



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

44th PARLIAMENT, 1st SESSION

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

EVIDENCE

NUMBER 081

Thursday, November 2, 2023

Chair: Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal



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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Surrey—Newton, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 81 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration. Today, we are returning to our study of the government's response to the final report of the Special Committee on Afghanistan.

For the first hour, I'm pleased to welcome two officials from the Department of National Defence. They are Major-General Greg Smith, director general of international security policy; and Major-General Paul Prévost, director of staff, strategic joint staff.

Major-Generals, welcome to both of you.

They have a request. The witnesses want to have a hard stop at 4:30 p.m.

You will each have five minutes to deliver your remarks. Please, go ahead.

Major-General Greg Smith (Director General, International Security Policy, Department of National Defence): Mr. Chair and members of the committee, thank you for the invitation to appear today to update you on the government's response to the final report of the Special Committee on Afghanistan.

As was stated, I'm Major-General Greg Smith. I am the director general of international security policy at the Department of National Defence. In this regard, I'm responsible for managing and strengthening Canada's international bilateral and multilateral defence relationships.

I am joined by Major-General Paul Prévost, director of the strategic joint staff. Major-General Prévost advises the chief of the defence staff on Canadian Armed Forces operations and is responsible for interdepartmental coordination for operations where the Canadian Armed Forces support a federal effort.

Turning to the special committee's report on Afghanistan, National Defence is implicated in recommendations one, two and 18.

[Translation]

Recommendation 1 calls for the government to re-examine the lessons from our mission in Afghanistan and apply those in future planning and response. Throughout Operation Aegis—our evacuation mission in Afghanistan—National Defence worked closely with Global Affairs, Immigration and 13 allies to evacuate Canadi-

an citizens and Afghan nationals, providing strategic airlift capabilities to help bring them to safety.

The Canadian Armed Forces provided these capabilities in a volatile environment, and we contributed to an international air-bridge that allowed the evacuation of approximately 3,700 individuals from Kabul. Following the operation, we conducted reviews to identify areas for improvement in relevant policies, programs and operations. These reviews reinforced the importance of such close coordination among partners.

National Defence is applying these lessons in ongoing operations, such as our support for non-combatant evacuations from Israel. Indeed, National Defence is ensuring the logistical feasibility and safety of these evacuations through collaboration with local, regional and international allies and partners.

[English]

Recommendation two of the report stressed that, during crises, interdepartmental coordination must be established rapidly to respond effectively. Interdepartmental coordination is constant in the federal government. National Defence participates in regular coordination meetings at the deputy minister, assistant deputy minister, director general and working levels. Ad hoc meetings are convened when a crisis is unfolding or seems imminent.

[Translation]

Recommendation 18 concerns our support to federal efforts to assist those who supported Canada's mission in Afghanistan. We are collaborating with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada to help resettle 40,000 eligible Afghans by the end of 2023 by assessing whether applicants or their families had a significant relationship with National Defence.

We are proud of what the CAF accomplished in Afghanistan and are implementing the report's recommendations in all activities to the greatest extent possible.

[English]

I look forward to your questions. Thank you for your time.

The Chair: Thank you, Major-General Smith. Your timing was excellent.

I'll be very strict with my time today when I keep the clock.

First, we'll go to the Honourable Michelle Rempel Garner for six minutes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Major-General Smith and Major-General Prévost, thank you for your service and thank you for being here today.

As part of our study on Operation Aegis and the evacuation of Afghanistan, there were some significant irregularities that came to light regarding the issuance of template visa documents and facilitation letters via Senator Marilou McPhedran.

I am wondering if any one of you, or your broader staff, authorized Mr. George Young, the former Liberal chief of staff to the minister, to issue template visa documents to Senator McPhedran.

The Chair: Major-General Smith or Major-General Prévost, please go ahead.

MGen Greg Smith: Chair, I think the director of staff would like to respond to that, if it's okay.

Major-General Paul Prévost (Director of Staff, Strategic Joint Staff, Department of National Defence): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We're aware of those allegations. Based on those allegations, we've done an internal review at National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces. No officials inside the defence department or the Canadian Armed Forces were involved in the production or the transmission of facilitation letters.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you.

Were any of your staff aware that Mr. Young had sent this document to Senator McPhedran?

• (1540)

MGen Paul Prévost: Through our internal review, Mr. Chair, none of our staff was aware of any facilitation letters being produced.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Are you aware of any mechanisms that would be in place for someone like Mr. Young, a ministerial staff member, to issue official government documents to senators to use in this situation?

MGen Paul Prévost: Mr. Chair, I'm not aware of any process in that regard.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Did any of your staff receive any formal notification or any official communications when Mr. Young issued the document to the senator?

MGen Paul Prévost: Mr. Chair, we didn't receive anything. We only found out, months after, through those allegations, that facilitation letters may have been provided.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: You did mention that you went through an exercise to undertake lessons learned and best practices. Unfortunately, I think this situation requires best practices. I find it unfortunate that there haven't been any consequences levelled. I know that's not within your staff's purview.

Have you provided any advice to the government on things like tightening up protocols to ensure that type of communication be-

tween ministerial staff and third parties, in terms of issuing government documents, won't happen again?

MGen Paul Prévost: With regard to facilitation letters and the process employed during Operation Aegis, it probably would be for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada to look into those processes. I think the processes inside government to ensure that there's a proper separation between the political staff and the officials are in place.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you.

For me, I do have a concern that what happened in that circumstance could have put Canada's armed forces, the people who are serving, at risk, given the potential lack of security screening and whatnot.

Has your staff, as part of your review, flagged any concerns in this regard to the government or provided any potential measures to be put in place to ensure this doesn't happen again?

MGen Paul Prévost: In the case of this operation, I'm not going to speculate on the security of our forces on the sole fact that a facilitation letter may have been provided. For that operation, it was very fluid on the ground. As long as IRCC had a name to give us and the person presenting themselves around Hamid Karzai airport was on the list that was provided by IRCC, those were the people we let through. I'm not too sure how the facilitation letters played into that system. The people we let through the gate and let through all the way to another location were all vetted by IRCC.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Would you suggest that having security screening measures in place to ensure the safety of all personnel involved would be a prudent recommendation for this committee to make in terms of future operations?

MGen Paul Prévost: That's a good question, actually. That's exactly what we do.

Right now, as you're aware, we're very involved in the crisis in the Middle East. There have been other instances, for instance in Sudan last year, where we had to evacuate Canadian citizens and members of embassies. The security protocols are in place, coordinated by the security agencies, IRCC and Global Affairs, to ensure that the members who get on Canadian Armed Forces airplanes for further movement are all vetted by our security system.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I guess there's just a bit of dissonance between the statement you just made and the previous one saying, in the case of Operation Aegis, that it was fluid and that you were relying on IRCC to do some of the screening.

Where does the buck stop right now in terms of screening? Is it IRCC or you? What sorts of mechanisms are in place to ensure there's information sharing and adequate...? It just seems like there's a bit of a gap between those two statements.

The Chair: Major-General, you have 30 seconds to respond.

MGen Paul Prévost: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I'll try to do this quickly.

Aegis was very different from any other situation we had faced before. I think people will remember how the situation was dire in Afghanistan. We had an end date to get as many Afghans as possible out of harm's way with no intent to return to the country. Every measure we could take, with some mitigation put in place to allow those Afghans to make it to the airplanes, was taken with a bit of risk, obviously. HKIA in Afghanistan was a very risky place to operate. We're very proud of all the work that was done there.

Since then, all the evacuations we've done for Canadians have been in accordance with all the procedures we have in place among CBSA, CSIS and everybody involved in the vetting process of Canadians. The Canadian Armed Forces can make sure that, for the person who gets on board a Canadian Armed Forces airplane, their name comes from the proper agency to do that. We do not do any vetting inside the Canadian Armed Forces.

• (1545)

The Chair: Thank you, honourable member.

It's 6:30, so I will go to the Liberals. We have Mrs. Zahid for six minutes.

Please go ahead.

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

Thank you, Major-General Prévost and Major-General Smith, for appearing before the committee today.

As of October 27, Canada welcomed 40,415 Afghan refugees to Canada under all streams. As the IRCC minister told our committee last week in response to my question, that job is not done as of yet.

I would note that 2,635 Afghans have arrived in Canada under the pathway for extended family members of former interpreters. I would also like you to further know that 20,000 applications have been received through the special immigration measures program for the ones who assisted the Government of Canada, with 13,520 applications approved and 12,065 having arrived here in Canada.

I believe many in both of these categories would have connections to DND. Are you tracking those people who assisted the CAF in Afghanistan and those who wish to come to Canada? What is the situation for those who have not yet arrived?

The Chair: Major-Generals, the floor is yours.

Please go ahead.

MGen Paul Prévost: I can start here, and we'll see if General Smith has anything to provide.

We are tracking that the government has reached its goal. It's a milestone. It doesn't mean that the work has stopped. In the case of the programs that pertain to the Canadian Armed Forces, which were one of the special immigration measures for an Afghan who had an enduring and significant link to the Canadian Armed Forces, there's no more space available as part of the 18,000 goal that was set. That said, we continue to work with IRCC. If there's more space available in the program, we continue to provide files to IRCC.

The Canadian Armed Forces' role in this whole process is fairly limited. We do not track exactly how many members of the family join the applicants when they're approved, where they're resettled in Canada or how many made it to Canada. Our role is really to validate that the applicant had a significant and enduring relationship with Canadian Armed Forces members during our operations in Afghanistan.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you.

The Chair: Major-General Smith, do you want to add something?

MGen Greg Smith: No, thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mrs. Zahid.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you, Chair.

My next question is in regard to the special committee's recommendations. The first recommendation of the Special Committee on Afghanistan was that the Government of Canada re-examine its whole-of-government review of lessons learned from Afghanistan to ensure that the review addresses all aspects of the government's performance in Afghanistan from February 2020 onwards. While accepting that there may be security considerations, given the sensitivity of DND's work, can you please share with us what specific lessons the Canadian Armed Forces and DND have taken from their own internal reviews and lessons learned?

MGen Greg Smith: I'll start, and I tried to refer to some of that in my scene-setting statement. If it does nothing else, it reinforces the importance of collaboration across government. We've talked about IRCC, CBSA and Global Affairs Canada. It's extremely important that we don't work within a silo. It reinforced that, and I think some of the successes that General Prévost could talk about would demonstrate some of that more recently.

It's equally about allies. We are not doing this alone. The statement talks about how difficult operations were out of Kabul and how that was a multinational operation. We evacuated other nationals, and other countries evacuated some people who came to Canada. It has to be international. We have to work with partners from a policy perspective but very definitely from an operational perspective. I would say that it has reinforced those points, and I think some of our more recent operations demonstrate that we've learned from it.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you.

In recommendation 18, the committee recommended that the Government of Canada instruct Global Affairs Canada to assemble a whole-of-government team, including the Department of National Defence, to help bring Afghans to safety. The government agreed with this recommendation in principle in its response to the report. Could you please outline, from a DND perspective, how this team has done its work and how it has gone?

• (1550)

The Chair: Major-General Prévost, do you want to go ahead?

MGen Paul Prévost: Yes. Maybe there are two things that I can say here.

We continue to help IRCC in the vetting process of Afghans who are applying to come to Canada. That work has continued since the crisis started in August 2021. We continue to be available to Global Affairs Canada and IRCC for any other support they require in bringing Afghans home. That's the first aspect of it.

A part of the recommendations in the report is to increase inter-departmental coordination, and I can assure you, Mr. Chair, and the member, that this has been demonstrated numerous times since that unfortunate crisis occurred in 2021. We had Sudan last year, obviously, and right now you have seen over the last few weeks the work we have done in Israel.

Any time a hot spot or crisis starts that has a Canadian interest, on the same day or the next day there's an interdepartmental call that happens within hours at the deputy minister level and the ADM level to start looking into that crisis.

The Chair: Thank you, honourable member. Your time is up.

I will go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for six minutes.

Please, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

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

Major-General Prévost and Major-General Smith, thank you for your service, for making yourselves available and for being here with us.

There is a biometric requirement in immigration applications that is a barrier for Afghans. It was especially so at the time of the evacuation from Kabul, but it still is. I don't need to explain the context, which is quite difficult.

One of the recommendations of the Special Committee on Afghanistan was to waive the biometric requirements for individuals and families who have worked for the Canadian Armed Forces. That is one of the recommendations in the report.

Your colleagues from other departments, including the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, or IRCC, have indicated that there is an equally rigorous biometric system for individuals and families who have worked for the Canadian Armed Forces. For example, Afghans who had held various positions in their own country could do their biometric tests in a third country. That was put in place to facilitate the process.

Is that other method of security screening still in place at this time?

[*English*]

The Chair: Major-General, the floor is yours.

[*Translation*]

MGen Paul Prévost: Mr. Chair, I can't answer that question because I'm not aware of the other system.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Okay.

That's perfect—

MGen Paul Prévost: The Canadian Armed Forces aren't involved in vetting refugees or immigrants.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: If I'm not mistaken, National Defence has a biometric capacity.

MGen Paul Prévost: It does, but it's not involved in the evacuation of non-combatants and refugees.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: So you've never been deployed to a crisis zone to do biometric screening. I'm thinking of Kosovo, for instance.

MGen Greg Smith: Mr. Chair, in the past, during tactical operations, we have indeed participated in operations where there has been biometric data collection, for example. However, we don't conduct them when it comes to immigration.

That's what I wanted to clarify.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I understand. So there's a biometric capacity.

I'm not trying to be critical, but I'm really trying to understand what would happen if a similar crisis occurred again.

We know that National Defence has a biometric capacity and that biometric requirements were a major obstacle for some Afghans when they were accepted by IRCC.

You told us that you were having department-wide discussions. Has this issue ever been raised with you? Since you're on the front line, and you have the necessary biometric capabilities, wouldn't that be a way to help people who absolutely have to leave so that they no longer have to face this kind of challenge? I'm thinking of the Afghans, among others. That's what concerns us right now.

MGen Paul Prévost: Mr. Chair, I'm not familiar with that file.

I'll find out if that possibility has already been considered. As Major-General Smith said, the biometric capabilities of the Canadian Forces are used in our operations, for example against the Islamic State, and not in the context of an evacuation of refugees or Canadian citizens.

The Minister of National Defence still has the necessary authority to respond to a request from one of his colleagues to provide a service, as is done in a number of cases.

So I'll check to see if this issue has already been discussed.

• (1555)

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: The goal would be to use the tools at our disposal.

That happened in the case of Kosovo.

The biometric tests were done on Canadian soil by Canada Border Services Agency officers who also have a biometric capacity. Instead of doing them before, we managed to bring people here.

So I'll leave you with that example. I think it would be a really good idea to eventually add these tests to your services in the event of such a crisis.

We're talking about a crisis, but it's not necessarily an armed conflict. It could be a natural disaster, like an earthquake or a tsunami, when people need to be evacuated quickly. Since you're on the front line most of the time, this could be another tool so that everyone can get out quickly and be accepted here in Canada.

If I understood correctly, you talked about ad hoc departmental meetings.

Would you be able to tell us how many times you met about the Afghan crisis? I'm asking the question because you told us that there were ad hoc meetings. I imagine there must be a number. If you don't have it today, would it be possible for you to submit it to the committee?

MGen Greg Smith: I will support my colleague by saying that there are constant meetings. As mentioned, this is done at all levels of the chain of command, from the deputy minister to the assistant deputy minister, to the director general and the workers.

There are hundreds of exchanges of information across government and with allies. So there are hundreds of meetings.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Is that done between departments?

[English]

The Chair: Honourable member, could you please not interrupt? I would appreciate it.

Major-General Smith, are you finished?

MGen Greg Smith: Yes. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: The honourable member can go ahead.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I just came back from Japan last night. I'm so sorry. The chair is going to slap me on the wrist, and he'll be right.

I think I have time for one last question.

[English]

The Chair: You only have 20 seconds. You only have time to thank the witness.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Okay.

A permanent emergency mechanism has been proposed to IRCC in the event of an international crisis. That exists at Global Affairs Canada, but not at IRCC. Could this type of permanent emergency mechanism in the event of an international crisis encourage the various departments to talk to each other if it existed at IRCC?

[English]

The Chair: The time is up.

Give a short answer, please.

[Translation]

MGen Greg Smith: I would love to know the details of that proposal.

[English]

Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I'd be happy to share that with you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

I will go to Ms. Kwan for six minutes.

Please, go ahead.

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

Thank you, as well, to the representatives from DND for being here today.

When the government first announced a special immigration measure for Afghans, DND sent 3,800 files to IRCC. Only 900 of those applications have been confirmed. That is to say, 2,900 of the applications referred by DND are lost somewhere between departments.

Does DND have any updates with regard to what happened to those files?

MGen Paul Prévost: I'll start on this one.

The first thing I'll say about numbers is that we have to be careful. The only thing I can assure you about numbers is this: Every time we mention a number, it's wrong. Things are fluid. The chief of defence always mentions that the truth has a time-stamp.

To clarify, the numbers given by the member are somewhat correct in the fact that, when the crisis occurred, we took every file we could gather from Afghans who were asking the armed forces to establish a link between them. These files were provided to IRCC in the first place. I processed a number of files. I can't exactly remember whether it was 900 or not. As the initial crisis abated, IRCC provided the files back to DND so we could prioritize the files and submit them back again.

So far, National Defence has provided over 2,000 files. None of the files has been lost between IRCC and the armed forces. It was just a matter of reprioritizing the files. Two thousand files have been submitted to IRCC, which, at this point, completes the files we have to submit to IRCC. Now that the 18,000 milestone has been reached, we continue to keep the rest of the files with us. As more space in the future becomes available, we will be ready to re-submit those files.

● (1600)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Of the files that have not yet been processed by IRCC and people not brought to safety, how many of them are left with DND?

MGen Paul Prévost: It would be more prudent, Mr. Chair, if I don't provide a number. If I give a number, it will be wrong. There is a significant number of files with us, and these files are dated back to two years ago, when they were submitted. We're not sure how many are still valid. We vetted a number of files that we have with us and that we're keeping. No files are being lost or destroyed. As more space becomes available, we will be providing them to the IRCC.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm interested in knowing how many spaces are needed to bring the rest of them to safety.

MGen Paul Prévost: That's an answer I could not provide.

First, I'm not too sure how many files are still valid, as some of those Afghans have found other places—other ways to get to other countries. At the same time, the work the Canadian Armed Forces did established a link between Afghans and the Canadian Armed Forces. When an individual receives an invitation to apply.... Some of them rest unanswered. That is only one person in an extended family. They can come with 10 or 12 people. In terms of how many people in total would come to Canada, I can't answer that question.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I think what is important here is this: What I do know is that there are Afghans who served Canada, who were part of the mission, and their loved ones, who have not made it to Canada, whose applications were not even accepted. They are just floating out in the wind somewhere. There are people who are still being persecuted by the Taliban and whose lives are at risk.

I'm just trying to figure out if DND actually has a record of how many of those it submitted to IRCC actually made it to safety. What I'm hearing is that we don't know, but there is a bunch of them who need to get to safety and DND is waiting for IRCC to make available the space so that they can come to Canada, be processed and be able to get to safety.

From this perspective...and maybe you're not able to answer this question. The government put an arbitrary cap of 40,000. That number has now been reached. Not everyone has made it to safety—that we know for certain—because I actually have files in my office of people who served Canada, and their loved ones, who could not get to safety.

Would it be useful for the government to lift the cap and make that space available so that DND can continue to submit those files to IRCC to bring those families and the people who served Canada to safety?

MGen Paul Prévost: I'll just start by saying again that no files have been lost. We know how many have been accepted and how many we still have that we've established—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm sorry. May I interrupt?

If you know how many you still have, can you tell the committee how many you still have?

MGen Paul Prévost: I do not have that number. I'll say that it's a significant number of files that we still have. I know that we do have those files. They're still on record, and they will remain on record with us here.

With regard to the second part of the question, 40,000 and 18,000 were goals established or milestones that we've reached. My

understanding is that Afghans will be able to continue to apply under other immigration programs with IRCC, and I think it's really more for IRCC to explain those programs.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I—

The Chair: Ms. Kwan, you have only five seconds.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Could the major-general send in those numbers to the committee when he has them, please?

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Can I get a confirmation?

The Chair: Major-General Prévost, Major-General Smith, do you want to comment quickly?

MGen Greg Smith: Mr. Chair, we take that on notice.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we're going to go to the next round. We'll go to Mr. Redekopp for five minutes, please.

Mr. Redekopp, we're very strict with the time today.

Thank you.

Mr. Brad Redekopp (Saskatoon West, CPC): Okay. Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Major-General Prévost, you're on the cross-government committee to coordinate emergencies like Afghanistan or the more recent evacuation of Canadian citizens from Israel. Is that correct?

MGen Paul Prévost: That is correct. We're an interdepartmental table.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Okay.

We clearly saw political interference with the evacuation from Kabul. Evidence tabled at this committee by Liberal politicians showed a group chat with Liberal politicians and Liberal political operatives making plans around the evacuation, and they did so without proper security clearances.

Recently, when war broke out in the Middle East, it took a full week for the Canadian Armed Forces to get planes into Tel Aviv. Have you talked with the current chief of staff and chief of the defence staff to coordinate this better? You said before that you hadn't talked.

• (1605)

MGen Paul Prévost: Mr. Chair, I'm not going to answer the first part of the question as I'm not aware of the political interference that the member is referring to.

In the case of Israel, there are a lot of moving parts that go into organizing an evacuation of Canadian citizens. Some of the limitations that Canada has are that we don't have a global presence with our resources. We don't have a global presence through bases—

Mr. Brad Redekopp: My time is very limited. I just want to know if you were speaking with the chief of the defence staff and the chief of staff on these issues.

MGen Paul Prévost: I advised the chief of the defence staff every day on our potential contributions to those options for the chief of the defence staff to recommend to the government.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Was that in addition to the chief of staff of the minister as well?

MGen Paul Prévost: I informed the chief of staff of the minister of the actions that we were taking and some of the decisions that would need to be made by the minister in order to effect the evacuation of Canadians. That's correct.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: That's a one-way conversation then. You inform them.

MGen Paul Prévost: No, it's never really a one-way conversation. My role is to advise the chief of the defence staff on the options that we can provide in order to bring Canadians home. The chief of the defence staff provides military advice to the government.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: What about with regard to the chief of staff of the minister?

MGen Paul Prévost: I inform the chief of staff of the minister that the chief of defence will provide military advice. We do have discussions on any of the files that the chief of defence will push to the minister for approval.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: The political interference we're talking about is the Marilou McPhedran case, where there were implications of fake documents and fake letters that were done.

Were there any changes that were done to mitigate and prevent that from happening again?

MGen Paul Prévost: I believe I've answered that question before. We were not involved and not aware of any facilitation letters being moved. As per normal process, the documentation that we send to the minister's office are appropriate Government of Canada communications letters sent by the chief of defence.

I was not aware of any letters being sent at that time.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Mr. Sajjan told this committee that when he was defence minister, he never read his emails. His quote was this: "I had no time then to be looking at emails." He also said, "I'll be honest with you. I don't know...I did not have time to look at emails" and "I don't remember looking at my emails".

As a general, do you use email in your job?

The Chair: Major-General Prévost, do you want to comment on that?

MGen Paul Prévost: Mr. Chair, I obviously read my emails as the director of staff of the Canadian Armed Forces.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Would that apply even in a crisis?

MGen Paul Prévost: That applies in a crisis.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: If you had a superior or a subordinate who wasn't reading their emails and monitoring their emails during a crisis, would you consider that superior or subordinate either grossly incompetent or extremely negligent?

MGen Paul Prévost: I'm not too sure where the line of questioning is going here. I think everybody has email boxes and manages their email boxes as best they can.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Redekopp, you still have 40 seconds.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: This all brings us back to George Young. He's the Liberal political operative at the centre of the whole Marilou McPhedran case that we talked about before.

Mr. Chair, I'm going to move a motion. I move:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), (a) the committee extend the total number of meetings currently allocated to the current study regarding the government's response to the final report of the Special Committee on Afghanistan by one meeting, to be held prior to December 31, 2023; and (b) Mr. George Young be invited to appear for two hours, at a date and time to be fixed by the Chair, but no later than December 31, 2023, to discuss matters related to the current study.

The Chair: Your time is up, Mr. Redekopp.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Is there time on a motion?

The Chair: We have to stop because we have the major-generals here. If it is the will of the committee, we can go to debate on this particular motion.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: It's my will, actually.

The Chair: Do you want the major-generals to be dismissed?

Mr. Brad Redekopp: They seemed a little unclear on the whole situation. They'll probably learn some things during this too, so I think they should stay.

The Chair: I have a list of speakers. I'll go to Ms. Kwan and then Mr. Kmiec.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Excuse me, but I don't think I've relinquished the floor yet.

We had talked at this committee, and the name of George Young had come up many times. He was, of course, former defence minister Sajjan's chief of staff during the evacuation of Kabul, and he was directly referenced to in this committee by both Senator McPhedran and Minister Sajjan. He sort of ended up becoming the nexus point, the centre, of everything that was happening with regard to the scheme that we have been studying.

It's really critical...and we haven't had a chance to hear from him yet. This is my point in this motion. We're kind of going around the edges here. We've heard different things from different people, but the fingers keep pointing back to George Young as the political operative, the chief of staff, who really was the one at the centre of this whole issue.

In some of the documents distributed to the committee by the clerk on May 3, 2023, there are multiple emails between Mr. Young and Senator McPhedran, on which ministers of the current government were copied, about the fake visa facilitation scheme. He was involved in many different communications that went back and forth with Senator McPhedran and emails on which were copied, as was said by the senator, many of the ministers involved in this here.

The problem we have is that we haven't been able to hear from the source of this. We've heard, for example, Mr. Sajjan saying that he didn't read his emails. That's not terribly helpful in this thing, and I believe it's important that we hear from Mr. Young.

No one has been able to answer the questions the committee has on these facilitation letters. Beyond the fake facilitation letters, if you recall, the senator talked about the one letter that said, "try it" and that was him suggesting to her that they didn't know if this would work. It was an attempt. They were desperate to get around the system as well as they could, so he said, here's a fake letter; why don't you just give it a try? That was the "try it" letter that Senator McPhedran referenced.

These are things we need to talk to Mr. Young about to make sure we have the facts and we have the truth at the committee.

On August 23, 2021, Mr. Young wrote the following in an email: "Thank you, Senator...I am putting it into the system. I will also ensure that Foreign Affairs is engaged to follow up, along with IRCC, so that all that...needs to be done can happen simultaneously."

This kind of goes to the heart of the Afghanistan report and the study, because he was the nexus of this ad hoc government response. How did this happen? How do we move forward? How do we prevent this from happening more? These are the answers we need to get.

When I look at these facilitation letters—

• (1610)

The Chair: Excuse me, honourable member.

I have everyone on the list. I won't stop you, but the reason is that you still want the witnesses to stay. I think it's time we let them go, because in 15 minutes I don't think all of us will be able to finish and they have a 4:30 hard stop.

Do you agree with me?

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Sure.

The Chair: On behalf of the committee, let me continue then.

I'm sorry, Major-Generals. It's a motion right now, so we'll be debating the motion. That's what it is.

That's why I was saying, on behalf of the committee, I would like to thank both Major-General Prévost and Major-General Smith for answering in a very open and very clear way.

Thank you. The very best to both of you. With this, you are excused.

Now we will continue with Mr. Redekopp.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: On a point of order, Chair, we have the two major-generals here. I think it would be important that we complete the round of questioning. It's not easy to get these people.

The Chair: Mrs. Zahid, that was a good try but the motion is on the floor. I have no choice but to let the motion be debated. That's why I already thanked Major-General Prévost and Major-General Smith.

You are welcome to leave. Thank you very much again for the great input.

• (1615)

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.): Chair, may I have the floor, please?

I would like to ask our colleague Brad Redekopp if it's possible to circulate his motion in French.

The Chair: It's coming right now. If you can give us two minutes, it will come to you.

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: I would ask that we stop discussing it until we get it in French, please, because it's a delicate issue.

The Chair: Are we okay with that?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: I will suspend the meeting for two minutes.

• (1615)

(Pause)

• (1615)

The Chair: We've returned. The floor is with Mr. Redekopp.

You had a question, or you said you wanted to call the question.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: No. I was just saying that, if everybody wants to pass it on division, we could move on quickly, but I'm not sure there's support for that.

I just wanted to highlight a few things.

At this committee, as I've said already, the name George Young kept coming up over and over again. It's our belief that we can't get to the bottom of what happened unless we actually hear from George Young, because he knows things that we haven't yet heard in this committee. He's been accused of certain things and hasn't had a chance to defend himself, for one thing. I think he has legitimate information that we do not have.

As you all recall, we have talked about this numerous times, and the issue was always put off. It was said, "We'll deal with that later" or "We'll deal with it when we come to the end." Here we are. We're at the end. From my perspective, it's really important that we hear from him.

The evidence and the information that were presented by the senator have his name all over things. There are many reports and many things that he has, and we really need to hear from him.

I'll give you an example. There's an email that was sent by George Young to the senator, which says:

Thank you Senator...I am putting it into the system. I will also ensure that Foreign Affairs is engaged to follow up, along with IRCC, so that all that can or needs to be done can happen simultaneously.

I appreciated the previous note. Everyone is working flat out, including folks like yourself, to try to make things happen in these very difficult circumstances. However, whatever we all might be feeling no doubt pales by comparison to the thoughts and feelings that the citizens of Afghanistan must be experiencing.

This was a very difficult time, and people were doing what they felt was the right thing to do. I think that evidence is there in this email. However, that doesn't necessarily make it right.

Again, in the interest of allowing Mr. Young to, number one, provide the missing information that we need for this report and, number two, possibly defend himself if he feels like he's been unjustly accused of things, it's really important that we do this.

With that, Mr. Chair, I will wrap it up. I don't want to take too much time. I know my Bloc friend might be feeling a little tired, so I will stop talking at this point and appeal to the committee to support my motion.

Thank you.

• (1620)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Redekopp.

I have a whole bunch of honourable members.... I have Ms. Kwan and then Mr. Kmiec, Mr. McLean, Mr. Maguire, Mr. Ali, Mr. Chiang, Mr. El-Khoury and Mrs. Zahid. Except for Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, everyone's on the list.

I'll give the floor to Ms. Kwan.

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

I was very disappointed to not be able to have my opportunity to ask questions of the major-generals. I have another significant question about the Afghan situation. We know that people in Afghanistan right now, especially with Pakistan.... The Pakistani government has sent out the edict that it will now start to arrest people, detain them and send them back to Afghanistan to face the Taliban.

This is very serious. I have a giant pile of files in my office of people who have been left behind. They are people who served Canada and their loved ones and who have been left behind. They are frantic and anxious about the situation.

I wanted to get some insight from the major-generals about the operation that DND might still be embarking on. What other work are they doing to try to bring people to safety, and so on and so forth? Now that opportunity has been lost because of the situation.

Mr. Chair, I'm wondering whether or not I could have the chance to submit written questions to DND so that I could get responses to these important questions about people who are not my constituents but whose lives depend on Canada to get them to safety.

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Kwan.

I am fulfilling my role as chair to the best of my ability. The motion is on the floor, so I have to respect that. That's why we are having the discussion on the motion that has been circulated in both official languages. If it is the will of the committee, we can always come back to Ms. Kwan's request.

Right now, I have other members on the list before you, Mr. Redekopp.

I have Mr. Kmiec now.

Mr. Tom Kmiec (Calgary Shepard, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

On Ms. Kwan's ask, absolutely, I agree with that, as long as everybody else can also submit written questions to both generals.

Very briefly on this, we heard from Major-General Prévost. He has just said that during this Israeli evacuation it did take several days before it got off the ground, that he was in fact talking to the CDS, the chief of the defence staff, but also to the chief of staff to the minister when organizing, preparing and doing logistics on it—

The Chair: Mr. Kmiec, they are not here. I just don't.... You understand that I—

Mr. Tom Kmiec: I'm just—

The Chair: It's not fair to talk when they're not here—

Mr. Tom Kmiec: It's okay. I'm just relating, Chair—

• (1625)

The Chair: Can we focus on the motion, please?

Mr. Tom Kmiec: That's where I'm going, because I'm saying that just in this current evacuation they're very clearly stating that they talked to the chief of staff. In the previous evacuation, we don't know, because we don't have George Young here to explain to us. That's, Chair, where it's connected. That's why it's so important to bring in George Young.

During the testimony we just heard about what happened in Afghanistan, we were told—this is a quote—he would be “putting it into the system.” That was the email. The question is, what system was that? The only person who will know what that system was will be George Young, because he was the chief of staff to the minister responsible.

From the emails, we can tell that many things were being routed directly through the chief of staff. Major-General Prévost just said that troops on the ground were using a list provided by IRCC. Then, the question we have to ask the chief of staff becomes, “Is that the system that's being referred to in the emails?” That's the only person who will know exactly what the system was.

I'll also add just as a final point that this is a department I used to work for as an exempt staffer. It would be highly irregular, almost impossible.... I cannot believe that facilitation letters would be sent by the chief of staff in an email to a senator to tell them to "try it". I cannot believe that something like that would be done. I was an exempt staffer there. There is no way that something like that would have been okayed, but of course, if the minister wasn't reading his emails, he wouldn't know either.

I support the motion. We should proceed to have Mr. George Young present to this committee.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. McLean, you're next.

Mr. Greg McLean (Calgary Centre, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I took Ms. Kwan's comments very seriously also. I hope we can get to the bottom of this.

As you know, Mr. Chair, I'm new to this committee, so there's no history here. However, I'm not new to the Afghan plight and the number of Afghan requests coming into my office to get these people to safety. It was enormous in the summer of 2021 and subsequently too. The questions were asked: What is the process here? How do we get through this?

What I've seen in this paper here and heard in the testimony is that there seems to be some kind of back door offered by somebody that wasn't clear on paper to everybody else. I do think we need to get to the bottom of it. I don't know why getting those answers is troublesome at this committee, because in understanding where the political influence may be when working through a crisis like this, whatever that may be, as long as there's standard practice and people understand it going forward, that's fair ball.

The transparency is what Canadians want. How were some people processed while other people were put in a queue and never got processed at the end of the day? What was the process? Who was in charge? Where was the manipulation of "here are some people I know, call this person and get this done"? This is something that I think is on us to actually get to the bottom of at this committee. I don't know why we're avoiding it, because I get these questions all the time: What happened here? Can you please find out? You're on this committee now, Greg, so can you find out what happened with this?

I have hundreds of people that helped our troops still waiting to get in from Afghanistan. I get sent photos of those people who are no longer on the list of people coming into Canada, because I get sent photos of them at their funerals.

This is still a problem. We need to find a way through and make sure that, first, we bring as many people back here as possible and, second, we know what the process was and how we usurp that process. Let's get a clear understanding of it.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. McLean.

Mr. Maguire, do you still want to go ahead? The floor is yours.

Mr. Larry Maguire (Brandon—Souris, CPC): I just want to say that my colleagues have mentioned all the things I was going to mention.

There is more here, but I just want to say that I really think it is time to support a motion like this to get Mr. Young before the committee.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Ali.

Mr. Ali, go ahead, please.

Mr. Shafqat Ali (Brampton Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

I want to add my frustration today. We had those witnesses. They had taken the time out to come here and were responding to very important questions. As usual, our Conservative colleagues would love to filibuster and—

The Chair: Go back to the motion, quickly, please.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: Yes, I am coming to it, sir. I am coming to the motion they just put forward.

During the witnesses' conversations, we were having that discussion and this motion was put forward, which was their time and they had to leave. In the past, we've had the defence minister, Harjt Sajjan, appear before the committee on this issue. The former minister of immigration Sean Fraser and Senator McPhedran have appeared before this committee on this issue.

We have had so many discussions on this issue, and here we go again. Our friend has brought forward that motion again on the same point that we have already had discussions on. I think it would be a waste of time. We have asked questions, had discussions on this issue and the same issue is being put forward. It would be a waste of the time of this committee. We can utilize our time on other studies.

Therefore, I would vote against this motion. Thank you, Mr. Chair.

• (1630)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ali.

Mr. Redekopp is asking for the vote, but Mr. Chiang's name is on the list and then Mr. El-Khoury and Ms. Zahid.

If you don't agree with Mr. Redekopp's request for a vote, then you can take the time.

Mr. Paul Chiang (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): You can call the vote.

An hon. member: Yes, that's fine.

The Chair: Okay. I will ask the clerk to call the vote.

(Motion negated: nays 5; yeas 4)

The Chair: Earlier Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe made a request to go early—he was out of country in Japan—and I am sure that every member will accommodate that.

If I can give Ms. Kwan two seconds here, then we will adjourn the meeting.

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

Before we adjourn, I'd like to bring back my request for committee members to be able to submit questions to DND, especially as we were robbed of our time to ask questions in the second round.

The Chair: Thank you. The motion is on the floor.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Thank you. The meeting is adjourned.

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