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Chair

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

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• (1305)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskij (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.)): Guests, panellists, and committee members, the targeting of groups for ethnic cleansing is an ongoing reality in parts of the world—and then there is genocide. Every anniversary of the Holocaust, the Holodomor, and the Armenian genocide, we invoke the words, “never again”. Yet Srebrenica happened, Darfur happened, and Sinjar happened.

As a consequence of ongoing threats of crimes against humanity, there are vulnerable populations in urgent need of sanctuary. The importance and urgency of the topic was recognized by all committee members. We'll be examining ways for Canada to support targeted groups, including accelerated resettlement and other humanitarian measures.

Appearing before us today in the first panel are Ms. Heather Jeffrey from Global Affairs, and Mr. Robert Orr and Ms. Sarita Bhatla from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada.

We'll begin with Ms. Heather Jeffrey.

I'd like to remind the witnesses that they have seven minutes for their opening statements.

Ms. Heather Jeffrey (Director General, International Humanitarian Assistance, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Mr. Chair and honourable members, thank you.

[Translation]

I am pleased to be here today to speak to you about how Canada supports vulnerable groups in inaccessible regions.

My name is Heather Jeffrey. I am the director general for international humanitarian assistance at Global Affairs Canada.

I will offer a few initial comments, guided by the topics which the committee submitted, and will then be pleased to respond to your specific questions.

Global Affairs Canada welcomes this study, as it addresses a grave humanitarian challenge.

[English]

Refugees, internally displaced persons, women, children, the elderly, and the disabled are just some of the groups who may have specific needs during times of crisis. While refugees are afforded specific rights and protection under the refugee convention, other vulnerable groups, like IDPs, remain the responsibility of their national governments. However, all persons who are affected by

humanitarian crises and have identified needs are eligible to receive humanitarian assistance.

Canada channels its support for humanitarian action through an established international humanitarian response system. In situations where international actors do not have a strong presence, support can often be provided to and through local humanitarian actors, including national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies.

Humanitarian actors work to save lives, alleviate suffering, and maintain the dignity of crisis-affected populations. They provide assistance on the basis of identified needs alone, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress and making no distinctions on the basis of nationality, race, gender, religious belief, class, or political opinions.

The assistance provided is specific to the needs of the crisis-affected populations and can include food assistance, water, shelter, protection, health services, education, and other activities. In cases of protracted displacement we also support efforts to find durable solutions and facilitate the transition of displaced persons away from dependency on aid towards an increased resilience and self-reliance. For example, Canada has provided support to the United Nations Refugee Agency to locally integrate former Angolan and Rwandan refugees in Zambia.

Humanitarian actors play a critical role in providing assistance to vulnerable groups in hard-to-reach areas. By operating in accordance with the humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality, and independence, they are able to engage in dialogue with all parties to a conflict to gain acceptance for their activities and access to otherwise inaccessible populations.

At the recent World Humanitarian Summit held in Istanbul, Turkey, Canada spoke strongly about the ongoing significance of humanitarian principles and the critical role that principled humanitarian action plays in facilitating the provision of assistance to those with the greatest needs, especially women and girls.

We recognize, however, that negotiating humanitarian access can be challenging. There are often many parties to a conflict. As the number of armed non-state actors fragments and proliferates, even well-established humanitarian partners can face difficulty gaining and maintaining acceptance for their activities. To this end, Canada also engages diplomatically to address situations of concern. We do so on a bilateral basis as well as in multilateral settings. Canada consistently calls upon all parties to armed conflict, both state and non-state actors, to respect their obligations under international humanitarian law.

One example of Canada's diplomatic engagement is our participation in the International Syria Support Group. The ISSG is co-chaired by the U.S. and the Russian Federation and includes all regional actors as well as Iran and Saudi Arabia. Securing humanitarian access is a central commitment for the ISSG. The members of the group use their influence with all parties on the ground to work together in coordination with the United Nations to help ensure humanitarian access to all people in need throughout Syria, particularly in all besieged and hard-to-reach areas. Across Syria about 5.5 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance in hard-to-reach or besieged areas. Of that number, close to 600,000 are in 18 besieged areas. As of June 23, 2016, 16 of those 18 besieged areas had been reached since the ISSG began its work in February.

The United Nations and its membership, and particularly the UN Security Council, must also demonstrate a sustained commitment to protecting civilians and to meaningfully respond when flagrant violations of international law occur. Within the UN system Canada strongly supports actors, including special representatives, rapporteurs, and the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator, to advocate for civilians.

Where problems persist, states can be compelled by the Security Council to take measures to facilitate assistance to civilian populations. In July 2014, for example, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2165, authorizing UN agencies to deliver cross-border humanitarian assistance in Syria by notifying, but not requiring the consent of, the Assad regime. Further resolutions have extended this mandate until January 2017. Since the beginning of the operation, 337 convoys from 7 agencies have provided food assistance to more than 2.8 million people, non-food relief items to 2.3 million people, and water, sanitation, and hygiene supplies to 2.1 million.

In conclusion, while humanitarian actors can and do make a real difference in the lives of people affected by humanitarian crisis, ongoing challenges remain. Canada will continue to support principled humanitarian action and to advocate for unimpeded access to all populations in need.

Thank you very much for your time this morning and I would be pleased to answer any questions.

• (1310)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Jeffrey.

Mr. Orr and Ms. Bhatla, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Robert Orr (Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you and good afternoon, Mr. Chair.

My name is Robert Orr. I'm the assistant deputy minister for operations at Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. I'm accompanied by Sarita Bhatla, IRCC's director general for refugee affairs.

Resettlement is of course one of a number of tools to assist vulnerable individuals. I'd like to provide a broad overview of how IRCC is able to assist some vulnerable individuals.

According to the United Nations Refugee Agency, a record high 65.3 million people were displaced at the end of 2015. That includes 21.3 million refugees, 40.8 million internally displaced persons, and 3.2 million asylum seekers.

[Translation]

These cold statistics represent many examples of vulnerable groups that require assistance by the international community.

Of course, the ultimate objective for these displaced people is to return home in peace and safety. Canada's primary goal is, accordingly, to help foster the conditions necessary for them to do so.

Unfortunately, that is all too frequently not an option. There are many protracted situations of displacement, as well as other contexts in which more immediate protection is needed.

In these situations, resettlement may be the best option available for some refugees, although we should remember that resettlement is only available to a very small percentage around the world.

[English]

The United Nations Refugee Agency estimates that out of the world's 20 million refugees, more than a million are in need of resettlement in 2016, yet in 2014, the most recent year for which we have figures, only 105,000 refugees were resettled worldwide. While Canada obviously does not have the capacity to help every single displaced person, we have demonstrated a strong commitment as a country to welcome refugees openly.

Mr. Chair, the objectives of Canada's resettlement program and the in-Canada asylum system are to save lives, to offer protection to the displaced and persecuted, to meet our country's international legal obligations with respect to refugees, and to respond to international crises by providing assistance to those in need. All refugees resettled to Canada receive permanent residence and a pathway to citizenship. They can be resettled as government-supported refugees, through a private sponsorship, or as part of our growing blended program where government and private sponsors share the costs equally.

As per the 1951 refugee convention and international practice, every government-assisted resettled refugee must be a person who has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion; is seriously and personally affected by civil war or armed conflict; or has suffered massive violations of human rights. In addition, according to the definition, refugees must be outside their country of origin.

• (1315)

[Translation]

We rely on our partners, such as the United Nations Refugee Agency, to identify refugees in need of resettlement who will then come to Canada as government-supported refugees.

When making referrals for resettlement, the United Nations Refugee Agency uses assessments of protection needs and vulnerabilities—for example, identifying refugees with legal, physical protection or medical needs, survivors of torture and violence, women and girls at risk, and children and adolescents at risk.

[English]

Determinations of vulnerability and protection needs are made regardless of religious or ethnic backgrounds, gender identity, sexual orientation, or other characteristics, but of course in many cases these characteristics may be important elements in the agency's identification of individuals as vulnerable and in need of protection. For example, in many countries, being a member of the LGBTI community can subject an individual to violence and persecution. Canada welcomes referrals of LGBTI refugees for resettlement, and has partnered with organizations interested in sponsoring LGBTI refugees. Canada also has consistently asked the United Nations Refugee Agency to refer women at risk for resettlement to Canada. Once referred, all refugee applicants must be assessed based on eligibility and on admissibility by a visa officer at a Canadian mission abroad.

Mr. Chair, significant challenges in processing resettlement applications arise when vulnerable refugees are in difficult-to-access locations, such as where there are security risks, where travelling to an interview would put refugees or their families at risk, or where there are significant logistical challenges.

Nevertheless, we continue to make significant efforts to process refugees in difficult-to-access locations, such as using video interviews of Somali refugees in Kenya, or Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Lybia. These officers frequently travel into a refugee camp to conduct interviews at an UNHCR, such as to the Kakuma camp in Kenya. Occasionally, when that is not possible, refugees must be transported to the nearest Canadian visa office, for example, refugees from the Dadaab camp may go to Nairobi, or to a third location, such as Khartoum, where visa officers from Cairo or Rome can come to process them. Of course, safety is paramount for the refugees we are working with, our processing partners, and our own officials.

Mr. Chair, turning to the issue of internally displaced persons, in line with international practices, the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act focuses on refugee resettlement and in-Canada asylum programs to provide protection to displaced person who are

outside their country of origin. It is challenging to provide protection to vulnerable internally displaced persons through immigration measures, and as Ms. Jeffrey has already outlined, there's often a real difficulty in negotiating humanitarian access.

[Translation]

This means protection efforts are primarily required through other avenues, such as humanitarian assistance, and diplomatic and other engagement, including those that aim to bring an end to conflict.

In exceptional cases, we have legal mechanisms to extend protection to particularly vulnerable individuals.

For example, we have the authority to grant permanent resident status to certain vulnerable foreign nationals on humanitarian and compassionate grounds, assessed on a case-by-case basis, and giving consideration to factors such as the best interests of children, family reunification, or discrimination.

[English]

The minister also has legal discretion to grant permanent residence based on public policy considerations, a tool used to respond to specific, exceptional, and temporary circumstances. However, since internally displaced persons are commonly located in conflict zones, establishing even temporary processing capacity poses many challenges.

In conclusion, Mr. Chair, Canada uses our resettlement program to offer protection to some of the world's most vulnerable. However, despite our best efforts in global leadership in this area, resettlement remains dwarfed by the scale of displacement and need for protection around the world.

[Translation]

Mr. Chair, Ms. Jeffrey, Ms. Bhatla and I are now happy to answer any questions that committee members may have.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Orr.

Ms. Zahid, for seven minutes, please.

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair. It is good to be back here today in Ottawa.

My question is for Immigration Canada and Global Affairs Canada. The international community first began receiving reports of massacres and atrocities by Daesh against Yazidis in August of 2014.

Could you share what instruction the department received from the minister and the government with regard to assisting the Yazidi community between August of 2014 and September of 2015?

• (1320)

Mr. Robert Orr: I don't think there was any specific instruction from the minister for the immigration department about that group during that period.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: After these reports came out in August, was there...?

Mr. Robert Orr: Not specifically on the Yazidis.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: There was nothing.

Mr. Robert Orr: That said, we continue to monitor consistently with the UNHCR where there are issues and where there are vulnerabilities.

I would turn to my colleague from Global Affairs, though, because that does not mean this was the entire Canadian response.

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: In terms of the humanitarian assistance responses, as I mentioned, we are a responsive program based on needs as they develop in real time.

Since the beginning of the crisis in Iraq, we have allocated \$140.9 million in international humanitarian assistance to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable. This assistance is primarily channelled in three different ways: through UN agencies first of all, those on the ground, UNHCR, the World Food Programme, World Health Organization, and others.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Ms. Jeffrey, when was this? Do you have any dates?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Funding is allocated continually throughout the crisis.

We respond through the consolidated appeals process on an annual basis, but we also respond as needs increase and the needs assessments change throughout the year. It's a continual disbursement of funds to the UN appeals and to the International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent family, as well as through non-governmental organizations, to meet needs on the ground as they are identified.

We provide funding to respond through trusted humanitarian partners, for example, the World Food Programme. They respond throughout, in this case the country of Iraq, as needs are identified by them and where the greatest degree of vulnerability exists. Canadian funding has gone to support the needs of the most vulnerable throughout the crisis.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: When did it start?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: It was at the very beginning of the crisis, so it is ongoing and continuous. In 2015, \$80 million in humanitarian assistance was disbursed, and we are continuing through 2016 with additional funding.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: I know that the minister has spoken about how a whole-of-government approach is being taken to address the crises in Syria and northern Iraq, which have been fuelled by the Syrian civil war and the rise of Daesh. I think we know that the situation on the ground in the region will only be solved by creating safety and stability, as well as an opportunity for the people in the region. The government's response includes a greatly expanded military training mission, increased humanitarian and development assistance, and work to enhance regional stability. Could you discuss

why this whole-of-government approach is important to improving the situation in that region as a whole?

Mr. Robert Orr: Obviously, there are many different ways we can respond to an appalling crisis such as the one we see in that area. I think it's vitally important that we use all the tools that are available to us. I think in this respect that Global Affairs is very much taking the lead on bringing those various elements together. Ms. Jeffrey has outlined a number of different ways in which we have been responding very effectively. We also work very closely with the international community to respond in the most effective way, and Canada certainly is playing its part in that effort.

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: I would just add that I think the integrated approach we're taking in response to the Iraq and Syria conflicts is a very innovative and really important development in the way we conduct our humanitarian and development assistance in particular. We're providing assistance across the whole spectrum of needs: security and stabilization, humanitarian assistance, and development.

One of the major conclusions of the World Humanitarian Summit was that humanitarian and development assistance need to work much more closely hand in hand in order to cover the continuum of needs, from emergency crisis response all the way through to building resilience, and eventually reintegrating or finding durable solutions for affected populations. Those include everything from emergency food assistance all the way through to livelihoods and other kinds of support that affected people will need. For us it's very exciting to have this kind of multi-year funding commitment that allows our humanitarian development and stabilization programming to move ahead hand in hand and to reinforce each other. The joint planning of those types of assistance allows us to do things we haven't been able to do in other contexts.

• (1325)

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Has the department ever tracked the immigrants and refugees by categories such as sexual orientation or religion?

Mr. Robert Orr: No, we do not track by that sort of information. There are a number of reasons for that, but primarily it's to protect the privacy of the individuals. Nevertheless, if we are considering vulnerability, those factors would very much be considered at the time of the application, and there may well be information about such things in the notes, but we do not track them in any other manner.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Can you outline any security, logistical, or other concerns that could arise from an attempt to extract internally displaced persons from within the borders of an unsupportive sovereign nation or within a failed or failing nation-state?

Mr. Robert Orr: I think things would probably go into three buckets on this one. The first one is, as you just mentioned, getting humanitarian access that respects state sovereignty, which can be difficult. Getting access to the individuals in that respect can be very complicated. That can also lead to other complications. If exit permits or that sort of documentation is required from that state, it can be very difficult to get people moved out of it.

Second, there's often the issue of simple logistics and trying to reach the people. It is a conflict zone, so it's often very difficult to reach them. Also, while there are tools that we could sometimes use elsewhere, like video conferencing and so on, to do the interviews, the technology may not be available or it may be broken. That makes it very difficult as well. It may be difficult for people to get transport in or out, and so on.

The third area is the security of the individuals. Within that, I think, there are three areas I would like to identify. One is the security of the applicants themselves, as you don't want to put them into an even more vulnerable position if it becomes known that there's the possibility of resettlement. The second one has to do with other groups that may need humanitarian assistance, who are not going to be assisted by resettlement, and what happens to them in the aftermath if people are resettled. The third one, of course, is the officials themselves and their security while doing the necessary work in that environment.

The Chair: Ms. Rempel, go ahead, please, for seven minutes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): I'd like to thank the witnesses for appearing during the summer.

First of all, I'm going to refer to the UNHCR report issued in June 2015 with regard to the genocide of Yazidis. One of the recommendations in the report to the international community is that the international community recognize the commission of the crime of genocide by ISIS against the Yazidis of Sinjar. In your estimation, has the government formally declared that this genocide has occurred?

Ms. Heather Jeffrey: Following the release of the report of the international commission of inquiry on the human rights violations and crimes perpetrated in Syria, Minister Dion made a statement in the House of Commons that acknowledged the commission of inquiry's findings. He declared that the atrocities committed by ISIL against the Yazidis in Sinjar constituted genocide.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Given that the government has declared this to be a genocide, has the genocide against the Yazidis been factored into the prioritization of refugees being processed under the government's Syrian refugee initiative?

Mr. Robert Orr: Under the Syrian refugee process, no, they would not be factored into that. Nevertheless, we are looking at a variety of different programs in the Middle East where we are accepting vulnerable individuals, and certainly the Yazidis would fit into that category.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: In an article in the *Toronto Star* in February 2016, the UNHCR, in an email response, said:

...we are submitting Yazidi women from Iraq for resettlement from Turkey...it is really for (Canada) to say if they are considering taking Iraqi Yazidis from Turkey as part of their resettlement program.

Since this date, since the UNHCR has been submitting names of Yazidi women from Iraq for resettlement, have there been any special efforts to bring these Yazidi women to Canada?

Mr. Robert Orr: There have been a number of Yazidis who have been accepted, both through the—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: How many?

Mr. Robert Orr: —the private sponsorship and the government sponsorship programs. Because we do not track ethnic or religious groups systematically, we cannot give you an answer in terms of the number.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: All right. Has the department ever been directed to track refugees on their status as members of a religious or ethnic or sexual minority group in order to prioritize refugees based on vulnerabilities due to these criteria?

• (1330)

Mr. Robert Orr: As I said, we do not systematically keep those sorts of statistics on ethnic or religious minorities.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: In your estimation the department has never been directed to track these statistics.

Mr. Robert Orr: In response to the question, I can say that we do not track those statistics.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Have you ever been directed to track them?

Mr. Robert Orr: Not to my knowledge.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

In terms of responding to the report's recommendation to accelerate refugee applications for Yazidis facing genocide, has the department been directed to take any special measures in this regard?

Mr. Robert Orr: Again, in response to resettlement we very much take our lead, on the government sponsorship side, from the UNHCR. It would depend on the cases that are referred to us by the UNHCR; but we look at those cases, if they are referred to us, very sympathetically.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: It's my understanding that many Yazidis list their nation of origin as Iraq. Is this correct?

Mr. Robert Orr: That would be correct.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Under this government, was there a cap placed on refugees from Iraq through the private sponsorship stream?

Mr. Robert Orr: Not that I'm aware of, but Ms. Bhatla may be able to respond.

Ms. Sarita Bhatla (Director General, Refugee Affairs, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): I can't speak to specific caps in specific regions at this point, although we could certainly get you that information. The reference to caps applies to private sponsorship applications, and the reason—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Has there been a cap placed on privately sponsored refugees from the Iraqi region?

Ms. Sarita Bhatla: I can't speak to that region at this time, but I'd be very happy to provide information to you on the caps that are used for the private sponsorship program.

What I would emphasize is that the cap is really about processing efficiencies and backlogs, the issue being that we do not want refugees to languish in backlogs without their coming to Canada. Therefore, we have to match the private sponsor interest and capacity with what we are able to process overseas, because the alternative is to have four- or five-year wait times for refugees who are in the queue but can't actually make it to Canada. It's extremely frustrating for the private sponsors who have to wait that long to get the refugees.

It's a planning tool and an operational tool to ensure that the applicants are treated with respect.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: From previous studies in this committee we've heard that there are many private-sponsor refugee groups, including private-sponsor refugee groups that are seeking to bring Yazidis to Canada, that are experiencing great delays or resistance in terms of their finding spots through the private sponsorship program. They are citing a cap on bringing in refugees, Yazidi women they've identified who may be in camps in Turkey.

Have you received any direction from the government to prioritize the applications of Yazidis facing genocide who may be located in Turkish refugee camps at the present time?

Ms. Sarita Bhatla: No.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Is there any implication of the government declaring the genocide of Yazidis by ISIS in terms of processing refugee claims through the privately sponsored stream? Should that be considered as a priority now that this declaration has been made?

Mr. Robert Orr: I'd go back to the general approach. Certainly on the privately sponsored applications, we will process the applications that come to us.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: However, at this point in time, there is no direction in terms of prioritizing applications from Yazidi groups that have now been declared to be facing genocide.

Mr. Robert Orr: Not specifically, no.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: To close, I know there are difficulties in tracking the applications of LGBTI individuals through the refugee stream.

In terms of your experience through the most recent refugee initiative, is there any best practice or things we should direct the government to put in place in terms of better tracking and prioritizing of the applications of LGBTI individuals?

Mr. Robert Orr: In terms of tracking them, there are a number of LGBTI cases that have come to our attention, and we are certainly very open to those applications. We recognize that this can be a very significant reason for vulnerability.

We do not track those sorts of things. As I said, we do not track ethnicity, religion, or whether one is a member of an LGBTI community. Primarily that's for privacy reasons.

A refugee may be a refugee for a number of different reasons and not just one specific thing.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Orr. Unfortunately, the time is up.

Ms. Kwan, for seven minutes, please.

• (1335)

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): I'd like to follow up on that question around tracking. The government has identified specific vulnerable groups, such as LGBTI, for example. If we don't have a way to track those vulnerable groups in terms of how many have been able to make application and gain resettlement into Canada, how do we know we're actually reaching the goal?

I wonder what other practices there can be, or what ways we can deal with this issue so that we have a better handle on how well we're doing in supporting these vulnerable groups.

Mr. Robert Orr: You're right. It is difficult to track the number, and we cannot say that we have accepted so many individuals from this group or from that group. That is not something we are able to do.

When we are considering an application, there are a number of different reasons that make a person particularly vulnerable and in need of international protection. It may well be their ethnicity and the fact that they are LGBTI, and so on. There can be a variety of different reasons which factor into this.

When we work with the UNHCR and discuss the sorts of cases we would like to have referred to us, all of these are very specific elements and the types of cases Canada would like to be considering for resettlement.

Ms. Sarita Bhatla: If I might just add to clarify, we do track based on nationality.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Ms. Sarita Bhatla: Therefore, we'll know, for example, that if the Yazidis were coming in, they were coming in as Iraqis.

However, we would not track by ethnicity or the type of persecution, largely I think for reasons that go to the protection of the individuals in question.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I think it does remain an outstanding issue. How do we know we are achieving the goal we set out to achieve when the government says that these are our identified vulnerable groups? Frankly, based on the information that's been received, we have no idea whether we're reaching that goal at all.

I want to turn to the Yazidis issue, since the report has come out to identify and acknowledge that this is genocide and the government has yet to declare this to be a priority. I have to be frank that I'm a little taken aback by that, and a bit upset about it actually. I thought there would be prioritization, even prior to this committee's sitting.

That said, I believe the maximum capacity of urgent cases Canada can handle is about 100. Is that correct, or has that number changed?

Mr. Robert Orr: I think what you're referring to are urgent protection cases.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Yes, correct.

Mr. Robert Orr: Those are the individual cases brought to our attention where we do immediate processing—normally within two to three days. We'd be taking individuals from a particularly vulnerable situation where they are at very real and immediate risk.

Again, the 100 number is a planning figure and not a cap. It is the number we would consider in those particular circumstances.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: In the case of the Yazidi genocide that has been acknowledged by the government, would the women and girls be considered as urgent cases?

Mr. Robert Orr: Those cases of urgent protection are refugees, which means they are outside their country of nationality.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Is there a way to make a special provision, then, to acknowledge the unique circumstances the Yazidi women and girls face, and the genocide that is going on, to overcome these various rules that exist, which say they are not part of the categories that could be considered? I think, at the end of the day, what we need to do is find a way to overcome these barriers, to acknowledge the urgency that very much exists. I don't think anybody around the table would say that this is not a vulnerable group that we must act for as best we can. Knowing that Canada can't do it all, surely we can do more than we've been doing so far.

Ms. Sarita Bhatla: If I could just take a step back in speaking about the vulnerabilities and how we assess them and in what context, I'll just give a reminder that we base our refugee resettlement program on the vulnerabilities as identified by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and the referrals are taken mostly by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

So we don't, generally speaking, proactively go out and declare that Canada wants X, Y, or Z. We work in concert with other countries internationally and we take our lead, to a large extent, from the UNHCR who has the expertise to look at the global context and ask nation states to take particular groups or to refer particular individuals.

• (1340)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: You used to have a program, prior to 2011, a source country program that allowed for applicants from certain countries to apply for resettlement without leaving their country of origin and/or without the UNHCR referral. Can that apply in this instance with the crisis that's taking place specifically with the Yazidi women and girls?

Mr. Robert Orr: We could speak about source country programs separately, but I think if there were to be something of this nature, it would be more in terms of a public policy, which would be probably the easier route to go on this one.

Ms. Sarita Bhatla: I would say that we repealed the source country class primarily because it was quite ineffective. We had a list of countries and regulation that we would consider, where applicants could go directly to a visa officer as opposed to through a referral, but it was very difficult and cumbersome, with changing country conditions around the world, to take countries on or off that list, not to mention the diplomatic considerations about saying to a country essentially that we consider that people inside its territory should be removed if they asked for—

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Here's a quick question. What suggestions would you make so we could take action right now to address this issue?

Mr. Robert Orr: There are a number of different issues. I think we've got to recognize that resettlement is not the only part of the solution. There are a number of things Canada can do to help the appalling situation that the Yazidis are facing right now—and a number of other minority groups in northern Iraq as well. I think that goes back to a lot of the humanitarian assistance that we are offering and that Ms. Jeffrey has outlined.

The Chair: Mr. Sarai, you have seven minutes, please.

Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.): I was my understanding that there was an IRCC directive by the previous two ministers to track ethnicity and religion of refugees. I think the program was called the areas of focus program. Has that ceased, and if it has, can we get some information on what it tracked and what the areas of focus were?

Mr. Robert Orr: Yes, you're correct that the area of focus was something that was created by the previous Government of Canada. It was to provide additional considerations in processing refugees, and it was really a form of prioritizing certain types of cases that Canada would be more interested in looking at. It was never exclusive. In other words, if people were not members of an area of focus, it did not mean they would not be processed, but it was just really a means of some guidance to the UNHCR in terms of what sorts of cases would be referred.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Is it still in play?

Mr. Robert Orr: It is not in play now.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: In the past, while it was play, were the Yazidis ever put on that list of...?

Mr. Robert Orr: There was no specific group that was put on the list.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: So what was the area of focus?

Mr. Robert Orr: There were a number of things, but in general, it spoke of women at risk, of LGBTI, of minority groups. It was quite generic in the sorts of elements it raised.

Ms. Sarita Bhatla: I would add that family ties were an important consideration. Those might be the kinds of things that were on that list.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Under that program were you able to track how many Yazidis, particularly women, between say August 2014 and October 2015, came into Canada?

Mr. Robert Orr: No. We were never tracking it that closely.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Were there any specific attempts during that time to help them out or to specifically bring them out of Iraq?

Mr. Robert Orr: Not that I am aware of.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: So there's no program—

Mr. Robert Orr: That said, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was keeping a close watch on what was going on, and they did refer cases to us from residents in Turkey, and those did include some Yazidis.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: You just don't have the numbers on—

Mr. Robert Orr: We do not have the numbers.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: But Canada did make a specific effort. It was the UN that identified them and asked us to do it.

• (1345)

Mr. Robert Orr: As it does everywhere we operate.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Okay, so that hasn't changed.

To be eligible for resettlement in Canada, a person must meet the UN convention definition of a refugee outside of his or her country and be seriously and personally affected by civil war. Do you think the definition for qualifying for Canada's protection should be changed?

Mr. Robert Orr: I think overall, the 1951 definition is the one we have incorporated into the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, word for word. That 1951 definition has proven itself to be incredibly resilient and valuable. If it were to be changed, I think it would be an international effort. Whether we would want to do that isn't, I think, up for debate, but it could become more restrictive if it was going to an international debate on what the definition might be.

You're quite right. I think it does not deal with internally displaced people. That might be worth a further discussion, but probably a separate discussion rather than within the UNHCR definition or the refugee definition.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: With respect to the situation in Iraq with the Yazidis, would it be safe to say that the practical effort is not just the fact that they've not been in a different country or moved out of Iraq but that they aren't in a safe place as it is? Is Global Affairs aware of whether the women are in a safe place and just have to be relocated to a UNHCR camp outside of the country? Is that the challenge right now?

Mr. Robert Orr: Well, if they are outside of the country, it's far more straightforward for us to deal with any applications from Yazidis. Inside northern Iraq, as you can appreciate, it is an extremely volatile environment. We would have to tread very carefully to do anything within Iraq.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: It would be very difficult, currently, if they are in Iraq, to process them, even if we were able to alleviate the processing requirement of being in a third state first.

Mr. Robert Orr: That is correct.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Can the Chair remind me when I'm about two minutes away?

The Chair: You are at two minutes and 20 seconds.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: I'll pass my time over to Ali then.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): I have two minutes?

Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I just had a very brief question, given all the things we have heard so far.

First of all, as I understand, on a yearly basis, the department meets with various countries and the UNHCR officials who are operating in those relevant countries. Are there any upcoming meetings that would be taking place with UNHCR staff in Turkey?

Mr. Robert Orr: We have regular meetings with the UNHCR in the countries where we operate, but we have permanent staff based in Geneva as well, so we are dealing constantly with UNHCR headquarters on a whole variety of issues. But we are certainly also trying to identify those populations that are particularly vulnerable and where Canada can play a role.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: But there's no annual meeting that takes place?

Mr. Robert Orr: There are annual meetings as well. There are large fora as well. There's the major meeting that is held each September, so that is coming up shortly. As well as that there are the continuing discussions with UNHCR officials.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you.

I have another follow-up question. My colleague, Ms. Zahid, asked about the Yazidi community and whether any steps were taken from August 2014 to September 2015 in their regard. You informed us that no specific steps were taken. Were there any particular challenges that may have prevented the previous government from doing anything about the Yazidi community that would come to mind?

Mr. Robert Orr: I emphasize again that we did take some Yazidis, working with UNHCR, who did identify some Iraqis, including members of the Yazidi community, for resettlement. Those cases have been processed and some have arrived in Canada. That continues.

Canada had a very major commitment to Iraqis. We were to resettle 23,000 Iraqis, and we have exceeded that, in fact. There has been a major initiative in that area.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Orr.

Ms. Rempel, I understand you're sharing your time with Mr. Kent.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Hopefully. Thanks.

Mr. Orr, the previous government's stated policy was to focus—albeit not to exclude anyone, but to prioritize Canada's resettlement efforts—on ethnic and religious minorities as well as sexual minorities. Is this correct?

• (1350)

Mr. Robert Orr: Amongst other areas. As I outlined, family connections were also taken into account, and so on.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Would you consider the Yazidi to be an ethnic or religious minority?

Mr. Robert Orr: I would.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: You said that this particular process has ceased. Did the current government direct you to cease the prioritization?

In your previous remarks, you said that the program by which you were prioritizing this has ceased. Was it this government that gave you the direction to do so?

Mr. Robert Orr: Yes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

Ms. Sarita Bhatla: Excuse me, if I may add to that, it was ceased during the time the previous government wanted to look at a review to see how effectively it was working. After that time, there was an election. So it was actually ceased prior to the election, or during that period, to review how it was actually functioning.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: That's interesting. If there was a review that was ongoing to see how effective this was.... You've stated that to your knowledge you've never been given direction to track the data in order to make a wise decision on the prioritization of ethnic and religious minorities. Would you just like to clarify if you've ever been given direction to track the prioritization process to see the actual outcome of prioritizing ethnic and religious minorities? I'll just give you an opportunity to re-clarify whether the department was ever given a direction by a previous minister to track this particular data.

Ms. Sarita Bhatla: To track Yazidis?

Hon. Michelle Rempel: To track ethnic and religious minorities as an outcome of refugee resettlement efforts.

Ms. Sarita Bhatla: There were certainly many discussions with the previous government about how we do the tracking and why we do the tracking. There was no request to systematically track ethnic and religious minorities in our resettlement program.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: To your knowledge.

I'll just give you an opportunity to put that on the record.

Ms. Sarita Bhatla: Yes, to my knowledge, there was no request to systematically change the way we track.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: You also talked about caps. Again, we're looking at Yazidis. We know that there's a great demand for private sponsor groups to bring Yazidis to Canada, that they are Iraqi nationals. Is it true that the previous government exempted both Syrians and Iraqis from the mission caps for private sponsorship?

Ms. Sarita Bhatla: To my recollection, that's correct.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: When did this process change?

Ms. Sarita Bhatla: I would have to get back to you on that.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Has that process changed? Are Iraqis and Syrians exempt from mission caps for private sponsorship under the current government?

Ms. Sarita Bhatla: I'll return and let you know.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: When will you be able to get us that information?

Ms. Sarita Bhatla: As soon as possible.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

We will be writing a letter to the minister, we hope. Certainly the Conservative Party will be. We would like that information as soon as possible. It surprises me that we're in front of committee today without that information.

I'll turn it over to Mr. Kent.

Hon. Peter Kent (Thornhill, CPC): I'd just like to continue to try understand why the current government is not prioritizing the acceptance and processing of persecuted minorities, including the Yazidis and others.

Mr. Orr, I come back to your point that to be eligible for resettlement in Canada, refugees must be outside their country of origin. Given the unique nature of Iraq today and the Kurdish autonomous region within Iraq—a subnational state but probably the most secure part of the country, with international air travel and commerce with continuing in that part of Iraq today—a minister of the Kurdish autonomous government, if you will, came to Ottawa in December. The minister spoke to a number of groups and was pleading for Canadian assistance for persecuted minorities who are afraid to go into the UNHCR camps because they would be persecuted there, as they were persecuted after the fighting began and the internal displacement began.

Is Canada unable to access these people to determine...? Apparently they are there. The Kurdish autonomous authorities have said they would enable Canadian access to these persecuted groups, non-UNHCR designated ones. Has there been any attempt to investigate, to get in and assist them? This is one of the largest groups of Yazidis.

Mr. Robert Orr: We are exploring what would be possible as we understand it at the moment. The security situation keeps changing in northern Iraq and Kurdistan. We would have to reflect carefully on what the protection needs would be and if it is possible and viable to operate there. It's not clear that it is.

The Chair: Mr. Ehsassi for five minutes, please.

● (1355)

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: I wasn't aware that I was actually on the list. I will pass my time to Mr. Virani, who has asked to be provided some time.

Mr. Arif Virani (Parkdale—High Park, Lib.): This is for the IRCC officials.

I will put to you my understanding, as well as the understanding of the CBC, and you can just clarify for me whether it is correct or not. My understanding is that the areas of focus policy of the previous government was to favour ethnic and religious minorities to the exclusion of Sunni Muslims in the region. Is that your understanding?

Mr. Robert Orr: The areas of focus did mention minority groups as being a priority for referrals to us from the UNHCR. I will not comment further on that.

Mr. Arif Virani: The areas of focus program was cancelled by the current government because it believes that a refugee is a refugee, somebody who meets the 1951 Geneva Convention definition. That could include anyone of any religion, including Sunni Muslims. Is that understanding correct?

Mr. Robert Orr: That is correct. We are concerned about vulnerability.

Mr. Arif Virani: Do you have a sense of the number of Sunni Muslims who have come into the country since this government came into office under the GAR program and how that compares with the previous government's acceptance of Sunni Muslims under the GAR program?

Mr. Robert Orr: Mr. Chair, we do not track religion or ethnicity in our statistics, so I cannot give you any indication of that. We do know, though—anecdotally, certainly—that a very large percentage of the Syrians who have arrived are Sunni Muslim.

Mr. Arif Virani: Also, the number of GARs that have arrived since November 4 has gone up. Is that correct?

Mr. Robert Orr: Indeed, particularly, as you are well aware, because of the very significant Syrian initiative.

Mr. Arif Virani: We understand from other testimony before this committee that the department has plans to go into northern Iraq, including into Erbil, in the fall. Is this a safe area to go into at this point?

Mr. Robert Orr: Erbil continues to be an area we are watching. Currently we continue to make plans to try to go into Iraq—to interview Syrians, in fact, in Erbil.

This will be one of the first trips IRCC has made into that area. Significant security precautions have to be taken as we move into that. But it will perhaps be a bit of a barometer on whether we would be able to function with other groups in that area.

Mr. Arif Virani: The trip at this point is not yet finalized. Is that correct?

Mr. Robert Orr: That is correct.

The Chair: Thank you.

That will conclude the first hour of this hearing.

I'll now allow a couple of minutes for the next panellist to appear. I'll suspend for two minutes. Thank you.

• (1355) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1400)

The Chair: Welcome back.

Appearing in our second panel is Mr. Michael Casasola from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Thank you for appearing before the committee. You have seven minutes for your opening statement, Mr. Casasola.

Mr. Michael Casasola (Officer in Charge in Canada, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

On behalf of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, I'd like to thank you for inviting me to appear before

this committee. UNHCR notes with satisfaction the particular interest of the committee in the protection of vulnerable populations and internally displaced persons or those we refer to as IDPs.

Our intention had been that I would be joined today by the head of UNHCR's Middle East and North Africa protection service, but regretfully, my colleague had a scheduling conflict and is unable to join me at this time. I would suggest that if there are any technical questions relating to specific populations, we may respond to the committee's questions in writing following my appearance today.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was established by the UN General Assembly in 1950 to protect and assist refugees and to find solutions for them. At that time, there were one million refugees, mainly from eastern Europe. Today, over 65 years later, UNHCR is confronted with refugee emergencies and displacement on a scale never seen before. According to UNHCR's global trends report, there were 65.3 million refugees forcibly displaced worldwide, an all-time high, including 21.3 million refugees, 40.8 million IDPs—another record level—and 3.2 million asylum-seekers awaiting a decision on their applications, all in 2015.

With respect to IDPs, the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre says that in 2015 there were 8.6 million who were newly displaced within the borders of their own countries by armed conflict, generalized violence, and human rights violations last year. Six countries combined accounted for 84% of the all new IDPs, five of which are Iraq, Ukraine, Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Afghanistan.

Mr. Chairman, primary responsibility for internally displaced persons rests with authorities of their respective countries, but the international community and the UN have a responsibility to share that obligation to respect and secure the rights of IDPs, particularly when states are unable or unwilling to do so. UNHCR has revisited its internal procedures and guidelines for our own involvement in IDP situations. When IDP situations arise that are linked or similar to refugee returnee situations, and where there is a need for intervention, we will intervene provided that it is at the request of the UN and in collaboration with other UN agencies and humanitarian partners.

UNHCR's protection assistance program for IDPs has traditionally covered a wide range of situations and activities. In practice, the nature, extent, and duration of our activities on behalf of IDPs varies as a function of the particular circumstances of displacement, including the pattern of displacement, the absorption capacity of the communities to which they have fled, the willingness and ability of authorities there to provide at least minimum protection against attack or abuse, the duration of displacement, and the demographic composition of the group being displaced.

Availability of funds is obviously an important factor that shapes the extent of our involvement with a particular population. I should note that right now we've only received 43% of the funds needed for the Syria operation. Many other operations are at much lower funding levels.

Since armed conflict and human rights abuses are major causes of displacement, UNHCR's activities entail presences in areas affected by serious disturbance or conflict, where physical safety and security are key concerns, recognizing that concerns about physical safety of UN staff can also limit the scope of our activities. UNHCR assistance has also entailed helping national authorities and other actors to extend essential services to IDPs, particularly in rural areas, including delivering non-food relief items, establishing basic health care facilities, and providing shelter.

As I noted at the outset, when UNHCR was created, it was given the mandate by the United Nations General Assembly to provide protection solutions for refugees. So, Canada's willingness to resettle thousands of refugees each year is key to UNHCR being able to fulfill its durable solutions mandate. UNHCR, by virtue of its mandate, promotes and coordinates resettlement among more than 20 countries, and identifies those refugees in need of resettlement based on criteria agreed upon among all resettlement countries to which UNHCR prioritizes refugees with acute protection needs and vulnerabilities.

UNHCR identifies refugees for Canada's government-assisted refugee program and its blended visa officer referred program. Further, UNHCR's role in referring refugees for resettlement is set out in the immigration and refugee protection regulations. Canada deserves particular commendation for the sizeable expansion of its resettlement program over the past year. UNHCR has expressed our deep gratitude to the government and the people of Canada for the opportunity you've given to thousands of Syrian refugees over the past year to rebuild their lives in Canada. UNHCR also thanks Canada for its pledge to continue to resettle refugees from Syria throughout the remainder of 2016, and we look forward to Canada's participation in future international refugee and resettlement-related forums where it may indicate its planning for 2017 and beyond.

As an aside, I should also add UNHCR's continued appreciation for the \$150 million Canada has given to UNHCR so far this year—a record—of which \$100 million is in support of our Syria operation in the Middle East.

• (1405)

What is important to note is that, if IRCC fulfills the objectives it has presented to Parliament for 2016 admissions, this year will have the largest number of resettlement arrivals since the Immigration Act of 1976, when an official refugee program was first introduced. While this is a cause for celebration, the unfortunate reality is that despite Canada's generous increase, the number of available resettlement places by all resettlement countries does not in any way meet the refugee resettlement needs identified by the UNHCR. Just one month ago the UNHCR released its global projected resettlement needs document, which examines the global refugee population and identifies, among the record number of refugees, who is most in need of resettlement. According to UNHCR's assessment, 1.19 million refugees are in need of resettlement. In contrast, only an estimated 120,000 resettlement spaces are made available to UNHCR by resettlement countries each year, recognizing that resettlement is a voluntary activity of states. In this context, UNHCR is urging countries to continue to expand their resettlement programs, as well as encouraging states to develop new pathways, including humanitarian transfers or visas, private sponsorship,

medical evacuation, family reunion, academic scholarships, apprenticeships, and labour schemes.

All of this increased resettlement activity falls on the thirtieth anniversary of the awarding of the Nansen medal to the people of Canada—the only time the medal has been awarded to the people of a country—recognizing their work to assist refugees. These values of openness and generosity, for which Canadians have been recognized, are ones we wish to continue to encourage, particularly for the large number of refugees who remain in need of a solution.

I would like to conclude my statement today by recognizing that greater international co-operation is needed to address the challenges around increasing internal displacement worldwide. The restoration of peace and the protection of human rights are the best ways to provide truly effective protection to the internally displaced. These are ultimately the responsibility of governments. The forms of protection and humanitarian assistance that can be provided by UNHCR to persons within their own countries serve primarily to promote or reinforce national protection, which itself must be provided by the national authorities. International organizations can play a supportive role, but they cannot substitute for governments in the protection of their own people.

Thank you once again for inviting me. I will be happy to try to address any questions you may have.

• (1410)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Casasola.

Mr. Ehsassi, for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: I'll be using the first five minutes, and then will be passing on two minutes to Mr. Saroya.

Thank you ever so kindly, Mr. Casasola, for being here with us today.

I understand that you have been with the UNHCR, serving with them in Ottawa since 2002. Is that correct?

Mr. Michael Casasola: That's correct.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: And prior to that you also had—

Mr. Michael Casasola: I worked for the Roman Catholic Diocese of London, where I was involved with the private sponsorship refugees program for at least 11 years.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: So you have many years of expertise.

Mr. Michael Casasola: Yes.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: One of the things I have heard you repeat on numerous occasions is that you very much appreciate the fact that Canada, as a general rule, has adopted a very non-discriminatory approach to the resettlement of refugees. Would you kindly elaborate on that.

Mr. Michael Casasola: When you identify refugees for resettlement, first and foremost you must keep in mind that they're a refugee, that they're outside their country of origin. In their country of asylum, the question then becomes: are they vulnerable and at risk in that new context? Not only are they a refugee, but now are they in danger, whether it's a legal or physical protection need, a survivor of torture, a refugee woman at risk? From that we use these independent criteria to effectively look at the refugee population and identify who needs resettlement. We have seven categories—I alluded to three or four of them already—that we use to identify those needs, but in addition to that we also look at the question of priority. Is it a normal priority, in terms they need to be resettled, or is it urgent or even an emergency? That's what Canada's urgent protection program responds to: those few cases we've identified who are in imminent danger and need resettlement right now.

The point is those are independent criteria that we apply to any refugee regardless of their nationality, their gender, and such. Certainly we do have efforts like the women at risk program, where we're proactively trying to look and respond to the gender-based persecution that refugee women face, but, again, it's an independent sort of category.

One of the realities in those categories that I've referred to is that when we're operating in a country of asylum, we're a guest of these countries that are hosting us, and we have to work in co-operation with them. To be able to do resettlement, we have to then present to them the categories and criteria that we're using, instead of saying that we're going to be pursuing this particular ethnic group or that particular ethnic group, which sometimes can create problems in the country of asylum, and the politics of that.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you for that.

I also want to follow up on a question that Ms. Zahid asked in the first hour. She asked if, from August 2014, when very serious atrocities took place against Yazidis in the Sinjar region, government officials had received any instructions from the previous government, and the answer was no.

I was wondering if I could confirm with you whether, from August 2014 to September 2015, you received any instructions from the Canadian government as to whether Yazidis should be given any preferential treatment.

Mr. Michael Casasola: I'm pausing to remember if there was anything specific.

As Mr. Orr indicated, certainly we have discourses with the government at many different levels—in the field, in our headquarters in Geneva, and here in Ottawa. I'll be honest, in that many of those discourses are discreet. I think they're even covered by the Vienna Convention in terms of a diplomatic entity.

I don't recall specifically. Certainly Canada has been very concerned, and it was pretty well known that we met on the creation of an office for religious minorities. We talked about issues relating to them. However, I can't recall specifically.

Again, much of our discourse with governments is discreet, in the same way that one embassy might talk to another embassy.

• (1415)

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: I understand that Sinjar is part of a region considered to be a conflict zone in Iraq. That, of course, obviously poses a number of processing capacity challenges for UNHCR officials. Would you kindly elaborate on the types of challenges that the UNHCR faces in regions such as Sinjar?

Mr. Michael Casasola: I'm not an expert on the situation in Iraq, but one of the challenges we have is the security of our staff. We've had staff members killed; we've had staff members kidnapped. That's quite serious, of course, not to mention the humanitarian agencies as well. Some of the partner organizations have faced some of the same challenges. We've had to reduce the availability of staff, sometimes moving staff out, declaring locations non-family duty stations. This all impacts the sort of assistance we can do.

In looking at the reality of a country like Iraq, which is hosting Syrian refugees but also has an IDP population, the sorts of things we can do in assisting refugees are different from what we can do with IDPs. For example, the refugee convention allows us, under article 35, to make signatory states responsible to us, to report on their treatment, to be responsible to us, and give us access and such. With IDPs, as I mentioned in my remarks, we first need the direction of the General Assembly to work. Oftentimes, the scope of activities we can undertake is limited in terms of what's possible, given that you're dealing with nationals inside their country of origin.

However, security would be the big concern for us. We have had to evacuate, I believe a number of staff at various points in time from Iraq.

The Chair: Mr. Sarai, you have one and a half minutes.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Your history in working for humanitarian causes probably gives you some expertise in this, including the fact you work for the UN.

My particular question pertains to Sikh and Hindu minorities in Afghanistan. Their being IDPs who face a lot of risk, especially the women but including the men, with fears of kidnapping, extortion, forced conversion, but very small in number, how has the UN in the past helped communities like them to escape? Their even raising their voice of wanting to leave is a big risk because of the properties they own. For the people who are not in the major cities, their lives become at risk. What has been the delicate path the UN has taken where it has been successful with any community in the past? What is your advice on assisting people like this?

Mr. Michael Casasola: It's quite difficult if you were to ask UNHCR to help facilitate the movement of people from their country of origin to another country.

The situation of Afghan Sikhs and the challenges they face has certainly been recognized. There is a section in our guidelines regarding refugee status determination relating to Afghans that refers to concerns about persecution. It effectively is more direct, not in terms of inside Afghanistan, but were they to be outside of their country of origin and to seek asylum, we provide guidelines to decision-makers on how basically to understand their asylum claims.

The Chair: Ms. Rempel, for seven minutes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Casasola, thank you for all of the work you've done to protect refugees. I think you'd find it is a non-partisan issue.

My colleagues opposite are asking questions about any specific directions given by the previous government to protect Yazidis. For your own edification, we had departmental officials here who said that is was the previous government's practice to protect religious and ethnic minorities as a priority for refugee processing. They did confirm that Yazidis, of course, fall into one of those categories. It was interesting, because we also had departmental officials tell us that the government has actually—I think they're going to get back to us to confirm—ended this process. It has also ended the process of excluding Syrian and Iraqi refugees from the cap on the private sponsorship program. That is just as context.

I would like to look at the report. I read your report in detail around the—

An hon. member: [*Inaudible—Editor*]

• (1420)

Mr. Michael Casasola: She doesn't mean the UNHCR report. It's the UN Human Rights Council report.

Thank you.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Sorry. In that particular report there are three recommendations for member states, which include considering “rescue plans targeted at Yazidi captives”, putting in place “a protocol for the care and treatment of Yazidis rescued” from areas that are “seized from ISIS”, and accelerating “the asylum applications of Yazidi victims of genocide”.

In recent weeks, has there been any emerging consensus from the international community on best practices on how to achieve those objectives?

Mr. Michael Casasola: Not that I'm aware of, but I may not be aware of all the discourse. A lot of that would happen in the Middle East and in Turkey right now where, it is my understanding, the largest percentage of Yazidis who have fled Iraq are located.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Just to clarify—

Mr. Michael Casasola: I was speaking with our office in Turkey earlier today. We're in constant communication with the Yazidi community inside Turkey.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Just to confirm, then, a majority of Yazidis actually would consider themselves to be Iraqi nationals. Is that correct?

Mr. Michael Casasola: That's not my area of expertise, but that's my understanding.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Could you tell us some of the difficulties you may encounter in dealing with religious and ethnic minorities, such as Syrian Christians and Yazidis, when present themselves at UNHCR camps for processing? What are some of the issues you and they may encounter in doing so?

Mr. Michael Casasola: I'm not sure. I've heard concerns about people articulating, but we always ask for specifics because we want to know. Unfortunately, we haven't received a lot of specifics, and I find it kind of surprising because, for example, on February 14, 2007, we made an appeal for Iraqi resettlement and we went globally. After many years of our strategy having been effectively to provide temporary protection in the region, we said that we would expand resettlement in a massive way. When Mr. Orr referred to the expansion of Canada's resettlement program of Iraqis, that was in part a response to that.

Unfortunately, we do have the information on registration on ethnic minorities, but we won't release it because it's extremely sensitive in the region and we have to work there.

Our vision is much bigger than resettlement. We have to provide assistance in working with the local governments. With that being said—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Just to follow on your line of thought, is UNHCR doing anything to actually prioritize the identification of Yazidis, in light of the declaration of genocide, in terms of asylum claims? If one of the recommendations is for member countries to accelerate the asylum claims and governments are saying that they're relying on UNHCR to identify refugees, what is UNHCR materially doing to identify Yazidis for the acceleration of their applications being processed?

Mr. Michael Casasola: There are two elements.

In fact, forgive me for first finishing that last little piece. To their credit, religious minorities registered much higher percentages with us than the ethnic population. It's estimated they were 1% to 3%. They were more than 10 times that in terms of the registration and the population registering with us, and they were even more than double that in terms of the number we resettled.

We didn't select them because they were a particular ethnic minority or religious belief. It was because they had a legal physical protection need. Because they were persecuted, based on independent criteria they met the refugee definition. Because they were victims of torture, they needed resettlement on that basis.

I mentioned there were seven categories of Iraqis who came to Canada.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Could I just push you to answer in the time I have remaining on the Yazidi-specific question?

Mr. Michael Casasola: Sorry.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: You've asked member states to accelerate the asylum claims of Yazidis. Is this correct?

Mr. Michael Casasola: The UN Human Rights Committee asked for that.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: What is the UNHCR doing to identify and accelerate the identification of these people? Countries are saying they are relying solely on the UNHCR to do this. Also, perhaps in our case where the government has cancelled the cap on private sponsorship exemptions for Iraqi nationals.... What is the UNHCR doing to provide names of Yazidis who may need asylum claims to be processed?

Mr. Michael Casasola: We would be using our independent criteria. We wouldn't be specifically saying, "You're a Yazidi. Come to the front of the line and we will bypass you over...as a survivor of torture."

Hon. Michelle Rempel: So, what you're saying is that, if a government is relying solely on UNHCR criteria to identify Yazidi applicants, right now the UNHCR has nothing in place to prioritize Yazidis as part of that selection process.

Mr. Michael Casasola: No, we would prioritize the Yazidis who might be survivors of violence and torture, Yazidis who are women at risk, Yazidis who are facing refoulement, and who are in need of legal protection.

The first step is RSD, refugee status determination. I'm thinking of the situation in Turkey. The second is the resettlement and referral.

What they're talking about in the report is the asylum process, ensuring that they have refugee status determination so they get recognized as refugees.

•(1425)

Hon. Michelle Rempel: What are you doing at the UNHCR to accelerate that or perhaps identify those victims to a greater extent?

Mr. Michael Casasola: We have processes in place, particularly in our office in Turkey, to accelerate the process of registration. The normal process is quite lengthy because of the large numbers who have arrived in the last years. But we actually have processes that allow people to come up much faster if we can identify particular vulnerability.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: How is that information being communicated to the Government of Canada?

Mr. Michael Casasola: We have regular discussions with the Government of Canada. I believe the regional processing post for Canada in the Middle East is in Ankara and our office in Ankara.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Have there been any discussions to date to take that information and actually prioritize the applications of Yazidis who have been identified through your process to come to Canada as refugees?

Mr. Michael Casasola: Again, we haven't necessarily identified people specifically because they're Yazidis, we've identified people because of these independent criteria.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: But in the report you say we should be accelerating—

Mr. Michael Casasola: That was not our report. It's the Human Rights Committee's report.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Sorry, the Human Rights Committee report, on which the government has based its decision to declare there was a genocide, says that we should be accelerating the asylum application of Yazidi victims of genocide.

Just to be clear, at this point the UNHCR has not operationalized a prioritization process for the identification of potential asylum claimants of Yazidi genocide. Is that correct?

Mr. Michael Casasola: Not simply because they're Yazidis exclusively, no. That's my understanding.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Kwan, for seven minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Mr. Casasola, for coming to the committee.

On the question around vulnerable groups, we just had a discussion with government officials about their inability to track various vulnerable groups. Does the UNHCR track vulnerable groups in your processing?

Mr. Michael Casasola: Certainly, we do identify vulnerabilities. One of the reasons that Canada was able to resettle a large number of Syrians was that we specifically identified vulnerabilities of individuals, such as women at risk, and I just mentioned examples of survivors of violence and torture. We track that information, which helps us identify among a large population whom we should be responding to.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Let me ask this specific question, because our government has identified specific vulnerable groups as well. For example, the LGBTI community is one specific group it has identified, and we have no ability, it appears, to know how successful we are in addressing this vulnerable community.

Does the UNHCR identify the LGBTI community as a vulnerable group, as part of your vulnerability indices?

Mr. Michael Casasola: Again, it would be similar to the situation of the Yazidis in the sense that just because someone is LGBTI.... It would still depend on what context they're in, right? Do they have a legal or physical protection need? Are they in a safe environment or a non-safe environment? That would determine whether they're to be referred for resettlement.

We don't publish information and I think we might have some difficulties tracking the number of LGBTI cases we refer. What I can tell you, only because I referred earlier to emergency resettlement referrals and to Canada having an urgent protection program to respond to it—and I think you referred already to a cap of 100—is that so far this year Canada has received about 23 cases. These are the highest-risk cases and over a third of them have been LGBTI cases. I only know that because I'm copied on all such submissions because they're given such importance.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: That's from which country?

Mr. Michael Casasola: They're from a number of different countries.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: A number of different countries.

Mr. Michael Casasola: Again, to ensure privacy and such....

Ms. Jenny Kwan: We talked about the inability to access various locations because of security issues—and then, of course, the UNHCR has people in various locations as well. For example, we don't have a processing centre in northern Iraq to process applications. Even though applications have been identified and approved by the UNHCR, we have no ability to do the processing there because we don't have a centre there.

Is that something the UNHCR can help us with, recognizing, of course, that there are security issues. Is it something that your office could help us with to expedite or to process these applications that you have already identified and approved through your office?

Mr. Michael Casasola: Certainly, we've been talking with countries about options such as video conferencing. It's one way that we keep hoping will work, and Canada was very successful in using it in Syria. When the conflict began in Syria, Canada actually developed a system with which it was able to continue to resettle a large number of Iraqis still inside Syria.

I don't know specifically whether the technology is there. I'm not a computer person, but sometimes there are, of course, issues with privacy and such, whether for example a computer system for telecommunications in one place matches another with enough discretion in terms of information and privacy.

Certainly, that's something we've talked to them about and we've talked to them about other locations, not just in north Iraq, but Yemen, other places of conflict, including the Dadaab camp, where we've had violence. This is part of our regular discussions.

• (1430)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: More specifically, in the fall—I think in September—the government was saying that officials would travel to northern Iraq, hopefully to see about processing there. Then officials advised us that that in the event they are not successful, they would be looking at perhaps other alternatives.

I guess my question is this. If the government approached the UNHCR now and authorized the latter to help process these cases in locations where we don't have processing centres, could your office accommodate that?

Mr. Michael Casasola: Of course, again, if we're talking about a refugee population....

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Yes.

Mr. Michael Casasola: Forgive me, because it's a bit hypothetical. We would have to know specifically, but certainly that's what we try to do. That's what we try to do routinely.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I would imagine that the challenges other jurisdictions might face are similar to Canada's in terms of processing and accessing applicants and so on.

Is there a set of best practices from the international community on what's being done that Canada can learn from?

Mr. Michael Casasola: There are other options.

Certainly Canada's policy is to interview refugees, and some countries will actually waive the interview. Some of the Nordic countries pick smaller numbers. Where they are convinced by the

totality of the evidence we have provided on the case, they'll accept it.

One of Canada's best practices—started by Mr. Alexander—which has helped facilitate the movement of the Syrians in large numbers has been to recognize all refugees on a prima facie basis. It has required less work, as there has already been conceptual acceptance, and I believe that the current minister has accepted this same approach.

There are different techniques that we try to promote. Certainly one of the other ways we're trying to promote is simplification of our processes. Referral for resettlement can be quite dense in terms of the information required for refugee status determination. Other possible solutions, etc., relate to registration information. If we can streamline that down with all resettlement countries, that would free up our resources to be able to do more.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: In the case of northern Iraq—I'm focused on that at the moment—I have a number of constituents who are waiting for their sponsored families, but they can't get the Canadian government to process their cases on the other end because they have no processing centres there.

Would you recommend for our government to take such action, which is to waive the processing from Canada and to accept on the prima facie cases that these applications have been vetted by the UNHCR and therefore are deemed to be valid and legitimate for Canada to process?

Mr. Michael Casasola: I would have to specifically know the circumstances. I'm cautious, because I don't want to suggest a strategy that might be different from what is being proposed in the region.

We have a lot of discussions with Canada in the region. Canada is actually the chair of the Syria Core Group. The core group is a group of states, basically all the key resettlement countries and the UNHCR, who get together to work out things operationally. I know they're struggling with some of these same questions about how we....

Really, it's an operational question that you're getting at. How do we actually get that person out? If we accept that the person needs the protection, then how do we ensure that you've been able to interview them to your satisfaction and you don't feel there's a security risk, as well as us feeling that they would not be put in more danger?

The Chair: Mr. Fragiskatos, for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Wrzesnewskyj. We share something in common: a difficult last name.

Thank you very much for appearing today, Mr. Casasola.

You have great experience in this area, and I don't need to tell you that vulnerable people flee, whether they're refugees or IDPs. They flee in irregular and unpredictable ways. They could arrive by boat, as Tamil migrants did a number of years back.

I want to ask you about a 2012 policy. The irregular arrivals policy that the government at the time put in place treated arrivals in a particular way. For instance, the full implications of this were and are that irregular arrivals are banned from applying for permanent residency, even if they are accepted as refugees. They are banned from sponsoring family members, including spouses. They are subject to mandatory detention and investigation, and there is no appeal process permitted.

Given the very grave situation facing the world right now with so many displaced peoples—we're talking about record numbers, 60 million plus people—what would the implications be if other states put that measure in place in their laws? Is that a way to move forward in a meaningful fashion with vulnerable peoples?

• (1435)

Mr. Michael Casasola: Concerning the question of designated foreign nationals, our views were stated before this committee at the time, and they are for the record. That's not my area of expertise. I'm more on the resettlement side; that's more the asylum side. Certainly we are looking to examples, to countries, like what Canada has done. There was a meeting on March 30 in Geneva, and Mr. McCallum was there. Canada was actually showcased because it had responded so generously to the Syrian situation. We need that good example. I would turn it this way and say we're looking much more for those positive examples we can cite with a view to encouraging other countries to act the same way.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I don't want to put you on the spot, because I understand you're a diplomat and I'm asking you to comment on policy, but from what I'm hearing, that's not an example that ought to be replicated by other states, given that this is an international problem.

Mr. Michael Casasola: Sure. Our focus is on access to asylum.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: My colleague Mr. Ehsassi brought this up a few minutes ago when he spoke. Just so I understand, you were never consulted, you were never reached out to by any member of the previous government to discuss the Yazidi situation, particularly after what happened in August 2014 in Sinjar, to your recollection.

Mr. Michael Casasola: Again, I would caution that I'm being transparent in saying that I don't recall it. That being said, there are many other avenues. They could have spoken with our headquarters. As I emphasized, our discussions are discreet with governments.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: But there's nothing that stands out.

According to documents tabled in the House of Commons, IRCC officials were instructed by the then minister of immigration to select refugees based on religion and ethnicity through what was called the area of focus process.

Did this, in your view, contravene the established practice and policy of working with the UNHCR to select the most vulnerable?

Mr. Michael Casasola: I'm not actually familiar with the area of focus. Certainly we had a lot of discussions with the previous government about our resettlement program, both numerically and in terms of where we selected refugees from. Some of it was very operational, to be quite honest, but again, I wouldn't be able to speak about the nature of any sort of recommendations that were made to us. They fall within the discretion of our discussions.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I'm interested in the concept of vulnerability. I wonder if you could speak on the dangers of applying particular markers of identity in terms of privileging vulnerable peoples, and also specifically the implications of that for other refugees or IDPs. Could you speak on that?

Mr. Michael Casasola: Sure. I think I made some related remarks earlier, but I may not have been clear at the time.

Independent criteria are used, such as the refugee convention, which doesn't say if you're this religion, you're a refugee, but if you're that religion, you're not. It says if you're being persecuted based on your religion, it's one of the grounds on which you can be recognized as a refugee. Certainly there is the danger in some parts of the world for the refugee community itself if a particular ethnic group is receiving resettlement or receiving assistance or receiving something special that is separate from others simply based on some non-protection need. When we've used these independent categories, this is the way we've also gotten support from the refugees themselves. They understand it more clearly. It's because this person has this problem, or it's because the person is a single mother who has no other male protector. They understand that concept.

The other issue, of course, is the host governments whom we have to work with, which has been alluded to. There's even just the challenge of the ability to get exit permits. I won't name names, and it wasn't Canada, but when countries seemed to have policies that were focused on a particular ethnic group, one instance I can recall is that a country of asylum wouldn't give exit permits for a period of time. You have to be able to navigate a whole series of relationships. When you're able to identify and say, "This is based on independent vulnerable criteria, which we told you about from day one, that when we come in here, we're going to look for the refugees with these particular needs, because they're being detained, they're facing refoulement, they're going to be killed inside your country of asylum", then we tend to have universal support.

• (1440)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I just think of a situation where, if particular markers are given privilege, you could have someone who doesn't belong to that category going through in a much more vulnerable position, let me put it that way. I worry about what happens if we privilege particular markers of identity. I think it could create an even worse situation. That's my fear. I know that you spoke on that, but I think it's critical to the entire discussion.

Mr. Michael Casasola: To be fair, though, and again, to be transparent with the committee, there have been instances where, for example, we know that a particular ethnic group or even a particular religious group is going to have a higher than usual acceptance rate. They're going to go through refugee status determination, but because we know that they have a higher acceptance rate, we can do a more streamlined or simplified process, whereas others who may have traditionally had a lower acceptance rate—again, this is for refugee status determination—might undergo a more rigorous determination process.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: A question about—

The Chair: Thank you. The time is up.

Mr. Kent, for five minutes, please.

Hon. Peter Kent: I'd just like to continue along the path of considering the vulnerable, the persecuted, the minorities who have managed to escape Syria and Iraq but have failed to enter the UNHCR camps for designation because they fear discrimination or worse—perhaps renewed persecution in those camps—and are living in the local economies, for example, in Jordan or in Lebanon. Most specifically, we've had information from ministers of the Kurdish autonomous region who have come to Ottawa in the last few months and complained—I think that's the fair word—that many Yazidis and others, including Christian minorities, who have not received UNHCR designation are not in the camps and are living in the local economy and are not supported by the government of Iraq, and that the Kurdish autonomous government, the regional government, is having to carry the load.

I understand they are still technically internally displaced people, but they are in a unique situation in which the government of Iraq is not accepting the responsibility that it should in their regard. What is the UNHCR doing about that?

Mr. Michael Casasola: I can't speak specifically to our program in Iraq in relation to Yazidis, because many of those elements are technical, and I hope you'll understand.

Certainly as far as the question of being afraid is concerned, I referred to that earlier and I would disaggregate the situation of IDPs versus the refugee population, because, again, when it's a refugee situation, we have the convention and our abilities are a bit stronger. To be quite honest, we count on countries like the United States and Canada, our supporters, our generous supporters, to also back us up when we talk, and they do, to their credit. They will do interventions with governments directly as a group and such.

But in terms of the situations in camps in the region, I'm a bit concerned about the.... Again, I'd love to have more details because I hear this sort of generic talk that “we're afraid” and such, and sometimes we say there are camps and technically there are actually no camps, for example, in some places. I know that one of the challenges we've had is that, for example, in Turkey we've been trying to sort out with the Yazidi population and the Turkish officials ways that they can have better levels of assistance. We have situations where they'll register with us, but they haven't registered with the Turkish officials, and again, registration with the Turkish officials will get the assistance. But they don't want to move from the location they're in and the Turkish officials are also.... I don't want to be critical of the Turkish officials because they're hosting 2.8 million

refugees—2.8 million Syrians, and many others as well. They've been incredibly generous. But sometimes it's just navigating these bridges of, if we could only get the Turkish officials to be there, or the Yazidi community to be willing to leave one location, because they want to be together as a group, so that they could properly register so we could get the assistance, we could get the information, so we could make the referrals.

Sometimes it's as operational as that.

Hon. Peter Kent: We've seen with the current government's accelerated refugee program the initial 10,00 of the 25,000 or so already in the process of private sponsorship. We know that with private sponsors across the board, many of them with specific focus on ethnic or religious groups and with family ties, there's a backlog and millions of dollars in escrow payments waiting to accept these refugee claimants to Canada. The government has put a cap on these private sponsorships, denied them in some cases, or not allowed quotas.

I'm just wondering what your recommendation would be, not just to this government, but to any government with regard to that welcoming ability, given the success of private sponsorships to accept, integrate, and successfully resettle refugees as contributing members of society. What would your advice be?

• (1445)

Mr. Michael Casasola: As I mentioned, I am a big fan of the private sponsor program. I have invested a great part of my life trying to privately sponsor refugees myself.

I think your committee was very generous when the high commissioner came to Canada and you hosted a lunch with him. When he was here in Canada—and he reflected to me on his experience subsequently—one of the things he came back with was that he was incredibly impressed by the generous spirit in Canada. One of the things I would say about the private sponsor program this year is that my concern about it isn't so much the backlog, but as the high commissioner said, that we want to keep the spirit alive, that we want to keep this strong support. We don't want people to come away frustrated and such. We want to maintain as much as possible.

That said, Canada is going to resettle a record number of refugees this year if it fulfills its plans—more than has ever been done before. So these are the tensions.

I don't want to be overly critical, but I know there are lots of groups in society who want to sponsor refugees—I'm part of one myself—but at the same time, Canada is bringing a record number this year. So I think the question is how we can sustain and ensure that this isn't just a moment, a statistical blip, but that we're effectively starting a new chapter.

The Chair: Mr. Tabbara, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you. I'll be splitting my time with Mr. Virani.

I just want to thank you for all the work you have been doing.

My question is how we identify vulnerability. The situation in Iraq and Syria is changing on a daily basis. As we've seen recently, there was a bombing of more than 250 civilians after Eid. When there's intense fighting in certain regions, maybe in Fallujah and Basra, is there a criterion to know where the vulnerability is for refugees—

Mr. Michael Casasola: Sorry, forgive me; I didn't mean to cut off your question.

There's first the questions of protection, assistance, and such, but then for the purpose of resettlement, again you're looking for the individual as recognized as a refugee. We all accept that the people are in danger because they may be killed, but then in the country of asylum, recognizing that we're only able to resettle—with the spaces given to us by the entire international community—about one in 10 of the people we identify.... So you have 60 million refugees, 1.19 million of those we've identified need resettlement, and there are only 120,000 spaces.

So among those people in the country of asylum, we're then having to say who's in danger or whose needs aren't being met?

Now, it's possible given the scenario that the people experienced something so terribly egregious that, when they were resettled, there are mental health problems as a result of that, and those are people whom we would call survivors of violence and torture.

I can't recall if I mentioned this already. Up until the Syrians overtook them, the Iraqis were the largest number of refugees coming to Canada, and the largest category for which people were selected was survivors of violence and torture.

We look for things like that, survivors of violence and torture, and the most common categories are refugee women at risk, survivors of violence and torture. Any more common than that is legal and physical protection needs. The people are in danger in the country of asylum, they might be a minority, and they might be in danger in the context of that; and we will resettle them because of that, anywhere in the world. They might be facing refoulement, forced return to their country of origin, or they may be detained because refugees are not supposed to be detained because they are refugees.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: I like how you mentioned previously about the processing of the application, and it's depending on what context they are in and it's regardless of religion, ethnicity, and their beliefs. If we start prioritizing based on religion, what type of challenges will we face, and what will the UNHCR face?

Mr. Michael Casasola: It would depend on context.

We would be looking for independent criteria always when we do this. Now, it's possible because we have had particular ethnic groups who because of their faith have been more likely to be found to be refugees, but they're referred on the basis of their legal and physical protection needs, on the basis that she's a woman at risk, for example.

The challenge most often comes with how they will be treated in the country of asylum and whether you will even actually get those visas for those refugees to be able to even be resettled, if you wanted to resettle them.

• (1450)

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Virani.

Mr. Arif Virani: How much time do I have, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have one and a half minutes.

Mr. Arif Virani: Let's just pick up on this point about survivors of violence and torture. That was the basic grouping that the UNHCR was identifying most frequently coming out of Iraq and Syria in the past few years.

Mr. Michael Casasola: Again, when we looked at cases independently and we said you're different from everybody else because you have survived violence and torture, that was the most common reason, on an individual basis, that Iraqis were referred to Canada.

Mr. Arif Virani: That applied to people of various ethnicities and various religions.

Mr. Michael Casasola: Absolutely.

Mr. Arif Virani: Minority religions and majority religions.

Mr. Michael Casasola: Absolutely.

Minority religions were a significant part of the people referred to Canada.

Mr. Arif Virani: Would majority religions also have been part of that group?

Mr. Michael Casasola: Yes.

Mr. Arif Virani: The majority religion practised in this area is Islam.

Mr. Michael Casasola: That's my understanding.

Mr. Arif Virani: Therefore, the majority of the people in flight in the area are also practitioners of Islam.

Mr. Michael Casasola: Yes.

Mr. Arif Virani: When this policy that my colleague Mr. Fragiskatos referred to, this areas of focus policy, was implemented, which put a gloss on....

Just so we understand it crystal clear, the UNHCR said here's a pocket of people we're suggesting to you for resettlement, and this was an additional gloss. People were prioritized by the previous Canadian government based on whether they were a religious or ethnic minority.

Is that correct?

Mr. Michael Casasola: Again, I'm not familiar with the policy, so I can't refer to that.

Mr. Arif Virani: Are you familiar with whether that was the first time Canada had implemented such a policy?

Mr. Michael Casasola: Our discussions with governments are discreet.

Sometimes governments will come forward with ideas that we don't think are great and we'll tell them so. Sometimes they'll come forward with great ideas and we'll publicly thank them. That's the nature of our discourse.

Mr. Arif Virani: Presumably, you also—

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Rempel, for five minutes, please.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: In your experience, which seems deep, have you seen groups being persecuted or being caused to be refugees based on their ethnicity, their religion, or their sexual orientation? Is that a factor that often causes somebody to become a refugee?

Mr. Michael Casasola: Religion is one of the grounds in the refugee convention, and certainly being a member of a sexual minority could be determined as being a member of a social group.

Certainly, that's the basis for a well-founded fear of persecution, and they need protection as a refugee.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: In the Middle Eastern refugee crisis, all groups, regardless of faith, are definitely facing persecution. However, are there groups that are at a greater risk of death or torture or imprisonment based on the fact that they are ethnic or religious or sexual minorities?

Mr. Michael Casasola: I think what might be helpful for you, instead of my trying to name them, is to say that we do have guidelines—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Are there groups that are at greater risk of becoming refugees, of dying, of being put into slavery?

Mr. Michael Casasola: Yes.

What I was getting at is that we do have guidelines relating to refugee status determination for Iraqis, for Syrians, specifically identifying certain categories that will help refugee status determination. People involved in refugee law, such as judges, make decisions that way, where we provide some guidance bringing together a whole bunch of—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Based on their religion or their ethnicity.

Mr. Michael Casasola: It could be because of that.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Depending on if they're being persecuted.

Mr. Michael Casasola: I gave the example of the Sikhs in Afghanistan where we referred specifically to the challenges they face in their country of origin.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: When the UN is recommending to accelerate the asylum applications of Yazidi victims of genocide, are they in fact asking countries to prioritize applications of a group based on the fact that they're being persecuted because of their ethnicity and religion?

Mr. Michael Casasola: I'm not sure what the consideration of that committee was in terms of streamlining, because I know there were a number of recommendations that they made.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Let me put it a different way. Would you consider Yazidis to be an ethnic and/or a religious minority in the region?

Mr. Michael Casasola: Yes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Yes.

Then when it comes to prioritizing refugees, and we had departmental officials in here talking about....You even said yourself that there is unfortunately, to humanity's overall detriment, a lot of people around the world who are displaced people. Canada is a very fortunate nation, and we are in a position to help.

One of our departmental officials said that one of the challenges they might encounter is long backlogs in processing. In this situation, especially when the UN is asking member countries to accelerate the asylum claims of a very persecuted group, one that the UN has said is facing genocide, do you think it is right for countries to prioritize based on that consideration?

• (1455)

Mr. Michael Casasola: If you're saying prioritize due to refugee status determination, then certainly that is something—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Is it right for this country to prioritize applications from Yazidis, given the declaration of genocide from the UN?

Mr. Michael Casasola: Are you talking about prioritizing for resettlement?

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Yes, for resettlement.

Mr. Michael Casasola: For resettlement. That's a voluntary act of states, right?

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Yes.

Mr. Michael Casasola: The recommendation actually asks for prioritization for refugee status determination. It doesn't actually talk about resettlement.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Okay.

In terms of the recommendation to accelerate the asylum claims of Yazidis, and other recommendations, including mounting rescue operations for Yazidis, in order to implement that recommendation, to accelerate that, would that not require both the UN and member countries to prioritize those groups, to make the resettlement of Yazidis a priority in their processing?

I guess what I'm trying to do is square the circle here.

Mr. Michael Casasola: I think I understand, and I'm not trying to be difficult, either.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Earlier you said that to date the UN has not altered its operating practices in processing refugees from the Middle East by identifying Yazidis and transferring that information to countries. We're hearing from the Canadian government that they are relying on your criteria to prioritize applications. I'm saying that if that's the case, how are we supposed to help these people? They are facing genocide.

I'm just wondering if there's any hope from the UN that we can get over this bureaucracy and actually try to accelerate these applications. My colleagues here are going back and forth trying to say whether or not religion or ethnicity is an issue in refugees being processed. It is. That's why you've said this in this report.

Therefore, what is the UN doing to help Canada, with a government that's relying solely on you to bring these people to Canada?

Mr. Michael Casasola: First and foremost, the people have to register with us. That's one of the challenges we've had with some of the population. Secondly, we are exploring a number of things. It hasn't remained static; we're always trying to adjust different techniques. The example of how we brought Syrians so quickly to Canada shows how we've been flexible in bringing in people in a large number.

Our concern has just been the potential challenge if you were to specifically say that someone, by virtue of his or her ethnicity and without any other factor, is effectively going to be selected for resettlement and not someone else. That's it.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: That recommendation—

The Chair: Thank you. Your time is up.

Mr. Fragiskatos for five minutes, please.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I wonder if you could comment on the question of dealing properly with vulnerable people as an international legal question and a problem that the international community faces as a whole. To my way of thinking, this is not a problem per se in Canada's immigration and refugee law. More specifically it relates to problems in the international environment, where we see a refugee convention in place since 1951 that defines vulnerable peoples who have been displaced in a very specific way as those who have fled their country of origin. That's the criterion.

However, we have millions of peoples—40-plus million, in fact—who are internally displaced. Also, there is a convention in place on stateless peoples. It goes back to 1960, but there are only 86 signatories.

Excuse me, there are two conventions. The one I'm referring to has 86 signatories. It's not taken nearly as seriously as the 1951 convention.

Would you say it's fair to look at this problem as something that the entire international community has to look at more? How do we deal with displaced peoples in general? We have 65-plus million now. This is a record number. I think the discussion ought to be broader. We ought to talk about this as something that is challenging for the entire international community. Perhaps Canada could take a lead in raising this.

There are stateless minorities, such as the Rohingyas in Myanmar, the Haitians in the Dominican Republic, and the Bedouins in Kuwait who lack citizenship well, and there are the Nubians in Kenya. On and on we can go with examples. There are just people who lack citizenship.

There are also people who have citizenship but who have been displaced. I wonder if the international legal order and the international community is equipped with the mechanisms necessary to deal with this very serious problem.

Mr. Michael Casasola: What you're describing—forced human displacement—is one of the greatest challenges facing the international community. One of the challenges exacerbating all of this has been not just the increased number of refugees but also the shortfall of solutions. Normally, because resettlement is so small, it doesn't get talked about in the same way we talk about things like voluntary repatriation, which is the most common solution for refugees.

The reality, and one of the drivers of this, is that refugees are forced to be refugees for longer and longer periods of time because

no solution is being presented to them politically. This is where we really need the political leadership to solve these conflicts.

I would be really worried if we were to open up a discussion on the refugee convention. The refugee convention itself has been responsible for protecting the lives of millions of people, including millions of Canadians who came to Canada as refugees, so I wouldn't want to do it.

There are some important forums coming up in which the international community will be talking about some of these issues. The UN General Assembly on September 19 will have a summit on addressing large movements of refugees and migrants. Then there's the Leaders' Summit on Refugees, which the United States is hosting. I believe Canada is one of the co-hosts. Again, we'll be talking about different ways towards solutions.

But it certainly is one of the great challenges affecting the lives of millions of people.

• (1500)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: There is hope in favour of this. In 1949, as you might know, there was a study published by the UN called "The Study of Statelessness". That report understood the issue of displacement in a novel way, that those who were displaced could flee their country of origin or could be internally displaced. It only ended up being contested when the committee looking at what the convention would look like, in 1951, decided ultimately on the definition they did. Therefore, there's hope for that.

Also, I take your point on the need for leadership, so perhaps Canada can provide a role in championing the need to rethink issues along these lines within the international realm.

I think the chair wanted a minute.

The Chair: Thank you.

Just as a point of clarification, in your opening statement, Mr. Casasola, when you listed the six countries that, combined, produced 84% of the IDPs in 2015, you mentioned that there were 800,000 such individuals in Ukraine. I recently spoke with ministerial officials in Ukraine, who listed the actual number of registered individuals at more than 1.5 million. Just for clarification, the discrepancy in the numbers is because those are strictly 2015 numbers, and the previous ones were from 2014 when Russia's—

Mr. Michael Casasola: Correct.

The Chair: —war of aggression began.

Mr. Michael Casasola: Correct. What I was referring to when I gave the 84% was the newly internally displaced in 2015. This would be in addition to internally displaced in other countries.

The Chair: Thank you for that clarification, and thank you so much for your work and your testimony before the committee today.

At this point, the meeting is adjourned.

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