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Chair: Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal



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• (1910)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Surrey—Newton, Lib.)): Good evening, everyone. I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 10 of the House of Commons Special Committee on Afghanistan, created pursuant to the order of the House of December 8, 2021.

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 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 of October 19, 2021, to remain healthy and safe.

Should any technical challenges arise, please advise me as we may need to suspend for a few minutes to ensure all members are able to participate fully.

Before I introduce our witnesses this evening, I want to flag some scheduling changes for the honourable members. I have been informed that Minister Joly is available to appear on May 2. However, we were scheduled to hear from witnesses in the first hour and another panel of interpreters in the second hour. I propose that we accommodate the minister and Global Affairs Canada officials for the full two hours next week and reschedule the panel of witnesses to appear on May 16.

As we are quickly running out of time before we must submit our report to the House of Commons, we could ask the interpreters to submit a brief. As we have already heard from other interpreters and we got a brief from the other interpreters, I would suggest that the interpreters that were supposed to appear submit a brief to the committee. As you know, time is of the essence. We have to proceed with drafting instructions for the second half of the meeting that we are scheduling on May 16, and then consider the report on May 30 and June 6. Unfortunately, I'm told there is no possibility to add any time to any of our upcoming meetings.

If everyone is in agreement, then we will proceed with these changes in the schedule, and then I can introduce the witnesses.

I can see hands up. There are no objections, so thank you. The clerk will modify the schedule accordingly.

Now I would like to welcome the Honourable Sean Fraser, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship. I have experience on another committee as well, and the minister has been very accessible.

Minister, I want to welcome you.

With the minister today we have Catrina Tapley, deputy minister; Jennifer MacIntyre, assistant deputy minister, Afghanistan; and Nicole Giles, assistant deputy minister, operations.

Minister, you are joining us for a full two hours today. Thank you to you and your officials. You have 10 minutes for your opening remarks. Please proceed.

• (1915)

Hon. Sean Fraser (Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, members, for the opportunity to address this committee on the government's effort to resettle Afghan refugees.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for inviting me today.

[*English*]

As you know, following the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan last summer, the government initially committed to resettle 20,000 vulnerable Afghan refugees. That commitment has now been increased to bringing at least 40,000 Afghan refugees to Canada as part of this effort.

[*Translation*]

I'm proud to say that we've welcomed over 11,500 Afghans to Canada, with more flights arriving every week.

[*English*]

Just last Thursday, over 330 Afghans who supported Canada's mission in Afghanistan arrived on a chartered flight from Pakistan to Calgary, with two more charters arriving this week with both privately sponsored and government-assisted refugees on board.

There are several distinct and specialized pathways that we implemented as part of this effort to resettle Afghan refugees. This, coupled with the unprecedented logistical obstacles and the dire situation on the ground in Afghanistan, has created very serious challenges to the program. That's why I'm pleased to be here today to answer any questions you may have.

I did agree to stay for the full two hours. I am supposed to be somewhere at 8:30, but perhaps we can stretch that. I'll leave it to you, Mr. Chair, to determine the logistics of the committee, given the motion that you've just adopted as well, but I am pleased to be here so that I can provide answers to some of your questions and whatever additional information and clarity I am able to.

[Translation]

I sincerely look forward to receiving recommendations from this committee's report to see what we can continue to do to support vulnerable Afghans.

Our programs include the special immigration measures for Afghan nationals, who, like those that arrived in Calgary last week, directly assisted the Government of Canada as part of our mission in Afghanistan.

[English]

As part of our commitment to resettle over 40,000 Afghan refugees, we plan to welcome approximately 18,000 individuals and families who had a direct, significant and enduring relationship with Canada through their work with the Department of National Defence or Global Affairs Canada.

We've implemented a special stream that is aimed at resettling 5,000 extended family members of interpreters who were already living in Canada and who were not included when family members were resettled in 2009 and 2012. We also implemented a separate humanitarian stream to welcome even more Afghan refugees based on certain particular vulnerabilities, including women leaders, LGBTQ2+ individuals, human rights defenders, journalists and members of religious and ethnic minorities.

As with our standard refugee programs, the humanitarian stream works through a referral system. Individuals don't apply directly to the program. Instead, individuals are referred by designated partners that are trained and experienced in assessing vulnerability and operating in situations of mass displacement and humanitarian hardship. Referral partners include organizations like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Front Line Defenders, ProtectDefenders.eu and Canadian private sponsors.

In light of the current situation in Afghanistan, and as an exceptional measure, we're waiving the requirement for refugee status determination for some private sponsorship applications, which broadens sponsor access to the program.

[Translation]

This is one of the ways we're continuing to work with the thousands of Canadians across the country who want to help any way they can.

[English]

In addition to all these special pathways, we're going to work with partners to use the economic mobility pathways pilot as well. This is an innovative program designed to help skilled refugees resettle in Canada, so we can welcome even more Afghan refugees.

[Translation]

By using our network of migration offices and implementing flexible approaches where possible, we've streamlined applications from Afghanistan to process cases as quickly as we can.

[English]

In every scenario, we're identifying and implementing creative solutions wherever we can find them. This includes measures like waiving certain standard requirements, expanding eligibility for certain prearrival supports, providing dedicated communication channels, delivering new e-application intake tools, undertaking biometrics collection trips and mobilizing significant resources.

By far, the biggest challenge is that many of the individuals selected under this special immigration program are still in Afghanistan. I need not remind members of this committee, amongst any parliamentarians, that this is territory that has been seized by the Taliban—a terrorist entity under Canadian law—and the Government of Canada has no military or diplomatic presence there. Our usual international partners are not able to provide the typical logistical support or arrange for travel in the ways you might see through a centrally managed effort that has a large presence with the UNHCR, for example.

● (1920)

Millions of Afghan refugees have fled Afghanistan. If we want to bring any 40,000 Afghan refugees who are already in third countries, I don't question that we would be able to deliver on that commitment more quickly. However—and this is an important element of this effort to me—we made a commitment to certain individuals and their families on the basis of their work with Canada. We don't plan to waver on that commitment, even if it means doing the harder thing, which is to continue to pursue all avenues to get them to Canada, despite the fact that they might still be in Afghanistan.

[Translation]

We're doing everything we can and innovating new ways to help Afghans inside and outside Afghanistan, including working with NGOs and engaging with other governments.

We're going to continue working to secure safe passage for those in Afghanistan, so they can travel to a safe third country, which allows us to complete application processing and facilitate onward travel to Canada.

[English]

We're working with partners in the region—whether they're our allies, other state partners, international organizations or non-profit organizations—so that we can identify a path forward. For example, we've been partnering with the veterans-led organization Aman Lara, which is helping evacuate individuals from conflict zones. They've assisted in the safe passage of now thousands of Afghan refugees who were destined for Canada.

The biggest hurdle from this mission, from my point of view and since I've been appointed as the minister responsible for this portfolio, is not the processing capacity of the Government of Canada, but the situational and environmental factors on the ground in Afghanistan. We share a lot of these challenges with other like-minded partners. We're not alone in the obstacles that we're facing.

It's important to put Canada's commitment to Afghan refugees in a global context. Unlike other partner countries in the region and some of our allies, we didn't have an established military presence in the months and years prior to the fall of Kabul, yet we have one of the largest commitments and efforts dedicated to resettling Afghan refugees. On a per capita basis, our goal of bringing at least 40,000 Afghan refugees to Canada places us among the top countries in the world when it comes to resettlement. In terms of raw numbers, we would be second only to the United States, which benefited from having a large military presence with logistical support that allowed them to evacuate a significantly larger number of people than all other nations. However, on a per capita basis, there's no question that ours is the most substantial refugee resettlement effort from Afghanistan globally right now.

I look at some of the other commitments that our partners have made. Again, in terms of raw numbers, a commitment of 40,000 is larger than that of the United Kingdom or Australia. It's the same commitment that's being pursued by the entirety of the European Union, more or less, which has 10 times our population.

[Translation]

We have a long-standing and proud tradition of welcoming the world's most vulnerable, and we'll continue working hard to bring people to Canada as quickly and safely as possible.

[English]

Since the fall of Kabul, IRCC has received over a million communications from those who have expressed interest in coming to Canada. Evidently, it's a far larger number than we could manage to bring to our country. Canada's going to continue to work with partners to provide crucial humanitarian aid to those who need it the most in order to support the people of Afghanistan in the years to come. We will be providing a new home to more than 40,000 Afghan refugees.

I know this is going to be incredibly hard news for a lot of vulnerable people, but the really hard reality is that not everyone who has expressed interest in coming to Canada is going to be part of this program. When you're dealing with more than a million requests—not all of them are formal applications—it's a really difficult thing, when you're trying to understand how we can do more to support vulnerable people but know that there are vulnerable people who will not be part of the effort. In the global context, again, with a hundred million displaced persons around the world, it's not feasible to resettle everyone who's vulnerable globally. This makes it a particularly challenging exercise.

As we've said, our priority is those who have directly supported Canada's mission in Afghanistan, families of interpreters and other Afghans from groups who are being targeted by the Taliban. I know that many have been waiting for a response from the Government of Canada regarding their eligibility under the special immigration

measures stream. Over the next few weeks, we'll be communicating directly with hundreds of additional individuals who are newly eligible for the program, as well as many of those who are not going to be eligible at this time.

• (1925)

[Translation]

And let me be clear—we've been working hard to bring those who are already approved under this program to Canada, and more flights are arriving across the country every week. This is in spite of the severe operational challenges we and our allies are facing on the ground.

[English]

We also need to make sure that we support Afghans upon their arrival in Canada. Making this broad-reaching initiative a success will continue to require collaboration across the government, as well as with provinces and territories, resettlement and settlement services providers, private sponsors, francophone minority communities, other stakeholders and all Canadians.

We also established the national Afghan steering committee last August, which is led by Fariborz Birjandian. He's a former refugee and the executive director of one of the largest and most successful settlement agencies in Canada: the Calgary Catholic Immigration Society.

[Translation]

The steering committee is coordinating volunteers and donations on behalf of all resettlement assistance providers across Canada that are welcoming Afghan refugees into their communities.

It's sometimes easy to get lost in the numbers and forget the human element of this story.

[English]

More than 11,500 Afghans have already arrived in Canada. That's over 11,500 lives that have—

The Chair: Excuse me, Minister. I would like you to wrap up, please.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Certainly. It's a good note to end on.

This is over 11,500 people whose lives have been drastically changed for the better as they're welcomed into their new homes and communities across the country after going through a nightmare that most people could never imagine.

I'll save the remainder of my remarks, and to the extent that I have an opportunity to work them into answers, I'd be happy to, Mr. Chair. I look forward to whatever questions the committee members may have for me.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister, for your remarks and for being accommodating to the committee members in spending time with us today. We started at 7:11 p.m., and we'll end the meeting at 9:11 p.m.

Without any further ado, I would go the honourable members.

The first member is Mr. Hallan for six minutes. Please go ahead.

Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC): On a point of order, Mr. Chair, perhaps we could just set aside the last three minutes of the meeting to go over the schedule you outlined at the beginning. I have a proposal to change the meeting of May 16.

The Chair: We'll do that.

Hon. Michael Chong: Okay. Thank you.

The Chair: Please go ahead, Mr. Hallan, for six minutes.

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

Thank you, Minister, for coming to the committee. On April 11, we heard testimony from former Afghan interpreters. They were the ones who came here between 2009 and 2012. Because of the bureaucratic mess that your department created, they felt it was important to do a hunger strike on Parliament Hill to outline the failures of your government.

Do you know how many times you or your staff have met with them since October 2021?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'll be off by a couple. I think they probably met about 28 times. They meet more or less weekly. I've met with them a couple of times myself, including since then.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: That's right. You and your department have met with them 29 times. Out of that, there were promises made to give them UCI numbers and to work with third countries to bring their families safely to Canada. Did you or your office make those commitments?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I try hard to only make commitments on things that I know to be true. I'll work my tail off to achieve that end. With this particular group, we opened up a new pathway, because we wanted specifically to bring the extended families of these previously resettled interpreters to Canada. It opened on December 9. I'm starting to see some movement as recently as the last number of weeks in terms of people who are making it through either the eligibility or security phase. You're testing my memory a bit. I think we're now at about 200 who have been through both the eligibility and security phase, another 150 for eligibility and more are being added now.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Minister, according to them, only about 35% of the families have received UCI numbers, and not a single family member has arrived here. Can you give an update or tell us when you expect those families to come to Canada? When can they get 100% of those UCI numbers, because, as you can imagine, six months is very unacceptable just to get UCI numbers?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Let me say the people you're talking about are stellar individuals who've served Canada. We've created this program because we want to bring their families here. In terms of the date they're going to get here, I'll be honest with you, I can't give you that because they're still in Afghanistan, and some of them face really serious challenges with respect to safe passage. There are others who have made it to Pakistan and who face some unique challenges around leaving there. They have issues with their travel documents too. We're going to do everything we can to get as many of their family members here as possible, but I can't nail down a

date with specificity, because these challenges are subject to factors outside of our control.

• (1930)

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: According to their testimony, after meeting 29 times, one of the results was that 16 more requirements were added by your department. Do you think that's acceptable?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Depending on what challenges you're talking about, some of it may have been an effort to actually avoid other steps, such as in-person interviews, that were not possible, so we could expedite the process despite the fact those weren't available. In and of itself, the number of requirements added is not a "make or break" when it comes to acceptable or unacceptable. It's a matter of whether we're doing everything we can to facilitate their travel to Canada. If that was what motivated those extra requirements, then I think it would be acceptable. If they were put up for the sake of delaying the process, obviously that would not be, but I expect it was the former, not the latter.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: I'm changing topics now to the red tape, which is really rampant within your department. The Liberal-made backlog is so bad that the Veterans Transition Network is shutting down their operations in Afghanistan. Groups such as Ark Salus and Aman Lara, and other veterans' groups and NGOs, have done quite a bit. At that time, they were doing an evacuation plan, and your government was doing an election plan. They had to do on-the-ground work where your government had continuously failed. Now, because of all the stonewalling and all the other hurdles that are being put in front of them, the obstacles, they feel like they can't do it anymore and they're going to pull out.

Why has your department done that? Why are they stonewalling groups that are actually doing more groundwork that, in some cases, your government hasn't done?

Hon. Sean Fraser: With respect, first let me say thank you to all of the groups you mentioned, including the Veterans Transition Network.

I'd point out that Aman Lara has even stated publicly that it was pleased to be working with our office. They've now been responsible for the evacuation of about 2,700 Afghans and have a couple hundred more ready to go, with hundreds more each month. We're partnering with them as well. It's a veteran-run organization that knows exactly what it's doing. I think it's important that we maintain those partnerships.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Respectfully, Minister, the red tape has caused them to not want to do it anymore. It's unacceptable that a group that wants to step up is pulling out because of Liberal-made backlogs and the red tape that's been put in front of them.

Hon. Sean Fraser: I have to disagree with you on something here. I think this is really important.

With regard to the red tape issues, there are real bottlenecks in this mission, and then there's noise that we can always work on. However, the real bottleneck here is safe passage outside of Afghanistan. There are other issues as well, but the challenges we're experiencing are not a case of our putting up so many administrative hurdles for people to go through the process. It's not the processing capacity or any big inventory of cases. It's the fact that it's really difficult to move through territory that's controlled by the Taliban.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: I would argue with that, Minister, because the rate of approvals is quite low compared with the rate for Ukraine.

The Chair: Mr. Hallan, your time is up.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: We're going to move to Mrs. Salma Zahid for six minutes, please.

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

Thanks, Minister, for appearing before this committee.

Minister, there has been a lot of confusion among the public and at this committee about the differences between the situations of people looking to leave Ukraine and those looking to leave Afghanistan. Could you briefly explain some of the differences, such as Canada's ability to operate in each country and the ease with which people can leave each of those two countries?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I think that's a fair question to ask, but what I see when I look at the different challenges with the effort to bring Afghan refugees to Canada and Ukrainians who are seeking temporary safe haven, is that there are some similarities, in that people are fleeing conflict zones at the hands of evil. In terms of the logistical challenges and the appropriateness of different immigration measures, there are some unique facets that I think are worth exploring.

Some things that make Ukraine, from a logistical point of view, somewhat simpler, is that we have operations in and around that region. We've had the opportunity to move equipment into the region because we have long-established presences throughout Europe. I think we have 34 locations where we have visa application centres and biometrics kits, etc. We were able to move people to the region to prepare for this ahead of time.

Similarly, even today there are still significant numbers of people who are seeking to flee Ukraine who can flee westwardly. Although it's very dangerous compared with a Canadian standard, people are able to exit the country to the west and travel throughout Europe to other locations where we may have a presence. That's not true in Afghanistan. We don't have a military or diplomatic presence there now. We don't have access to people for the purpose of collecting biometrics.

The other big difference, and this is a really difficult one, is that when I speak with Afghan refugees who've made it to Canada, they love their homeland just as much as I love mine and just as much as Ukrainians love theirs, but the really heartbreaking piece of the conversation is when they share with you that they know it's not going to be safe for them to go back. They need to have a permanent resettlement program. With respect to those who are coming

from Ukraine, we hear time and time again that the people who are seeking to come here need a safe place to stay while the war ravages their homeland, but they intend to return to Ukraine when it's safe to do so and want very much to be part of the rebuilding of Ukraine on the back end.

These different scenarios create different challenges. At the end of the day, though, I think it's important that we use the right tool for a unique job in each circumstance.

• (1935)

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you.

Minister, my next question is with regard to the situation of Afghan refugees who are currently in Pakistan, one of the bordering countries that has accepted refugees from Afghanistan. A large number of Afghans are presently in Pakistan.

Could you please discuss the challenges facing Afghans who want to enter this country and how long Afghan refugees are able to stay? What is needed from these refugees? What can Canada do to allow them to travel to Canada? How can we make that process easier for them?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you for that. Obviously when you just look at the geography, Pakistan provides one of the handful of places people have been able to get to since this mission began. We actually are seeing significant numbers of people move through Pakistan now and onward to Canada. In fact, the flight I mentioned that landed in Calgary last week with some of those who made a contribution to our mission came through Pakistan. I believe one of the two landing this week is also coming from Pakistan. Therefore, we are seeing significant numbers of people moving.

It's not that simple for everyone who has made it to Pakistan. One of the challenges I find really difficult in this position is that, in different third countries, there are sometimes exit controls put on a person's ability to travel, and those requirements somewhat change by times. Sometimes there are controls on their entry based on what documentation they need. Sometimes it depends whether they've travelled by road, walked across the border at an irregular point of entry or come in by air. When you have changing criteria to enter the country and exit controls that are beyond the control of the Government of Canada, it can make it a real challenge. We continue to have conversations with our partners in the region, organizations that have relationships on the ground, to do whatever we can to prevent the circumstance where people get to a third country but then face the potential that they might have to go back before they can be eventually resettled in Canada.

It is not an easy problem to solve, but I'm very encouraged by the recent flight that landed and the one that will be landing this week.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Okay. Quickly, can you please discuss the sponsorship agreement holder organizations that are willing to sponsor people, privately sponsored refugees? Is there any plan that their quota will be increased specifically for the Afghan refugees or do they have to remain within their specified quotas for the year?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I don't have much time.

The Chair: Minister, you have two seconds.

Hon. Sean Fraser: We'll keep looking at options to do more with our partners as sponsorship agreement holders. They're excellent partners to work with when it comes to private resettlement, and we'll keep looking at options to do more in partnership with them.

• (1940)

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you.

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

Now we'll go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for six minutes.

Please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

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

I'd like to thank the minister for making himself available for two hours today. That is very generous of him.

Minister, the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration issued a press release calling on you to waive the UNHCR refugee determination.

Will you be following that recommendation, yes or no?

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: Indulge me for 30 seconds, because it's a little more complicated than an ordinary decision to waive the refugee status determination.

I'm looking at the 40,000 refugee commitment. We have nearly half that group. It's likely to be made up of those who've made a contribution to Canada. We've already waived that requirement for that group. We're working with sponsorship agreement holders who are largely resettling people who are outside the country. They don't need refugee status determination already if it's a sponsorship agreement holder working with people outside the country.

I'm looking at the extended families of the previously resettled interpreters who came in 2009 and 2012. They don't need one either. When I'm looking at our suite of programs, I don't see that there will be a need to waive, because the people who are going to make up our program don't require it already.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Minister, I gave you 30 seconds to answer my question.

I was looking for a yes or no answer. The request was made by the committee, which your parliamentary secretary sits on, by the way.

I gather that you can't provide a yes or no answer.

The Liberal members of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration support the request. Have they at least reached out to you about it?

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'm sorry. Are you asking whether they made a request?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: It was a news release issued by the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: Yes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: The Liberal members were supportive of the news release.

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: From my perspective, we don't need to, because we already have for the groups that are coming in. There's a unique issue around other private sponsors—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: All right.

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: —but we don't currently have a plan...for those other private sponsors.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You're saying you don't need to.

You also said that Canada had welcomed many Afghans under the government assistance program. Why did the UN not provide any of its available annual spots so that the applications of Afghan refugees could be forwarded to Canada?

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: We're working with different referral partners. The UNHCR has had a bit of a challenge, because its capacity in the region over the last number of years has dwindled significantly. It is starting to ramp up operations in the region in the last couple of months. However, our referral partners are not just the UN. We work with the United States and non-profit partners.

For the people who made a contribution to the government's mission in Afghanistan, we use DND and GAC. The UNHCR is one of the referral partners we use, but not the only one. That's perhaps why it may have a smaller number in this particular effort compared with other traditional refugee resettlement programs.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: We've heard from many groups on this next issue, and you've probably met with some of them.

Can you tell us why you have not recognized the Hazaras as a persecuted group?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: Hazaras could qualify on the basis of referrals into our program with some of these organizations as a religious or ethnic minority that is discriminated against by the Taliban. They could be eligible, but we do rely on the referral partners that we work with to assess their vulnerability before they are entered into the program.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Are you considering that at all? It's a measure that would make a big difference for members of the community right now.

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: Hazaras have already been resettled in Canada. There could be more if they get referred into our program by our referral partners.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You said that 11,500 of the 40,000 expected Afghans had arrived in Canada thus far. At that rate, I'm sure you would agree that we won't even reach half of the target.

Is there a new target? What are you going to do if you don't reach the target?

• (1945)

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: I am very confident that we will attain our target. I see the regular pace of arrivals now. I've been seeing a number of flights coming in each week during the last few months. I do see that we have a regular pace. The biggest challenge to meeting our target on the schedule of next year, that I've discussed, no longer has anything to do with the capacity of IRCC. It's whether we can secure safe passage for the people we've made a commitment to who are still in Afghanistan. There are about 10,000 who have already been through the eligibility approval process and are still in the country now. Solving that safe passage through and outside of Afghanistan will be the next bottleneck we need to address.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You think you'll be able to reach the target, then.

If possible, I would like the department to send the committee a detailed plan of projected arrivals until the end of 2022. Table form would be fine. I simply want to know the rate at which the department is planning to bring in refugees to meet the target. You said that you would meet the target, so logically, I would think the department has a plan to do that. It would be helpful to the committee to see that plan.

[English]

The Chair: Minister, the time is up, but you can respond quickly.

Hon. Sean Fraser: There is no specific schedule for the exact number of people. We are seeing a flight with a few hundred people

on a weekly basis. I expect something like that to continue, subject to the challenge I mentioned on the safe passage issue for those who are still in the country.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

[English]

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

We will now go to Ms. Kwan for six minutes.

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

Thank you to the minister for coming to our committee.

I want to follow up on the former interpreters issue. With respect to the additional documents that are being required of them, many of them would not be able to produce them because they have actually had to burn them. The family members had to burn them. What they are asking the government, in those instances, generally speaking, is to waive the onerous documentation requirements and to provide them with a single travel journey document, so that they can exit Afghanistan to a third country.

Will the minister do that, similarly to what is being done for Ukrainians?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Just to clarify, that is a bit different from what is being done for Ukrainians. We can issue single journey travel documents for people who are seeking to come to Canada from Afghanistan or a third country, but they get the travel document after they have completed the process. The challenge I see with what you propose, which is issuing a single journey travel document that would allow them to exit Afghanistan, is that it doesn't actually solve the safe passage issue.

I'm sorry. It looks like you want to jump back in.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I do want to jump back in.

First, for them to actually get out of Afghanistan, they need to have that as a travel document. Then we can talk about exiting the third country, but without that first document, they can't go anywhere and they are stuck in Afghanistan.

Will the minister issue single journey travel documents for these Afghans?

Hon. Sean Fraser: A Canadian single journey travel document doesn't guarantee you entry into a country, from Afghanistan into Pakistan or Tajikistan, for example. The requirements to enter into those countries will be set by those countries. Having a travel document to come to Canada doesn't satisfy that requirement.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: According to the Afghan witnesses, or the witnesses who presented to committee, many of them have actually said that if you present them with a single journey travel document, they will find a way to get to a third country. There seems to be some discrepancy. The minister is saying that even if they got one, they can't get into a third country. They're saying that they could. Even so, the minister is not issuing those documents to them and is requiring them to provide all kinds of documentation, which some of them will not have because they have had to burn them.

That is the reality. I ask that the minister please understand that. If the idea is that the single journey travel document is not a thing that will work, then find a mechanism that will work. Right now, none of it is working and people cannot get to safety.

I want to raise another issue as well regarding the people who have actually made it to Pakistan. I have been advised that there are about 700 Afghans who have actually made it to Pakistan, but Canada has not done the final step to bring them here to Canada. Will the minister organize evacuation flights for those individuals?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Evacuation flights from Pakistan.... There are people who are in Pakistan who are able to leave now. An evacuation flight wouldn't necessarily.... It's a solution to a problem that we're not having right now.

The issues facing people who have made it into Pakistan depend greatly on the individual case files, oftentimes on the basis of which a person has entered into Pakistan, particularly when people have crossed into Pakistan in an unofficial way. There's a big challenge for certain people who didn't enter with proper documentation to leave Pakistan, even though they have very good reasons for not having that documentation.

I don't think an evacuation flight solves the problem of getting people here. If there are people who have been approved to come to Canada, we're seeing there's an ability for people to be moved from Pakistan to Canada.

• (1950)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: There is no question that some people actually entered Pakistan or a third country illegally because they had no other means to do so. It's the only way they can actually get away as best they can from the Taliban. We have to recognize that.

For them to be in that third country, for them to fly to Canada, it means a single journey travel document would assist them. Waiving those documentation requirements would assist them. It means waiving the refugee determination requirements which, by the way, they would need if they were to extend their stay in a country such as Pakistan, for example, because the visa in Pakistan would actually expire. All of those things come together.

The minister needs to look at these issues not with tunnel vision but with a broad vision as to the combination of approaches that could be done to assist individuals. Instead of saying that doing this or that won't help, if you did all of these together, it would actually make a difference.

This is what the families are urging the minister to do.

I'm quickly running out of time, but I also want to ask this: Has the minister considered women athletes as women leaders? None of them have been able to get access to come to Canada safely.

Hon. Sean Fraser: I don't try to delve too deeply, after we set the criteria, into selecting which groups qualify for the program. Certainly, I think some could. We allocate spaces to referral partners who then identify people, typically based on their vulnerability. We make sure that we're bringing in people who are at risk of persecution.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: On the question around groups to determine who meets the vulnerability requirements, would the minister ex-

pand the groups to agencies such as Amnesty International and other reputable organizations to waive the refugee determination requirements?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I don't want to announce, not having spoken with other groups, that we're going to have new referral partners come on. I'm happy to consider what recommendations the committee may make. The groups that we work with are not unprofessional or don't have the capacity. I'm talking about the UNHCR, for example.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm sorry. I'm not suggesting that they're unprofessional. I'm simply saying that you need to expand the number of groups.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Kwan, your time is up.

I have to go to my own member of Parliament, Madam Findlay, for five minutes, please.

Go ahead.

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

Through you, Mr. Chair, to the minister, this committee has heard a lot of testimony from many witnesses describing your department as slow to react, overly bureaucratic, risk-averse and even indifferent to the fate of our Afghan allies and their families.

When I put that to you, I am distinguishing between the allies, the Afghan allies of ours who fought alongside our Canadians, helping them with language and culture, and those who were already outside of Afghanistan waiting as refugees to come here. You've mentioned several times and spent quite a bit of time on the 40,000 number, but that does not help these people and their families who were promised that, for helping us and standing up for us, they would be helped to come here.

What do you say for your department when we are hearing this testimony week after week in this committee?

Hon. Sean Fraser: My starting point, first, is that I have come to know the people who work in the department, who work in my office and who worked in the previous minister's office. Indifference could not be further from the truth. These are honest, hard-working people who want to do whatever they can to save the lives of people who made a contribution to Canada. I think that's common, frankly, with staff and members from all parties.

One thing that I think is really important for us to reflect on is that the challenges and delays are driven by circumstances that are touched by violent conflicts.

I'll acknowledge as well that I don't think that permanent, ordinary refugee resettlement programs are particularly well designed to respond to crises as they occur in real time. There are a certain number of things we've done with respect to Afghanistan that are very unique to try to address some of those. Again, when I look at the other crisis we're dealing with from a migration point of view, in Ukraine, different innovative tools we were able to develop to respond to that crisis—

• (1955)

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: I'm sorry. I only have a limited amount of time.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Sure, it's your time.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: We're not getting to the specifics. You talk about timelines. There was a time, before the withdrawal in Afghanistan, when this government had a good five months to get people out and had freedom of movement. They were supporting countries. We had diplomatic relations then. Why didn't this government act sooner to help our allies and their families then?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Although there were some people who were talking about the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, I think you saw the world community of like-minded nations respond at about the same time. I'll be the first to say, though I wasn't in this position at the time, that the fall of Kabul happened more quickly than I had anticipated. We can talk about the different levels of relative presence on the ground, but if I put it into perspective, I think the United States had 110 planes on site. Canada, at the time, having ceased our military operations a number of years before, had two, and one of them wasn't in great working order.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Minister, we've heard testimony in this committee that, in fact, there was Canadian intelligence on the ground for months before who were informing our embassy and this government as to the movement of the Taliban and what was happening, yet we also heard testimony from the ambassador that it all seemed to happen within a day or two.

There's conflicting testimony at this committee, but anyone watching the Taliban's movements would have seen them on the move. Certainly people in the official opposition and veterans were telling your government, "This is happening, and we have to get these people out."

We seemed completely ill prepared, and now we're in a situation where your department—now you are the minister—seems to expect these allies and their families to apply online for any amount of assistance. How do you expect them to do that when the Taliban is in control of the country? They can't just go to an Internet café. They can't use cellphones or computers because they're being hunted down.

The Chair: Give a quick response, please.

Hon. Sean Fraser: There was a lot wrapped up in the question.

One of things you come to realize when you take over the helm of an effort like this is that there are very real challenges that people who are trying to access your programs have. You do what you can to accommodate as many people as possible.

The things that keep me up at night, despite the fact that you get an immense reward when you meet people who have come and have a new lease on life in your country or your community, are the people who aren't able to access the program. That stays with you.

There are going to be challenges. There are going to be people who don't make it into the program, but we do everything we can to facilitate people's participation in the program, whether it's by setting up dedicated service lines to call or email, or where we have access to them in person to make exceptions to those practices. You

try to respond to the individual needs of the people you're trying to help as best you possibly can.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Madam Findlay.

Now I will go to Ms. Damoff for five minutes. Please, go ahead.

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

Minister, thank you for joining us tonight and for the work you and your team are doing in Afghanistan, Ukraine and around the world.

We had a number of NGOs here early in our committee meetings that talked about the terrorist financing rules that Canada has in place and the issues they have caused in delivering aid, education programs and many other things to Afghanistan. I'm wondering what you're seeing in terms of immigration, because we have heard a lot about Afghans being unable to leave the country, and whether that terrorism financing legislation is causing issues on the immigration side as well.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you very much for the question.

One of things that's a bit odd is that this is a law that was developed a number of years ago in response to a very different circumstance. I would hazard a guess that the drafters weren't contemplating a scenario of its application where a terrorist organization would seize control of a country and assert its authority to govern.

It has created certain challenges. I think you've heard testimony from other witnesses more on the humanitarian aid point of view. There are some things.... My chief obstacle right now is more tied to safe passage. In theory, when you start to think about the different kinds of operations you could have—should you gain access to the country—if there are some taxation issues where the Taliban's trying to collect funds, it could pose challenges.

It's something that we're looking at. It seems to be more of an immediate concern on the humanitarian side of things, but it's not without application in the immigration context, so we're keeping an eye on it and looking to see if there are solutions we can advance before it starts to cause greater challenges. It's something we have to watch closely but, to date, the far bigger challenge I'm facing is the safe passage of Afghans throughout the country and then onward for travel to Canada.

• (2000)

Ms. Pam Damoff: On safe passage, one of the groups to whom I spoke has said they could assist with that safe passage if they were able to get funds on the ground.

Have you heard that, Minister?

Hon. Sean Fraser: In the early days of my tenure in this position, there were some conversations—I risk stepping on the toes of one of my colleagues—about the role of Global Affairs and partnering with some groups like that. It hasn't been a frequently cited challenge that has come up for those who might be able to facilitate safe passage.

I'd also point out that we are partnering with groups right now that have now moved almost...very soon, it will be nearly 3,000 people outside of the country. There are ways to work where we don't have fears that this particular challenge will be engaged, but it is something, in case other solutions present themselves, that we need to consistently look out for.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Minister, you talked a lot about the challenges with third countries. Even for people who are able to get out of the country, it has been a challenge. We heard testimony from people who asked, "Can't Canada just give them their documents?" Ms. Kwan was asking you a similar question.

Are these countries, like Pakistan, accepting Canada's documents? It sounds like a good solution when you hear it, but on the ground, does it help people get out of the country safely?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'll ask your forgiveness in advance. There's no clear answer for any given individual when they show up at the border of a third country from Afghanistan. The requirements seem to shift over time, depending on which mode of transportation they've used or whether they've crossed in accordance with local laws. As Ms. Kwan pointed out, many people seek to cross contrary to local laws in order to protect themselves. All of these factors impact how a country will respond to the different documents they have on hand.

With respect to certain travel documents that would permit a person to travel onward to Canada, we have made a decision that, before they get permission to travel to Canada, they need to be approved under the process and complete the process of getting here. We don't want to shortcut the process by issuing a travel document that gets a person to a third country but not on to Canada. We do want to make sure that, when a person gets that travel document, it's to come to Canada.

There are other things we're willing to do to work with people as they get partway through the process, such as completing their eligibility screening and getting their initial biographic details. We can provide information to that applicant about the status of their application. If they want to try to use it, they're free to, but we can't consistently say that a certain document entitles them to enter or exit a different country.

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

We'll move to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for two and a half minutes, please.

Go ahead.

[*Translation*]

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

I'm going to continue with Ms. Damoff's line of questioning. The fact that the Taliban are designated as a terrorist entity creates certain challenges. NGO representatives who appeared before the committee told us that it was hard for them to carry out their work on the ground—provide humanitarian assistance—because they were afraid of being prosecuted under Canada's Criminal Code. They made that very clear to the committee.

I put forward a motion in the House calling on the government to simply reassure NGOs that they would not be prosecuted for doing

the important work they want to do. Every party except yours supported the motion, Minister. If I put forward the motion again, would you be able to convince your fellow members to support it the second time around? I believe a number of members in the Liberal caucus wanted to support the motion.

• (2005)

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you.

You'll have to forgive me if I don't have the fine details of the motion.

I would want to make sure that we move forward.

Just for the sake of clarity, I would like to make sure that this legislation doesn't prevent humanitarian aid from going to vulnerable people or potentially interfere with other aspects of the Government of Canada's efforts in Afghanistan. Whether it's the proposal that your motion identified or not, I would want to make sure I have the benefit of legal advice. I would hate to create what feels like a great solution before the House of Commons, where we all feel good about having tried to do something positive, but which potentially doesn't actually solve the problem.

I think we want to get the legal solution the right way.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You are in cabinet. This is something NGOs are asking for, and even your fellow minister Mr. Sajjan told us that there still wasn't a legal opinion on the matter. Meanwhile, the situation has been going on for eight months.

How is it that your government hasn't sought a legal opinion to address the situation and really help people on the ground, when it would be so easy to do? Do you see that as a problem?

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: I can't speak to what conversations were had about this going back to the very beginning. I think it's the kind of thing that we should continue to look for a solution for. Whether it requires a legislative fix or whether it's something that can be avoided by the nature of the activities we conduct ourselves in will depend on a bit of further analysis we need to conduct.

I don't have time to get into a full answer because I'm running out—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Why hasn't it happened already? That's my question.

[*English*]

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

We'll move to Ms. Kwan for two and a half minutes, please.

Go ahead.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The minister's answer to Ms. Damoff is actually contradictory. On the one hand, Afghan interpreters' families have said that they are told they need to get to a third country. Then when they get to a third country, they're asked what they are doing there and told that they need to actually be in Afghanistan because they can't be guaranteed passage if they're in a third country. On and on it goes in a circle, and nobody can actually figure out what the right thing to do is.

People have used all different kinds of measures as best they can in survival mode to try to access safety. I would urge the minister to use flexibility in terms of addressing these issues for these families instead of the rigid approach where they have to go through A, B and C in order to get to D. Otherwise, people will not be able to get to safety.

I also have this question for the minister. Human rights defenders have received written messages from GAC indicating that their applications have been deemed eligible by GAC for the special immigration measures and have been forwarded to IRCC for processing. That was eight months ago, yet IRCC has not even acknowledged receipt of the application. What is the holdup?

Hon. Sean Fraser: You asked two questions or made two points.

On the first, with respect to third countries, my understanding is that people are, by and large, being told they should try to get to a third country in accordance with the laws of that country. In this conversation, the documents we are talking about issuing don't typically entitle a person to enter another country. A journey document to Canada doesn't necessarily mean that you get into another country.

Similarly, exit controls that a third country may put in place may depend on what documentation a person has. If they haven't entered in accordance with local laws, I understand this can be a factor that interferes. It looks like you want to....

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Minister, you have 30 seconds to answer my other question. Please don't repeat the same stuff over again.

Hon. Sean Fraser: With respect to the individual circumstances.... On the referral piece, I would typically have to dig in to see the status of an individual case file. Once somebody is referred to our program, we would typically start processing it.

● (2010)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm happy to pass that information on to the minister, but it's not just one case. There's a class or group of people who are getting stuck and not getting to move forward with their application. They are stuck with IRCC. It is the red tape that is being created.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kwan. I appreciate your intervention.

Now, I would love to welcome the Honourable Erin O'Toole again. I'm sorry for the mix-up in the last meeting. I was a bit emotionally impacted.

Mr. O'Toole, you have a full five minutes today. Please go ahead.

Hon. Erin O'Toole (Durham, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: You're welcome.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: You must have been surprised to see me for some reason.

Minister, it's good to have you here. I'm going to use my time judiciously.

Section 25.1 of the act allows you to make direct ministerial interventions on humanitarian grounds. How many of those have you, or your delegate in the department, issued with respect to the Afghan refugee situation?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'll have to follow up with you to determine the specific answer to that question.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Can you undertake to provide that to this special committee?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I think I can provide you with that answer.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Yes, please provide the number.

Up until August 31—several weeks after the fall of Kabul—the United States and some allies rescued approximately 120,000 refugees. At the tail end of August, Canada was in an election under the caretaker convention. How many ministerial exemptions were provided during that time—August 15 to the end of August—to help facilitate the rescue of people? I understand you weren't the minister, but do you know how many were issued?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I would ask the officials who are here with us, in case they have that information. I don't have that information with me today.

The Chair: Does Ms. Tapley want to respond, or anyone else?

Ms. Catrina Tapley (Deputy Minister, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): I'm sorry, Mr. Chair. We will have to get back to you with a precise number.

The Chair: Thank you.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: If you could table with the committee the specific number of exemptions given during that time period in August, and perhaps in the five months ahead of time.... To my colleague Mr. Hallan's point, for months before the fall of Kabul, veteran organizations and many NGOs were demanding swifter action while it was possible for us to use our assets—C-17s and other aircraft—to get people out.

You were not the minister at the time. Was there any initiative under way that you were told about, as part of your briefing as a new minister, regarding how many we were able to get out in the previous six months?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Is this in the six months prior to my appointment to this position?

Hon. Erin O'Toole: This is in the six months prior to the fall of Kabul.

Hon. Sean Fraser: The information I have is just in advance of the fall of Kabul. I believe we're dealing with about 3,700 people who were evacuated from the area around that time and who were resettled in Canada.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Ms. Kwan mentioned a single travel document that would help facilitate people getting out of Afghanistan or the larger region. Is your department currently working on such a document—the number one request of many refugees and their families?

Hon. Sean Fraser: We can issue single journey travel documents after a person completes that process and is eligible and approved to come to Canada. We can do that, but we don't have plans to start issuing travel documents before a person has completed the process of becoming approved.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Do they have to give documentation to secure that document?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Yes. They would need to also complete the biometrics process before they can be approved to come to Canada. We're not using it to shortcut the process to get people here without having gone through the approval process.

Hon. Erin O'Toole: You said in your remarks that you plan not to waver from our commitment to the people who are at risk due to serving Canada.

When do you anticipate—what timeline from now going forward—completing this evacuation? Is it months? Is there a timeline that your department is using?

Hon. Sean Fraser: We anticipate that we will be able to complete this next year. That was the commitment I made publicly. The precise date will depend on our ability to secure safe passage for the people we have made a commitment to who are still in Afghanistan. We pursue a number of different strategies with different partners to make that happen, but that is one that I can't, with a straight face, tell you there is a certain date when the 40,000th person is going to arrive, because we have to deal with facts that remain uncertain and challenges that remain unsolved.

● (2015)

Hon. Erin O'Toole: Is there a date for the people who are located outside of Afghanistan? I gave you a document related to the family of a constituent who is in Tajikistan.

Is there a shorter time frame for people we know are outside of Afghanistan that their families can expect them to return home?

Hon. Sean Fraser: It will depend on the individual case and where a particular person is. I want to be careful not to speak to an individual case, because I don't want to create an expectation when I don't have the facts, and obviously there would be privacy concerns.

For the most part, we are seeing right now that there is a pretty good ability for us to move people who are in a third country and have been approved. We're seeing a pace of arrivals in excess of about a thousand a month right now, with a new large plane arriving on a weekly basis and sometimes more frequently. If you were to follow that logic, you would find yourself sometime into next year—not too deep into the year.

I'm not as worried about making good on our commitment to those people who are already outside of Afghanistan. I'm not worried about us wavering on our commitment to those in Afghanistan. There is less certainty around the specific date of the arrivals for the people who are in Afghanistan.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. O'Toole. Your time is up. I appreciate the tone that you have set for the committee. All the very best.

Now we will move to Mr. Baker for five minutes.

Please go ahead.

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

Minister, thank you for being with us today.

I want to start by recapping some of what I've heard.

I think it's fair to say that all of us here at this committee, and you, Minister, want to make sure that we bring as many refugees as we can from Afghanistan to Canada as soon as possible. The government set a commitment to bring in 40,000 refugees by the end of 2023. There are 11,500 who have arrived. There are 10,000 more, if I understand you correctly, Minister, who have been approved but are in Afghanistan and need to get out of the country to be able to come to Canada. That is a total of 21,500 who have either come to Canada or have been approved and are still in Afghanistan and need to find their way out. To reach our target of 40,000, that leaves a balance of about 18,500.

We've heard that there are millions of Afghan refugees who have fled Afghanistan. Can you explain why we've not been able to meet the target of 40,000 as yet?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Sure. There are a couple of different factors at play. There are a couple of different things that you have to understand. You left out a key group, as well, of people who are already in a third country who have been approved. We also started this Parliament, at the point when I was appointed, where we had initially a commitment we'd made before the last federal election to resettle 20,000 Afghan refugees. We've had to formally increase that commitment beyond the campaign commitment. We've actually implemented and approved additional spaces.

One thing that's really important for people to appreciate is that, when you look at the process, it's a bit different for government-assisted refugees compared with privately sponsored refugees, and it's a little different for the humanitarian cases as compared with the special immigration measures for the people who made a contribution to Canada's mission. One thing they have in common is that I don't sit in my office in Ottawa and say, "There's a group of people right there. Let's fill up the spaces we have available." We use referral partners for a reason.

On the special immigration measures for people who made a contribution to Canada, we want DND and GAC, which are placed most closely to the people who worked for them, to be able to identify who amongst the people who've applied can qualify for our programs. Similarly when we deal with a private sponsorship group or government-assisted refugees but we have a referral partner, we leave it to those groups to identify the individuals who will be subscribed to a program, typically on the basis of their vulnerability. When we're dealing with spaces we've granted to the UNHCR, for example, and they're ramping up operations in a region, they don't necessarily have the ability to deal with 10,000 people who've already been approved and are waiting for a country to take them. In the case of a traditional refugee resettlement effort, it might look something a little more like that, but when we're responding to a crisis in real time it makes it really challenging.

I made the point earlier that if we just wanted to pick any 40,000 Afghan refugees it would be much easier, because to your point, there have been people who've fled Afghanistan in large numbers for a very long time. We wanted to make sure that we didn't waver on our commitment to help those who've helped us. We've made commitments to the family members of interpreters who were resettled here previously. When we're making a commitment to people who are still in the country, it changes the landscape to a significant degree, but it's important that we continue to work with our referral partners to fill out these programs, which I expect will be done actually quite quickly.

• (2020)

Mr. Yvan Baker: I appreciate that. What I heard you say, and thank you for flagging it for me, is that I'd missed a group of people who are out of country, who've fled Afghanistan but have already been approved.

I'm just thinking about the folks at home who are following this or some of the witnesses who've presented to us who might be watching today, reading your testimony or watching your testimony. If you had to identify or summarize, what are the key bottlenecks for that remaining number of people to reach our target, the 40,000-person target?

I'm approximating between the folks who have been approved inside Afghanistan, the folks who have arrived and others who've been approved who are outside Afghanistan. What would you say are the key bottlenecks in terms of bringing those people here?

The Chair: Minister, please respond very briefly.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Sure.

We need to get them into the program. We need to work with the groups that are going to refer them into the program. Our referral partners have been great. Some are a little more quick than others, and that's great. However, regarding the bottleneck to getting people here, the ones outside the country who are approved, I have faith they'll be able to be landing in large numbers in the months ahead.

The base bottleneck is that it's really tough to move people through Afghanistan. The documentation required to get them into a third country where we can complete the process and have them

travel on to Canada is the big problem that needs to be solved for those who are still in Afghanistan.

Mr. Yvan Baker: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Baker.

Now we'll move to round number three. We'll start with the Honourable Michael Chong for five minutes.

Please go ahead.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, thank you for appearing in front of our committee. I will begin by asking about the special immigration program for Afghans who have a significant or enduring connection to Canada, which was announced on July 23 of last year. How many applications have been received under this program?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I don't mean to not be straightforward, but what you mean by "applications" changes the answer to the question.

With respect to the special immigration measures, someone could fill out a web form indicating interest. Then they would get referred into the program by our referral partners and we'd issue an invitation to apply. At that stage, they'd officially come to apply.

Hon. Michael Chong: How many invitations to apply have been sent out?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I don't have the precise number. Does one of our officials have that? I can provide it after if you'd like. That would be fine.

Hon. Michael Chong: Yes.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I have it, Minister, if you'd like it.

The Chair: Hold on. It's one person at a time.

Ms. Tapley.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Minister, we have 14,818 applications, and that's by individual.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Chong.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

How many of those 14,818 applications have been approved?

Hon. Sean Fraser: If my officials have the number with them, I'd be happy to provide that.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Of those applications, we have approved more than 10,000. Of those, 5,644 are here in Canada and resettled. We have another almost 5,000 in our landing inventory, which means they've been approved. The rest of those applications are at various stages of review and processing.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you.

How many of those roughly 5,500 individuals here in Canada had left Afghanistan by the end of August of last summer?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: With the exodus from Kabul, we were able to resettle about 3,700 initially. I'll have to double-check whether all of them fall into that same category of special immigration measures that we put in place, but the majority of those would fall into that category.

• (2025)

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you for that.

I believe a significant number of the 3,700 were not Afghans but were other nationals, but I think we can clarify that later. If you had that more detailed information, it would be helpful.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: They were all Afghans, Mr. Chong.

Hon. Michael Chong: All 3,700 were Afghans; is that correct?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: That's correct.

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

Minister, why was Canada so much slower? In your opening remarks, you mentioned measuring Canada's per capita contributions. Why did we punch below our weight on a per capita basis in the days leading up to the end of last August? When I say we punched below our weight, as the deputy minister indicated, Canada evacuated some 3,700 people from Kabul by the end of last August. The United Kingdom has approximately double Canada's population, and under Operation Pitting, which was their analog to Operation Aegis, they evacuated 13,000 people from Afghanistan by the end of last August.

Why is it that on a per capita basis, we did about half of what they were able to do when it came to evacuating Afghans with an enduring and significant tie to Canada?

Hon. Sean Fraser: One of the things that are important to understand is that we didn't have a significant logistical presence on the ground that would allow us to move large numbers of people to the same degree that certainly the United States had. I would point out that we've now caught up to or even, in some instances, surpassed a lot of the folks who may have evacuated larger numbers in those few key days or weeks, in terms of the number of people who are already resettled. The comparison with the U.K. is interesting, because some people are there but their status is not yet finalized, but I have full faith that we're going to surpass those numbers soon.

Your question about those few key days really has to do with the fact that we hadn't had a military presence since 2014, and even our diplomatic presence wasn't of such a nature that would allow us to move thousands and thousands of people in a very short period of time. It required a lot of collaboration with others.

The Chair: Mr. Chong, thank you very much for your intervention.

Now we'll move to Mr. Sidhu for five minutes.

Go ahead, please.

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

Thank you, Minister and your hard-working team at IRCC, for taking the time to be with us today and sharing your insights. We very much appreciate how approachable you are about joining this very important committee.

Minister, in your department's news release of August 13, you listed the Manmeet Singh Bhullar Foundation as an organization you would be working with. Can you speak to the work and legacy of this group in terms of Afghanistan?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you.

First of all, I have had the opportunity to meet with representatives of the Manmeet Singh Bhullar Foundation. I know there are people sitting at this table who have connections to the organization. Maninder, your advocacy for them is really deeply appreciated.

I don't need to regale folks with a history of the organization. Obviously, he was somebody who made a remarkable contribution to public life in Canada and made it his mission, before he sadly passed away, to help resettle some vulnerable minority groups, including a group of Afghan Sikhs whom I had the pleasure to meet with during a recent trip with one of my colleagues, who happens to be chairing this committee.

When I saw the... It blew me away. I'm sorry. I'm at a bit of a loss for words. There was a room filled with almost a hundred people—not all of them came in this particular instance from this one particular group—including a 75-year-old man who was wanting to work and give back to Canada. We had young kids who were very grateful to be there. Seeing this group, which potentially faced persecution, not just be welcomed in Canada but to come with a spirit of wanting to give back, it was really an extraordinary experience for me.

• (2030)

The Chair: Just for the information of the committee, I met with Mr. Bhullar, Manmeet's dad, yesterday in Calgary, and there is only one family that is left. The other family, he told me, is here in Canada.

Mr. Sidhu.

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

Thank you to the minister for those insights.

Minister, we are speaking about settlement agencies and the work that many groups here in Canada are doing. As you know, Canada has a stellar reputation of welcoming the world's most vulnerable. However, we know that getting them to Canada is only half the equation.

Minister, what are we doing to ensure that Afghan refugees have the support they need in order to succeed when they start their new lives in Canada?

Hon. Sean Fraser: This is really important. I think sometimes, from the public's point of view, we think the refugee journey ends when the plane lands at the airport.

Mr. Sidhu, you joined me recently at Pearson, when we saw a group who arrived from Tajikistan. For the people who arrived, it was the beginning of a new chapter and an entirely new life. That chapter only starts out on a positive note if people get the kind of support they need when they are here.

To the point of your question, to make sure that people are set up for success, we rely on an extraordinary network of settlement agencies across Canada, as well as a partnership with the Province of Quebec to provide settlement services to new arrivals, to see groups being able to provide language training and in some instances child care, and to give them those supports they need to know such as how to sign up for a bank account or apply for a job. In those early days, it matters immensely.

I'm finding that people find a lot of comfort in being part of a community when they arrive, when they have folks who may be from their own country of origin, may have access to the restaurants they enjoy and can have a bit of a home in the new community where they arrive.

Our settlement agencies are very good at working with groups to provide those kinds of experiences, but whether you're talking about the hard, essential supports, such as housing or income support, whether it's the training offered through settlement agencies or whether it's those soft supports at the community level, we do whatever we can to make sure that people receive a full suite of supports, because when they do well, we all do better as a result.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Through you, I'd like to thank the minister.

I think it's important that, as Canadians, we continue to support those who are most vulnerable. I know that Canadians across the country are stepping up. From my recent visit to Vancouver, meeting with local Afghanistan groups through the chair's office in Surrey, I know a lot of good work is being done, but I want to say thank you so much for the hard work that you and your department are doing.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Sidhu.

We'll move to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

You have two and a half minutes. Please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I hope you'll find my tone acceptable.

We all know how precious every single day is for Afghan interpreters who worked with the Canadian Armed Forces, not to mention for their families. We all recognize the importance of their situation.

How does IRCC's process work for Afghans who still don't have Internet access?

Please keep your answer brief. I don't have much time.

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you. There have been a number of different things we have tried. Even in the early days, I think there were instances where departmental officials had taken to using WhatsApp to communicate with people, which was a more prevalent way of communication for people locally. Trying to figure out the way locals communicate is really important—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Sorry, Minister, but I'm asking about those who currently do not have access to the Internet.

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: Okay.

Right now, given where our programs are at and the fact that we're using referral partners who are fairly sophisticated, I don't see it being a huge obstacle. However, for people who are trying to get into our programs and aren't there yet, they can also work with people in Canada who are trying to help them. To the extent that we don't have access to a person and the person doesn't have access to the Internet and who, because they don't have the personal connection, can't get paper copies, and for whom, even if they had paper copies, it might still be difficult to send them given their personal life situation, there are people who are facing obstacles as a result of that. I don't want to sugarcoat it, but we do, by working with groups who can represent them or advocate for them, have the ability to get them into a program that way.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I see.

At our last meeting, I asked witnesses why Canada had to subject interpreters to biometric testing when they had already been screened during the war. Everyone agreed that the practice made no sense. They have already gone through security screenings given that they worked for Canada's armed forces, and now, we are making them go through the biometrics process. I'm sure you would agree that finding a place to have photos and fingerprints taken isn't exactly easy.

Do you agree with all of the witnesses who appeared before the committee and said that the requirement made absolutely no sense?

• (2035)

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: In the limited time I have, I will say that, when it comes to something as important as national security concerns, I like to listen to the advice of security agencies. Having a biometrics process in place is an important part of the process, and I'd remind you as well that there are a lot of people who did not necessarily get screened by the Canadian Armed Forces who could still be part of our program. I'll continue to follow the advice of experts in national security rather than trusting my gut on something.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: They nevertheless have status—

[English]

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

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: I am so sorry.

Generally, the tone in this committee has been perfect and I'm very happy with the way members have dealt with the past many months. I'm looking forward to the little more time that's left.

Now we'll move to Ms. Kwan for two and a half minutes.

Please go ahead.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Former Afghan interpreters have advised us that applications submitted since January 12 have yet to receive a file number. That's about 65% of the 300. This is about the same time as the government began its effort to expedite the process for Ukrainians.

Could the minister advise us how many existing staff or FTEs were assigned to process the special immigration measures for Afghan nationals, and how many new staff or FTEs were hired and when? Was there any change in staff deployment by IRCC for the Afghan measures since August 2021? If the committee could get those numbers if the minister doesn't have them at his fingertips, I would appreciate it. I'd like those numbers broken down by staff and FTEs, new and existing in the month to which this applies, and then the offices as well as the streams.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Do we want to just see if our officials have those now?

I doubt they have that particular information at their fingertips, but if not, we can....

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Maybe just a quick answer, because I have a minute and a half.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: I have some, but I don't have it all. We have moved temporary duty officers into the region. We do them in rotations now to keep up that work. We have reprioritized staff from other lines of business to work on these particular lines of business, but for the exact number that we have used throughout, we'll have to get back to the member.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I would appreciate getting the exact numbers broken down by streams, months and offices.

Could the minister advise us on how many interpreters and collaborators who helped serve Canada are still in Afghanistan and how many of their family members are still in Afghanistan?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I don't have that breakdown by.... I'm sorry. You said, interpreters and collaborators. Can you tell me what you mean by "collaborators"? Are you talking about people who came in the SIMs stream?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: No, I mean people who actually helped and who may not necessarily be interpreters, but who also helped the

Canadian military. They could be guards, for example, who worked at the embassy.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Okay. I'll ask our deputy minister.

Do we have it broken down by that information to provide to the member?

Ms. Catrina Tapley: We would have that number for the applications that we have on hand, Minister. For those extended family members of interpreters who were resettled in 2009 and 2012, we believe all but 250 are still in Afghanistan. For those remaining SIM applications, Ms. MacIntyre—

The Chair: The time is up now. We'll come back to you.

Ms. Jennifer MacIntyre (Assistant Deputy Minister, Afghanistan, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): It's just over 5,000, Mr. Chair. It's closer to 6,000.

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

Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

We'll move to Mr. Hallan for five minutes. Please go ahead.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

To the minister, through testimony in this committee, we've heard from different generals and majors and through the VTN and NGOs that there was a heads-up given months in advance. The UN-HCR testified at this committee and said it briefed the government in January 2021 about Kabul falling. What we see is a repeated pattern of knowing what was happening and no action being taken.

Twenty-three of your own Liberal MPs warned the government in December 2020 about the fall, but the PMO told those members to mind their own business. It's a very concerning trend that we kept hearing. It caused a lot of chaos, as you know. IRCC gave the wrong information to applicants at the time when Kabul was falling. You and your government were worried about knocking on doors instead.

From January 2021 to the time of Kabul, was there any game plan at all? If there was, can that be tabled?

• (2040)

Hon. Sean Fraser: Before I answer, I have to say I appreciate that everybody's had.... Not to be the tone police, like our chair, but I think everybody's interested in collaborating. I think everybody wants to move the needle on this. I take exception to the idea that, because there was a federal election on the go, progress couldn't have been achieved. We saw thousands of people being resettled. I think that the election campaign was a particularly important one for the people we're dealing with—

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Minister—

Hon. Sean Fraser: No, I'm going to answer this question. We increased our commitment from 20,000 to 40,000 people. I didn't see a similar commitment in your election campaign. I look back to 2009 and 2012, and I see a total effort that brought 800 people here and their families were left behind.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Minister, I will tell you that because of the campaign, MPs' offices were shut out from—

Hon. Sean Fraser: If we want to turn it into a partisan effort—

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: —making inquiries.

The Chair: Mr. Hallan, can we be a bit more respectful and let the minister speak? I usually don't cut people off. I would love to see that you want to hear what the minister has to say.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: It's the tone of it.

Hon. Sean Fraser: I will wrap up. I don't want to turn this into a partisan bickering match. I have to say that everybody at this table, on Ukraine, has been pulling in the same direction.

Alexis, you've been advocating for chartered flights. We're moving forward with chartered flights and other solutions. Jenny's been great in raising the need to do biometrics in third countries.

Jasraj, you've been great in talking to me about the need to help people here—

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: I only have a bit of time. My point is that there were months of preparation when things could have been done, but nothing was done.

There was an election. We will hear from your side that an election was important enough to abandon the people from Kabul. We know that some of the decisions made by IRCC cost people's lives. They were sent to the wrong gates at Kabul airport. They were told to wear red and they were targeted by the Taliban. To say that it was an important election, I would wholeheartedly disagree and many Canadians would too.

The fact is and the reason I'm raising this is that we don't want this to happen again. This crisis that happened in Afghanistan highlighted the fact that IRCC, under the Liberal government, cannot do two things at once. It cannot do everyday business. We saw that because our MPs' offices were shut out from making any types of inquiries because of the election. All of the resources were being pumped into Afghanistan. That's what we know. Every MP can attest that we could not make regular, everyday inquiries during that time. It's because a selfish election was called.

Again, your government had months to prepare. Was any plan made between January 2021 and July 2021? Was any step taken in between that time?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Let me clarify. When I said the election was important, I meant on the issue of resettlement of Afghan refugees. We made a commitment in our election platform campaign to resettle 40,000 Afghan refugees. To the additional 20,000 who are going to get here because of that campaign commitment, I think it was very important.

As a point of contrast, I've yet to see what my honourable colleague's plan was to welcome people from Afghanistan.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: We had a very clear plan. Because of the Liberal-made backlog and bureaucratic mess under the Liberal government, our plan was to create more private sponsorship. I privately sponsored a family. It took the Liberal government four years to get them here. We knew, as Conservatives, that we needed to get away from the bureaucratic mess that the Liberal government created and have more private sponsorship, because it's a better way to go. There's less burden on taxpayers that way as well.

We had a very clear plan in our platform.

I would just like to, if I could.... I believe I'm up but—

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Hallan. Your time is up.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: On a point of order, can we get a few documents tabled?

The Chair: I will allow you to proceed on a point of order.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: I'd like the officials to table a few things, specifically, any instructions that were given to IRCC employees for processing Afghan refugee cases and Afghan special immigration measures cases from January 2021.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Chair, this isn't a point of order.

Mr. Yvan Baker: Yes, it's not a point of order.

• (2045)

The Chair: Ms. Damoff, please go ahead for five minutes.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you, Chair.

Minister, I'm going to take us back to the really difficult situation people are facing in Afghanistan right now. There are challenges that people are having, trying to get out of the country. We know that women and girls are unable to travel without a male escort.

Minister, what are some of the innovative things that you're doing at your department to try to get these really vulnerable people out of the country?

Hon. Sean Fraser: You'd think after seven years of learning that we would know how to work these things.

Thank you for the question. The challenges are extraordinary, and we've been over that. One of the things that I think is really important is.... We sometimes lose the human stories behind some of these cases, when we talk about the numbers and the process. The treatment of women and girls by the Taliban is horrific.

I'll give you an honourable mention here, Ms. Damoff, for your work on the status of women committee during our first two and a half years here together. You've been a stalwart champion for women and girls since the moment that we've ever met.

There's one particular instance that has stuck with me that I just can't shake. There was a young 10-year old girl who was on her way, trying to come to Canada, and who had already been through a huge part of the process. She was killed at a checkpoint by the Taliban. We don't know with certainty whether that particular person was targeted. This is the same group who is now even removing Canadian citizens from an airplane because they were travelling alone.

If there's one comfort I take from our presence in Afghanistan, it's that there's an entire generation of girls who benefited from an education and whose lives will hopefully be changed.

Some of the things that we're doing in particular on this mission to help women and girls.... I'm sorry. I'm distracted in my own mind over that case. If you look at the eligibility criteria for the humanitarian stream, there's a huge focus on supporting those who are vulnerable because they're women. Sometimes it's just the fact that they were women leaders. Sometimes it's the fact that they were women leaders who were changing the society in a way that wasn't convenient for Taliban operatives. It's no coincidence that we were targeting women parliamentarians and judges. It's not because we like parliamentarians and judges as much as we might. It's because they were adopting laws that were promoting gender equality, or as judges, putting people in jail who violated principles that we believe in.

We also work with organizations that have an expertise in identifying people based on either vulnerability or the criteria we set out, including somebody's work as a human rights defender. Canada was the first country in the world to establish such a stream, and it's something we collectively can be proud of by trying to work with groups on the ground who can identify people on the basis of their vulnerability, including people who are vulnerable because they're women.

I think it's a strength of this particular program, but I'll rest a lot easier when I see that we've achieved our goal to get more of those women here to Canada.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Minister, I just have over a minute left. Could you speak about the importance of having government-sponsored refugees come to Canada, and how has that changed since we were elected in 2015?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you for this. Although I don't necessarily take it this way, there was a comment made a moment ago about it being less of a burden on taxpayers when we're dealing with privately sponsored versus government-assisted refugees. I think it's really important that we are all careful in our language. Refugees are not a burden on our communities. They are huge contributors.

I have seen government-assisted refugees—technically this was a BVOR application—show up in my community with nothing, start a chocolate factory and put dozens and dozens of my community members to work. I remember my friend Tareq saying that he experienced for the first time somebody asking why he was coming to Antigonish to take his job. That was the first guy they hired at the chocolate shop.

These are the kinds of stories I hear about from the government-assisted refugees I meet. They run restaurants in my community. There's a young guy named Omar—if you're watching, Omar, hello. It's good to see you.

He opened a lemonade stand outside his parents' restaurant on the Pictou waterfront to save enough money to buy himself a Nintendo Switch. His mom told him about a young boy back home who needed to save money for surgery because he had throat cancer, and Omar spent his summer raising money for some boy he had never met with throat cancer on the other side of the world. Somebody did buy him the Switch, by the way, so it all worked out. But—

● (2050)

The Chair: Minister, please wrap up.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Sure. I'm sorry. I could talk all day about this, Chair.

Long story short, bringing government-assisted refugees to Canada to complement the strong private sponsorship stream is important. It allows you to effectively target people who you want to bring here, and it allows you to move a lot more quickly than would otherwise be the case.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Damoff.

Now we can move on to round four. I'll go back to Madam Findlay for five minutes.

Please go ahead.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have so many questions.

I still don't entirely understand, Minister, how it is that the IRCC expects people in safe houses and on the run from the Taliban, partly because Canada and its partners leaked database information and partly because the United States left database information behind.... How are they expected to get biometrics done in that country, and how are they expected to access WhatsApp or any kind of Internet application?

Hon. Sean Fraser: There were a couple of elements to the question. First, on leaked information, no data leak is okay, and no privacy breach is okay. I think the event you are referring to—and feel free to correct me if I'm wrong—involved someone who “replied all” to an email, and the email addresses, in some instances, may have had details about who the individuals were. Other people on the thread, if they uploaded their profile details, could have seen them. We responded by changing the practice so that it was a web form rather than email correspondence, so that kind of thing couldn't happen again.

With respect to people who are sort of moving about the country, are you asking how they are expected to use WhatsApp?

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: No, I said that the IRCC is seeking biometrics done in-country and also online applications filled out for people who are in safe houses and on the run from a ruthless regime. How is that reasonable in your view as minister? Why are there not special exemptions in this specific country?

Hon. Sean Fraser: First, getting biometrics in-country would be a major development, but it doesn't solve all of the problems. This is one of the challenges that we face, though. Most of the people who are going to do biometrics, as it stands now, will have to secure safe passage outside of the country and do them in a third country, kind of like we've now set up with Ukraine since we had to shut down our visa application centres there during the early days of the invasion.

The safe passage piece is what we need to solve if we're going to allow people to get to third countries where we can safely administer biometrics kits and have people complete the process. It's one of the real challenges when you're dealing with a territory that's been seized by the Taliban.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Minister, part of the problem that I don't understand is that, when we're dealing with people who can be vouched for by Canadians.... This isn't just some country somewhere where people are trying to get out. These are people and their families who have fought alongside Canadians. We have all kinds of veterans reaching out saying, "I know this person. I know their family". People who served in police services in the military who were interpreters, we know them. There are people here who know them, yet we're still using the same requirements we would for anyone coming from anywhere.

Hon. Sean Fraser: My view is that, when you're dealing with a conflict zone, the need to deal with a robust security screening process increases. Not only do you deal with people who might be potential bad actors and you didn't realize that—the vast majority of people are good and innocent people who would like to come here; I recognize that—but you also are able to confirm that a person is who they say they are.

When it comes to the screening process, it's really important that we follow the advice of our national security agencies. I'll trust my officials to correct me if I'm wrong here, but my understanding is that about 80% of the cases that are rejected for inadmissibility on security grounds come through the biometrics process.

In addition, before you do biometrics, we do an enhanced biographic screening and get whatever information we can on the basis of a person's name, age, where they've been living, if we have access to a social media page—

• (2055)

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: I understand all that, but the thing is that they're being treated the same, as though they aren't refugees and they're just wanting to come to Canada. We are talking about refugees, people fleeing from persecution and death squads. I don't need to tell you that these are very serious situations they're facing. It's not a normal situation.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Madam Findlay. Your time is up.

I will give only a few seconds to you, Ms. Tapley, if you wanted to clarify, as the minister asked you to.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: No, the minister was correct.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Deputy Minister, and thank you very much, Ms. Findlay.

Now we'll go to Mr. Baker for five minutes.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Yvan Baker: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, I want to go back to our commitment to the 40,000. Can you talk about the 40,000 refugees settled in Canada? There are many countries that have been involved in Afghanistan over the past number of years, before the fall of Kabul.

I'm wondering if you can share with us how our commitment and what we've done compares to the commitments and what others have done in terms of resettling refugees.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Sure. Thank you.

Before I do, I want to offer a response because I think this is an important thing for people to understand about this particular conflict. Every refugee initiative that we've launched has a similar security screening process. One thing that my eyes have been opened to is that it's really challenging to respond to a crisis for a refugee purpose in real time as it unfolds.

If you look at Syria, we were dealing with hundreds of thousands of people who had fled, starting three years earlier. The groups that we were pulling people to Canada from were in camps in Lebanon and Jordan and had already been processed by the UNHCR. To deal with people as a conflict emerges and still apply a rigorous security screening process is a whole new level of difficult that I don't think we've dealt with—certainly not in my lifetime.

To Mr. Baker's question, my honestly held belief is that Canada is the best in the world when it comes to resettling people for humanitarian purposes. If I go back to the middle of the pandemic.... I was with the High Commissioner for the UNHCR just a couple of weeks ago in Ottawa. He made the point to anyone who would listen that Canada kept the global system of resettlement alive over the course of the last few years when some other players around the world retracted and the world was shut down for reasons that we all appreciate now.

From my perspective, I was blown away when I came to learn that, in the year 2020, Canada resettled one-third of the total number of refugees resettled around the entire world. I think this is something Canadians should be really proud of. It's not just a government thing. Canadians and communities across the country have embraced refugees with open arms.

On a relative scale of commitments in Afghanistan, on a per capita basis, we're the ball game. On a raw numbers basis, the United States is the tops because they had such a massive evacuation effort. Australia's made a significant commitment with 31,500 over the next four years. I pulled some of these numbers ahead of time. I see that the European Union has a total just shy of 40,000, with 37,000. New Zealand has just shy of 1,500. The United Kingdom has 20,000 over the next few years. They may go further because they have two programs, but I haven't seen clear targets on one. The U.S., of course, has provided support for the resettlement of up to 95,000. We've been working with the U.S. to have some referrals that they've evacuated be resettled in Canada. Some of those people are in process already.

Those are most of the big players on the scene when it comes to the Afghan refugee resettlement. By this time next year, with the exception of the United States, I expect Canada will probably surpass not just where other countries are but potentially their entire goal over the life cycle of this entire effort, which sometimes spans four or five years.

From my perspective, we're owning up to our reputation as being the best in the world at what we do, and this is what we do.

• (2100)

Mr. Yvan Baker: Thank you for that.

I only have about a minute left.

When I asked you earlier, one thing you talked about as the key bottleneck in bringing refugees from Afghanistan more quickly to Canada was the issue of securing safe passage. Can you talk very briefly about what's being done to try to help secure safe passage for those trying to flee Afghanistan?

Hon. Sean Fraser: This is the biggest challenge I face as immigration minister. Afghanistan is what I've spent more time on than anything else. This is one where every time you feel like there might be a solution or a lead, it seems to escape you.

For reasons I think we can all appreciate, Canada's not on friendly terms with the Taliban. I don't expect that's going to change really soon. We work with partners in the region. We work with international organizations and we work with allies across the world. Different groups have been talking about or planning to set up potential humanitarian assistance programs, but none of these have the capacity to secure safe passage or do the in-country biometrics that we discussed during a previous question.

We work with Aman Lara, which is a veteran-run organization that has now successfully moved 2,700 people outside of the country. Every time we find an opportunity to work with a non-profit partner, an international organization or another state partner, we try to connect with them to figure out how we can work with them to move people throughout the country.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

Thank you, Mr. Baker.

We'll go to Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe for two and a half minutes.

Please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Thank you again for meeting with us today and for doing such a great job answering our questions.

I appreciate the minister making himself available to the committee for two hours. We are certainly grateful.

One thing I admire about the immigration minister is that he seems to have a lot of common sense. That brings me back to the last question I asked him.

Afghan interpreters who underwent security screenings by the Canadian Armed Forces are now being made to provide biometric information. If we apply some common sense to the situation, it's clear that there's a problem with that requirement.

Minister, I'd like you to confirm what you told me earlier. Did you really say that the Canadian Armed Forces had lower security standards than IRCC in relation to Afghan interpreters? It's a straightforward question.

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: No. I would describe it in a different way. I understand where you're coming from, but I think when you're dealing with people who may not have been connected very much over the past decade to the Government of Canada, when you're dealing with others who've not had that same relationship and maybe haven't gone through the screening process before—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I'm really talking about Afghan interpreters who underwent security screenings by the Canadian Armed Forces and who now find themselves having to hide, flee or find a biometric data collection centre despite having already gone through the process. It's ridiculous, really. I think we can do better than that for these people. I think we can exercise some common sense here. That's a quality I admire about you.

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: Again, when it comes to matters of national security, I use my common sense to rely on people who are experts in it. Our security screenings are typically valid for a period of 10 years in Canada. There might be individuals who, if they had a recent security screening, could potentially come into the program on that basis. Individuals with whom we've had no contact for a longer period of time might be required to go through the biometrics application.

In terms of the people we're dealing with—of the 40,000—who essentially have an expired security assessment or biometrics analysis, I don't expect we're dealing with a very large percentage of the overall numbers. The security screening writ large for the entire mission is very important, but I think the unique situation you've described probably doesn't impact a huge number of people.

Would our officials have information about the scope of that universe of people, by any chance?

• (2105)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

The time is up, but I will give the deputy minister time if she wants to respond.

Ms. Catrina Tapley: For those who are here, we would have to go back and look at what kind of screening was done at DND at the time. I think it would vary, depending on other things.

With regard to the families of interpreters who were resettled in 2009 and 2012, that definition of “family” in the program is extremely broad and includes siblings and their families and others. It's not just that we wanted to make sure we confirmed the identity of the principal applicant, but it would be for all of those family members as well. None of those family members would have been employed by the Government of Canada.

The Chair: Thank you, Deputy Minister, and thank you, Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: I will move on to Ms. Kwan, the last speaker on this one, for two and a half minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: First I'd like to ask the officials to also table the information I asked for previously, with respect to the two types of applications for Afghans that are in process. How many of them have received UIC numbers, how many of them are still waiting for the UIC numbers, and how many of them have been refused? Could I get that information?

Minister, around biometrics, I think you will understand this challenge. If you are in Afghanistan and you can't get to a third country and there are no in-country biometrics being done, then you have no hope of actually fulfilling all the requirements in order to get to safety. From that perspective, retired military personnel have said that the government can in fact do the biometrics in Canada.

That will go a long way to resolving the issue. Will the minister take that into consideration and change the requirement as it stands right now?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I take a different view of it, because I don't think that solves the problem of getting people here more quickly. Even if you have biometrics and you're in Afghanistan, safe passage is not guaranteed or necessarily made easier by the fact that you've completed biometrics.

The other piece that concerns me is that, if you were to do biometrics in-country, you would lose whatever benefit it provided

from a security point of view. We have both domestic and international legal obligations that would prevent the refoulement of someone going back to Afghanistan if they were inadmissible to Canada for security reasons. I don't expect that this is going to be an enormous number of people we're dealing with, but when it's part of the security screening and approval process, I think it's important that we do it before someone arrives in our country.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: On the question around refoulement, the government actually doesn't have any concerns with the safe third country agreement on refoulement. I'll just remind the minister of that and maybe he could keep that in mind when he's dealing with the safe third country agreement.

With respect to biometrics, it will go a long way. I think the minister will understand if people don't have documentation, there's no way they can go through all of the steps. They don't have the documentation because they've burnt them. What happens to those applicants?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Every case is very unique. Trying to find unique solutions for people who we think qualify for our programs is an immense challenge. You've hit the challenge on the head, I think. Solving problems for people who were inside a country you don't have access to is what's making this difficult. For the people who were outside—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you, Minister.

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

On behalf of the committee, I want to thank the honourable—

Hon. Sean Fraser: Mr. Chair...?

The Chair: Yes.

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'm sorry to do this right when you were wrapping up, but if you will give me 30 seconds, one of our officials, after a 36-year career in the public service, is attending what I expect will be her very last committee appearance before she retires in just about a week. I wanted to give a huge thank you and congratulations to my deputy minister, Catrina Tapley.

Catrina, it's been a pleasure to work alongside you and I wanted to honour you before you head out the door on us.

The Chair: Deputy Minister, congratulations and thank you for the great work you have done over the past many years. It's always wonderful having a deputy minister like you providing a leadership role.

On behalf of the committee members, I also would like to congratulate the deputy minister on her service to Canadians. Also to the honourable minister, deputy minister and the assistant deputy ministers, Jennifer MacIntyre and Nicole Giles, thank you for being here today. It's much appreciated. All the very best to you.

Ms. Tapley, did you want to say something quickly?

• (2110)

Ms. Catrina Tapley: Thank you for your kind words, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the minister for his as well. This is indeed my very last committee appearance, so thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Now we'll move on to Mr. Chong's suggestion on committee business.

Hon. Michael Chong: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I've consulted with several members of the committee in just the last couple of hours and I believe there's a consensus. I'm asking if we could change the plan for the May 16 committee meeting. Currently, you've proposed that we spend two hours issuing drafting instructions. What I think there's a consensus to do is to have two 45-minute panels with the witnesses who were to have appeared but were cancelled because of all of the rescheduling with the ministers that has taken place recently, and then to have half an hour for drafting instructions. Alternatively, if the clerk can so confirm, we could have two 60-minute panels with witnesses who were previously scheduled but had to be cancelled because of ministerial rescheduling, and have an additional half hour for drafting instructions.

We either have a two-hour meeting with two 45-minute panels and 30 minutes for drafting instructions, or we alternatively have two 60-minute panels with a 30-minute period for drafting instructions for two and a half hours.

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

Hon. Michael Chong: If that would work, that would allow us to have the two panels of witnesses who we were to have previously but were cancelled because of all of the movement around the minister's appearances.

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

I want to clarify that I didn't say two hours for the drafting instructions. In fact, I put one hour and one hour, but we just wanted to say that we already had interpreters appear before us and now perhaps they could summarize their brief in writing. That was my intent.

To your question now, I would ask the analysts if they could please clarify how much more time they need for drafting this report on that day.

Is 30 minutes enough for you, or do you need more time on that day?

If nobody wants to respond, then I'll go to Ms. Damoff, who has her hand raised.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Miriam Burke): Ms. Kwan also has her hand up, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Ms. Damoff, and then we'll go to Madam Kwan.

Ms. Pam Damoff: There's a terrible echo.

The Chair: Yes, there is.

Ms. Pam Damoff: My understanding of what you were proposing, Mr. Chair, is that one hour would be with witnesses, such as

the Rainbow Railroad. I can't remember the other witnesses, but that would be the first hour. The second hour would be drafting instructions. Is that correct, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: Exactly. That's correct.

Ms. Pam Damoff: I don't think that's what Mr. Chong understood, but regardless....

Also, we've heard from a number of Afghan interpreters. We were just going to ask this particular group of Afghan interpreters to submit a written brief. Perhaps we could switch the order around and do drafting instructions first, Mr. Chair, because I think it's important that the analysts get our instructions. If it's important to the opposition to hear from these other witnesses on two panels, that would be fine, but I think we need to do our drafting instructions first.

My understanding is that there is no extra committee time. I don't want to have to end the meeting without the analysts having all the information they need. Perhaps we could do drafting instructions first. If the opposition wants to hear from Afghan interpreters rather than receive their written briefs, then we can use the remaining time, if it's 45 minutes each, for those additional panels.

The Chair: Thank you.

Madam Kwan, please go ahead.

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

I think that if we are efficient with our time, we should be able to give instructions. If we cannot get an extra half-hour at the end of that meeting, we should be able to give instructions in half an hour and then, therefore, split the two panels into 45 minutes for each panel. That way, we give an opportunity for both panels to appear.

In terms of instructions, I urge committee members to come to the meeting and be ready to tell the analysts and the clerk what the instructions are, so that we're not hemming and hawing, and delaying that process. If we're efficient and if we've done our work beforehand, I think we should be able to do that.

Aside from that, Mr. Chair, I have one other request that I'd like to put forward pertaining to this committee and related to the report. I've sat on committees many times and the Library of Parliament does excellent work with respect to suggested questions.

Mr. Chair, I would like to make the request that, for the questions that have been given to us for this particular meeting for the minister and officials, we actually ask the officials to provide answers to all those questions. I think they are excellent questions, but we did not have time, obviously, to go through all of them. If I need to move that as a motion, I will.

• (2115)

The Chair: Let me say that, for the NDP and Liberals, the way I see it is that on May 16, for the first 30 minutes, we come prepared and we give instructions to the analysts, and then there will be 45 minutes for each panel. If I have consensus, I can get that meeting out of the way.

Mr. Chong, are you in agreement with that?

He's the one who brought this forward. I just want to make sure he's on board.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Michael Chong: I agree.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you. I appreciate that. We're all set. It makes my life very easy.

Now I will move on to Ms. Kwan's request. I think we made sure earlier that, for the information Ms. Kwan or anyone else asked for, officials have already agreed. I don't think we have to vote to clarify that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm sorry, but do you mean to say that in terms of my request for the officials to provide answers to all the questions submitted by the Library of Parliament pertaining to this report, it will then be an undertaking for officials to provide those answers to us before we draft the report? Do I understand that correctly?

The Chair: I thought you were asking about the questions that were asked by the members.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: No. I am asking about the questions in the document we received from the Library of Parliament, the suggested questions for ministers. They were excellent. These were just excellent questions that I think would help our committee write a report.

I'm moving a motion that committee members to request that officials answer these questions provided by the Library of Parliament before we write a report.

The Chair: We'll have Ms. Damoff and then Mr. Sidhu.

Ms. Damoff, please go ahead now.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you, Chair.

I agree the Library of Parliament does excellent work with their questions. That's why all of us have the opportunity to ask those questions. We just had the minister and officials here for two full hours. It was very generous of his time to stay for the full two hours even though we started late. I think those questions could have been asked by any of the members during the two hours that we had the minister and officials here. I don't think it's reasonable to ask the officials to then, in turn, answer more questions that were done by the Library of Parliament.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Excuse me, Mr. Chair. Perhaps you didn't see me, but I had my hand up.

[*English*]

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I don't think we should drag this out. I suggest we go ahead and vote on Ms. Kwan's motion.

[*English*]

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Let's do it, and then we can all go home.

The Chair: Is there an agreement on Ms. Kwan's motion?

• (2120)

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Mr. Chair, there's some confusion here. What's going on here? I hear a lot of echo, and we're all talking. Perhaps you could just reiterate.

The Chair: Ms. Kwan brought in a motion saying that we should ask the officials to answer all the questions that are in the document from the Library of Parliament. I would like to ask if there is consensus on the motion she brought forward.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: I agree with it.

Mr. Yvan Baker: I'm opposed.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Let's have a recorded vote, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Sure. Thank you. Let's have a recorded vote.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5)

The Chair: The time is already 9:21.

Thank you very much to all the members, interpreters, technical staff, the clerk and, of course, the analysts.

I'm going to call the meeting adjourned.

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