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Chair: Mr. Ali Ehsassi

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.)): I'd like to call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 106 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Before we begin, I'd like to remind all members and witnesses in the room of the following important preventative measures.

To prevent disruptive and potentially harmful audio feedback incidents that can cause injuries, all in-person participants are reminded to keep their earpieces away from all microphones at all times.

As indicated in the communiqué from the Speaker to all members on Monday, April 29, the following measures have been taken to help prevent audio feedback incidents. Old earpieces have been replaced by a model that greatly reduces the probability of audio feedback. The new earpieces are black in colour, whereas the former earpieces were grey. By default, all unused earpieces will be unplugged at the start of a meeting. When you are not using your earpiece, please place it face down in the middle of the sticker for this purpose, which you will find affixed to your table. Please consult the cards on the table for guidelines to prevent audio feedback incidents. The room layout has been adjusted, as you can see, to increase the distance between microphones and to reduce the chance of feedback from an ambient earpiece.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format.

I'd like to make a few comments for the benefit of the members as well as our distinguished witnesses.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. For members in the room, please raise your hand if you wish to speak. For members on Zoom, please use the "raise hand" function. The committee clerk and I will certainly do our best to maintain a consolidated speaking order.

In accordance with the committee's routine motion concerning the connection tests for witnesses, I am informed that all witnesses have completed the required connection tests in advance of our meeting.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee will commence consideration of the subject matter of supplementary esti-

mates (C), 2023-2024, votes 1c, 5c, 10c and 15c under the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development.

Pursuant to Standing Order 81(4), the committee will commence consideration of the main estates 2024-2025, votes 1, 5, 10, 15, 20 and L30 under Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development; vote 1 under International Development Research Centre, and vote 1 under International Joint Commission, referred to the committee on Thursday, February 29, 2024.

I'd now like to welcome the numerous individuals we have here with us today.

First and foremost, it is a great honour to have the honourable Minister of International Development, Minister Hussen, here with us today. Thank you so much for being with us.

The minister is joined by officials. The officials who are accompanying the minister are Christopher MacLennan, deputy minister of international development; Alexandre Lévêque, assistant deputy minister for Europe, Arctic, Middle East, and Maghreb; Peter MacDougall, assistant deputy minister of global issues and development; Cheryl Urban, assistant deputy minister, sub-Saharan Africa branch; and Shirley Carruthers, chief financial officer.

Minister, you will be provided five minutes for your opening remarks. Thank you for being with us. The floor is yours.

• (1535)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen (Minister of International Development): Thank you so much, Mr. Chair and members of the committee.

Today, I'm here to discuss Canada's role in providing international assistance to advance sustainable development around the world. It is, of course, critical that we do so in a way that keeps in mind the current global context and the results Canada has achieved over the past year, and that examines the challenges ahead.

It is no secret that the global development landscape is changing rapidly. We've seen the devastating impacts of the Israel-Hamas war, the violence and instability in Haiti, the brutal conflict in Sudan and the ongoing destruction by Russia in Ukraine. We've also seen how climate change is disproportionately affecting underdeveloped countries, with flooding in Pakistan, hurricanes in Honduras and drought in Somalia.

Canada is also operating in a context of weakened democracies worldwide and growing authoritarianism. In particular, we're seeing global backlash against gender equality and a rollback of hard-won human rights, including sexual and reproductive rights. This is very disturbing. In this context, Canada is steadfast in its commitment to advance gender equality and deliver a feminist approach to international assistance in pursuit of a more prosperous, safe and equitable world for all of us.

Allow me to share some results from just this last year.

In 2023, Canada's official development assistance increased by approximately 7% to \$10.9 billion, resulting in Canada's highest official development assistance by gross national income level since 1995. As part of these investments, we're delivering on the global climate change commitments we've made as a country. We continue to work with partners to promote clean energy, phase out coal, invest in climate-resilient and smart agriculture, support environmental adaptation initiatives for the most vulnerable countries and, absolutely, protect biodiversity.

Through Canada's support for the Global Environment Facility, we're helping more than eight million people adapt to climate change and protect 100 million hectares of marine biodiversity.

We're also among the top donors supporting gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. The women's voice and leadership program is one example of this. We've supported over 1,100 women's rights organizations, feminist movements and LGBTQI+ organizations in more than 30 developing countries. We're delivering on our 10-year, \$1.4-billion annual commitment to advance the health and rights of women and girls around the world.

From Peru to Bolivia, Zambia and Mozambique, I've seen the transformative impact of Canada's international assistance programming. I've heard directly from young men and women, from community leaders and from others about how our supports are literally changing lives and changing systems.

Other examples of how our aid is saving lives include Canada's contribution of over \$930 million over three years to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, which has so far saved over 44 million lives.

However, despite this progress, the past year has been very challenging. I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge this, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

The human cost of conflict is growing rapidly. According to recent United Nations estimates, over 300 million people around the world will need humanitarian assistance and protection in 2024.

Canada provided \$1.3 billion in humanitarian assistance in the 2022-23 fiscal year to respond to the life-saving needs of the people affected by conflict and natural disasters around the world. Canada has also announced \$100 million in humanitarian assistance funding to address the urgent needs of vulnerable civilians in Gaza, the West Bank and neighbouring countries.

• (1540)

[*English*]

Of course, as members will have seen in budget 2024, we are investing an additional \$350 million to respond to humanitarian crises around the world, because the need is greater than ever before.

Now let's turn to the challenges that lie ahead of us.

We know that development assistance alone is not enough to meet the growing needs of developing countries, so we need to continue to work with other countries, development partners, multilateral development banks, financial institutions and the private sector to mobilize all the possible resources to enable development finance to support the progress towards sustainable development goals.

Through the grants and contributions transformation initiative, Global Affairs Canada is finding new ways of working that are faster, more transparent and more flexible. We need to continue to play a leadership role in shaping the international development landscape of the future in recognition of the fact that Canada and Canadians do not live in a bubble. What happens around the world affects us right here at home, and investing in international assistance to contribute to global peace and security and inclusive economic growth helps us build a more peaceful and prosperous world for all of us.

With that, I want to turn it back to you, Mr. Chair.

[*Translation*]

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

We will now proceed with questions from the members. As I understand it, MP Chong is first.

Mr. Chong, you have six minutes.

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

Minister, in the statistical report on international assistance for the fiscal year 2022-23, the Government of Canada provided \$730,000 in international assistance to Iran. Can you tell us what that was for?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Because of the detailed nature of the question, I'll turn to my officials for that particular project.

Mr. Christopher MacLennan (Deputy Minister, International Development, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): When we do the report every single year, it includes two types of spending. It includes the spending that goes to multilateral organizations such as the United Nations agencies—the Global Fund, for example. It also includes our bilateral assistance directly to countries. Usually it's not to the country itself; it's through organizations that do development assistance work on the ground.

Any country that is eligible for official development assistance as dictated by the OECD will receive funding through these multilateral organizations.

Hon. Michael Chong: Okay. I don't have a lot of time, and we're already almost a quarter of the way through my time.

Do you know what the \$730,000 is—

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: It is an imputed percentage from Canada's contributions to multilateral organizations that have undertaken work in Iran.

Hon. Michael Chong: Okay, thank you.

Minister, we don't agree with the resumption of funding for UNRWA. The government announced the suspension of funding at the end of January—I think January 26—and then reinstated it on March 8. Were there any planned transfers during that roughly five-week period? What were we suspending during that five-week period?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: As I said at the time in my numerous statements, we paused additional funding to UNRWA pending the examination of the allegations that came forward.

Hon. Michael Chong: Was there any scheduled funding during that period that was suspended?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We paused any additional funding to UNRWA. I can't be more clear than that, sir.

Hon. Michael Chong: The government announced on March 8 that funding would be reinstated, and I believe it's \$25 million of the \$100-million commitment that is to be transferred to UNRWA this fiscal year. Is that correct?

• (1545)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Can you rephrase your question? I don't know what you are asking. Are you asking me if we have stopped pausing funding to UNRWA, or are you asking me about a specific number?

Hon. Michael Chong: No. My question is that \$25 million is supposed to be transferred to UNRWA. Is that correct?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes, that's correct.

Hon. Michael Chong: Has that money already been transferred to UNRWA?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes, it has.

Hon. Michael Chong: Were any conditions put on the transfer of that funding?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I want to address your question by going back to the relationship between Canada and UNRWA. It's a recognition of UNRWA's role in Gaza as well as in the region. UNRWA is responsible for the humanitarian response to two million Gazans and four million Palestinians in the region.

We stopped pausing funding in recognition of two things. One was the tangible and numerous steps that UNRWA itself and the UN had taken to build confidence and put in more oversight and accountability measures that built the confidence of donor countries like Canada. Second, we also stopped pausing funding in recognition of the dire humanitarian situation on the ground. When you combine those two things, we were confident to move forward.

The responsibility of UNRWA to continue to implement those oversight and accountability mechanisms and to meet its obligations towards neutrality and anti-terrorism are ongoing. They're not just stuck in that time.

We will continue to monitor that, but we are very confident in the number of significant steps taken both by UNRWA, the UN and the Secretary General.

Hon. Michael Chong: The UN's Colonna report made 50 recommendations, some of which were to allow UN bodies such as the UNHCR and the World Food Programme direct access to Gaza to address the humanitarian crisis there without having to go through UNRWA.

Have you put those kinds of conditions, tied to those recommendations in the report, on the transfer of the \$25 million? If not, are you prepared to put conditions on the remaining \$75 million that has yet to be transferred?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Number one, the World Food Programme is already in Gaza. They do—

Hon. Michael Chong: Yes, but the UN report's criticism of how the World Food Programme is operated in Gaza is that it's not operating under its own auspices there. It has to operate under UNRWA rather than under the World Food Programme. Their recommendation was that UN agencies be able to go directly into Gaza without having to seek intercession through UNRWA.

My question is, have you put conditions like that on the transfer of funding to UNRWA? If not, are you willing to do that in the future?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: You characterize that as intercession. What I would say is that we recognize UNRWA as being the backbone of the humanitarian response in Gaza. That's not just the Canadian position; it's the position of many international trusted partners who deliver aid to Gaza. They rely on UNRWA and use their logistics and their networks to distribute that aid.

For example, that's what the World Food Programme does.

The Chair: Thank you.

We now go to MP Zuberi.

You have six minutes.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Minister, for being here and for the amazing work of your team in promoting international development and Canada's presence on the international stage.

My first question is going to be around the Humanitarian Coalition.

There are a number of amazing humanitarian groups in Canada that do very important work. The Humanitarian Coalition is composed of respected humanitarian organizations. There are some others that are not currently in this coalition.

Can you elaborate on any criteria that could allow those others who aren't inside to enter? Can you elaborate upon that and give us some understanding?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I will begin by saying that on the crisis in Gaza—the war between Israel and Hamas—we have been very concerned from the very beginning about the impact it has had and continues to have on Palestinian civilians. Our commitment to providing life-saving humanitarian aid has been very strong from the very beginning. We were the first western country to respond, with an initial allocation of \$60 million. We followed that up with an additional \$40 million.

That, again, is the recognition that we should be guided by the principle of making sure that Canada continues to provide life-saving assistance to anyone in the region who needs it, even to the point of embarking on airdrops when it was difficult to reach northern Gaza and joining allies in doing that.

On the mechanics of who gets to join the Humanitarian Coalition, I'm going to turn to Deputy MacLennan to provide details on that.

• (1550)

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Answer briefly, please.

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: The Humanitarian Coalition is not a Canadian government organization. It's a grouping of Canadian humanitarian organizations. They have their own set of criteria as to who can join and who has decided not to join for various reasons. It's really up to the coalition itself.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: That's helpful. I raise it only because of matching funds that have been given to the coalition. Sometimes groups outside of the coalition ask for matching funds. I hope that you, in the future, will consider those requests. I'm sure you do already, but it's just on that particular point.

Minister, you started to touch upon a point that I wanted to elaborate on.

You have spoken to this already in part, around UNRWA, and around the nightmare that we are seeing occur within Gaza with the humanitarian crisis that is occurring there. Our allies, including America, have highlighted and pinpointed that much more unimpeded humanitarian aid needs to get into Gaza. Our allies, including America, have stated as such.

First, can you tell us why UNRWA is so important for the delivery of that aid?

Second, can you tell us anything in addition to this that you would like to share in terms of Canada's record with respect to stepping in during this crisis, this nightmare?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you.

I have been to Rafah, and I have seen first-hand the number of trucks that are stuck at the border. There are thousands of trucks. There were at least 2,000 when I was there. They had been at the border for more than 21 days.

That aid needs to get through. The process that was in place at that time was too cumbersome and time-consuming. There have been improvements recently, with the opening of the Erez border

crossing. That has allowed Jordan to cut through the West Bank and deliver aid to northern Gaza, which is a priority for all of us because northern Gaza has famine-like conditions, according to the head of the World Food Programme, Cindy McCain.

The fact is that international humanitarian law calls for the unimpeded access of both aid and humanitarian workers. That's been the Canadian position. We've worked with our partners to make sure we're there not only to provide aid but also to ensure that we're doing everything we can to have the aid go in, including by pursuing airdrops. For various reasons, the trucks were not able to make it to the northern Gaza population. Therefore, we embarked on airdrops, together with many like-minded countries, and we'll continue to do that.

The amount of aid and the conditions under which humanitarian workers have to operate inside Gaza are not optimal. They are far from acceptable. Based on our monitoring of the situation, we continue to call for better, unimpeded access for both aid and workers.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: In the minute that's left, I'd like to ask you about Sudan and the important work you have done with your team to step in during this humanitarian crisis, in which over 15,000 people have died since the civil war started in April 2023.

Can you elaborate, please?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: The conflict in Sudan is very concerning, because it has led to one of the highest populations of displaced people in the world today, in terms of numbers, both within Sudan, which is a very large country, and also in the region. Our job is to make sure, first of all, that we are contributing to efforts to end the conflict through working with partners. I was able to meet with the last civilian Sudanese prime minister, who has a connection to Canada and who is working very hard to make sure there is a return to democracy in Sudan and an end to the conflict.

We are providing \$132 million of aid to trusted partners in Sudan and neighbouring countries to make sure people have the life-saving assistance they need.

Thank you.

• (1555)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will now go to Mr. Bergeron.

You have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron (Montarville, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister Hussen, thank you for joining us today. This is your first appearance in front of this committee since your appointment last summer. As a former member of the National Assembly, in both the opposition and government, I'm always surprised by how rarely ministers get involved in parliamentary committee business on the Hill in Ottawa. In any case, we're delighted that you're finally here today to discuss the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development's estimates and appropriations for development assistance.

The Bloc Québécois strongly disagreed with the Canadian government's decision to suspend funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, or UNRWA. We were greatly relieved by the decision to reinstate it. We felt that this was the right thing to do, given that Gaza is experiencing one of the worst humanitarian crises in decades and that this wasn't the right time to suspend Canadian aid. In addition, according to a United Nations press release, Israel has yet to provide any evidence to support its allegations that a significant number of UNRWA employees are members of terrorist organizations. It was appropriate to restore funding to this organization, which is likely in the best position to provide effective assistance to Palestinians struggling with the ongoing aggression in their territory.

To even suggest that funding for UNRWA wouldn't be approved seems incredibly insensitive, given the current situation in Gaza.

On that note, and given your observations and your rather worrying description of humanitarian aid in Gaza, what can be done to ensure that the aid reaches its destination in order to avoid the famine predicted by the United Nations?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Given the escalating humanitarian crisis in Gaza, we're reinstating funding for UNRWA as part of our broader commitment to provide urgent assistance to Palestinian civilians facing food shortages and severe restrictions on access to health care.

[English]

UNRWA, I agree with you, represents a lifeline for two million Gazans. When it comes to the infrastructure and their networks for being able to distribute the aid very quickly, they're second to none.

What more can we do? We of course need to continue to support UNRWA in their efforts to provide more support to the Palestinians in Gaza, but also to work with other organizations, such as the World Food Programme, the World Health Organization, UNICEF and many others, including Canadian organizations that are on the ground in Gaza providing that life-saving assistance.

Access is also an issue. We need to continue to advocate for access and continue to innovate and use other methods when people are in severe need and the regular methods are not working. That's why we pursued airdrops, together with the Jordanians, the Germans, the Dutch and others, through the World Food Programme, for example.

We also need a ceasefire. We need the conflict to end, so that it will be much easier for humanitarian workers to work in a less dangerous environment.

We need a ceasefire. We need the conflict to end. Ultimately, our government's position is that we need a two-state solution, so we have two states for two peoples living side by side in peace and security.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you, Minister Hussen.

You no doubt know that this committee is currently looking into the whole issue of Canada's presence or involvement in Africa. This must be an important issue when it comes to the francophonie and international trade. I imagine that you're paying special attention to the issue from an international development perspective.

Global Affairs officials admitted that they weren't sure how to approach the matter. First there was talk of an African strategy, an African approach, an African framework, then an African policy, and now they don't even know what to call it. This gives the impression that the government is flying blind when it comes to Africa. Canada has signed many free trade agreements around the world, but none on the African continent, even though Africa has been identified as the next economic El Dorado.

How much of this funding here is specifically earmarked for Africa? Is there an international development vision for Africa in particular, or are things still rather vague?

• (1600)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Thank you.

[English]

I would just say that we need to broaden and deepen our engagement with Africa on trade, investment, economic co-operation and international assistance and make Africa foreign policy a priority, but we're not starting from scratch. We're starting from a good place. Already, our international assistance policy commits 50% of all bilateral international development assistance to sub-Saharan African countries.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Minister.

We next go to Ms. McPherson, who is joining us virtually.

The floor is yours. You have six minutes, Madam McPherson.

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

Thank you, Minister, for being here today to answer our questions. I have a number, so I'll jump right in.

As you know, because I've raised it with you a number of times, I believe that the small and medium organizations in Canada do incredible work, really incredible work. Run through the Inter-Council Network of Provincial and Regional Councils for International Development, they are able to reach Canadians across the country. They are able to do innovative, long-term and very good development work on the ground.

There have been some concerns that there has been underfunding for the small and medium-sized organizations across the country. I'd like to get some information from you on whether or not the pilot initiative will be continued if there is funding allocated in these main estimates to the Canadian small and medium-sized organizations for impact and innovation and the pilot initiative. If there are funds allocated, can you please tell me how much?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I will start by making a brief remark on this, and then I'll turn to the officials on the specific amount. What I would say very clearly to all the members and the chair of this committee is that I agree with the member. We need to encourage more small, medium and large Canadian-based organizations to feel welcome in our programming, in our funding envelopes and in our projects, and we need to leverage their expertise, their credibility and their knowledge of international development. They do great work, so I agree with the member. We need to do more, but, as the officials will highlight, we're already making progress.

I'll turn to my deputy to provide further detail.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Could those answers be quite concise, please? I have some other questions.

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: Sure, I'll be very concise.

We don't have specific allotments directly from this year's budget, not because there's not going to be money that flows that way. It's just that it doesn't align directly with the main estimates in that way, but it is a part of the programming. We have 39 SMOs right now that have received ongoing funding, and 50 SMOs have been selected to test innovative solutions using the fund for innovation and transformation, and that will be ongoing.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you. Could you share any details about the dollar amounts that will be going out when they become available? That would be helpful.

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: Sure.

Ms. Heather McPherson: We're talking about small and medium organizations here, Minister, and a concern that I have and I've expressed to you many times is around Bill C-41.

A year ago your government pushed through Bill C-41. It significantly changed the way Canadians can do international development work. We were happy that the NDP was successful in amending the legislation to ensure that humanitarian work was exempted from the new authorization regime, but development work, the work you're responsible for, is still within that Bill C-41.

We're over a year in. There is no guidance for Canadian organizations on how to navigate this regime and apply for authorizations from the government. We know there are situations in Sudan, the DRC and elsewhere around the world where this is going to have impacts, so I have two questions for you.

How much development funding for Afghanistan—not humanitarian funding but development funding—has reached Afghanistan since Bill C-41 passed? When will Canadian organizations see the guidance from your government that can help them navigate what is a completely inappropriate, draconian authorization regime?

• (1605)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'll answer the second question first, and then I'll turn to the officials for the specific amounts.

There's no doubt that any delays on such important development work are frustrating for all of us. Public Safety is leading this effort, and we're working very closely with them to make the authorization regime operational as soon as possible on the development side of things. We're hopeful that this will launch in the coming months.

Ms. Heather McPherson: To be perfectly honest, just to interrupt before I get the answer to the first question, there was supposed to be a review after one year. That's in the legislation. That's impossible to do, because you haven't given organizations any of the framework on how to apply for these authorizations. You're in contradiction of the legislation that is supposed to be doing the review.

I will go to your colleagues on the amount that has flowed to Afghanistan since Bill C-41 passed.

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: On that specific question, we'd have to get back to you in writing in terms of the amount since the time of the passing of the legislation to today, the exact amount on development assistance.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Could you tell me if any has gone?

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: Yes, but I don't know what the amount is exactly off the top of my head.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

The next question I have for you, Minister, is around Gaza. We know that last week the United Nations reported that it would take until 2040 to restore the homes devastated in Israel's bombing and ground offensive in Gaza, and that's if the conflict ended today.

We are seeing a crime of “domicide”. The world hasn't seen anything like the unprecedented destruction of housing in Gaza since World War II. We also know that, with the unexploded ordnances and environmental destruction, the land in Gaza is now a significant hazard for rebuilding. In fact, scientists have said that the planet-warming emissions generated during just the first two months of the war in Gaza were greater than the annual carbon footprint of more than 20 of the world's most climate-vulnerable nations.

I asked the government months ago about the plan for the reconstruction of Gaza, and I really want to get an answer. What is the plan of the government? Will you clearly state now that Canada will not accept any solution that denies the right of Gazans to return to their land? What plans have you made for increasing Canadian assistance to help fund the rebuilding of Gaza for Gazans when this war is over?

There is a very deep concern that, as we rebuild Ukraine, as we rebuild Gaza and as we rebuild Sudan, people around the world will suffer if the money going to that rebuilding is coming off their backs, and the people who are living in these communities need support to rebuild their communities.

The Chair: We are already 20 seconds over, so please respond as briefly as possible, Minister.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Mr. Chair, that will be a challenge, because the member has asked perhaps four questions. I don't know which one to start with.

I'll say that we've been there for the Palestinian civilians in Gaza and we'll be there in the future. Of course, we are advocating for a ceasefire, so that we can allow more aid to go in and have unimpeded access for humanitarian workers.

The Chair: Thank you.

As the members will notice, the bells are ringing. Do we have unanimous...?

Mr. Chong.

Hon. Michael Chong: Minister, I believe if you seek it, hopefully you will find it. It is that we continue to sit until the bells have expired and the question is put, that we then suspend to allow members to vote, and that we then come out of suspension once the Speaker has declared the result of the vote.

The Chair: Is there unanimous consent to that?

Yes.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): My voting app is acting up right now. If I could go five minutes before, just in case it doesn't work....

Hon. Michael Chong: Mr. Chair, I'll reframe the unanimous consent question.

It is that the chair suspend five minutes before the bells have expired, that the committee remain suspended until the Speaker has declared the results of the vote, and that the committee come out of suspension at that point in time.

I believe that if you seek it, you will find it.

• (1610)

The Chair: All heads are nodding. Excellent. Thank you very much.

Now we will go to the second round of questions. We will start off with MP Aboultaif.

You have five minutes.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC): Thank you, Chair. Welcome, Minister, to the committee.

Minister, you paused the assistance or aid to UNRWA for about six weeks. Is that correct?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes, we did. That's roughly, not exactly.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: What does that mean, technically? You announced that you were pausing the flow of money or assistance.

What happened in that case?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: As I indicated earlier in my question to your colleague, together with other donor countries, as well as the Secretary-General of the United Nations, we looked at this issue. We demanded and asked for enhanced accountability measures, enhanced oversight measures and tangible steps to be taken to address issues around neutrality and other issues.

I must say, in that time period, the UN Secretary-General, the UN system and UNRWA itself took a number of tangible steps to address our concerns and implement and institute additional oversight and accountability measures. Some of those are ongoing. Some of them have been completed, but some are ongoing. We expect that work to continue.

Based on those actions, we lifted the pause on additional funding to UNRWA.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: There was a gap. You stopped the flow of funds, but people still needed that assistance on the ground. How did you manage to allocate the money or—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: In that time period, we also provided additional support to the tune of \$40 million to other international trusted partners that were also active in Gaza, including the World Food Programme, UNICEF, the World Health Organization and others.

I want to challenge an underlying assumption that you are making in your question, which is that it was either UNRWA or the others. That wasn't the case. Even before the pause, in the first \$60 million of assistance that Canada announced in response to the crisis in Gaza, some of it went to UNRWA, but most of it actually went to many other organizations, including the Humanitarian Coalition.

Our response has always been UNRWA and the other organizations, not one or the other.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: On the record, I'm trying to clarify the fact and clarify the mechanism. It's clearly important for all of us to understand that.

Is there any specific program that you don't support, among UNRWA's programs or work?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I don't understand the question. Do we oppose UNRWA's work? Is that what you're asking?

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: The question is—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: UNRWA provides life-saving support for Palestinians, which, by the way, is something I have never heard your party and your members talk about. In all this time, I haven't seen a single member of that caucus get up to talk about the dire humanitarian situation in Gaza, so the question—

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: Please let me finish. I think the premise of the question is this. I am saying UNRWA has several programs that it does, some with food, some with education, some with.... Is there any specific program that Canadian money does not support among what UNRWA does, or do we support everything it does? That's the question.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We support the work of UNRWA to provide life-saving assistance to Palestinian civilians. That's what we do.

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: True, but are there any specific programs for which you say, I won't support this specific program?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I don't understand the nature of the question. We provide funding to UNRWA to provide support to Palestinian civilians, and that includes delivering humanitarian support as well as education and other services.

• (1615)

Mr. Ziad Aboultaif: I'm trying to understand how the money is going to be distributed. It's just a normal question. As I said earlier, there are certain areas that UNRWA.... UNRWA did a lot of work for so many years. We understand that, and I've lived through it somehow in the past. There is no surprise. I am asking a technical question about whether there are any programs you support more than UNRWA does, compared to others you don't.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Now you're talking about the proportion, which one is more and which one is less. I'll turn to the officials for that. All I know is that UNRWA is the backbone of the humanitarian response in Gaza, and we support them fully in that work. They have an extensive history and network. Who delivered what truck and when, I can't answer. That's too granular. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much. Next, we go to Madame Chatel.

You have five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sophie Chatel (Pontiac, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister Hussen, I would like to welcome you to our committee. We appreciate having you here.

I'll keep talking about the situation in Gaza. Cindy McCain, the director of the World Food Programme, said that northern Gaza is in full-blown famine. It's unbelievable that the situation has reached this point. I find it appalling that my Conservative colleagues are saying that we should stop funding the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, or UNRWA. If we did that, hundreds of thousands of people would die.

What more can be done to help? How can this organization's funding provide immediate assistance and help prevent this humanitarian disaster?

[*English*]

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: The member brings up a really important point that what we are talking about is life-saving assistance. Literally, hundreds of thousands of people are on the verge of famine. In fact, recently, as the member indicated, the head of the World Food Programme, Cindy McCain, said that in northern Gaza at least, there is a full-blown famine. This is something that a number of respected human rights organizations and humanitarian organizations, I should say, have been warning about for months. It is why we have been calling for unimpeded humanitarian access. It is why Canada, together with like-minded countries, has embarked on the extraordinary effort of launching airdrops. Northern Gaza was not accessible to trucks and to aid workers, so we had to resort to that to do everything that we can, because that's what international humanitarian law calls on countries to do: to do everything that we can to ensure that humanitarian aid reaches people. We have to make sure people have access to life-saving assistance.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Thank you.

Many of my constituents also feel concerned about the situation in Haiti, another disaster. The supplementary estimates provide funding for Canada's response to the crisis in Haiti. How will humanitarian aid help support the people of Haiti in this unprecedented crisis?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: We're deeply concerned about the situation in Haiti and its impact on innocent civilians.

Canada continues to support Haitian-led solutions to the political crisis and the security and humanitarian situation affecting the country. Canada has always been committed to supporting development in Haiti. It provided \$140 million in international aid in 2023, including almost \$14 million in humanitarian aid.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Thank you.

Some of the committee witnesses have talked about the climate crisis and its negative impact on people in developing countries. It's quite concerning. There's also talk of climate refugees.

I know that supplementary estimates (C), 2023-2024, include international funding to fight climate change. How can this assistance help these refugees?

• (1620)

[*English*]

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Absolutely. That's another really important question.

On the issue of climate change and the impacts of climate change, the impacts of biodiversity laws, the impacts of plastic pollution, we simply cannot do it alone. We need to collaborate with others. We need to work with others to tackle these challenges head-on, and Canada is doing its part through our feminist international assistance policy. We're contributing to climate adaptation measures by providing resources to developing countries to implement climate adaptation measures. Through the Global Environment Facility, we've contributed to efforts to fight biodiversity loss and plastic pollution.

All of these things are beneficial to Canada as well, because, if that plastic is not tackled at the source, it will wash up in Canada. We all rely on biodiversity for our medication and other benefits, and we're working with like-minded countries and communities around the world to tackle these issues on the front lines.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you. We'll go to Mr. Bergeron.

You have two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister Hussen, thank you again for joining us.

I'll pick up on the question asked by my colleague, Ms. Chatel. We learned that an investment of \$28.3 million was earmarked in supplementary estimates (C), 2023-2024, for Haiti. However, according to Global Affairs Canada's departmental plan for 2024-25, this funding ended on March 31, 2024. How much money has been invested so far, and why hasn't this funding been increased?

[*English*]

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'll turn to the officials for this question, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Shirley Carruthers (Chief Financial Officer, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): I don't have the exact number we've invested.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Can you provide an answer later?

Ms. Shirley Carruthers: Yes.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Good.

We know that, two years ago, Canada helped replenish the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. We know that another replenishment is on the horizon. The situation is the same for the Global Polio Eradication Initiative. Are we expected to step up and replenish the fund and the initiative?

[*English*]

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: On the global fund question, Mr. Chair, I'll again turn to the officials for the specific numbers.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: If I understood the question correctly, you're talking about the next allocation of funding. For a number of years, the Government of Canada has provided annual support for both initiatives.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: I gather that we can expect to step up to the plate again.

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: We'll certainly step up to the plate. However, as noted, in both cases we must wait for the organizations to launch what is known as the replenishment of funds.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: So you're telling us to stay tuned.

[*English*]

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: Stay tuned.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

We will go to Madam McPherson. You have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I wanted to follow up on one of the questions I asked that the officials answer with regard to Bill C-41, that clarification on the funds that have been sent to Afghanistan since Bill C-41 was enacted. Please clarify when you submit that back to the committee whether those organizations are Canadian or whether those organizations are multilateral organizations. Thank you.

Then, I would also go back to the minister.

I know I threw a lot at you, Minister, right before I ran out of time, but I would like to ask the question again. Can you please state that a Liberal government would not accept any solution to rebuilding Gaza that denies the right of Gazans to return to their land?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: On the issue of the Palestinians—in particular, I think you're referring to the possible displacement of people from Rafah—our position on that is very clear. We oppose any military action against innocent civilians in Rafah, because they have nowhere else to go; therefore, they're staying and seeking refuge in Rafah. We've made that very clear.

• (1625)

Ms. Heather McPherson: That's not the question. I'm asking about when there comes a time that this conflict is over—hopefully, soon, because there's such an incredible loss of life—and there is rebuilding of Gaza. Does the Canadian government commit that no rebuilding of Gaza will happen unless the right of Gazans to return to their homeland is clear?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'm just not sure what you're referring to in terms of.... I mean, do you have information to inform me about whether Palestinians have been denied their right to return to Gaza? I'm not sure what you're referring to, Ms. McPherson.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Yes. There's a long history of Palestinians not being able to return to their homeland—

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Particularly to Gaza—

Ms. Heather McPherson: —and there is a very big risk that, if there are not concrete steps taken by the international community in this circumstance, the same failure to allow Gazans to return could happen again. I do not want Canada to be involved in helping to rebuild Gaza and build a part of Palestine if Gazans are not given the absolute, clear right to return to their homeland.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Look, we support a ceasefire. We support the right of Palestinians, as civilians—

Ms. Heather McPherson: That's not what I asked, Minister.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: —to live in peace in Gaza, and we oppose military action in Rafah.

The Chair: Thank you.

For the last two questions, for two minutes each, we first go to Mr. Genuis. You have two minutes.

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): I am deeply concerned about the humanitarian situations in Gaza and in Afghanistan, as I've said many times. Both of these territories are controlled by recognized terrorist organizations. Canadian organizations cannot operate in these places without authorization. That was the problem that Bill C-41 was supposed to solve. It was supposed to provide a framework whereby organizations could provide support in terrorist-controlled areas.

We heard last spring, when we studied this bill at the justice committee, about the great urgency of the matter to avoid another winter. That was in the case of Afghanistan. Minister, it's been a full year. No organization has been given authorization, because there's been no framework whatsoever for giving them authorization. In my view, given the urgency of this and that we were told a year ago what the urgency was, this is utterly disgraceful, and this

affects many of the humanitarian contexts we're talking about. Is this an issue of government incompetence that we've delayed a year, or is it simply a matter of you or your officials not actually believing in the framework of the bill in the first place?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I will avoid the hyperbole of the member and stick to the facts.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Yes, many people are dying, and I've been given only two minutes, so you have 30 seconds. Can you provide an answer?

The Chair: Allow the minister to respond, please.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I'm not going to resort to hyperbole. If you let me answer, I'll give you the answer that I provided earlier—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Talk, please. I want to know. What's the answer?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: —which is that this is an important matter. The delays are frustrating for all of us, and I understand where you're coming from. Public Safety is leading this effort. We're working with them. I hope we can arrive at a solution very soon in the coming months and that we operationalize this as quickly as possible. That's why—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Minister, that's not good enough, and if I seem frustrated, it's because I am, and I'm trying to reflect the urgency and frustration of the vast number of people who have families in Gaza, Afghanistan and other places that are controlled by terrorist organizations.

I have one more question I want to get in. I, along with other members, sent you a letter—

The Chair: You have nine seconds left.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Well, I'll get it in. I sent you a letter on Burma. It took you six months to respond, and you didn't answer the core question. Why are you providing aid through government-controlled areas instead of opposition-controlled areas in Burma? It took you six months to respond, and you didn't even answer that basic question as to why it is not through opposition-controlled areas.

The Chair: Be very brief, Minister.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: It's very rich that the honourable member is trying to give me a hard time for aid to Burma when his leader would cut all international aid. Maybe you should advocate.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: That is complete nonsense. Can you answer the question and take your job seriously?

The Chair: Mr. Genuis, as I indicated to you, you're out of time. Thank you.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Can you answer the question, Minister?

The Chair: Mr. Genuis, you're out of time. Mr. Genuis—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: On a point of order, Chair—

The Chair: I've reminded you on several occasions that you're out of time.

What is your point of order?

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Chair, witnesses at parliamentary committees have an obligation to answer questions. That applies to ministers as well as to members of the public. I asked a very direct question, and I'd like you to put to the minister that he has an obligation to provide a simple answer to a simple question.

The Chair: Mr. Genuis, I understand that the minister did respond to your question.

We have two minutes remaining.

Mr. Sameer Zuberi: Mr. Chair, this is a false point of order. This is a figment—

The Chair: Mr. Alghabra, you have two minutes.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: We brought Kristian Firth before the bar for the same reason—because he wouldn't answer questions that were put to him.

Hon. Omar Alghabra (Mississauga Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, thank you for being here today.

This is, perhaps, a good segue to asking you this question, because there is a lot of posturing. Canadians, understandably, are asking this: What is the value of Canada's aid to people in need around the world? Why is it important that Canada plays a role around the world when people are in need?

I'll give you these two minutes to explain why Canadians should be proud of Canada's role.

• (1630)

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: That's right. It's a point that's lost on the leader of the official opposition and the honourable member.

We need to—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Are you here to answer questions, or just to make partisan comments?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I am trying to answer the question.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: This is silliness. You're a minister of the Crown. Take your job seriously.

The Chair: Perhaps you could refrain from interrupting.

Minister, go ahead, please.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: I think I know my job better than you do, sir.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: But you don't.

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes, I do.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Bill C-41—

The Chair: Mr. Genuis, could you refrain from interrupting?

Hon. Ahmed Hussen: Yes, I do.

I wish you brought the same level of advocacy on international development to your leader, who wants to cut international development assistance in total.

International assistance and development are important for Canada. They are important because we live in partnership with the rest of the world. What happens in many parts of the world affects us, whether it's the loss of biodiversity, as I indicated earlier, or whether it is the deterioration of peace and security, instability, the proliferation of plastics or the lack of respect for human rights. All of these things impact us right here. It is absolutely in Canada's national interest to contribute to peace, security and development around the world. We are a trading nation. We thrive on access and engagement with the rest of the world, not withdrawing from the rest of the world.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We now have three and a half minutes before the vote. As I understand it, the minister can stay with us only until 4:30.

I will now suspend, and we will resume as soon as the votes are counted. That should be in approximately 15 minutes or maybe 17 minutes from now.

Thank you very much, Minister.

The meeting stands suspended.

• (1630) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1650)

The Chair: We'll resume the meeting on estimates.

Once again, I want to thank the witnesses who are appearing before us. For the benefit of the members, I will once again identify all the officials who are here to answer our questions.

We're grateful to have here with us Christopher MacLennan, deputy minister for international development; Alexandre Lévêque, assistant deputy minister, Europe, Arctic, Middle East and Maghreb; Peter MacDougall, assistant deputy minister, global issues and development; Cheryl Urban, assistant deputy minister, sub-Saharan Africa branch; and Shirley Carruthers, chief financial officer.

Thank you all for being with us today.

We will now resume questions by the members. The first member up is MP Epp.

Go ahead. You have six minutes.

• (1655)

Mr. Dave Epp (Chatham-Kent—Leamington, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

In his opening comments, the minister outlined the many different projects that are funded through your department. On average, how many “sign-offs” does it take to flow a project through a Canadian CSO or NGO?

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: To be perfectly honest, I don't know what the average number of sign-offs is. There could be numerous sign-offs depending on all the key elements that are required to put together a contribution agreement for a Canadian organization.

Mr. Dave Epp: I wonder if you could table some background information on that.

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: I could for sure.

Mr. Dave Epp: I'll tell you why. In conversations with CSOs, I've been told it takes up to 19. The reason I raise this is that the Senate produced a report on diplomacy. Granted, it was more targeted at the foreign service, which isn't exactly this department, but the criticism I have heard of DFATD and the international development regime has been that through past cost-cutting exercises, the bottom has been trimmed but not so much the top.

I understand there are some efforts being made to address that. Can you speak to those?

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: I'll speak along two lines.

First, in response to your direct question, it's been pretty clear for a number of years that particularly our Canadian partners, but quite honestly also even large multilateral partners, have found the Government of Canada a very difficult partner to work through because of the thickness of our processes and the timelines that are often required to undertake the many components of putting together a contribution or grant arrangement.

The government takes this very seriously and has embarked on a rather serious process that also encompasses our grants and contributions transformation initiative, which the minister mentioned. We have actually brought in Canadian partners to help with the re-design, so we're actually co-designing and working together to figure out ways in which we can thin out all of those processes we were mentioning.

With respect to the question of bottom-heavy or top-heavy, under the transformation initiative there is a commitment to rationalizing the senior executive ranks at Global Affairs Canada. It's an ongoing process, as you know. It's a very large department in terms of the number of executives who are there. We're in year one, basically, or maybe at the end of year one, so we're—

Mr. Dave Epp: Do you have a timeline for completion?

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: It will be over three years.

Mr. Dave Epp: Would you expect that more funds would then flow potentially through our NGOs and Canadian-based civil society organizations, as opposed to through multilateral partners? That's another criticism I hear—that it's easier right now to flow funds through multilateral organizations, because some of the levels of accountability are transferred to the other organizations as opposed to being homegrown. We all want taxpayer money to be appropriately spent and reviewed, but that has to be done faster and better.

Do you have any comments on that?

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: I have two thoughts on that.

There is a commitment to use Canadian organizations more. The amounts going to Canadian organizations have stayed roughly in the \$1 billion range over a number of years.

The challenge has been that the world changes. The needs, for example, we have to respond to very quickly dictate which tools would be best to have available. For example, Canada's support to Ukraine, which has been massive over the last two years, has required us to use the IMF, the International Monetary Fund. There are times when it's difficult to use Canadian organizations, depending upon what the challenge is.

However, we are working to find ways to better leverage Canadian organizations.

Mr. Dave Epp: Thank you.

I'm going to switch gears a bit. As you are aware, this committee is undertaking a study of Africa, and our response has many levels to it. In assessing projects under the international development framework, to what extent is the lens of trade used? I know there are other lenses that are used when evaluating projects.

To what extent is the benefit of trade considered, both to the host and to the donor country? The donor in this case is Canada.

• (1700)

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: In general, it depends on the context we are working within. A good portion of the development assistance programming that we undertake is dedicated to specific sectors of development, such as global health or sexual reproductive health and rights. There are fewer opportunities there to make the link to trade and improving trade.

However, we also do a significant amount of work in the economic development sphere, and there are more direct relations to trade there. As part of the Indo-Pacific strategy, there is a dedicated effort to find ways to better use our development assistance to respond to the needs of developing countries in the Indo-Pacific area that would facilitate trade for them, but also, obviously, directly with Canada. I would say the same opportunities are possible in Africa.

Mr. Dave Epp: Here's a more specific question. Why was \$5 million dollars from the DFATD budget transferred over to the Department of the Environment for the Africa food accelerator?

I don't quite follow that one.

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: That's a good question.

You can take it. Okay.

Mr. Peter MacDougall (Assistant Deputy Minister, Global Issues and Development, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Thank you.

This funding is part of our overall \$5.3-billion climate finance initiative. Most of the money flows via Global Affairs, but we also accept project proposals from departments. In this case, it was Environment Canada working with a platform to support adaptation activities on food security in Africa.

Mr. Dave Epp: That was a project initiated—

The Chair: That's your time, Mr. Epp. Thank you.

Mr. Dave Epp: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: We'll go to MP Chatel next. You have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Thank you, Mr. Chair. I would like to share my time with my colleague, Mr. Alghabra.

I'll keep talking with the witnesses about Canada's investments in developing countries to fight climate change and its effects, which often affect vulnerable people more acutely. I know that a \$450 million investment was promised as part of the Green Climate Fund, a United Nations fund created by the Paris Agreement.

Has this money been provided? If so, how does it make a difference? What about all the other money contributed to various organizations? Do you assess the impact of your financial support for international organizations?

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: Yes, absolutely. The goal of all these investments is to make an impact. However, we often talk about loans. In these cases, it's different. We use innovative funding mechanisms. These include longer-term loans lasting up to 15 or 20 years, over which the impact will be spread out. That said, we can still use a few key indicators to assess the results of each fund, such as how many tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions were prevented and how many cars were taken off the road.

Mrs. Sophie Chatel: Thank you. I'll now give the floor to my colleague.

[*English*]

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Deputy and officials, thank you very much for being here today.

I want to build on what Mr. Epp has asked. I come across different charitable organizations that raise money and do a lot of what appears, to me, to be excellent work abroad, but organizations that have never been granted any funds for projects find it—at least, they tell me they do—very difficult to be a first-time applicant.

What is your advice to them for how they should go about demonstrating their work and trying to have the best application put forward?

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: That's a very good question. It's been a challenge for a very long time.

As was mentioned, the rules with respect to offering a grant or a contribution arrangement with an organization are sometimes quite detailed, and it requires knowledge of the situation on the ground.

We expect to get results from these projects, obviously. The challenge often with a number of small and medium-sized organizations is that they have small footprints globally, and that requires us both to help them with their concept notes, for example, to how to better write the proposals that they're making, and to work with them. For that reason, we did a dedicated call for small and medium-sized organizations, so that they were targeted for the purposes of opening up a chance for new organizations to take part in Canadian assistance.

• (1705)

Hon. Omar Alghabra: When did that happen, and how successful has it been?

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: As I mentioned earlier, a number of organizations have already received funding, and it's ongoing. We have a large number of other ones that have gone through the process and have been approved in terms of the quality of the proposal. It's ongoing, and I can get you the specifics with respect to that call.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: When GAC examines applications, does it also look at the organization's ability to deliver work globally? There are some organizations that tend to specialize in certain parts of the world. Does it work against them if they're regionally focused?

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: I wouldn't say that it works against them if they're regionally focused. Global Affairs Canada has funding in all corners of the world. We have programs in the Americas, sub-Saharan Africa, the Maghreb, the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific, so there are lots of opportunities around the globe.

For certain, the government has made a commitment to act upon a number of really important sectors: global health, sexual reproductive health and rights, climate change and food security, so a predominant amount of our global development assistance spending is in those areas, which means that organizations that align with those priorities have greater opportunities in that respect.

Hon. Omar Alghabra: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Alghabra.

Next we go to Mr. Bergeron.

You have six minutes, sir.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you.

I want to thank the witnesses for staying with us and continuing to answer our questions. When you see the minister, I'm counting on you to greet him on my behalf. I didn't get a chance to do so before he left so hastily.

For parliamentarians, figuring out how much the Canadian government spends on official development assistance is often like trying to find Waldo. Can you tell us how much the Canadian government invests each year in official development assistance, without taking into account past or future years? What percentage of our gross domestic product, or GDP, does this amount to?

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: We have the figures. As you know, the Government of Canada works on a fiscal year basis, but the OECD works on a calendar year basis. The figures just released for 2023 show that Canada invested 0.38% of its GDP, or \$10.9 billion.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: You said \$10.9 billion.

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: Yes, \$10.9 billion for 2023.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: That's 0.38% of the GDP. You must admit we're a long way from 0.7%. With last year's downturn, how can we show that we're aiming for 0.7% of the GDP?

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: The government currently isn't committed to achieving a target of 0.7% of the GDP. There isn't any specific plan. However, the government made a commitment to keep increasing the funding each year. Since 2016, the funding has increased every year.

• (1710)

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: It didn't last year.

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: I was talking about up to 2023, the most recent year for which we know the figures.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Okay.

I would like to address the Haiti issue. I understand that it isn't necessarily possible to provide the figures on how much has been spent so far.

However, I want to touch on something that I wasn't able to discuss in my last turn. I had only two and a half minutes. Why hasn't Canada increased its contribution, given the situation in Haiti? Obviously, this question is more political in nature. That said, can you give me an administrative answer?

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: You asked why this contribution hasn't increased. Since 2022, Canada has spent \$380 million, which is quite significant. This includes international aid for development, but also support for the mission approved by the United Nations Security Council. In my opinion, our contribution has increased.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: I was talking earlier about the \$28.3 million announced in 2023-24 as part of Canada's response to the crisis in Haiti. Now you're talking about \$380 million. Please explain, because I'm not sure that I understand.

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: I was referring to the period since April 1, 2022.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Okay. We'll try to find Waldo then.

On that note, there was an announcement of additional funding of \$350 million over two years, beginning in 2024-25, to enhance

Canada's ability to respond to large-scale crises and deteriorating humanitarian crises around the world.

My questions relate somewhat to my question about Haiti. How much of the \$350 million announced over two years has been spent so far? In addition, given the growing number of crises, why hasn't this amount increased?

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: This \$350 million in funding was just announced in the 2024 budget. It must still be approved by the House of Commons, so none of it has been spent yet.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: So this was an announcement in the budget.

In the previous budget, was any funding allocated to enhance Canada's ability to respond to large-scale crises and deteriorating humanitarian crises around the world?

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: Yes. However, these amounts were specifically earmarked for certain crises.

Mr. MacDougall, can you think of an example of extra-budgetary humanitarian assistance?

Mr. Peter MacDougall: Are you talking about last year?

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: Yes.

Mr. Peter MacDougall: The money wasn't announced in the budget, but came from the crisis pool.

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: Mr. Bergeron, in the funding allocated to international aid, \$200 million is set aside each year for special cases, specifically to enhance support in response to a humanitarian crisis when it occurs. For example, in 2022-23, Canada spent \$1.3 billion on humanitarian assistance. At Global Affairs Canada, our budget for humanitarian assistance is \$609 million a year. These amounts are added up every year.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Does this \$350 million come on top of the \$200 million?

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: The \$350 million will come on top of Global Affairs Canada's reference levels, specifically its humanitarian assistance program, which has an annual budget of \$609 million. During a crisis, the department could dip into what we call our crisis pool. However, the \$350 million—\$150 million this year and \$200 million next year—will be part of our humanitarian assistance program.

• (1715)

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Is that—

[English]

The Chair: I'm afraid we're a minute and a half over.

For the last question, now we go to MP McPherson.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair. Thank you to the officials for remaining today and answering our questions. It's useful.

I'll comment very quickly on a question that my colleague, Mr. Bergeron, asked with regard to ODA. It's at 0.38%, which is about half of what we have committed to. I was a bit shocked to hear the officials mention that we have not committed to 0.7%. I think we all know that it was, in fact, Prime Minister Pearson who actually put that 0.7% benchmark in place. Many of our allies meet and exceed that amount, so to hear the minister talk about the importance of international development while continuing to underfund international development from Canada is worrying, and particularly so when we see that the Conservative leader has said that, if he was to make government, he would cut international development spending.

This is not Canada being back on the world stage. This is not where we should be. We should be much more ambitious in our goals with regard to international development.

In the questions I have to start with today, first of all I'd like to request something. Could you please share with the committee, in writing, the legal evaluations your department has conducted over the war in Gaza, including legal advice you have received regarding the International Criminal Court and the International Court of Justice and arms sales, please. That's the first request I have for you.

The second one is with regard to humanitarian access. Right now we know there are incredible conflicts happening in Sudan, in Haiti, in the DRC, in Ethiopia, and of course in Gaza and Ukraine. We want to understand, or I would like to understand, what your government is doing to better ensure humanitarian access to some of these very challenging places to work. In particular, what is the government doing to ensure the safety of humanitarian workers in these places?

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: The Government of Canada has used every platform available to it to call for access and humanitarian access and respect for humanitarian law. At every possible opportunity we have done that. We work through our partners, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross. We work through the United Nations. What we can do is work through the system that has been put in place to respond, and, when possible, sometimes use our privileged chairs that we get to sit in to make these demands.

As an example, very recently the minister took part in an international conference in Paris on Sudan. That was, as you have noted, one of the key things that everybody noted. Really, what was required was a peaceful resolution of the conflict, but, in the interim, access and the funding of the appeals that the United Nations had made for Sudan was what was most needed.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

I would press the government to continue to do this important work because, of course, the challenge is that you will have to be nimble. You will have to be able to work with non-traditional partners to be able to provide the urgently needed humanitarian access in many of these conflicts. Honestly, we don't have some of those

relationships right now, and the government needs to do that work much better.

I also wanted to ask: With the expected end of the Middle East strategy, is there a new Middle East strategy in development to respond to the changing situations that we see in the region? We know that the original strategy was a response to the Syrian crisis and to other crises in the area. This all looks very different now. The needs are massive. The crises continue to build and grow.

Is there consideration of a broader strategy that would encompass the foreseen changes, including in Israel, Palestine, Lebanon and other countries, knowing that the current strategy ends in 2025?

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: That's right. That is a part of this year's main estimates, as you note.

As you noted, the previous Middle East strategy, which had been in place since 2016, was built very much on a different problem set and a different platform. The decision was made that it was time to ramp down that strategy. Of course, since October 7, everything has changed again in the Middle East.

As everybody has noted, everybody hopes for a ceasefire as soon as possible. At that point, when we see what the situation is, whether it be the political situation on the ground, the humanitarian assistance situation on the ground, the development needs of the region or, finally, as you have noted in previous questions, the reconstruction needs in Gaza, it will require the Government of Canada, obviously, to reflect on and review our current footprint in the region. We will be coming forward with advice to government when it is appropriate.

● (1720)

Ms. Heather McPherson: My final question for you is with regard to sanctions.

In December we sent a letter asking that there be sanctions on extremist settlers in the West Bank. This was violence that was supported by extremist ministers in the Israeli government.

We asked in February. It's now May, five months after we asked for this. Why is it taking the government so long, when other countries have already figured out how to put those sanctions in place? Is the delay, from your perspective, political or administrative?

The Chair: Be very brief, please.

Mr. Christopher MacLennan: I'll pass it to my colleague Alexandre, as I'm not an expert on sanctions.

Mr. Alexandre Lévêque (Assistant Deputy Minister, Europe, Arctic, Middle East and Maghreb, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Thank you. I'll be very brief, Mr. Chair.

All I can say is that all these options continue to be on the table and are considered actively by the government. The advice continues to be provided by officials.

I wouldn't say, to the point of the honourable member, that it's due to any deliberate delays. All of these are under active consideration currently.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Lévêque. We even had five seconds to spare. I'm very grateful.

At this point, I would like to thank all of you. It has been almost two hours. We're going to be going into committee business.

Thank you very much, Mr. MacLennan, Ms. Urban, Ms. Caruthers, Mr. Lévêque and Mr. MacDougall. We're very grateful for your time and for your insights.

We're going to suspend the meeting for a couple of minutes, because we have two members who are joining us virtually for committee business.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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