targets in a short period of time, and people who would otherwise not survive will not die.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you.

Ms. Perez, what is your view on removing caps so that more Afghan refugees can be privately sponsored?

Ms. Kaylee Perez: Thank you for the question, MP Findlay, and to Wendy for all that you've interjected. It's been great to hear from you.

I think first and foremost I want to say that Afghans are in need, and our association has also raised concerns about the limits on the eligibility criteria. Currently, to be eligible to be privately sponsored as an Afghan, you must fit one of five categories. Our association has had concerns about that and has been interested in seeing that removed so all Afghans have access.

One thing that I think is important to consider here with this decision is our existing inventory and capacity. We have a historic high inventory, as I shared. Over half of the current inventory is made up of a group-of-five community sponsorship cases. One of the realities with the efficiency of processing cases is that groups of five and community sponsorship cases take longer to process at the ROC-O level, at the department within Ottawa, before they're sent overseas. I also think there is a dynamic that many groups of five and community sponsors would submit their cases via a sponsorship agreement holder if they could, but SAHs ultimately are limited by our spaces and our capacity.

I think groups of five and community sponsors play an important role, but I think it's important for us to learn from the Syrian response and the impact of that rapid response. I think there is something to say here about how SAHs are risk-managed partners. We support program integrity. It would be great for us to be able to work with and support more groups who, as a result of not being able to be sponsored through a sponsorship agreement holder are often left going the route of a group of five or community sponsorship application.

These are some of the considerations I would share.

• (1900)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Findlay. Your time is almost over.

We'll now go to Mr. Baker for six minutes.

Go ahead, please.

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

Thank you to all our witnesses for being here today.

Wendy, it's good to see you again. We've had the pleasure of working together in a number of different forums. You attended an event in Etobicoke in the past for International Women's Day, if I'm not mistaken. Also, of course, I had the chance, when I was a member of the provincial parliament at Queen's Park, to work with you at an event held by the Diversity Institute. Anyway, it's good to see you again, and thank you for your leadership and advocacy on this important issue.

I will start my questions with Ms. Perez, if that's okay.

Ms. Perez, I hope you can help me sort of flesh out some of the things you were talking about. Could you just talk about the SAHs' capacity to resettle and support additional numbers of refugees?

Ms. Kaylee Perez: Sure. Thanks for the question, Mr. Baker.

There are 130 sponsorship agreement holders in Canada, many who have been involved since 1979. Over the past few years, since 2016—I have some stats here of landings—we have resettled over 18,000 privately sponsored refugees a year. I would say that's all of the privately sponsored refugees who've arrived in Canada, so not all of those numbers are reflective of the cases that sponsorship agreement holders have done. However, we do represent a significant number of the resettlement numbers.

We are a diverse association that is actively connected across faith-based, ethno-cultural and humanitarian networks with long-standing experience, having been involved in private sponsorship and the effective settlement of refugees for many years.

One of the realities that I would also mention is that we've grown significantly over the past seven years. We used to be about 80 organizations doing around 6,000 sponsorships a year, and over the past seven years we have grown to 130 organizations. Much of that growth is due to the Syrian response and the growing needs of refugees globally.

One of the important considerations around SAH capacity is that within our association we are diverse in how we are structured and the number of sponsorships that we do. When it comes to interest in Afghan resettlement, we did run a focus group and collected some stats. There are 66 sponsorship agreement holders who've expressed interest in engaging in the resettlement of Afghans and who have said they have the capacity to engage. There are 12 SAHs who are interested in doing more than 100 spaces.

That gives you a sense of where the interest is at within our association. I think many are eager to engage, but the reality is that 20% of the SAHs within our association have two or more full-time employees. The rest are either volunteer-run or have a combination of part-time staff and volunteers who are working together to facilitate sponsorship. While we do have the interest and the desire to scale up, to do that in a healthy way SAHs are asking for support to allow them to hire additional staff to manage the growing number of cases and to support quality settlement post-arrival.

• (1905)

Mr. Yvan Baker: This is helpful. I only have two minutes, so I'm going to ask you a couple of questions and I hope we can get to them briefly.

My understanding is that there are hundreds of thousands of Afghans who have been recognized by UNHCR. Have we looked at resettling them?

Ms. Kaylee Perez: Are we looking at resettling the refugees who had already been identified by the UNHCR, pre-Taliban takeover?

Mr. Yvan Baker: Well, I won't speak to pre- or post-. My understanding is that they've been designated or recognized by UNHCR, and I'm just wondering whether those are some of the folks you were trying to resettle.

Ms. Kaylee Perez: I'll quickly respond, and I see, Wendy, that you're wanting to jump in.

I would say that Afghans were among the top five refugee groups in their need for resettlement pre-2021. There are some cas-

es of refugees who have been privately sponsored within our existing inventory, but post-Taliban takeover, as has already been shared, there have been difficulties in accessing UNHCR registration. That limits their ability to be sponsored via groups of five and community sponsors. However, sponsorship agreement holders do have the ability to submit those cases if they involve Afghan refugees who are outside Afghanistan.

Mr. Yvan Baker: Okay.

Oh, sorry, go ahead.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Ms. Maria Toorpakai Wazir: I would like to say something about this.

Recently, when all the things that recently happened as the Taliban took over in Afghanistan, I know that my dad and some of my friends in the U.S. asked me to help some of the high-profile Afghans to evacuate. We helped five families, 37 people. My dad went into Kabul with some other men. As we are from Waziristan, they are well respected in that way within the Taliban. When we went there, it was all over in the area, and people were very scared.

My dad would contact them and pick up each family separately—no luggage, nothing with them, just whatever they could grab. We couldn't take them through the Torkham border. We wanted them to come to Pakistan first, but they did not have any documents, anything, so the Torkham border couldn't do anything. Then we brought them to Spin Boldak, which is almost a day.... They travelled all night—

The Chair: Thanks—

Ms. Maria Toorpakai Wazir: And the next day they arrived in the evening. And that's how it happened. It was very difficult, but we brought—

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we are going to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, for six minutes.

Please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's a pleasure to see you in person.

I want to thank all the witnesses who are with us this evening. I think it's obvious that we are dealing with admirable people who are dedicated to the cause of the Afghan people. We are very fortunate to have them with us.

I think we can move this study forward in the right way with their help tonight and eventually use what they tell us to make recommendations in the very important report that this committee will have to draft.

As you know, dear witnesses, this committee must shed light on the government's handling of the Afghan crisis and also focus on the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. So those two areas will be addressed.

My first question is for Dr. Cukier and Ms. Perez.

Do you have any reason to be disappointed? If so, what has caused you the greatest disappointment in the government's handling of the Afghan crisis?

We'd like to hear your comments on this because we don't want the same mistakes to be repeated in the future.

● (1910)

[*English*]

The Chair: Ms. Cukier.

Dr. Wendy Cukier: I think the context has been very challenging with COVID, with responding to all sorts of unanticipated events. So I would reframe your question to say what would I like to see the government do. I would like to see the government do what it showed it could do when it pulled out the stops to support Syrian refugees in 2015 or, even frankly, what it has done in a matter of weeks for Ukrainian refugees. There are many things that can be done to streamline processes.

I know some of you are very familiar with all of these details, but to Mr. Baker's question, there are Afghan refugees with UNHCR designation who are in Turkey, who are in India, who are in Indonesia, whom we can sponsor tomorrow. The problem is that the people who escaped in August are stuck in limbo.

I have an employee who is Afghan. She came to Canada on a student visa two years ago. She's a Ph.D. student. Her partner is a Hazara refugee who's been in Indonesia. We can sponsor him. Her family is stuck in Pakistan. We can't do anything for them. Her sister was accepted at a Canadian post-secondary institution just like she was, and yet she was denied a student visa because they did not believe she would return to Afghanistan. I'm sorry, but it makes no sense.

My orientation is also very much driven by the needs of Canada's economy because the boomers like me are retiring or dying—I hope to do the first before the second—and our employers large and small are desperate for workers, desperate for highly educated, highly skilled workers, but also for general labour, and there are huge opportunities I think to create pathways for refugees that will make them self-sufficient in a short period of time.

[*Translation*]

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

Could I have a comment from Ms. Perez on the same question?

[*English*]

Ms. Maria Toorpakai Wazir: Is it okay if I make a comment?

The Chair: Ms. Wazir, let Ms. Perez go first and then I will go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Ms. Maria Toorpakai Wazir: Sure.

The Chair: He wants you to answer.

Ms. Maria Toorpakai Wazir: Okay, thanks.

Ms. Kaylee Perez: Thank you.

Merci, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

I would echo much of what Wendy has shared and reframe it to: what is it that we need?

There has been a slow release of the plan for an “emergency response”. We need clear and ongoing communication to best be able to plan and also to manage the interest that we're seeing and receiving on a regular basis as SAHs. The IRCC department needs to be resourced sufficiently to be able to process the existing inventory, the Afghan response and this Ukrainian response.

I would also echo a lot of what Wendy said about the response to Ukraine and that setting a precedent for how emergency responses can be handled.

There is a strong Afghan diaspora community here. We have well-networked organizations, the SAHs, as well as organizations such as Wendy's one, who are eager to harness public interest, civil society, good funds and time, and we just need clarity on how we can best plan for and do that in a rapid way, recognizing that we also need to look at this surge moment as an opportunity to grow sustainability within our sector and recognizing that the private sponsorship program is a pillar of resettlement here in Canada. We need to ask where there are areas that we can learn from, in the Syrian response and the most recent surge, to grow and build the infrastructure that we need for sustainability. I would argue that a key part of that is supporting sponsorship agreement holders to grow and to be able to respond to this need.

Thank you.

● (1915)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, I'll give 30 seconds of additional time if you want Ms. Wazir to respond.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Yes, I completely agree.

[*English*]

The Chair: Ms. Wazir, you have 30 seconds, please.

Ms. Maria Toorpakai Wazir: Thank you.

We have refugee crises all over the world. A lot of refugees are coming to Europe, to Canada, to America, all those countries that are accepting them; and now from Ukraine and Syria, all those refugees. Right now, there are refugees for whom we are arranging sports clinics and camps here in Toronto; they are from Afghanistan.

However, again, there are a lot of refugees in Pakistan who are living in miserable conditions. I feel that you cannot bring everybody to Canada or to Europe. We can help them right there. I'm from that region and I have the awareness of these people; I can speak the languages. It's the same thing with other Afghans here who can reach them. I do go and hold awareness campaigns for them, clinics for them. We did sports clinics and tournaments there where the [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] and I think this is how we build good relations there, too.

We can reach to these people. I want to build a sports centre for them, but alone I cannot do it. I need help from the government and—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Wazir. It has been over one minute. Thank you kindly.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I'd like to thank the witnesses.

[*English*]

The Chair: I will go to Ms. Kwan, for six minutes, please.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for the presentations and your excellent work.

I'll go first to Kaylee, if I may, with the sponsorship agreement holders piece.

Do I understand you correctly that you're asking for the government to not put a limit on the privately sponsored refugees from Afghanistan?

Ms. Kaylee Perez: Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

My specific comment was in regard to the eligibility criteria currently in place for Afghan refugees. Right now, in order to be able to submit the private sponsorship application of an Afghan, you have to be part of an LGBTQI group, a persecuted religious minority group, a human rights defenders group, a women leaders group or a journalists group. You have to be affiliated with one of those types of groups.

My comment was in regard to the eligibility criteria being limiting. Why not enable all Afghans to access private sponsorship?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I absolutely agree that the government needs to expand eligibility and allow Afghans or any group anywhere to be able to make an application, but accessing a sponsorship agreement holder is very difficult. There are a lot of people who cannot access that, so should the government expand and lift the cap, frankly, on privately sponsored refugees? I'm looking for a quick answer, and I want to go to Wendy for the same question.

Ms. Kaylee Perez: Thank you, Member Kwan.

Our association does not have an explicit position on that. What I would share is that we are concerned about the high inventory and the potential that a lifted cap could raise on processing in an equitable way for all refugees.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Maybe I can go to Wendy very quickly on that question. I do want to come back to address the processing delay and the lack of resources.

Dr. Wendy Cukier: Our position would be raise the cap. If the SAHs are concerned—and we understand their concerns—about equity and so on, lift the cap for a group of five, make it easier for a group of five to do the sponsorship.

I'll talk more about how different things are now than they were before, but suffice it to say that you now need to come up with \$100,000 up front to support families with many of the SAHs, which is not reasonable or sustainable. There are other models that have worked well in the past and will continue to work.

• (1920)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: On the issue around refugee determination, Wendy, you suggested that what the government should do—which is what the NDP has been calling for for a very long time—is lift the requirement for refugee determination for groups of five. It makes no sense to have that requirement there, especially now in the face of what's going on in Afghanistan. Should the government lift that refugee determination requirement similar to what they have done with Syrian refugees?

Dr. Wendy Cukier: I believe so, and I believe that we can still institute security and health checks to keep people safe.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: On the question around resources, there's no question that there's a lack of resources for processing the application. The minister indicated at the immigration committee that it takes on average three years for privately sponsored refugees to make their way to Canada. They were contemplating that for the Ukraine situation, and if it's going to take three years, it's too long. You're right that there are too many people who are stuck in the backlog.

What should the government do by way of resourcing this properly so that we can get in the people who have been waiting and backlogged in the queue from other countries, as well as the people who are now in need of refugee status? Should they apply the same immigration measures they have made available to Ukraine so that people can come with a temporary residence permit and then make the application for refugee status here in Canada, or even extend that to privately sponsored opportunities?

Dr. Wendy Cukier: There are innovative approaches that governments have used in the past. There were 25,000 Syrian refugees who came in four months because the Prime Minister and the minister made a commitment and pulled out the stops. Whether you do it in the way they're doing it with Ukrainians or whether we do it the way we did it with Syrians, it's possible, but it does require resources and, more importantly, it requires shared political will. This can't be a partisan issue; this has to be a Canadian project.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I would agree that there needs to be innovation. Mind you, with the Syrian refugee initiative, the government didn't quite do it in four months, but I get your point. What you're saying is that it can be done much better than what is being done now, and what it needs is collaboration from all the parties and NGOs on the ground to get this work done. If the government's willing to lift the cap and make that opportunity available, I would absolutely agree with that.

I want to come back to the backlogs because part of the problem is this: The government announced the process for Afghans; however, they did not put additional resources into IRCC. Not only are people in other countries with refugee status backlogged, all immigration streams have been backlogged and there's complete chaos. That is the situation right now.

The government says it has put in additional resources, but these are not enough to deal with what we are dealing with right now. From that perspective, should there be a dedicated specific response and resources, both in financial resources as well as immigration levels numbers, to address the issue? Could I get a quick answer?

The Chair: Madame Kwan, I'm sorry, but we're 30 seconds over.

Go ahead quickly, please.

Dr. Wendy Cukier: Yes, and business process re-engineering is essential. Doing things the way we've always done them and throwing money at them is, in my view, not efficient.

Ms. Kaylee Perez: Yes to increasing the immigration levels. That is crucial to having resources dedicated to process the existing inventory. Resources are needed at IRCC to hire staff to process cases and also for settlement-providing organizations to be able to make sure they are intentionally connecting with privately sponsored refugees and sponsors and also funding the infrastructure of sponsorship agreement holders to be able to say yes to working with new and additional sponsors.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'm going to go to Mr. Ruff for two minutes.

Please, go ahead.

Mr. Alex Ruff (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC): My first question is for Maria.

I just want to thank you for your inspiration and leadership. Having spent time in Afghanistan, I understand the challenges and lack of equality. It takes strong women leaders like you to make the case. That's what we need to help inspire and help change the culture, because ultimately I think changes are needed in Afghanistan.

In my opinion, we as a country failed to get enough Afghans out before the fall of Kabul into the Taliban's hands. I want you to just emphasize how important it is for us to get more of those people out and for us to lift these barriers to getting those Afghans, particularly young girls, out of the country, who are being targeted because of the dire situation.

• (1925)

Ms. Maria Toorpakai Wazir: Thank you, sir.

I would say that Afghanistan has been at war for decades. These people have lived in this kind of violent situation, and aggressive

behaviour has become their daily routine. Of course, people were very scared when the Taliban took over, because they remember the history. When they were jamming all the airports, I saw all men and I did post about that. I did send a message: Women are the ones who suffered the most in these regions, and you are leaving the women there in the houses, but you are the ones who are fleeing. It was all men who were fleeing.

The Chair: Ms. Wazir—

Ms. Maria Toorpakai Wazir: We need to help these women and these girls. But, again I would say that we need to make sure that we find the people from among them. So I make this offer to the Canadian government: I'm here. I can play a role as mediator between the Taliban, my people, and my region. I speak the language. I speak English and I really care about the humanity of these people. I think I can make a difference. I can talk to them. They would understand—

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

Ms. Maria Toorpakai Wazir: —and we are family.

The Chair: Thank you kindly.

Now I'm going to go to Ms. Zahid for two minutes.

Go ahead, please.

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

Thanks to all three witnesses for appearing before the committee and talking about the issues that matter to the Afghans. I have only two minutes, so I'll be very quick.

My first question is for Ms. Wazir. I want to thank you for your inspiring work with women and girls in Afghanistan as you seek to empower through the power of sports.

You mentioned that the young girls and women who have fled Afghanistan and who are in Pakistan are facing adverse conditions. What do you think the Canadian government can do to support them so that they can get the education they need, including the girls who have fled Afghanistan and those girls who are in Afghanistan, and that some daily activities like sports can be part of their activities?

What would you like to comment?

Ms. Maria Toorpakai Wazir: One of my dream projects is a sports centre that we have been working on. We have designed it in a way that will give them opportunities. We want to bring those from the tribal areas. It will be an all-women's sports school, which is a unique idea in this region. People trust me and my family now. Also, this will be all girls and women, so people will be comfortable. Culturally, it is appropriate.

I go into these regions, into this area. I was going to visit Kabul recently, but I just delayed it. I'm telling you that I am going to these regions. I do talk to the people, and I know that they want schools and sports. I can arrange all the workshops for them.

The facility that I want to build will give them all an opportunity. I want to bring those who have a lot of support from the western.... We have [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] then to feel that these people are different [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. The fear is that because people are so apart from each other. That's why people from the west are scared. I want to bring them together, have them in the camps together and teach each other. I think then this fear will go away.

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

Thank you, Ms. Zahid, for the two minutes.

Now I will go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for a minute or a minute and a half—whatever.

• (1930)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Okay.

I'll be as quick as possible.

I want to congratulate you, dear witnesses. You have been fantastic. I agree with you, there's no question that this should not be a partisan issue. The committee has to produce a report that will be very important going forward.

Now, since I don't have much time, I'd like to ask Dr. Cukier and Ms. Perez the next question. I'd like both of you to have time to answer.

What do you think the most important recommendation of this committee should be?

[*English*]

Dr. Wendy Cukier: Prima facie designation of Afghans as refugees....

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Dr. Cukier.

Ms. Perez, what do you think?

[*English*]

Ms. Kaylee Perez: Thank you.

I would say that investing in the development of an emergency response framework that is set with objective criteria so that can determine how emergency responses are handled in the future, and for IRCC to be funded sufficiently to process this Afghan response and have it not impact the existing caseload....

The Chair: Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe, I appreciate that.

Now I will go to Madam Kwan for a minute or a minute and a half.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

[*English*]

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I have a quick question. The government announced that it would provide an extended family sponsorship process for Ukraine. Should the government be applying the same special immigration measure for Afghanistan?

The question is to both Wendy and Kaylee.

Dr. Wendy Cukier: I believe there are many innovative approaches that can be used, and that's certainly one that would be very helpful to many of the families we're dealing with—for example, my employee I mentioned.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I don't know if you're able to answer the question. It might be outside of your realm. But I wonder whether or not we should be exercising and expanding all the measures to people in Afghanistan.

Ms. Kaylee Perez: I don't have a particular response to your specific question. I'm not familiar with the details of what has been set up for the Ukrainian family reunification response.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Ms. Kaylee Perez: What I will say is, as you have mentioned, that expanding and maximizing the use of all of the available pathways to resettle Afghans in need is something we would support.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Maria, could you quickly answer yes or no to that question?

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Wazir.

Ms. Maria Toorpakai Wazir: I missed the question.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: My quick question was whether or not the government should expand immigration measures to allow for extended family sponsorship applications for Afghanistan.

Ms. Maria Toorpakai Wazir: First of all, I want to thank all these governments. They're already doing a lot.

We still have those Afghan refugees in Pakistan. They're staying with us. Their applications are in progress. I think that for those who are stuck, this kind of thing should be sped up, because there are high-profile Afghans who are stuck and whose applications are still in progress and taking a long time. So yes, I think this would be wonderful.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Kwan.

On behalf of all members of Parliament and the committee, I want to thank the three witnesses. Your input into this is very important and well taken, so thank you kindly. All the best to you.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Ruff.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Before the witnesses are dismissed, I would like to request that Ms. Perez submit in writing to the committee her ideas behind the objective criteria for the framework development. I know that we don't have time here. I guess that's it. That was my question.

Ms. Kaylee Perez: I can do that.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm going to suspend the meeting for a few minutes for the next panel.

● (1930) _____ (Pause) _____

● (1935)

The Chair: I'm going to call the meeting back to order. We will now welcome the representatives on this panel, the witnesses who are here.

We have, from the Aga Khan Foundation Canada, Khalil Shariff, chief executive officer; from the Centre for Newcomers, Dr. Kelly Ernst, vice-president, vulnerable populations; and from Global Affairs Canada, Reid Sirrs, a former ambassador of Canada to Afghanistan.

Welcome, each of you. You have five minutes to make your opening remarks. Please respect the time.

We'll start with Mr. Shariff.

You have five minutes. Please go ahead.

Mr. Khalil Shariff (Chief Executive Officer, Aga Khan Foundation Canada): Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and all of you for inviting me to share some perspectives on the committee's work, based on the Aga Khan development network's extensive and long-standing presence in Afghanistan.

Our work to improve the quality of life of Afghans stretches back 30 years, and our commitment to be present in the country today remains firm and permanent.

Let me begin with some brief background. The Aga Khan Foundation Canada is a Canadian global development agency that has partnered with the Government of Canada and Canadians to improve the quality of life of communities in Asia and Africa for four decades. The foundation itself is part of a global family of agencies known as the Aga Khan Development Network founded by His Highness the Aga Khan. The network operates in over 30 countries and reaches millions of people annually.

Our partnership with Canada in Afghanistan began in 1996 at another urgent time in the country's history. The support of the Government of Canada was critical to our early humanitarian efforts then, and Canada has remained one of our core partners since that time, including through the far-sighted support of Global Affairs Canada, the International Development Research Centre and, notably, thousands of individual Canadians who have contributed as donors, fundraisers, and volunteers, providing essential support over these years.

During this time, we have reached millions of Afghans by enabling strong local organizations; improving the quality of and access to essential services, such as health care and education; advancing the empowerment and equality of women and girls; investing in infrastructure; and increasing economic opportunity.

In all of these activities, we have built on the principle of pluralism, a principle that values Afghanistan's rich diversity and supports the inclusion of all segments of Afghan society. Canada's

work to support the equality of women and girls has been a particularly important part of that partnership.

Today, the AKDN's work in Afghanistan ranges from humanitarian response and the provision of essential services to cultural restoration, telecommunications, hospitality, and financial services. The AKDN employees, some 10,000 staff, almost all of whom are Afghans, give it a distinctive reach and scale. In the face of the current humanitarian emergency, our response plan alone aspires to reach some three million Afghans. We operate with a network of international partners and ongoing collaborations with the UN system and its agencies.

This presence and experience has taught us that determined, transparent and inclusive engagement led and driven by Afghans in their communities can and does succeed. At this time of change and uncertainty, our approach is to listen to and support people at the community level to help them realize their aspirations for a better life, coming together to find solutions that are sustainable, acceptable, and deliverable.

Most certainly, the priority now for us today must be to meet urgent life-saving needs. In addition to the distribution of food, cash, and other necessities, we must also urgently invest in agriculture, livelihoods, and small enterprises to stop the downward economic spiral and reduce the need for humanitarian assistance over time. Support to essential services, such as health care and education, especially for women, girls, and other marginalized groups, is likewise critical.

However, even as we meet these urgent needs, we must at the same time build for the future by investing in a wide range of local development efforts, especially by supporting community organizations and the institutions that enable them. By ensuring that the voices of Afghan citizens continue to be heard at the community level, these local organizations can continue to be a positive and constructive force for development, stability and peace throughout the country.

We are ready to work with Canada, as we are today working with other international and local partners to advance this work, but we face significant barriers.

One is the general banking crisis that is restricting funding flows in economic activity in the country. Another is the barrier that is specifically preventing Canada, both the government and other Canadian actors, to mount the kind of response that our values and track record in Afghanistan demand.

● (1940)

Most importantly, Canadian actors need a clear, predictable and enduring framework to ensure that those activities we all agree are paramount are not inadvertently caught by provisions of the Criminal Code regarding anti-terrorist financing or by applicable sanctions.

Therefore, we would encourage the committee to prioritize swift changes in policy and legislation that would facilitate this critical work, just as the UN Security Council and other like-minded partners have now already done.

Let me conclude, Mr. Chairman. Neither the aspirations of ordinary Afghans, nor the solidarity of ordinary Canadians have been disrupted by the changes of the last several months. We are certain that with the right focus and will, Canada can continue to be a positive force, a beacon of hope and confidence, and a significant contributor to an improved quality of life for all Afghans at this difficult time.

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

We'll now move to Dr. Ernst, for five minutes.

Please go ahead.

Dr. Kelly Ernst (Vice-President, Vulnerable Populations, Centre for Newcomers): Thank you very much for having me today.

I'll give you a bit of background on what I'm about to say.

I'm here from the Centre for Newcomers in Calgary. We're a large settlement organization with a dedicated refugee response and we have a team of people working on the Afghan response. Our scope, though, is not the immediate arrival. After they arrive and have been here for a few weeks or months, we try to provide support to people. We do that through a collaborative effort with local groups—such as the Calgary East Zone Newcomers Collaborative, which is a collaborative of more than 100 different groups—and with national groups, as well. For example, for LGBT people, we work with private sponsors and the Rainbow Coalition for Refugees across the country.

What I'm about to say is based on feedback from the Afghan community leaders locally, Afghan people themselves whom I've met and had focus groups with, service providers that have now provided services to well over 400 people, and various service partners.

Among the most important issues we're facing are the barriers associated with the differential support services based on immigration type. Those are separated among government-assisted refugees, privately sponsored refugees, and refugee claimants, or those seeking asylum in Canada. All Afghans get different types of services based on their status. It's very false, in our minds, and it really needs to be cleaned up.

Those who get the most support are, obviously, the government-assisted refugees. They get all of the services they wish. Although privately sponsored refugees are eligible for those services, they don't always get the services they need, in our experience, because private volunteers and sponsorship groups don't always know about the services, even within their own communities.

Claimants are not offered English-language or settlement support until they become permanent residents. Of course, asylum seekers who have not started their claim get the least amount of support and have to rely on private people for that support.

The other issue I'd like to raise is that this differential response is, to our minds, not well received by claimants—especially knowing that 100% of Afghan refugee asylum seekers in Canada were accepted by the Immigration and Review Board, yet they have to wait months, if not years, to get the services they need...until they are permanent residents. Often, provincial, municipal and private people are pointed to to provide that support, but that, too, is very differential. Provincial and municipal supports do not equal federal supports, which are provided through IRCC. That differential on supports truly needs to be eliminated.

Equality of service, across all refugee statuses, is extremely important. As one of the last panellists said, a *prima facie* noting of a refugee as they arrive, regardless of how they arrive, is extremely important. That also extends to what's going on in Afghanistan at the moment. We are also receiving dozens, hundreds, of requests from people from Afghanistan who are either internally displaced or recently displaced outside of Afghanistan, asking to come to Canada. There's very little we can do with them, given the lack of response by IRCC in those areas and private sponsors' inability to respond.

With that said, I know my time is up. I'm happy to answer questions later.

• (1945)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Dr. Ernst.

Now we will go to former Ambassador of Canada to Afghanistan, Mr. Sirrs.

Please, go ahead for five minutes.

Mr. Reid Sirrs (Former Ambassador of Canada to Afghanistan, Global Affairs Canada): Thank you very much.

Mr. Chair, honourable members, and colleagues, on October 14, 2020, I was appointed as Canada's 11th ambassador to the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. This was my second post in Kabul following my first tour in 2014.

During my time I represented the Government of Canada's interests in the country, focusing on bilateral relations, programming and human rights, official development and security assistance. The vast majority of this was managed through multilateral, non-governmental and civil society organizations with the support of my team at the embassy, colleagues in Ottawa, and at other missions in the region.

My team also supported me in working with the international community to monitor peace talks between the Taliban and the Islamic republic, which were taking place in Doha. As security conditions in the country deteriorated, our priorities expanded to include updating travel advisories and consular messages, exploring options to continue programming in an environment shared with or controlled by the Taliban, developing plans to maintain an embassy presence in Kabul after the withdrawal of NATO and for various evacuation scenarios.

[*Translation*]

Canada has a deep connection with Afghanistan and the Afghan people. Over the past 20 years, we have worked alongside the citizens of Afghanistan to achieve tangible results in democracy, human rights, education, health and press freedom, effectively changing the country from what it was in 2001. A generation of women and men have participated in democratic political processes. The rights of women and minorities have been promoted and advanced. A free and vibrant press has flourished, telling the stories of Afghans and holding the government to account. Literacy rates, especially for women and girls, have improved, and infant mortality rates have declined.

Our legacy includes a generation of Afghans who have seen and experienced a freer way of life with a government that takes responsibility for providing social services, an improved standard of living, and a country where women and girls are active in all aspects of society.

● (1950)

[*English*]

Providing a reasonable duty of care has been a constant challenge in Kabul. The threat of terrorist attacks and kidnapping, coupled with the widespread prevalence of COVID-19, the uncertainty of fragile peace talks and decreased staff levels at the embassy greatly impacted where and how we did our work. The complete collapse of the Afghan forces and the Taliban's rapid takeover of Afghanistan came as a surprise to everyone.

Up until a few days before the decision to temporarily suspend embassy operations, Canada and the international community were expecting difficult times in August and September, but not a complete takeover of the capital. In fact, we expected the Afghan military to defend the city until the onset of winter, allowing time for negotiations to continue.

With this in mind, we were considering options to maintain a skeletal presence throughout the fall so we could continue essential programming as well as support possible evacuation efforts. With the support of a special advisory team from the Canadian Armed Forces we were able to continually update our concepts of operation for maintaining a presence in the country to a temporary suspension of operations and implementation of a non-combatant evacuation operation. This team was also instrumental in securing space in the air bridge that became an essential bridge for getting so many people out of the capital.

On August 15, Kabul fell with next to no resistance to the Taliban, the president and his senior advisers fled the country, and the airport was overrun. Later that afternoon I left Afghanistan on a

Canadian military flight with the remainder of my team and some Afghans, foreign diplomats and international contractors. A few days later, with the support of the Canadian Armed Forces, a special consular team was able to return to Kabul's airport to resume evacuation efforts.

Working under extremely harsh, very fluid and dangerous conditions, this civilian and military team helped Canada assist approximately 3,700 people to leave the country by the end of the month.

[*Translation*]

As we all have seen, this was only the beginning of a sustained effort that has become increasingly complicated in a country under Taliban control. While efforts continue to ensure safe passage for Canadians and Afghans, the growing humanitarian crisis and deteriorating human rights situation are deeply concerning.

Despite this unfortunate reality, Canada will continue its efforts to fight terrorism and to hold the Taliban to their international obligations.

Thank you for your attention.

[*English*]

The Chair: We can go to the honourable members of Parliament, starting with Mr. Chong for six minutes.

Please go ahead.

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ambassador Sirrs, for appearing before us today and thank you for your service.

Congratulations on your new appointment to Argentina, and thank you for your service in Afghanistan.

You said something in your opening remarks that is somewhat surprising to me. You mentioned that the fall of Kabul on August 15 took you by surprise.

At what point did you realize that Kabul was going to fall? Was it the day or two before, or the day of? When did you realize that the Taliban weren't going to stay outside the capital, that they were going to come in and take it over?

Mr. Reid Sirrs: Mr. Chair, thank you very much.

I received information on August 12, which was the Thursday before, that led me to believe that the security of the embassy and all the people who worked within its compound was at risk of attack from the Taliban. As a result—

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you for that. I appreciate that.

It seems to me that the intelligence and advice you got as ambassador wasn't as accurate as it should have been, because from afar, at the other end of the world here, it was clear to many of us in July that Kabul was going to fall. From just reading the standard suite of quotidian publications like *The New York Times*, it was pretty clear what was happening. Hence, statements and letters that were being written by the opposition urgently calling on the government to begin an immediate evacuation were issued several times in June and July of that year.

I just make that general point.

Is it safe to say that the real, urgent evacuation efforts began around or after August 12? When you look at the data, approximately 850 people were evacuated by Canada leading up to August 16, and then suddenly between August 15 and August 29, some 2,800 people were evacuated. Clearly, evacuation efforts significantly increased after the fall of Kabul on August 15.

Was that a result of the government being in caretaker mode, or was that a result of the fall of Kabul and the urgency that the fall of Kabul triggered amongst staff?

• (1955)

Mr. Reid Sirrs: When we made the decision to evacuate on August 12, as I said, that was based on information we got from other sources. We had actually started the process for SIMs beforehand. We were looking at removing those who were associated with the embassy as being immediately identified as vulnerable to attacks from the Taliban, so the process started. The paperwork started to get them prepared to evacuate out.

As a result, people were starting to move out in early August, and then it continued, as you know, through the rest of the month.

Hon. Michael Chong: When did the planning begin? Did it begin in July, or well before that?

The Chair: Ambassador Sirrs.

Mr. Reid Sirrs: Planning in terms of the SIMs policy itself actually went back into March, where we were working with IRCC to come up with a plan for how to introduce a new public policy for special immigration.

Hon. Michael Chong: Did the government ask for advice on evacuating Afghans with enduring ties to Canada, or was this planning that was done at the behest, organically, of Global Affairs? Was this triggered by a request for advice from the government or direction from the cabinet?

The Chair: Ambassador Sirrs, please go ahead.

Mr. Reid Sirrs: Thank you.

Essentially, when we started, we raised the flag back in the fall. Actually, the flag was first raised on the assumption that we were facing a big climate crisis. Drought was becoming quite profound, so we started pushing forward in regard to how to start dealing with the massive onslaught of people who would likely show up at the borders because they don't have food or water.

That evolved as we saw the deterioration in the talks. That devolved or evolved into a discussion on how this was going to be more profound, where we actually do start to worry that the outcome is not going to be positive or in favour of the republic contin-

uing, so we'd better start looking at coming up with measures to get people out.

Hon. Michael Chong: I have last general question.

To the period ending August 5, 2021, NATO allies, including Canada, evacuated over 70,000 people from Hamid Karzai International Airport. The U.K. alone evacuated over 11,000 people. We evacuated some 3,700 people, disproportionately less than NATO partners and allies. The U.K. is roughly double our size. They evacuated almost four times or three and a half times what we evacuated. The U.S. is 10 times our size, and they certainly evacuated a lot of people in the weeks and months leading to the end of August.

Why was our response slower than that of our NATO allies and partners?

The Chair: The time is up, sir.

Mr. Sirrs, please go ahead, very briefly.

Mr. Reid Sirrs: Thank you.

It's a complicated situation, because we were actually dealing with a lot of countries all trying to get out at once. The U.S. had a lot more people on the ground, and I'm not sure if the numbers that are quoted actually include a lot of their own people who are already part of the U.S. stream and not a part of an immigration stream.

• (2000)

The Chair: Thank you, Honourable Member Chong.

Now we'll go to the parliamentary secretary, Madam Damoff, for six minutes.

Please go ahead.

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

Thank you to all our witnesses for being here.

Ambassador Sirrs, I have a few questions for you.

First, just to comment on what you were saying at the end there, you mentioned that the U.S. still had a large footprint on the ground, whereas Canada had left about 10 years prior to that.

We've heard a lot during our committee hearings about the challenges of getting Afghan citizens out of Afghanistan now. You're in a unique position, in that you can tell us a bit about the difficulties in getting out people who had supported Canada and getting the documents they needed from the Afghan government to emigrate and leave prior to the fall, and also whether the Afghan government was putting up any barriers to its own citizens in terms of leaving the country to come to Canada.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Sirrs.

Mr. Reid Sirrs: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

On the documents required to leave, the SIMs process was quite straightforward in terms of documentation. We realized early in the game that we needed to come up with a mechanism. It was actually IRCC that came up with a mechanism called the “single journey travel document”. That was something that allowed people to get out of the country relatively quickly without a whole lot of core documentation—like a passport. We had people with children that had been born two weeks before, and they obviously didn't have a national identity card or a passport.

The issue we found in processing people at the airport very early in the game was that the Afghan government started barring people who did not have passports or their Afghan *tazkiras*—national identity cards—on the planes. In fact, we had one flight that actually was forced to off-load about 70 passengers, I think, because there was one person on the plane who did not have a passport in their hand.

When I made interventions with their Office of the National Security Advisor, as well as their Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I asked for special exemptions and waivers. We were given one for one flight and were told that after that, “never again”. I discussed the issue with my colleagues at other embassies—the British embassy and the American embassy—and with the Dutch and the Danes, for example, and they all had the same problem. They were having difficulty getting people out because they could not get people the documentation to get on the flights to leave the country.

In the end, it came down to a question of a decision at the senior policy level. The president of the country did not want Afghans leaving because he felt that there would be a brain drain, and we retorted that we needed to have part of the brain come with us so that they could come back and build the country later on.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you.

When we were there and we had a footprint on the ground and then left, do you know why we didn't do the planning to bring some of these people to Canada? The previous government brought some. There is no doubt that there were some interpreters who came here, but is there a reason that you are aware of for why we didn't just bring those people to Canada at the time? Ten years have passed from when we were there until now.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ambassador Sirrs, please go ahead.

Mr. Reid Sirrs: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, back in 2013, there was actually another special immigration program for former interpreters with the military.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: A point of order, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: Ambassador Sirrs, hold on for a second, please.

We'll suspend for a few minutes.

• (2000)

(Pause)

• (2005)

[*Translation*]

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC)): We are resuming the Special Committee on Afghanistan.

Ms. Damoff, you have the floor.

[*English*]

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you, Chair.

I think Ambassador Sirrs was answering my question.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Go ahead, Ambassador Sirrs.

Mr. Reid Sirrs: Thank you very much, Chair.

To recap quickly, in 2013, there was an immigration program, a special program, for interpreters with the Canadian military. That program ran its course.

When I arrived in 2014, it appeared that there were those who had missed out and had appealed for another round of the program. At that time, Ambassador Lyons and I made a recommendation to Ottawa to elevate this at the CIC, at that time, to basically see if there was an opportunity to open the program again. The minister at the time decided that, no, sufficient time had been granted, and so the matter wasn't pursued any further.

Ms. Pam Damoff: So we could have actually gotten those people out sooner if we'd increased the numbers, but it was a decision by the government not to pursue it. Is that right?

Mr. Reid Sirrs: I can't say how many we would have got out—

Ms. Pam Damoff: Right.

Mr. Reid Sirrs: —but there may have been an opportunity to get some more people out of the country at that time, yes.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Okay, thank you.

Chair, how much time do I have left, because I lost some time there.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): You have a minute.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Okay.

Mr. Shariff, you talked about how you have 10,000 staff. It's obvious that you have quite a lot of experience and a large footprint on the ground in Afghanistan.

We know that the Taliban is preventing unaccompanied women from leaving the country. Do you have any suggestions for how we can get around this?

• (2010)

Mr. Khalil Shariff: In all candour, our focus is to figure out a way to operate in the country for the people who are remaining there.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Okay.

Mr. Khalil Shariff: As you know, there are tens of millions of Afghans who will continue to remain in the country indefinitely. I really don't think I can add very much to that difficult question.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Okay.

The Vice-Chair (Hon. Michael Chong): Thank you, Madame Damoff, and Mr. Shariff.

[Translation]

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have six minutes.

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

I want to thank our witnesses for taking part in this extremely important study. I would also like to thank Ambassador Sirrs for his service to the country in what is understandably an extremely difficult context.

Mr. Shariff, you seem to be in contact with a number of non-governmental organizations, or NGOs, and a number of people working in the humanitarian sector. We've had representatives of some NGOs appear before the committee. They told us that it was difficult for them to work on the ground in Afghanistan because of the Canadian Criminal Code and the fact that the Taliban are considered terrorists. They are afraid of being prosecuted.

Have you heard about this problem?

[English]

Mr. Khalil Shariff: Thank you very much, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

It is a very serious question and a very serious problem. One thing I hope the committee might look at with some focus is how we can create a predictable, enduring and flexible framework for Canadian actors, the government and others, to operate in the country.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Some people have told us that a motion, for example, could be moved in the House of Commons, asking for unanimous consent. The motion would propose that NGOs should not be prosecuted if they continue their extremely important work on the ground.

Do you think that's a good idea?

[English]

Mr. Khalil Shariff: Mr. Chairman, my sense is that we're going to have to have a pretty robust set of responses to this. We basically have a situation where we have a policy agreement that we should mount a very significant response and a legal impediment to doing so. We need to bridge that gap. I think we have to ask Parliament to act in probably a series of ways, but what I would say is that this should be an enduring fix. It shouldn't be a short-term fix. It should be an enduring fix, because this is likely to be a situation that we're going to confront for some time.

[Translation]

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

On August 25, 2021, your organization, the Aga Khan Foundation Canada, said that it would ensure “ongoing coordination with

the authorities, local communities, donor agencies, and other stakeholders who have supported AKDN's programs and initiatives...”.

Mr. Shariff, is your organization required to work with the Taliban right now?

[English]

Mr. Khalil Shariff: Mr. Chairman, we are present in the country, as I've indicated. Our posture has been from the very beginning to be proactively communicative, to be transparent and open, with the de facto authorities about what we're doing and why. This allows us to continue to operate in the country and to safeguard our staff and our beneficiaries. That's something we're going to continue having to do.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Shariff, for what your organization is doing. We are extremely grateful.

Mr. Sirrs, on August 15, 2021, Canada suspended operations at its embassy in Kabul and repatriated its diplomatic staff.

Why did Canada decide not to allow embassy officials at Hamid Karzai International Airport in Kabul during evacuation operations?

[English]

Mr. Reid Sirrs: Thank you very much, honourable member Brunelle-Duceppe.

On the 15th of August it was a very chaotic day. When we actually were preparing to leave to go into the airport compound, it was evident that a lot was going on. We could hear explosions. We could see fires all over the city. When we came into the military side of the airport itself, it was very obvious that the city was coming under siege. It became evident to us that a whole bunch of chaotic activity was taking place and that it was going to escalate and grow quite a bit.

Therefore, for us when it came down the question of why not leave anybody behind, at the time it looked like the whole airport was going to be overrun. We saw a lot of military aircraft coming in and off-loading equipment and military personnel, and to us it just seemed to be far too dangerous for us to stay put and leave anybody in harm's way—at least until we could get a sense of what was going to happen to the airport.

As we all saw on the TV, there were two planes after ours where people were hanging off the airplanes and fell. It was quite close for us and I think at the time the decision was the right one to make to pull all Canadians out so we that could actually go back in and continue the effort afterwards.

● (2015)

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: That is understandable. I don't think anyone here would have liked to be in your position. Once again, I tip my hat to you.

What impact did the closure of the embassy have on Canada's evacuation plan?

[English]

The Chair: You have 30 seconds, Mr. Sirrs.

Mr. Reid Sirrs: If I understand the question properly, the ramifications were a loss in physical presence in the country. We are no longer able to physically process people for the immigration program. As a result, we did send people back in as long as we could, but the pressure on the airport, which was the only point of egress for all of us to get out, was so high. Canada wasn't the only country, of course. We had many other NATO member states as well as just civilians themselves trying to get out on commercial flights as long as they could. The pressure was so high that we couldn't sustain any more volume to go through. We were given time slots to get out and worked through this air bridge that I mentioned in my remarks. Canada only had so many time slots to get planes in, load them and get people out.

The really biggest ramification is our inability to continue processing. It's now much more complicated to get people processed through the system and on their way to Canada.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

[English]

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

We will go to Madam Kwan for six minutes.

Go ahead, please.

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

Thank you to all of our witnesses for your presentations and, of course, for your work.

I would like to go first to the ambassador, if I may, and follow up the line about evacuation, or even immigration measures to be made available to Afghans. We have heard from other witnesses, including retired majors, who indicated that there would be opportunities, for example, to go to a third country to provide assistance and help people get to safety.

Do you have any information, or can you tell us about what you saw on the ground while you were there, as to how other countries were able to do some of that work? We understand that the United States and some other countries were able to continue that work. Is that something Canada can learn from those other countries, to try to get more Afghans safely through to third countries and then come to Canada?

Mr. Reid Sirrs: Thank you, Honourable Member Kwan. It's an excellent question that is hard to answer, because while we're at the coal face, we're not able to see so much of what people are doing in other countries in getting people to third countries to process.

I do know that the complication for us was making sure that we had people properly screened to get on the flights to come to Canada. I think, moving forward, what we will have to look at are policies and regulations for how to process people more effectively

and more efficiently. At the time, I think we did a very good job given the constraints we were facing.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: What about going forward, and not just looking back, and to say, what about now? People still need to get to safety. The government's immigration measures allow for people to access those immigration measures only if they are in a third country. Many Afghans are not in a third country, so what can Canada do to facilitate that process and what can we learn from other countries that have done that?

Right now the government has announced, for example, that for Ukraine they are setting up biometric centres in neighbouring countries. Can we not do the same?

● (2020)

Mr. Reid Sirrs: I'm going to have to defer that to the immigration authorities who are the experts on that, because certainly we have seen how complicated it can be to get people through the system. We want to make sure that we get the right people through the system.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Let me go to Mr. Shariff from the Aga Khan Foundation. I think Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe was just asking you a question about ensuring that NGOs on the ground would be able to provide humanitarian assistance without having to worry about prosecution from the Canadian government.

[Technical difficulty—Editor]

The Chair: We will suspend for a few minutes.

● (2020)

(Pause)

● (2020)

The Chair: I will call the meeting back to order.

Madam Kwan, please restart your question.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I'll follow up that question. With regard to ensuring that NGOs on the ground would not feel concerned that they might be prosecuted by the Canadian government with the anti-terrorism laws, you talked about having a durable measure, for sure. In the short term, other countries have provided an exemption or entered into a contractual agreement where they would be exempted from the anti-terrorism measures.

Is that a possible option at this time, given the urgency of the situation?

Mr. Khalil Shariff: Mr. Chairman and Ms. Kwan, thank you very much for that question.

Obviously we would welcome such an exemption if it were possible within the Canadian legal framework. I think you're right to say that virtually all our like-minded partners have found a way to carve out the humanitarian and development activities we're talking about. My sense is that we have to work expeditiously to create whatever the mechanism is that will work in accordance with the Canadian legal framework.

I don't think there's a policy issue here. All the other like-minded partners have done this. It's a matter of making sure there's a Canadian solution to this problem.

• (2025)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Absolutely. I think that if the Canadian government wanted to do it, we can certainly do it. Right now, time is of the essence.

I want to ask another question of all the witnesses. It's been brought to my attention that the minister has the authority to create public policies to enable the government to assist at-risk Afghan refugees at his discretion—with his own authority.

In consideration of the vulnerable populations and to protect the integrity of the process, the ministry says that we have not been releasing that information to the public. I wonder if any of the witnesses are aware of this situation where the minister has the authority to exercise special decision-making to help at-risk populations and we don't know what that policy is.

Are you hearing that on the ground?

The Chair: Who are you addressing the question to, Ms. Kwan?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'd like to ask Mr. Shariff that question first and then we'll go to the other witnesses.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Shariff, then Dr. Ernst and then Ambassador Sirrs.

Mr. Khalil Shariff: Mr. Chairman, this is not something I'm current with, so I can't answer the question. Thanks.

Dr. Kelly Ernst: I am aware that the public policies have been used to get internally displaced people to Canada. In fact, I have received a number of refugees based on public policies being administered.

Mr. Reid Sirrs: I'm in the same situation as Mr. Shariff. I'm not up to date on that particular aspect of a public policy for the minister.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much. That's interesting.

I just wonder whether or not you're experiencing anything on the ground. That statement actually came from the ministry, so we

know for a fact that is what's happening. Of course, if we don't know what the public policy is, how it is being applied by the minister and for whom, how would people know at what point they can actually ask for that special consideration?

I'm going to leave that—

The Chair: Your time is up, but you can have 30 seconds.

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

My last question is one I also asked the last panel. The minister has made an announcement for Ukraine that there would be special immigration measures, including sponsorship of extended family members for Ukraine.

Should the minister be applying the same measure for Afghanistan? Do you have an opinion on that?

I would like just a quick answer from all the witnesses.

Mr. Khalil Shariff: I'll just say, Mr. Chairman, that the situation is a crisis situation. I think we should mount whatever response we can muster both in the country and then to support those who need to leave.

Dr. Kelly Ernst: Absolutely. We should do it not only within Afghanistan, but in transit countries and here as well.

The Chair: Ambassador Sirrs, please wrap up. Thank you.

Mr. Reid Sirrs: My opinion is to follow policy and not implement policy, so I would defer to the authorities in immigration. They would be best placed to decide.

Thank you.

The Chair: On behalf of the members, I would like to thank the witnesses for being present today and for their input to this committee. I appreciate that.

I wish all the best to all three of you, particularly Ambassador Sirrs in your new appointment.

Thank you, members. The meeting is adjourned.

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