House of Commons
Chambre des communes
CANADA

Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

FAAE • NUMBER 010 • 2nd SESSION • 41st PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Wednesday, February 5, 2014

Chair

Mr. Dean Allison

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● (1530)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West—Glanbrook, CPC)): Good afternoon. Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), we are here for our study on the situation in Syria.

I want to welcome our witnesses and thank them for coming. We welcome Dennis Horak, director, Middle East and Maghreb political relations division; Leslie Norton, director general, international humanitarian assistance directorate; and Isabelle Roy, acting director general, non-proliferation and security threat reduction bureau.

You will each have an opening statement, and then we'll get a chance to go around the room and ask some follow-up questions.

Why don't we start with Dennis. I will turn it over to you, sir.

Mr. Dennis Horak (Director, Middle East and Maghreb Political Relations Division, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade): Thank you.

My focus today will be on the political and security aspects of the situation in Syria as it has evolved since my director general, Mark Gwozdecky, appeared before you on December 3, 2013. Details on the humanitarian situation will be given by my colleague Leslie Norton. My colleague Isabelle Roy will update you on the international community's response to the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons in Syria.

The war in Syria continues to rage, and Syrians continue to die and flee their homes in horrific numbers. The death toll now exceeds 130,000. The regime continues to target fighters and civilian population centres indiscriminately. The humanitarian consequences and regional political implications are dire. The regime retains the military momentum in the conflict, but overall, neither the Assad regime nor opposition groups are in a position to militarily defeat the other in the medium term. It is not clear, however, that either side realizes that reality.

An increasingly noteworthy development has been the emergence of conflict between various opposition military groups. While the opposition fighters have never really managed to produce a united front, the war is now evolving into a series of different conflicts involving a variety of actors with different goals and shifting allegiances.

In addition to fighting the regime, elements of the opposition have begun fighting each other as al-Qaeda-affiliated groups, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL, seek to stake out territory. This is being resisted. Two separate al-Qaeda groups, ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra, have even clashed with each other. The Kurds, meanwhile, have announced the establishment of a provincial government in northeastern Syria. Efforts continue to bring the various arms of the opposition under some form of coherent leadership control—excluding the al-Qaeda groups—but that remains a work-in-progress.

The Assad regime has taken advantage of these clashes and divisions within opposition-held areas to attempt to expand its terrain in and around the cities of Homs and Aleppo. These divisions on the battlefield mirror the cleavages that continue to exist at the political level in the opposition ranks. The Syrian opposition coalition is the main opposition political umbrella, but it continues to be divided and has little credibility on the ground inside Syria. It remains only partially representative of the myriad opposition groups on the ground.

In the meantime, the war continues to leak across Syria's borders. Bombings and violence in Lebanon have accelerated. Echoes of the sectarian conflict between Shia and Sunni in Syria are being heard in Lebanon, fuelled in part by Hezbollah's intervention on the side of Assad. Both Jordan and Lebanon, but also Iraq, Turkey, and Egypt, continue to bear the heavy social and economic burdens of rapidly growing refugee movements. Free-flowing arms and the implantation and growing strength of terrorist groups in the Levant threaten the stability of the entire region. Despite these challenges, the spillover risks are, for the moment anyway, being contained.

In response to increasing needs, during his recent trip to the region Prime Minister Harper announced additional Canadian assistance in response to the Syrian crisis. Canada's total assistance to date now includes $353.5 million in humanitarian assistance, $210.6 million in development assistance to Jordan and the region, and $67.6 million in security-related regional assistance. My colleagues Leslie and Isabelle will discuss this assistance in greater detail.

Despite the carnage, the regional threats, and the military stalemate, the prospects for peace in the medium term remain dim, but a step in the right direction was taken with the convening of the Geneva II conference last month. Joined by 40 other countries, including Canada, the opposition coalition and the representatives of the regime met for the first time, face to face, in Montreux and later Geneva, Switzerland, to discuss Syria's future.

Expectations going into Geneva II were very low, and the opposition coalition very nearly boycotted the conference entirely. Many members of the coalition opposed sitting down with the regime, and a number disavowed it entirely. Some extremist elements even threatened coalition members who did attend. In the end they came, but the episode reaffirmed the dysfunction of the opposition and renewed doubts about their ability to deliver their supporters in the event of any agreement short of regime surrender.

But the opposition did find a largely sympathetic room on the opening day in Montreux. Most countries blamed the Assad regime for the war and its consequences, while expressing support for the goals of the opposition. At the same time, they urged both sides to work towards a political solution that respected the rights and freedoms of the Syrian people.

● (1535)

As Minister Baird noted:

> Until the dignity and freedom demanded by the Syrian people are enshrined in a peaceful settlement and the institutions that will uphold it, this war will not end, the terrorist threat will increase, the human nightmare will continue, and the violence will threaten all of Syria's neighbours.

In Geneva, the three main points of discussion were: prisoner releases, humanitarian access, and the formation of a transitional governing body.

The question of a transitional governing body was and remains the most contentious. It is the fundamental point of division. The Assad regime was not prepared to talk about a post-Assad era, while the opposition came to Geneva expressly to underscore that Assad and those close to him would have no role in the transitional period. In this, the opposition has wide support, including Canada's.

The first round of talks ended on January 31 without agreement on any issue. They are scheduled to resume on February 10, but the regime has not yet agreed to the date. In the meantime, the war continues.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak to you today.

My colleagues will now provide an update on the humanitarian and chemical weapons situations in Syria.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Norton.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Leslie Norton (Director General, International Humanitarian Assistance Directorate, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade): Thank you for having invited me today to present the most recent information on the humanitarian crisis in Syria and on the measures that Canada has taken in this matter.

As you know, the committee's last briefing on the humanitarian situation in Syria was held on December 5. At that time, living conditions for the Syrian people and those fleeing to neighbouring countries were disastrous. Unfortunately, the situation has continued to deteriorate.

[*English*]

The Chair: Ms. Norton, could you slow down just a bit for the translators? I promise not to cut you off.

Ms. Leslie Norton: Okay. I'm trying to make it within my five minutes. There is a lot to tell you about.

The Chair: I'll give you a little more time.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Leslie Norton: Indeed, millions of Syrian residents are struggling to meet their basic needs, while millions of Syrians are trying to find refuge in neighbouring countries. The vulnerability of these populations is increasing more and more quickly, and their limited resources are diminishing rapidly. Neighbouring countries and host communities, for their part, are dealing with a great deal of pressure due to the arrival of such a large number of people in such a short time.

According to the United Nations, 9.3 million people need humanitarian assistance in Syria. As of January 30, more than 2.4 million people had registered as refugees, while hundreds of thousands of others chose, for various reasons, not to do so. In all, it is estimated that 3 million people—more than half of whom are children—are seeking refuge in neighbouring countries. The United Nations estimates that the number of refugees could reach 4.1 million by December of 2014.

The situation of children is of particular concern. Indeed, the conflict has caused immense suffering among boys and girls of all ages in Syria, both physical and psychological. Beside the direct threats of which they are the victims, such as violence, abuse, lack of safe drinking water, and inadequate nutrition, they whish becoming a lost generation as several million children inside and outside Syria are not attending school. We have to do everything in our power to prevent the loss of this generation of Syrian children.

● (1540)

[*English*]

Since your last briefing there have been several developments.

On December 19 Minister Paradis outlined the details of our latest $45 million in Canadian humanitarian assistance. Through UN agencies, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, and NGO partners, our contribution is focused on winterization activities to ensure that Syrians, whether they've remained in Syria or have sought refuge in neighbouring countries, have access to life-saving relief items and shelter to help them survive the very harsh winter conditions. Funding is also focused on prevention and response to sexual and gender-based violence as well as support for water and sanitation, food assistance, and medical interventions, including those in response to the polio outbreak.

Polio remains a major concern in Syria as several cases have been confirmed in the last months. The international community, led by the World Health Organization, was quick in responding to the situation and launched a mass vaccination campaign targeting 22 million children across the entire region. So far three rounds of vaccination have taken place, and the preliminary results are encouraging. We must, however, keep in mind that a substantial number of children have not yet been reached, and we must continue to advocate for the vaccines to reach children across the country, including in besieged areas.

In December, the UN launched revised appeals in response to the humanitarian needs stemming from the Syrian conflict. These appeals represent the largest request for humanitarian funding for a single situation in the UN's history. The combined value of all humanitarian appeals in 2014, including the UN appeals and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement appeals, is approximately $6.9 billion U.S., or approximately $7.7 billion Canadian.

On January 15, I accompanied Deputy Minister Paul Rochon to the Second International Humanitarian Pledging Conference for Syria in Kuwait. Donors pledged a total of $2.3 billion at the conference or $800 million U.S. more than last year. Canada used the opportunity to reiterate its commitment to remaining one of the leading donors to the Syria response.

Following the pledging conference, the Prime Minister travelled to Jordan where he announced additional support of $150 million in humanitarian assistance in order to respond to the increasing needs of conflict-affected people in Syria and in neighbouring countries. This brings the total Canadian humanitarian response to the Syria crisis to $353.5 million.

Of the $150 million announced, $100 million will be allocated to helping ensure that the basic needs of affected populations are met, by providing life-saving assistance such as food, safe drinking water, shelter, health care, and protection inside and outside Syria. As was the case with previous funding, this support will be provided through experienced humanitarian partners.

The remaining $50 million will be allocated to the "No Lost Generation" initiative that outlines education and protection activities for children in Syria and in the region. Led by UNICEF, in partnership with the UNHCR, Save the Children, World Vision, and other NGO partners, the strategy aims to address the hidden impact this long conflict has had on children, with practical investments to expand access to learning and psychosocial support, strengthen social cohesion and peace-building, and restore hope for the future to millions of children. The details of Canada's support to this initiative are still being worked out. However, the $50 million allocation will help protect thousands of children and give them access to education.

● (1545)

[*Translation*]

As you learned during the committee meeting held on December 5, the United Nations Security Council published a presidential statement last October to urge Syria to grant immediate access to humanitarian organizations wishing to offer lifesaving assistance to people impacted by the crisis. In spite of this measure, and in spite of the great efforts made by United Nations member states and organizations, little progress has been made to improve humanitarian worker,s access in Syria.

Canada continues to press all parties for improved access for humanitarian personnel, who have routinely been targeted regularly in this conflict, and to ensure their security. Humanitarian access was in fact one of the issues discussed by representatives of the opposition and the regime during the Geneva II talks, which recently ended in Switzerland. Unfortunately, these talks did not lead to an agreement on improved humanitarian access.

Despite the challenges, significant results have been achieved by our humanitarian partners. I will be happy to answer your questions in this matter.

As the conflict drags on, humanitarian needs keep rising quickly and dramatically. Humanitarian aid, along with development and security assistance, is imperative to mitigate the disastrous consequences this conflict had, not only on the Syrian population but on the neighbouring populations as well.

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Roy, we'll now go to you.

Ms. Isabelle Roy (Acting Director General, Non-proliferation and Security Threat Reduction Bureau, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Chair, committee members, it is with great pleasure that I speak before you today to give you an update on current developments regarding Syria's chemical weapons. You will remember that my director general, Ms. Sabine Nolke, briefed this committee on December 5.

[*Translation*]

At that time, we could but note the dedication and cooperation of Syria in meeting the objectives of the disarmament mission. It had met phases 1 and 2 of its obligations, i.e. 1- allowing the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) inspectors to visit and inventory every site related to Syria's declared chemical weapons program, and, 2- effectively dismantle all equipment to create and mix chemical weapons.

Today, phase 3, the actual destruction of remaining chemicals, should have been well on its way, but unfortunately, this is not the case. It is an unfortunate coincidence that we should be meeting on this day, Feburary 5, which was the date set by the Executive council of the OPCW by which all declared chemical agents were to have been removed from the Syrian territory. A deadline that is clearly not met.

The situation started to deteriorate in mid-December when fighting increased significantly around chemical weapons facilities and along roads which were to be used to move chemical agents to the port of Lattakia. There were other challenges external to the will of the Syrian government, such as customs problems in Lebanon, through which most of the equipment needed to transit from, and an unusual winter storm which blocked roads not only in Syria, but in the whole region for days.

[*English*]

All of these obstacles led to Syria not being able to deliver the chemical agents identified to be of highest priority to the port of Latakia by the benchmark date of December 31 for destruction aboard a U.S. ship, the MV *Cape Ray.*

The executive council of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, the OPCW, did not condemn this delay initially, as there were legitimate reasons for it. It is a well-known fact that the timelines set out in the U.S.-Russia framework agreement at the root of this process remain extremely ambitious, and leave little to no margin for unpredictable events.

Syria was finally able to make a first delivery to the port of Latakia on January 7, and a second one on January 27. These two shipments, however, represent only 53 tonnes of the approximately 700 tonnes that should have left Syria by the date of December 31. A total of 1,300 tonnes of chemical agents needs to be removed from Syria. Today less than 5% has been removed.

● (1550)

[*Translation*]

At the January 30 extraordinary meeting of the Executive council of the OPCW, Canada in coordination with the Western European and other WEOG countries representatives made a strong call on Syria to stop obfuscating and pick up the pace of transport of chemicals to the port of Lattakia. Syria replied that it is still committed to meeting its obligations. Its ally, Russia, continues to argue that Syria is working in good faith and will eliminate its arsenal.

In fact, just yesterday, Russia, through a statement by its deputy foreign minister Gennady Gatilov, offered assurances that Syria would complete the removal process by March 1.

[*English*]

Despite the delays, with the effective destruction of Syria's chemical weapons production, mixing, and filling facilities, even if Syria keeps hold of the chemical components, it is no longer capable of using these to make a weapon. Regardless, we are of the view that removing these chemicals must happen much sooner rather than later.

[*Translation*]

The US vessel MV *Cape Ray* left Norfolk on January 28 after a complete redesign to accommodate the destruction by hydrolysis of priority 1 chemicals. It should arrive at the Italian port of Gioia Tauro approximately 3 weeks after its departure, depending on crossing conditions.

Many countries stepped up with significant contributions to the OPCW-UN Mission to ensure that it was able to carry out the destruction phase. Denmark and Norway deployed two commercial vessels for the transportation of Syria's priority agents from the port of Lattakia to the Italian port of Gioia Tauro for their transfer onto the U.S. vessel, the MV *Cape Ray*, for their eventual destruction by hydrolysis in the Mediterranean.

Russia, China, Norway, Denmark and the UK have also provided frigates to ensure the necessary security for the maritime operations. The U.K. has offered to destroy a small portion of the first priority chemical agents on its own soil. Germany has offered to destroy some of the residue resulting from the hydrolysis process aboard the MV *Cape Ray.*

Significant financial contributions were also made by States Parties to the Chemical Weapons convention to the OPCW Syria destruction fund. Some as large as tens of millions from Norway and Canada to more modest amounts by smaller countries which normally do not contribute to such operations such as India: $1 million USD; Czech Republic: $518,000 USD; Belarus: 15 portable field kitchens. Such commitments reflect the breadth of the international consensus on eliminating Syria's chemical weapons program.

● (1555)

[*English*]

Of note, Canada has definitely stepped up its efforts in response to this crisis. As my colleague Dennis indicated, through the global partnership program, the stabilization and reconstruction task force, and the counterterrorism capacity building program, Canada has contributed $67.6 million in security-related assistance to the region to address the conflict in Syria more broadly, including programs and equipment related to weapons of mass destruction threats such as those posed to the region by a chemical weapons attack in Syria.

Specifically with regard to Syria, we provided $2 million in support to the OPCW to help it carry out the initial UN investigation on allegations of use in Syria, as you know. We also contributed in October 2013 the use of a Royal Canadian Air Force CC-177 to deliver 10 U.S.-donated armoured civilian vehicles to the OPCW UN mission, as you also know.

Also, the Prime Minister, during his recent visit to the Middle East, announced on January 24 a total contribution of $15 million to the UN-OPCW mission. Of this, $10 million will be allocated to the OPCW trust fund, and the remaining $5 million will be provided to the U.S. Department of Defense in support of their destruction efforts aboard the MV *Cape Ray.* This places Canada among the top five donors.

Canada and other like-minded countries have expressed deep concerns at the current delays and have firmly urged Syria to intensify its efforts. Our expectations remain that Syria will continue to follow through on its commitments.

We will continue to closely monitor the situation to ensure Syria carries out its obligation to meet the final deadline of June 30, 2014.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll start over to my left for the first round which will be seven minutes of questions and answers with Mr. Dewar, please.

Mr. Paul Dewar (Ottawa Centre, NDP): Thank you, Chair, and thank you to our guests for the update. Unfortunately, not much good news.

When I look at the concerns many people are underlining, and you certainly did that in your briefs to us today, there are concerns around the civilian population becoming more and more vulnerable. Those who can get out are going into camps that are becoming untenable, and it's concerning many when we think of, in particular, Lebanon and Jordan. It's potentially destabilizing those countries.

With regard to the number of people who have crossed the borders to Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon, can you give us—I'm not sure, maybe Ms. Norton—some understanding as to where we're at in terms of the capacity of those countries to receive more refugees? Are we at the tipping point, I guess is what I'm trying to get at?

Ms. Leslie Norton: As I had mentioned, there are I think 2.4 million registered refugees. There are a fair number who are not registered who are also living in these countries. There are various reasons why they haven't registered. The estimations are that there are roughly three million people living as refugees in these hosting countries.

They are not living in camps in Lebanon.

Mr. Paul Dewar: That's right.

Ms. Leslie Norton: They are living with families and wherever they can find places to stay. In Jordan, a fair number are in camps, but a fair number are also living with the hosting communities. I think you're accurate in suggesting this has a potential destabilizing impact on these countries, particularly Lebanon and Jordan.

I'll leave Dennis to comment on those specific details of destabilization, but with regard to the capacity to absorb, I would say our humanitarian partners did ramp this up to what they call an L3 crisis. What that means is the United Nations has to bring all resources and personnel required. The A team is supposed to be brought in theatre to respond to this crisis.

Certainly, when we had our bilateral conversations with the heads of all the agencies in Kuwait, they were very clear that this is one of the top crises they are dealing with. I think we all know they were also dealing with the Central African Republic, South Sudan, and responding to the typhoon in the Philippines.

Just to say, the partners are aware. Resources are a big challenge for the partners. If, as an international community, we can continue providing resources, the United Nations, the NGOs, and the Red Cross movement can continue to help out to the best ability they can, but that will require neighbouring countries to keep, of course, asylum space open for those crossing the borders.

There will be a tipping point. I don't know what that is.

● (1600)

Mr. Dennis Horak: To follow up a little bit on the issue of the tipping point, I guess the problem and the risk is that nobody knows where that point is. If we had looked at the beginning of the crisis and said what would be the tipping point in terms of the kinds of pressures the neighbouring countries could bear, I think we would probably look at the numbers now and say that's probably about right, but they seem to be able to manage.

Certainly, the pressures on the individual countries vary depending on the country. We're not close to a tipping point in Turkey in terms of stability because of Turkey's size, it's capability, etc.

We and others are putting a lot of money into Jordan to try and make sure it's able to deal with the camps and the refugees who are there. This comes after years of Iraqi refugees flowing into Jordan as well, so they have had a double hit over the years. They seem to be managing that well. They are worried and concerned, obviously.

Lebanon seems to be on a tipping point constantly and seems to be able to manage. The regional assistants will be going to Lebanon and elsewhere to try and stabilize the situation, but as Leslie said, the situation of the refugee inflows into Lebanon are unique in terms of not going into camps. As I said earlier in my statement, there have been some sectarian reverberations in Lebanon that are a concern. It's always a delicate balance in Lebanon, and finding out where that tips is really unknown.

Mr. Paul Dewar: I have two other points before my time is up.

One is that last fall we were hearing about starvation in the suburbs of Damascus, and now we're hearing about similar instances of lack of access to food. I would like an update on Homs. What has happened there? We heard there was an agreement by the government to let women and children out. Where is that at? Also, can you fill us in on what's happening within Syria, as much as we have relevant information.... Are we still getting reports of potential starvation? And what has happened in Homs?

Finally, we've just talked about this issue of the saturation points. Many of us were looking to see if our government would actually be looking beyond the 1,200 refugees committed to in the resettlement of refugees from the region to Canada. I know that it would be with another department, but is there any discussion of it and any thinking within government right now on that issue?

So that's Homs, any other hot spots on starvation, and any thinking on resettlement of refugees and bringing them here to Canada. Thank you.

The Chair: And all in 45 seconds, please.

Voices: Oh, oh!

Mr. Dennis Horak: I'll just say very quickly on the issue of getting the women and children out of Homs that I was in Montreux with Minister Baird and there was some discussion around it. The opposition was concerned that basically you would be clearing out women and children and declaring open season on the city for the government to attack. It was resisted by the opposition.

Ms. Leslie Norton: If I may, I'll very briefly add a couple of points.

There are a couple of other besieged areas that are the priority of the UN right now, especially the emergency relief coordinator. She will be going to the Security Council on February 12 and presenting, and trying to look at ways to unlock access to the besieged areas to try to get all parties to agree. But it's beyond Homs. There is rural Damascus, there's Aleppo, and there are a couple of other areas as well.

My understanding is that it was 1,300 refugees that we'd accepted to resettle, and I have to say that we would have to get back to you. We'd have to consult our colleagues from Citizenship and Immigration on whether there have been further discussions.

● (1605)

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Norton, for keeping that brief.

Ms. Brown, for seven minutes, please.

Ms. Lois Brown (Newmarket—Aurora, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for being here.

I'm sorry that we have this revolving door. It doesn't seem like anything has changed since you were here in December. In fact, things are taking a turn for the worse, I would say.

I wonder if any of you can speak to diplomatic initiatives that are under way. We saw the Friends of Syria group of countries that were involved and were trying to make some attempts to build some bridges. Can you speak a bit about diplomatic endeavours?

Also, could any of you speak about where China and Russia are at this point?

Mr. Dennis Horak: In terms of diplomatic initiatives, I think, frankly speaking, that all of our bets are on the Geneva process. It's really the only game in town at this stage. There were very low expectations going into Geneva. I was willing to bet that they wouldn't even last a couple of days, and they were there for more than a week, which was somewhat encouraging. Did they make any progress? No, not really, but they have agreed, at least in principle, to meet again.

Again, while expectations are low, the fact is that there are discussions ongoing. Perhaps there may be some breakthroughs on access, humanitarian access, or perhaps some localized ceasefires. That's I think probably at this stage the most we could hope for. Again, even for those, I think expectations are low.

Certainly, the Russians have been much more supportive of the regime. They remain so, but they did put a lot of pressure on the regime to go to Geneva, and to go back to Geneva, so they're playing a role in that regard.

The Chinese have had a much lower profile, a much lower role in this. It's really been very much, on the diplomatic front, an American and Russian initiative, and that's what got the Geneva process going. The rest of it, I think, is more sort of sideshows at this stage.

Ms. Lois Brown: Is there a date set for the next meeting in Geneva?

Ms. Leslie Norton: Should I mention the high-level group...

Ms. Lois Brown: I'm sorry?

Mr. Dennis Horak: There is another meeting of the high-level group on access. Let's just say a word or two about that.

Ms. Leslie Norton: There is another parallel process under way. I would characterize it as diplomatic. Coming out of the October 2 presidential statement at the UN Security Council, the emergency relief coordinator, Valerie Amos, with Australia and Luxembourg, set up essentially what is called the high-level group on access with seven key sub-working groups. Really they are all focused on elements of access.

It is an attempt to bring together the key countries that have influence over Syria or the opposition forces to try to improve access. The working groups are either on cross-line access or access to besieged areas, for instance, or the demilitarization of schools and hospitals. These are the things that they are focusing on. They've broken into working groups, and a number of the interested countries have joined these particular working groups and they are trying to work to get some real results.

There is also one on the vaccination campaign. At the end of January, Canada hosted a meeting in the mission in Geneva, again bringing together some of the key partners in the UN as well as interested member states to try to find ways to facilitate improved access for the vaccination campaign. So that's a bit of a parallel process, but it's really focusing on improving access.

And now, the emergency relief coordinator will brief, as I've mentioned, the Security Council on February 12, trying to put forward some real actions that we can implement now, today, to try to improve the lives of people in Syria.

Ms. Lois Brown: Is there somebody taking the lead on that diplomatic discussion?

Ms. Leslie Norton: Luxembourg and Australia are, with OCHA and the emergency relief coordinator.

Ms. Lois Brown: You spoke about the funds that are coming in. Canada has been a major contributor and, Ms. Roy, you identified that we are the fifth-largest donor just in the chemical weapons, just in that part of it.

Ms. Isabelle Roy: We are among the five top.

Ms. Lois Brown: So I put that aside because that's a special project, as it were.

Ms. Norton, I wonder if you could talk about where Canada fits in that? I know there was a funding conference in Addis Ababa last year, a year ago January, if I'm not mistaken. What I have understood is that the contributions have not come in as quickly as needed, and at one point I think that only 27% of the money had actually flowed. So can you talk a little bit about where contributions are at and if there is any pressure point that can be put on countries that have made a declaration for contributing? Is there anything that can be done to get that money in?

● (1610)

Ms. Leslie Norton: I am happy to report it was in Kuwait One. We called the meeting on January 15 Kuwait Two, the second humanitarian pledging conference. In Kuwait One, about $1.54 billion was pledged of which $1.126 billion was received, 73% was received. The numbers are much higher than at first we thought, and many of the member states of the United Nations as well as participants in this particular conference have essentially looked at what regions they come from, whom they have influence on, and have made a lot of diplomatic *démarches* about basically pledges being fulfilled.

Canada—our minister—has also spoken on a number of occasions about trying to ensure that partners will pay what they had actually pledged. Currently since January 2012, Canada has disbursed $203.5 million and, as you know, there was $150 million in addition just announced, bringing our grand total to $353.5 million.

We are ranked sixth overall as a donor, but perhaps more importantly, if we remove the European Commission because it is of course made up of many countries, we are the fifth-largest country donor to the humanitarian response.

Ms. Lois Brown: Can you speak a little bit about how our humanitarian partners are targeting education, because you've talked about a lost generation? That has to be of deep concern to everyone who is looking at this situation. We've got children who are not in school and that doesn't bode well for the future of Syria when this situation gets resolved. Can you talk a little bit about what's happening there?

The Chair: Ms. Norton, just very quickly because we're out of time....

Ms. Leslie Norton: It has been very recognized by all of the actors in the region, and so that's why UNICEF, UNHCR, and some other NGO partners have come together to have this No Lost Generation campaign. It's a strategy they're going to implement throughout the region, and it's really targeting vulnerable Syrian children. It's not only looking at education, but also protection. I know you've probably heard about the recruitment of children as well. This is a way to ensure their protection.

Of the $150 million announced by the Prime Minister, $50 million will go towards this campaign. This complements some of the funding that we have already provided to some of our partners in the neighbouring countries as well as in Syria, to protect and assist children, as well as to bring them into schools.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Garneau, sir, you're going to finish off the first round. You have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Marc Garneau (Westmount—Ville-Marie, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for your testimony today.

I want to go back to the issue of Geneva II, and the fact that very clearly the Assad regime is not prepared to remove itself so that this transitional government can take place. That's very clear, and unfortunately it's very discouraging because, as you point out, the two sides are unfortunately in a stalemate situation, and maybe don't even know it.

My colleague from the Conservative Party referred to Russia and China. I'd like to know more about that, if I can. Russia and China have obviously taken the side of the Assad regime, in the sense of telling the rest of the world to stay out of it. Obviously, as long as they have that support, it is some sort of legitimization for them, and perhaps also the source of considerable assistance of a military kind. Are we putting any pressure on Russia and China, to the extent that we can, to face the fact that this misery and the continued death toll are going to rise, that nine million people need humanitarian aid, and that this is going to continue this way?

● (1615)

Mr. Dennis Horak: Again, while the Chinese are sort of lumped in with that group, they're less of an issue in this than Russia.

Certainly, Russia is their major international backer—actually, they are along with Iran, and we can get into that later, maybe. But certainly Russia is a principal supporter. We have spoken to the Russians. I have spoken to them personally as well. They have very firm views. Their concerns—in some respects their interests, but also their concerns—relate largely to the spread of terrorism and the degree to which that may spread back into Russia. There are all sorts of reasons they give. There's also the whole issue of interference with internal affairs and Orange Revolutions and all of this sort of thing. We've spoken to them, the Americans have spoken to them, everyone has spoken to them. They're not moving.

That being said, they were very helpful in getting the regime around the table and in supporting the Geneva I communiqué, which sort of lays out various principles, including a transitional governing body—with mutual consent, I should add. So they're not completely obstructive on this. They are in support of a process that can somehow bring an end to this. So that's encouraging, and we've been supportive of that, and certainly the Americans who work very closely with them.... But efforts to try to get them to abandon their regime are going nowhere, really.

Mr. Marc Garneau: Has there been an analysis to figure out if, for some reason, Russia stopped providing any military weapons to Syria, whether Syria would be in trouble? How important is that supply chain of weapons to Syria?

Mr. Dennis Horak: Do you have anything to say about that?

Ms. Isabelle Roy: I'm guessing that you're referring to conventional weapons?

Mr. Marc Garneau: Yes.

Ms. Isabelle Roy: I'm not aware of any study, any recent review about that specific point. But I know that a few months ago there were reports about a new delivery of weapons, and Russia suspended that because it was considered as not being very helpful. So we could try to see if there have been some studies on the specific point, but so far I'm not aware of any.

Mr. Dennis Horak: I think the point is that certainly there will be other sources. Iran could be another source, as well; if not a source, it may be a conduit. It's difficult to stem the flow of arms to the regime. They're much better armed certainly than the opposition would be, and will remain so.

Mr. Marc Garneau: I'd be interested in knowing—they have fighter jets, helicopters, missiles—if it's all coming from Iran? I'd be interested in knowing how much they depend on those inflowing weapons. I don't think they have a huge weapons industry, perhaps, small arms and smaller stuff, but they're using some pretty big stuff as well.

Mr. Dennis Horak: They had a pretty good head start on this. They had a pretty well-developed and advanced—advanced in terms of size—military, which has taken a beating but not as much as we would think. They started from a pretty high base and they did receive some arms. Whether they continue to receive Russian arms, I haven't seen recently. I think it's very likely; if not Russian, then Belarusian or whoever. The Iranians do supply them with some material, not a lot, but with certain key material and advice, which is key as well in terms of advisors.

The weapons are there and they're of sufficient quantity. If things were frozen off right now, they could still last a fair bit.

Mr. Marc Garneau: Is the Canadian government's position still that in a post-conflict Syria, if we ever get there, there is no place for Assad and that he must be removed?

Mr. Dennis Horak: Yes.

Mr. Marc Garneau: Okay, that's still our position.

On the chemical weapons and the fact that—

[*Translation*]

there a was a slowdown, you have explained that the specialized ship that is in charge of destroying these chemical agents, the MV *Cape Ray*, will arrive soon. In the meantime, the chemical agents are being sent to the port of Lattakia. Is the intention then to send the 1,300 tons to Lattakia and to load them all at once on the MV *Cape Ray* to destroy them at sea?

● (1620)

Ms. Isabelle Roy: Norway and Denmark have chartered frigates specifically for the transfer from the port of Lattakia and the large American ship.

Mr. Marc Garneau: It will be somewhere in the middle of the Mediterranean, is that right?

Ms. Isabelle Roy: Yes, and 5% of the chemical agents that have been removed are already on those two ships.

Mr. Marc Garneau: They are waiting for the MV *Cape Ray.*

Ms. Isabelle Roy: That is correct.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you.

That's all the time we have.

We're going to move over and start our second round of five minutes.

Mr. Anderson.

Mr. David Anderson (Cypress Hills—Grasslands, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

Mr. Horak, earlier on you were talking about the regime change and surrender, and you made a comment around the lines that the solution really lies in realizing the opposition's goals. I'm just wondering if you could talk a bit—maybe this answer is self-evident—about how coherent those goals are. Is there a cohesive presentation of goals that we can look at and say that these are the things that can be achieved, or is it just not there?

Mr. Dennis Horak: The reason I'm hesitating is because the notion of cohesion and the opposition is sometimes hard to deal with, because it's a very divisive group. When we're talking about the opposition, it depends who we're talking about.

In terms of the opposition coalition, which is sort of the principal one that is recognized by many countries, in discussions with various friendly countries, they have developed a game plan on where this wants to go, in terms of a transitional government, democratic principles, etc. There was a thing called the London final communiqué of October 22 of this year where they laid out a number of principles. You have the Geneva principles from the Geneva 1 communiqué of 2012, which, again, laid out the principles underlying a transitional government and enshrining principles of democracy.

When I'm talking about the principles of the opposition, I'm talking about a commitment to democratic government and diversity of Syria.

Mr. David Anderson: Would that be the one main commitment they're making that they can agree on, or are there others as well?

Mr. Dennis Horak: I'm just summarizing.

The Geneva communiqué of 2012 lays out on four or five pages an agreed program and basic principles and these are reaffirmed by the London 11 final communiqué this past year. The idea is to set up a diverse democratic state that reflects the interest of all of Syria's people. That's their goal. Whether everybody who claims to be part of the opposition ascribes to those goals is another story. But in terms of their formal commitment, that's what I was referring to. It's a constant source of pressure on the opposition to reflect that in word and deed. We have urged them to be as diverse as possible both in their membership and in their approach.

Mr. David Anderson: Are we comfortable then in saying that the diverse membership is committed enough to those principles that we can expect to see them realized if a transition government is put in place?

Mr. Dennis Horak: Well, I'm not sure we're 100% comfortable with that. We do not formally recognize the Syrian opposition coalition as the sole legitimate representatives of the Syrian people, as many other countries do, because of concerns we continue to have about the diversity of the membership and their commitment. Others have fewer concerns. They acknowledge that they are not perfect but that they are the best game in town. There's a lot of pressure on everyone who is part of the coalition or everybody who is working with the opposition to try to impress upon them that these are the goals that need to be maintained. I think, by and large, for a good section of the opposition, that is a genuine commitment. Am I confident that at the end of the day, assuming Assad leaves, that this is the kind of Syria we're going to get? I couldn't say I'm confident.

Mr. David Anderson: I don't have a lot of time left, but I wanted to switch. Paul started to ask about this a bit, but there were some reports in the paper the other day about areas where the government is deliberately starving people and expecting that people are going to turn over rebel leaders before the government allows food into an area. I'm just wondering if you can comment on the validity and accuracy of those reports. Is there anything that can be done to deal with such situations?

Mr. Dennis Horak: I saw the same reports. We have very few ways to verify the veracity of them, but I don't doubt them for a second. I think doing that is very much in Assad's playbook.

● (1625)

Mr. David Anderson: Okay, thank you.

Mr. Dennis Horak: In terms of what we could do about it beyond trying to work out humanitarian access, there's very little at this point.

Mr. David Anderson: Okay. I have just a quick question about vaccine programs. Has there been resistance to them or has implementing them gone really well?

Ms. Leslie Norton: I would say that it's gone quite well, and I say this because they've managed to have quite widespread coverage. They had targeted 22 million children in the region and in the first round they managed to vaccinate 24 million children in the region, of whom 2.4 million are in Syria. In the second round in December they managed to vaccinate 2.2 million in Syria, and then in January, 3 million in Syria. I think all parties recognize the importance of vaccinating. WHO has been able to negotiate access for the vaccination campaign; however, there still are areas that are unreachable. There are hard-to-reach areas as well as the besieged cities.

Mr. David Anderson: They haven't been using that as a political tool at all, have they?

The Chair: Thanks. That's all the time we have. We'll have to come back in the next round.

We're going to turn it over to Madame Laverdière for five minutes.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière (Laurier—Sainte-Marie, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

To begin I would just like to ask for clarification. It was mentioned that Canada could be a member of the high-level group, but Canada is still not a member?

Ms. Leslie Norton: We are a member of the high-level group on access. We attended the meeting on January 30 in Rome.

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: Okay, thank you.

[*Translation*]

I would like to go back to the comments that you made about the $50 million to prevent a lost generation of children. Could you please give us a few more details about this? For example, how many children do you expect will be helped? Which partners are you working with on the ground? What are other countries doing?

I have another question which might seem a little strange, but which is relevant in the context of this initiative. Are there other international initiatives being led by Canada or other countries that are trying to look at the situation over the long term? In other words, that are already thinking about the reconstruction of this country? I have even heard suggestions that children could be use as peace builders, etc. Could you please comment on all of this?

Ms. Leslie Norton: Thank you for your question.

As you indicated, there is the No Lost Generation initiative. It has been estimated that 6 million children do not have access to school and 3 million of those children are not protected. A UNICEF report entitled *Education Interrupted* was published last December 12.

The No Lost Generation strategy has a budget of $1 billion. It will help 2.2 million children in Syria who do not go to school. That means two thirds of the children. There are also another half-million children outside of the country who do not go to school.

In total, 5.5 million children are affected.

I am sorry, but I am getting the numbers a little bit mixed up

[*English*]

So it's $1 billion to reach the 6 million who are without access to learning and the 3 million who are without protection support. You have 4.3 million inside the country—1.2 million who are refugees—and they anticipate that more than 3.3 million have actually dropped out of school.

There is a need for long-term planning and host country support, and a need for international investment to be doubled. There is a need to scale up on innovative ways to reach children. Of course, they also need to come up with innovative ways to reach children who are in Syria, where the education infrastructure is completely devastated. A big chunk of this money is within the SHARP and the RRP, which are the appeals for inside and outside Syria. So a big component of that is within those particular appeals. It's being led by UNICEF. UNHCR is a large partner. World Vision, Save the Children, and a couple of other NGO partners have come together with regard to this campaign.

There is another initiative under way. I'm sure people have heard of Gordon Brown's initiative called Reaching all Children with Education in Lebanon. That is another initiative that is complementary to this initiative as well.

So they're looking at the needs across the region and trying to really have a campaign, a strategy, to address these needs.

● (1630)

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: The need is $1 billion, basically, and Canada now has committed $50 million. How is the commitment going on this initiative generally?

The Chair: That's all the time, but I'll let you answer the question.

Ms. Leslie Norton: I'm not sure what the commitments are against No Lost Generation, because it's a new initiative that has come out. It's part of the 2014 appeals. We're learning as we go along what other countries have committed. But we can find that out for you and get back to you on it.

I'll just say that there are some innovative approaches. For instance, they're looking at different timing for school: some Syrian children will attend during the daytime, some in the evening. They're also training up teachers, etc.

Those are just some examples. We'll get you that information on other donors.

The Chair: Thanks.

To finish off round two, we'll go to Mr. Goldring for five minutes.

Mr. Peter Goldring (Edmonton East, CPC): Thank you very much.

It mentioned in the report on chemical weapons that it was all declared chemical agents. How was it determined that this was the entire stock? Could there have been any holdouts? Were there various locations for those chemical weapons? Or is there still a possibility that there could be other locations of chemical weapons there?

Could you comment on that, please?

Ms. Isabelle Roy: In terms of the declaration coming from the Government of Syria we assessed that it was pretty accurate. When I say "we" it was really a shared assessment...all our main partners, as well as the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

We have some ways, if I may say, to match with some other sources—intelligence and information—so we assessed that it was pretty accurate.

There could be, I would say, some elements, some aspects in the Syrian declaration where we would like more clarification, more details. We could obtain that since Syria has now been an official member of the Chemical Weapons Convention since October 14. It gives us—all the members of the convention—the leverage to send OPCW inspectors and to request any kinds of inspections if we believe we need to obtain more information on certain aspects of Syria's declaration.

So far the number of sites and the number of facilities were all inspected by the OPCW inspectors in the fall. These two phases were perfectly fulfilled and respected and closed.

Mr. Peter Goldring: So there's still a possibility there might be more there. How desperate is the regime itself, if push comes to shove?

Ms. Isabelle Roy: But again, the OPCW inspectors have been in all these facilities and for that we have the highest confidence in the information received by them, by all these inspections. They have been inspected and all these facilities have been, I would say, deactivated, roughly destroyed.

The option, the possibility of having another facility on which we would have no information, is extremely low, I would say.

● (1635)

Mr. Peter Goldring: Are all these chemicals right now under full control in the locations where they are?

Ms. Isabelle Roy: Yes, right now they are under full control. The problem is the removal of these chemicals out of Syria.

Mr. Peter Goldring: Yes.

Ms. Isabelle Roy: Even if we could say that right now after the two first phases that they are under full control, we never could exclude the possibility, given the situation of conflict in the country, that they could fall into the wrong hands. That's why we pressed Syria to remove all these chemical elements out of the country.

Mr. Peter Goldring: Were there any suggestions of the cluster munitions or other undesirable weapons?

Ms. Isabelle Roy: On that process, it was only on chemical weapons because it was closely monitored and assessed by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.

In terms of cluster munitions, as we said at the earlier session in December, and Canada has also commented publicly in the last months, yes, we have indications that there has been the use of cluster munitions, and we have condemned that with almost the whole international community.

Right now where the cluster munitions are is not part of that process and so I cannot answer you on that.

Mr. Peter Goldring: So they could still be out there?

Ms. Isabelle Roy: They could still have clusters, yes.

Mr. Peter Goldring: A question under the—

The Chair: Mr. Goldring, that's all the time we have. I'm sorry to have to cut you off.

We're going to start the third round with your colleague Ms. Grewal.

Mrs. Nina Grewal (Fleetwood—Port Kells, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for your time and your presentations.

While talking about the Geneva discussion, we know that the representatives from different fighting groups in Syria are meeting in Geneva to discuss a possible peaceful resolution. Reports about these meetings suggest that they are very tense and they are unproductive. Given the situation on the ground, in your opinion who stands to gain the most from these talks and what kinds of outcomes can the international community expect from the meetings in Geneva?

Mr. Dennis Horak: Who stands to gain from the talks? Hopefully, the Syrian people stand to gain from the talks, if there's some sort of settlement or at least some interim confidence-building measures to access, for example.

But as I said earlier, I think our expectations are very low that there will be any sort of agreement coming out. The fact that they're still meeting and they've agreed to meet again is encouraging, but I wouldn't want to hazard a guess at this point whether they'll achieve anything next time around.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: In 2013, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons was awarded the Nobel peace prize for its work—all of us know that—in resolving the chemical weapons crisis between the United States and Russia in Syria. The immediate issues seem to have been handled relatively well.

However, in such an unstable region, what are the additional risks that we face of prohibited weapons being used or falling into the hands of groups who are not allowed to have them?

Ms. Isabelle Roy: The process led by the UN and the OPCW, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, only related to chemical weapons. This is what I was asked to talk about today.

When you talk about other prohibited weapons, do you have something more precise in mind? Do you mean other than chemical?

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Yes, other than chemical weapons, any others that are dangerous to people's lives—

Ms. Isabelle Roy: Weapons of mass destruction?

Mrs. Nina Grewal: Yes.

● (1640)

Ms. Isabelle Roy: So far, chemical weapons were really the most pressing threat because we had clear indications. You followed what happened to the history on which my director general briefed this committee in December. That was urging the destruction of weapons of mass destruction, to make sure that they disappeared from Syria.

The International Atomic Energy Agency has already provided reports on some suspicion of a nuclear facility that could have been built in Syria. That has been done years ago. So far, there have been measures taken by the government in Syria—again years ago—to comply with its obligations in terms of nuclear. The IAEA provides regular reports on that, but it is not, I would say, a concern as important as chemical weapons.

In terms of cluster munitions, as I just said, they might have cluster munitions, but they don't belong to the weapons of mass destruction category.

Mrs. Nina Grewal: One of the unfortunate consequences of the ongoing conflict in Syria is the thousands of innocent people forced to flee from their homes and take refuge either in internal refugee camps or in neighbouring countries. The politics of refugee camps are quite complex and they put a great deal of stress on host countries.

What is the situation concerning refugee camps and how are the host countries dealing with the strain of handling so many refugees? Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

The Chair: A quick response, please, because we're out of time.

Mr. Dennis Horak: It's certainly a concern for us. It's been pressure on Jordan. A lot of countries have been giving a lot of money to help stabilize the situation in the refugee camps.

Ms. Leslie Norton: Perhaps it's very important to add as well that the majority of the refugees are not in refugee camps. They are really living with host communities and with host families, which perhaps is a plus because it means that the refugees are not all located or warehoused in one area, but they're spread throughout entire communities.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I'm going to turn it over to Madame Laverdière and Mr. Dewar, for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Hélène Laverdière: I will be brief.

Ms. Norton, in your presentation you spoke briefly about the results that have been seen when it comes to access for some humanitarian partners. You invited us to ask you questions about this. I would like it if you could talk to us about the results that have been seen. Thank you.

Ms. Leslie Norton: Thank you for your question.

The last time, my answers in French were not clear. I will answer in English, to ensure that I am understood correctly.

[*English*]

As you all know, through our humanitarian assistance we support the provision of shelter protection, food assistance, health care, basic relief items, and education as well, within and outside Syria. I'm going to give you three examples of results to date because we do have extensive results.

More than 10 million crisis-affected people were provided with access to safe water in Syria in 2013.

Up to 3.8 million people in Syria and more than 2 million refugees in the neighbouring countries received food assistance through the World Food Programme and its partners each month in 2013.

Relief items were provided to 4.86 million people inside Syria in 2013.

We have a lot more examples if you're interested, but they're along that scale and our partners have been able to achieve these results with the help of Canada.

Mr. Paul Dewar: To go down that humanitarian assistance path a bit more, one of the really horrific outcomes of this crisis and this conflict has been the effect on children, particularly on girls, as you mentioned in your brief, and it's been mentioned by government... just some money to deal with sexual violence. One of the reports we were hearing, and I certainly heard before Christmas break, was that in the camps in Jordan in particular the girls are very vulnerable because, as you already mentioned, they're not in school, and some are being sold off.

There were some suggestions by some groups that school's one thing, but the other thing that's important is if there could be some cash-for-work programs within the camps that other agencies have involved themselves in, in places of crisis. I thought that made some sense. Who are we working with in particular on the issue of sexual violence? Who are our partners when we're looking at getting into those vulnerable groups, beyond just the education piece? It makes some sense that we would be able to provide whatever work can be put together and some cash-for-work, because obviously some of these families are selling off members of their families for cash. People are buying up young women and taking them out of these camps. I'm wondering if we're working with partners to help protect some of these young girls and women.

● (1645)

Ms. Leslie Norton: I think in conflict situations we all clearly understand that women and girls really do face greater risks in sexual and gender-based violence. You did mention forced marriage, and of course there's abuse and sexual exploitation. I think the case in Syria is absolutely no exception to that. You've given some very good examples.

The specific areas of concern addressed under what we call the SGBV area, which is sexual and gender-based violence programming, is through our UN and our NGO partners. They are focusing on trafficking, forced and early marriage, domestic violence, and sexual harassment. Our partners are also supporting survivors of SGBV. They offer psychosocial support. They provide medical consultations, legal advice, awareness sessions, counselling training, empowerment courses, and clinical care for sexual assault survivors.

As for the issue of cash-for-work in refugee camps, I was wondering if you were condoning child labour, but I'm assuming you weren't.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Let's say “no”.

Ms. Leslie Norton: Okay. As you can understand, this is a very sensitive topic when you look at cash-for-work in neighbouring countries, countries where locals might not have employment. So I think our partners try to target this through other means. For instance, Save the Children will set up safe spaces for children to play and make sure they have a place to go where they are safe and where they can play with other children, but also learn and be educated. Those are just a couple of examples. UNHCR, of course, and UNICEF are very active in the refugee camps. As well they offer safe spaces for people if they have concerns to come and report them.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Thank you.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Schellenberger for five minutes. You can finish off round three.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger (Perth—Wellington, CPC): Thank you very much, Chair.

Thank you for your presentations today.

Can you comment on the specific situation of religious minorities in Syria? Does religion in general play a big part in this civil war?

Mr. Dennis Horak: The short answer to the second question is yes, increasingly so. We're seeing, increasingly, this becoming a much more sectarian Shia versus Sunni kind of conflict. Certainly with the influx of foreign fighters linked to al-Qaeda and others who are on a religious mission, it's a problem.

The Christian community is concerned about that and is concerned about the risk of having an intolerant Sunni-dominated government, which is the majority population actually in Syria, come out of this whole conflict, and are worried what that would mean for them. I wouldn't want to say that much of the Syrian Christian community have allied themselves with the Assad regime, that's probably too strong, but certainly they are leaning more towards them because of their concerns about this new force being driven in part by a more extremist vision for Syria. So that's a concern, absolutely.

● (1650)

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: When you speak of democracy, is this what the opposition is fighting about? Are they fighting about democracy? It seems to me there are a lot of the same partners that played in Egypt, and I don't think democracy was the main issue in Egypt. It doesn't seem to have worked out that way. Am I correct in feeling that way?

Mr. Dennis Horak: This whole nightmare started with Syrians on the street demanding more rights. They were legitimate democratic demands that they were asking for. There is still a strong force for that even within the more formalized Syrian opposition coalition.

I know what you're getting at. There are elements of the Muslim Brotherhood that are part of the Syrian coalition. Absolutely, there's no question about that. What their democratic credentials are going forward is certainly a question, and it's a question we've had. We've urged very strongly that they become more inclusive, in terms of who is brought into this coalition, in terms of bringing people who have much stronger democratic credentials. They've done that to a degree; to our satisfaction, probably not.

But certainly, assuming this coalition has any influence on where this whole process ends up, there will be a lot of pressure going forward that there be a democratic inclusive system of government and transitional government with democratic orientations. But you're right to be concerned that there are elements within the opposition, on the ground and elsewhere, whose democratic credentials are probably suspect.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: Great. Thank you.

Without taking sides, what is the most beneficial thing that could be done for those displaced, both inside and outside the borders of Syria? I know we've heard education, I've heard inoculation, I've heard various things. I know that goes on.

And I know we have some great NGOs working in that area. Are the NGOs restricted to certain areas or are they free to go to most areas to help refugees without helping the fighters first? Do they have to pay a ransom to get into an area to look after people? Is that going on at all?

Ms. Leslie Norton: If I may, when you speak to the refugees in the neighbouring countries, they all want to go home. The most beneficial thing we could do is allow them the ability to go home with dignity, and the choice to go. But that's not where we're at, and we all understand that.

Whether there are ransoms, I'm not aware of ransoms. Certainly if our partners are leaving from Lebanon to get into parts of Syria, they do talk about the number of checkpoints they have to go through, and going from A to B there can be well over 30 checkpoints.

Mr. Gary Schellenberger: I'm not talking necessarily of the ones outside Syria; I'm talking about the ones inside Syria.

Ms. Leslie Norton: That's what I mean. As they're leaving Lebanon, basically going in with a convoy into Syria, they will hit, at times, up to 30 to 40 different checkpoints. And at each point they do have to negotiate access, even though they may have gotten the green light from the Syrian government or from the opposition groups.

The issues of access and security are linked arm in arm and they're very challenging for all of our humanitarian partners. Do they have freedom of access all over the country? No. The Government of Syria has essentially given approval to a certain number of international NGOs to function within the country itself. The Syrian Red Crescent has probably the best access across the country compared to other organizations and that's why it's such a key partner of our partners, like the World Food Programme, as well as the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Federation of the Red Cross.

The World Food Programme, for instance, works with 18 local or national NGOs, and that is also a way that they're able to access many parts of the country. Now, the north is very challenging and the World Food Programme is doing airlifts into the northeastern governant, but then there are other parts of the country that need to be reached crossing other borders, and there are challenges of freedom of movement for many of our partners in such places.

● (1655)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That ends all of our rounds, but I know there are a couple of questions over here. So if there are any more from the opposition—Marc, that includes you—we can do that.

David, you go ahead, and I know Lois has a question as well.

Mr. David Anderson: I just have one or two questions. I'm interested in following up on what I think Mr. Schellenberger asked about in terms of the minority religious communities. Can you talk a little about where the funding is coming from? Typically, as something becomes more sectarian, there's obviously money behind those organizations. Where is the funding coming from for the various opposition organizations?

Mr. Dennis Horak: Depending on which organization you're talking about, it's coming from a variety of different sources. In terms of the political opposition coalition, they get funding from western countries and from countries in the region. On the military side, there are countries or also individuals within certain countries who provide funding for weapons, for example. Those groups affiliated with al-Qaeda may get funding from a variety of different sources...individuals within certain countries from the region. So it's very widespread.

Mr. David Anderson: Okay. Is it not coming from individuals within one or two specific countries, then?

Mr. Dennis Horak: It could be.

Mr. David Anderson: And we don't want to name those?

Mr. Dennis Horak: No.

Mr. David Anderson: Okay, we'll leave that. I noticed there was some talk about concern over enforced disappearances from the UN, and I'm wondering if you can talk a little about the aspect of enforced disappearances and what's happening there.

Mr. Dennis Horak: I'm sorry, I'm not sure what you mean by “enforced disappearances”.

Mr. David Anderson: I would assume that what they're talking about is the disappearance of civilians and military people and the ongoing procedures that the regime has had in place for many years in dealing with dissidents and people who—

Mr. Dennis Horak: Okay, basically, it's detentions by the regime. I just hadn't heard the phrase “enforced disappearances” before. I'm sorry, what was your question, then?

Mr. David Anderson: I'm just wondering if you can comment on that—if you want to call it detentions by the regime or the disappearance of people who are being held by the regime—it's becoming an increasing problem.

Mr. Dennis Horak: I'm sorry, I don't have any information on that, but I don't doubt it at all, and I don't doubt that it would be increasing. That's the nature of the regime. As you mentioned, they've always been like that and they're under threat and there is no question they would step it up.

Ms. Lois Brown: Do I get the last question? Thank you.

Just a question about the atmosphere within the refugee camps themselves. I have to imagine that you have people fleeing Syria who, in Syria, would have supported the Assad regime and people fleeing Syria who would have supported the opposition. Do you see conflicts arising from those tensions within the refugee camps? Is there security available for the refugee camps? Or are they fairly calm areas?

Mr. Dennis Horak: We haven't really seen it much in the refugee camps. There is security. I think criminality and other issues are a bigger problem than the war carrying over into refugee camps.

Where we've seen the spillover is more in Lebanon, and it isn't in camps, where we're seeing Alawite—sort of the Shia community within Syria—refugees have gone to Alawite areas in Lebanon, and Sunni refugees have gone to Sunni areas in Lebanon, and some of those areas touch up against each other. We've seen in northern Lebanon, in the city of Tripoli, some of this spillover. Whether those are generated by refugees or whether those are generated by sympathizers for the two sides who are already living in Lebanon is an open question, but certainly some of those sectarian tensions have been evident in Lebanon for sure.

Ms. Leslie Norton: I would just add that part of the Canadian assistance on the security-related side actually is supporting the Government of Jordan to ensure security in and around the refugee camps in Jordan.

The Chair: I also have questions from Paul and Marc to finish up then as well.

Mr. Paul Dewar: I just had a quick question regarding if things go ahead for the February 10 scheduled meeting. I want to confirm we will be participating?

● (1700)

Mr. Dennis Horak: No. These are the head to heads.

Mr. Paul Dewar: I'm sorry. I'm glad you clarified that.

Mr. Dennis Horak: It started off with...just have the internationals the first day, and then they went for a week head to head, and it's the head to head part.

Mr. Paul Dewar: Got it. Thanks.

The Chair: Marc.

Mr. Marc Garneau: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Refugees. We've accepted 1,300, I think 1,100 privately sponsored and 200 government sponsored. Considering the amplitude of this tragedy with millions in refugee camps spread over several countries, and considering we had many more from Bosnia, 5,000 I think, and Kosovo I think about 5,000, and a fairly large number from Uganda in the seventies, and the Hungarians, and the Czechoslovakians, and the Vietnamese, I have difficulty understanding and believing the thesis, which has been presented by the UNHCR and by the Canadian government, that just about everybody over there really wants to stay there because ultimately they want to go back to their country. They don't want to go to other countries.

The pickup by other countries has been very low so Canada is not at the bottom of the pile in this particular case. But can you really explain to me why our number is so low because we're seeing children growing up in these camps, and they may be there for many years to come. I'm sure their parents would jump at the opportunity in some cases to begin a new life with those children in a country such as Canada. Certainly the Syrian diaspora in Canada is saying we should be accepting many more.

Could you talk to me a little bit about that situation. What are the statistics? How many people are actually applying to be accepted by other countries? Is there a backlog?

Mr. Dennis Horak: All I would say is I don't think we have the details and the information on applications. I think really in terms of the policy question and statistics, the question would probably be best addressed by Citizenship and Immigration. I don't think we're in a position to comment.

Mr. Marc Garneau: I actually asked your boss before Christmas, and they said they would get back to me, but they haven't gotten back to me. I think we have a right to know what is actually happening with respect to the 1,300, and I certainly would like to see the government provide a more solid answer as to why we're only doing 1,300 people.

The Chair: Thank you very much to our witnesses for taking the time to be here today. We appreciate all the testimony.

I'm going to suspend the meeting so we can go in camera and give our witnesses a chance to head out. Then we'll come back to finish up.

Thank you very much.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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