



HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

CIMM • NUMBER 026 • 1st SESSION • 42nd PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Wednesday, July 20, 2016

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Chair

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

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• (0905)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.)): Good morning.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on June 16, 2016, the committee will resume its study on immigration measures for the protection of vulnerable groups.

Appearing before us today for the first panel we have, from the Arakan Project, Ms. Chris Lewa. Ms. Lewa is joining us not by video conference, but by voice conference from Brussels. From the Sentinel Project for Genocide Prevention, we have Mr. Drew Boyd, the director of operations. Thank you for being with us here today in person and by audio.

I'd like to begin with Mr. Boyd, if you could take seven minutes to make your presentation. Thank you.

Mr. Drew Boyd (Director of Operations, The Sentinel Project for Genocide Prevention): I want to thank the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration for inviting me today. I also extend to you my appreciation for your willingness to address the protection of vulnerable groups currently under threat around the world.

The Sentinel Project for Genocide Prevention is a Toronto-based NGO that works to prevent mass atrocities, including the crime of genocide, through direct co-operation with threatened communities and the innovative use of technology.

We operate in several countries, most notably in Myanmar, formerly Burma, where we use new methods of employing the existing telecommunications infrastructure to prevent intercommunal violence, especially that directed by extremists toward the Muslim minority groups such as the Rohingya. Elsewhere we have worked in Kenya's Tana Delta and Lamu regions, which are plagued both by intercommunal violence and terror attacks by the Islamist Al-Shabaab militia based in Somalia. We also operate a small fleet of unmanned aerial vehicles to support civilian protection and other beneficial applications as part of a broader effort to advance the field of humanitarian aerospace.

One of the most challenging issues to overcome when working in unstable environments is that of accessibility. That means not just the ability of organizations to bring assistance where it is needed, but also the ability of threatened communities themselves to participate in the assistance programs and benefit from them.

The question of how one bridges the gap caused by disarray and uncertainty caused by violence and exacerbated by geography is a

difficult one to answer. In our experience at least part of the solution is to investigate the role of underutilized information and communications infrastructure already in place and to build capable objective-driven systems on top of it.

Information when seen and used in a humanitarian or a development context can help in overcoming barriers, making smart decisions, quickly identifying focal areas, and assessing risks. This is representative of a growing recognition that information itself can be a form of humanitarian aid, since people require high quality information to make effective decisions about their lives, especially those living in difficult and dangerous conditions. Without putting the right information into the right peoples hands, delivery of every other form of assistance, such as food, medicine, shelter, and protection, is going to be less effective.

One area of particular concern for us is the regions occupied by or in the vicinity of the Islamic State group, and specifically their targeting of the Yazidi, Christian, and Shia communities. As recently as January of this year, one of our board members has been active in northern Iraq during a fact-finding mission and has highlighted some of the barriers to action, as well as some of the opportunities for assisting vulnerable groups where accessibility is an issue.

The barriers are most often institutional, primarily relating to rampant corruption combined with an understandably fractured power infrastructure. While these conditions can hinder work throughout the region, they are especially salient in places where minority communities are distrustful of regional governments and their representatives. This is certainly the case with the Yazidis in Iraq.

We have assessed the communication infrastructure, and the region is capable of supporting systems that circumvent power structures and connect outreach efforts directly to residents. Such systems can be used for extending the reach of Canadian government assistance efforts, broadcasting information to physically unreachable populations, and facilitating coordination.

It's also important to recognize that Christian, Shia, and particularly Yazidi communities currently face an existential threat at the hands of groups such as the Islamic State, but just as their persecution did not begin with this extremist organization, neither will it end with them. I encourage the Government of Canada to commit to a long-term view of assistance for marginalized communities in Iraq and the Levant.

I also encourage the Government of Canada to investigate innovative approaches to mitigating the extreme targeting of marginalized communities, which is unique in the new challenges that it brings and requires creative responses. Conventional methods alone may not be sufficient to fully address these crises, but they can have a greater impact when supported by new tools available to us, such as widely accessible mobile telecommunications and open source software.

Canada will be more impactful if it adopts and adapts these same tools when responding to crises created by those who persecute vulnerable minorities and threaten their very existence.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Boyd.

Now we turn to Ms. Lewa, who is here by audio and not by video due to security concerns. Ms. Lewa, you have seven minutes, please.

Ms. Chris Lewa (Director, The Arakan Project): Sorry, I believe that I am on video for the meeting. I was told that it would be the case, but it would not be put on the Internet later.

The Chair: The video is completely shut off.

Ms. Chris Lewa: The members of the committee can see me.

The Chair: You can see us, but no one can see you.

Ms. Chris Lewa: Oh, I see. I don't know what the problem is because I said that I just do not want it to be posted online after this meeting, but for the live debates I can be on video.

The Chair: Ms. Lewa, these are carried live. If we put you on the screen, you will be publicly displayed on the screen. So, as per your request, we've removed the video portion. You can see us. We cannot see you, but we can definitely hear you.

Please proceed. You have seven minutes.

●(0910)

Ms. Chris Lewa: Okay. Thank you.

Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.): Sorry, Chair, but you might want to let her know her audio will be shared live. As long as she's aware of that it's okay.

The Chair: Please proceed. You have seven minutes.

Ms. Chris Lewa: Mr. Chair and honourable members of the committee, thank you for inviting me to speak today on the persecuted Rohingya minority from Rakhine State in Myanmar.

The Arakan Project is an NGO based in the region, documenting the human rights situation of the Rohingya in Myanmar for the past 15 years, and also monitoring conditions of Rohingya refugees in host countries as well as irregular maritime movement. The Rohingya Muslims have been described as the most persecuted minority on earth. For decades, they have faced intense discrimination and exclusion on the basis of their religion and ethnicity. They have been rendered stateless. Their movements are severely restricted. They are subject to gross human rights abuses by the Myanmar authority. Moreover, long-standing hostility by Rakhine Buddhists broke out in communal violence against them in 2012, and for the past four years, 120,000 Rohingya have remained confined to segregated displacement camps in Myanmar.

In the last few weeks, the new NLD-led government has taken some first steps to address anti-Muslim movements inciting violence in the country. On May 30, the government also established a senior level central committee on the implementation of peace, stability, and development in Rakhine State. However, its mandate and task have not been made public. Of concern is that this initiative may be based on the draft Rakhine State action plan that was leaked to the media in 2014 and which is deeply problematic. There are clearly no easy solutions to the crisis in Rakhine State.

Over the years, thousands of Rohingya have fled from Myanmar by boat and over land, and especially since 2012. In May 2015, Thailand's anti-trafficking campaign resulted in boat loads of Rohingya abandoned at sea by smugglers, who were initially not allowed to disembark anywhere in the region.

Today, more than 100,000 Rohingya refugees are registered by the UNHCR in the Asian region. Many, many more are unregistered. According to the UNHCR, figures in the five main host countries in June 2016 were as follows: Bangladesh, 32,885 refugees registered, plus 200 to 500,000 unregistered; Malaysia, 53,163 registered, plus 50 to 70,000 unregistered; Thailand, 602 registered; Indonesia, 962 registered; India, 14,422 registered. In the last three countries, there are an unknown number of unregistered refugees as well.

None of these countries have ratified a refugee convention or statelessness convention, nor have they enacted domestic legislation to protect refugees. The Rohingya in these states generally are considered to be irregular migrants. Malaysia, Indonesia, and India allow UNHCR to assist the refugees, including Rohingya, but UNHCR registration only provides informal protection and can be difficult to access.

Bangladesh only recognizes as refugees Rohingya who fled during the 1991-92 exodus, and Thailand keeps Rohingya in indefinite detention. In Bangladesh and Aceh, registered Rohingya are housed in refugee camps where basic services are provided by the UNHCR and its partners. However, in Malaysia and India, they are living among host communities in slums or makeshift camps with little to no assistance. Access to formal education is usually not available, with refugees relying on community-supported or NGO schools. Access to health care is also inadequate.

With the exception of India, Rohingya refugees do not have the right to work and are vulnerable to exploitation as well as to arrest and detention as undocumented migrants. India started issuing long-term visas to refugees in 2015, and Malaysia is currently discussing the issuance of work permits to Rohingya refugees. Rohingya refugees are at constant risk of arrests. In Malaysia, about 2,500 Rohingya were trapped in immigration detention during my last visit in February. The 320 refugees who had landed in 2015 were finally released last week.

In Indonesia, I was just told that there are at least 50 in detention, including women and children. In Thailand, about 400 rescued or arrested refugees in past years are being indefinitely held in immigration detention centres for men, or in government shelters for women, children, and victims of trafficking.

Canada was the first country to resettle Rohingya refugees in 2007, selected from Bangladeshi refugee camps. After Bangladesh suspended resettlement in 2010, small numbers were taken in from Sri Lanka, Cambodia, and Malaysia. Recently, Canada also accepted a few from among those rescued in Aceh last year.

● (0915)

The UNHCR's priority in Asia is to encourage states to take more responsibility for solutions for refugees, including registration. Thus, referrals for resettlement are made on an individual basis according to vulnerability criteria or specific needs. The UNHCR does not promote large-scale or group resettlement, including of the Rohingya. Nevertheless, the Arakan Project is advocating that resettlement countries, including Canada, increase their intake of Rohingya refugees and to consider for resettlement not just the most vulnerable but also others, such as families with youth, for whom resettlement would provide access to education and a better chance of integration.

Rohingyas seeking protection outside Myanmar are not just refugees but are also stateless. While resolving the situation of those currently inside Myanmar will take time, the potential repatriation of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar, including those born in exile, cannot be envisaged in the near future. In the meantime, a generation of youth, without access to education, is being wasted. Resettlement should be extended as one of the durable solutions for Rohingya refugees.

The Arakan Project recommends, first, that the Canadian government continue its advocacy, with respect to the Government of Myanmar, for democracy and human rights and the urgent need for a resolution to the marginalization of the Rohingya; second, that it increase its support for the provision of basic services, including education, to Rohingya refugees in all countries; third, that it continue its advocacy in states in Asia for regularizing the Rohingya, including in Malaysia, through the issuing of work permits; fourth, more specifically, that the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration increase the number of Rohingya refugees selected through government-sponsored refugee resettlement programs; fifth, that it increase the ability of Rohingyas to access private resettlement through the repeal of the requirement that we settle refugees sponsored by community groups—and I'm talking about the groups of five community sponsors—who are recognized and referred by the UNHCR; and, finally, that it consider the reintroduction of the

source country class to allow resettlement of particularly vulnerable Rohingya from within Myanmar.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Lewa.

Mr. Tabbara, you have seven minutes.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you both for being here in person and by audio. I want to thank you for the great work you're doing helping vulnerable people around the world.

Ms. Lewa, the UN considers the Rohingya people to be one of the most persecuted minorities in the world. In 2016, a UN report raised the possibility of a pattern of violations against the Rohingya amounting to crimes against humanity. The report documented a wide range of systematic human rights violations and abuses, including forced labour, sexual violence, and threats to life and security.

I know that there are a lot of Rohingyas who have been living in refugee camps since the violence of 2015. Can you tell us a little bit about the living conditions in these camps?

Ms. Chris Lewa: Yes. I think you are talking mostly about the internally displaced people's camps inside Myanmar.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Yes, sorry.

Ms. Chris Lewa: Right, they are not the refugee camps outside the country.

Yes, I visited them at the end of May and was shocked. I have visited these camps every year now, and the conditions today are absolutely unacceptable and appalling. There are so many problems. Of course, access to health care is a big issue, because the Rohingya, as I said, are completely confined and segregated in these camps and cannot access health facilities outside except under military escort. There is only one hospital, in Sittwe, and many people are afraid to go there. Those who live in faraway camps sometimes need to arrange transportation by boat, etc., because the local Rakhine community does not allow Rohingya patients to actually access the local hospital, which is sometimes a few hundred metres from the camp.

Shelter is another issue. After four years, they're still in the same temporary shelters made of bamboo. Initially they were built because nobody wanted to see these camps as permanent, but now, after four years, I think there is an absolute need to replace these shelters. They are falling apart. It makes it very dangerous for children and families.

The sanitation is also pretty bad. Lots of toilets were destroyed. Women had to, for example, defecate in the fields. They were also at increased risk. There is a sense of desperation there. These people used to live together with the Rakhine in the town of Sittwe or nearby, and now they just don't see anything happening.

When we talk about the possibility of crimes against humanity, we also have to look at northern Rakhine, where the Rohingya are not in camps. Eight hundred thousand of them live there, but they have restrictions of movement that prevent them from accessing livelihoods and making a living. That's also why a lot of people flee.

• (0920)

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: I have an estimate of 120,000 Rohingyas who are in these camps. Would humanitarian assistance help alleviate their situation?

Also, you talked about unregistered Rohingyas. How can the international community help with alleviating and getting these Rohingyas registered?

Ms. Chris Lewa: What we start seeing now, after four years, is a little bit of donor fatigue, I think. That's part of the problem.

Also, wider conditions in the camps are not very good anymore, but it's also, of course, due to the fact that I think the international community was waiting to see what Aung San Suu Kyi would do, with the hope that these camps would not stay another four years. But that, of course, is very difficult to say.

Support for humanitarian assistance is, of course, absolutely necessary.

When I talked about unregistered refugees I was mostly referring to those outside the country, although when you're referring to the 120,000 IDPs in the camps inside Myanmar, there are also a number of them who are unregistered. But the main issue I was referring to is those who are unregistered outside the country, and therefore are not receiving any protection at all as refugees.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: There was a change in the government not too long ago. Has the situation of the Rohingyas changed at all? Has it been better, or has it become worse? Can you elaborate on that?

Ms. Chris Lewa: First of all, I should say that the election victory of the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi in November has raised a lot of hope for the Rohingya, even though they had been excluded from the election and denied their voting rights for the first time in history during that November 2015 election. But so far, I cannot say that the situation has deteriorated. That's not the case, but it has also not improved. As I said, there have been a few very recent moves by the NLD that show that at least they are willingly addressing the situation. Now it's a matter of seeing how that's going to develop.

You may know that the NLD, for example, requested the international community not to use the term "Rohingya" and also not to use the term "Bengali", which the previous government had been using all the time. Basically "Bengali" means "Bangladeshi" and implies that you are an outsider and that you should leave the country. Aung San Suu Kyi requested that this be done to try to defuse a bit of tension and to avoid, as she said, "emotive terms". I think this move is quite reasonable, but, unfortunately, the reaction has not been that good because the Rohingya want to continue to be self identified as "Rohingya" and the Rakhine do not want to see even the Muslim community being called a "Muslim community" in the Rakhine State. They don't even accept that term; they want to call them "Bengalis". So just with a term you can see how difficult it is to even address the problem.

So far in Rakhine State, the first step on the ground by the government of Aung San Suu Kyi has been through the committee I mentioned in my presentation. They have restarted what is called a "citizenship verification exercise". Unfortunately, that also is not going very well because many Rohingya do not want to apply for this. First of all, they don't see why they should apply for citizenship when they consider that they used to be citizens anyway. Also, they want to see the word "Rohingya" put on the documents. At least Suu Kyi has removed "Bengali", but you see that this discussion on terms is very deep inside Myanmar.

Just to finish, at the moment the Rohingya have refused to participate, and the Rakhine have also protested against it.

• (0925)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Rempel, you have seven minutes, and I understand that you will be sharing your time with Ms. Gallant.

Hon. Michelle Rempel (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): Yes, thank you.

Mr. Boyd, when I was looking up information about your project and what you do, I saw that you operate an early warning system. Could you tell the committee a little bit about that and whether or not it was triggered in the case of the Yazidis, and how that worked and how it can help the international community?

Mr. Drew Boyd: We have two levels of early warning. One is our conflict-tracking system, which is similar to a lot of different tracking systems that other organizations have implemented. It focuses on the escalation of conflict on a global scale in line with the concepts of the escalation towards genocide. It is specifically tuned towards that. Unfortunately, I think one of the shortcomings of this global focus of early warning is that it is entirely too broad. It's very difficult to focus on every particular region and identify them. In that case, it was not tripped.

On a more localized level, for every project that we implement in all the regions where we operate, each has its own early-warning mechanisms that are much more well-tuned to the local conflict and can be set off a lot more easily, allowing us to make a quicker response. A lot of that is based on the infrastructure that we build, and the information and communications infrastructure that we build upon.

In terms of how this could be used for the larger international community, or the Government of Canada's efforts, I would say that certainly more localized initiatives should incorporate information, communications technology, early-warning components. They are very simple to implement, and with local knowledge and international expertise, you have a much greater likelihood of actually detecting and responding to events as they occur.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Have you or your organization had a chance to review the report that was recently issued by the UN with regard to the declaration of genocide against Yazidis?

Mr. Drew Boyd: Yes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: There are many recommendations within the report for the international community. I'd like to give you an opportunity to speak to how Canada can respond to most of them, to the ones that were made for member states. Moreover, specifically with regard to the scope of this study as well, based on your experience, perhaps you could speak of specific ways that Canada can fulfill the recommendation of accelerating asylum applications for the Yazidi victims of genocide.

Mr. Drew Boyd: Certainly. This comes back to what I mentioned in my opening remarks, which is the issue of accessibility, and also the issue of coordination. Because security is still very tenuous in the northern Iraq region and it is a location where those prejudices that have resulted in genocide predate even the Islamic State, it's an incredibly difficult situation to address. The best way for the international community to address it is to build the sort of infrastructure that allows the implementation of asylum applications, the identification of and assistance to vulnerable groups, and that really does involve a concerted physical presence in the region—not necessarily within the conflict zone itself, but the establishment of a base of operations nearby so that the international community can reach out and appeal to and coordinate with the local groups by circumventing some of the power structures, which are obstacles to the implementation of a lot of international programs.

● (0930)

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

I'll turn the floor over to my colleague Ms. Gallant.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): My question is for both of our witnesses. In Iraq and the Levant, and places where the Rohingya refugees reside, generally speaking, what government document requires the religion of the person to be displayed—passports, visas, birth certificates, work permits, hospital cards, voting cards? Given that our second witness stated that the Rohingya want to be identifiable and not everyone else does, what are the different ways that a person's religion is displayed?

The Chair: Perhaps we can start with Ms. Lewa.

Ms. Chris Lewa: I'm not very sure I have completely understood your question, Ms. Gallant. Could you repeat briefly the issue about documentation?

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: In some countries, the religion is required to be front and centre. For example, in certain countries the religion of the owner of the passport is front and centre, on the first page of the passport. What other countries that you and our first witness have described require the religion to be prominently displayed in the various forms of government documentation?

Ms. Chris Lewa: Actually, the Rohingya are stateless and don't have passports. They don't have identity cards. They used to have a temporary small white card, which has now been cancelled. They only have a receipt at the moment. The government has created a system of what they call "citizenship verification", so that they have to actually reapply for citizenship. Initially in the documents, they had application forms where they had to put in the term "Bengali" as ethnicity, and of course Islam as religion. But because of the fact that they had to put down the term Bengali, which was under the previous government, all the Rohingya refused to participate. Now the NLD has suggested that Bengali should not be put there, but also not Rohingya.

Still, it's very interesting, because in Myanmar, generally the minorities, not just the Rohingya, have always wanted to clarify at least ethnicity on their identity cards, and of course their religion as well. As you know, in other countries.... I remember during the genocide in Rwanda, people had their religion and ethnicity on identity cards, so there was a way to identify them for killing, even. In Myanmar, it's very interesting, because some of the minorities want to be recognized. They insist on having race and religion on their identity cards.

As for passports and all that, no, the Rohingya don't have that. They have these small receipts and that's all. That's why they are undocumented.

The Chair: Mr. Boyd, we are out of time. However, if you'd like to respond to that question, I can provide you with 10 to 15 seconds.

Mr. Drew Boyd: I would just add that as far as I know, neither Iraq nor Myanmar requires the religion presented predominantly. However, it is important to recognize that in the case of Iraq, it is not necessarily the religion but also the denomination of the religion, Shia or Sunni, which isn't presented in any way. That is also a dividing factor, and that the Sunni Islamic State looks to wipe out Shia.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Kwan, you have seven minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Ms. Lewa, you mentioned the source country class as an item that perhaps could be examined to address this issue. I wonder if you can elaborate on that. That's been a constant theme, I think, throughout our various hearings from different witnesses as a means to address some of the crises that exist in the international community.

Ms. Chris Lewa: Well, I understand, through colleagues here in Canada, that in 2011 the regulation creating the source country class was repealed. The source country class allowed residents of designated countries to apply directly to Canada for refugee status from inside their own country, whether the country of residence or the country of origin.

I think it could be possible to use that for the Rohingya, especially for particular individuals who are at risk inside the country. Of course, this program would not be without difficulty, but perhaps it could be mitigated by the UNHCR presence in Rakhine State. Since UNHCR has quite a significant operation there, they could perhaps help identify some particular individuals who may be able to benefit from this. I understand too that the source country class could be reinstated with a simple regulatory amendment restricting its scope to nationals, to habitual residents in a source country. There doesn't need to be a change of legislation in Canada.

Thank you.

●(0935)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Yes, you're correct. It's particularly to assist those who are internally displaced in their own country. Thank you for that.

You mentioned a little bit about the humanitarian aid that is required, and in particular access to health care. Do you mean access to medical supplies or to medical personnel? And in terms of international aid, would it be useful or helpful for the international community to send a team of medical personnel there to provide medical assistance. Is it more supplies they need, or is it both? This is just to clarify specifically around the need for humanitarian aid.

Ms. Chris Lewa: Access to medical care is, of course, one of the biggest problems. I think what is probably most important is perhaps strong advocacy with the government here, because, as you know, there was an attack against the humanitarian agency by Rakhine extremists in 2014. Now the situation there has returned to normal more or less, but the biggest problem is the fact the Rohingya NGO health workers cannot leave the camps, so they can't go out and can't get permission to move. In order to provide assistance to the Rohingya IDPs in the camps, you need people who are able to provide services from their own community, but there has been fear among the Burmese in Rakhine about working with the humanitarian agency because there have been death threats against them.

As I said, the main hospital is in Sittwe. It's the only one that has some equipment. In the camps, there is only one "station hospital", as they call it, which has two doctors for 90,000 people and who are only working from Monday to Friday. A team of doctors must have permission from the government to work there. It may be useful, but, as you know, MSF, Médecins Sans Frontières, used to work there. They had a large team and were the main provider of health care, and then the Rakhine Buddhists attacked them and forced them out. They've now been allowed back again to the camps, but not as before; they provide just some doctors to the government health service. The big problem is not necessarily the fact that there is no access at all, but the fact that the tension in the the community, especially from the Buddhist hardliners and the monks, is preventing Rohingya from accessing health care. It's freedom of movement and security that are the biggest problems for accessing health care.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I think it was Mr. Tabbara who offered the number of 120,000. I'm wondering whether or not that is your understanding of how many individuals we are looking at in this crisis.

Ms. Chris Lewa: Yes, 120,000 is the current figure by OCHA, the UN humanitarian aid coordinating agency, of IDPs in camps. These are the ones who are listed by the government and are receiving assistance, because, as I said to your colleague earlier, some of them do not and live in shacks and huts. They are not provided with regular assistance, just with donations, which are not directly official.

The problem in Rakhine State is not just the camps; it's also the population in other Muslim Rohingya villages around the camps. The difference between them is only the fact that they didn't have their houses burned down during the violence, whereas the 120,000 did lose everything. But in terms of access to health care, freedom of movement, access to livelihood, they face the same restrictions.

The authorities mentioned these restrictions as being for security reasons. I would say that's probably partly true, but I also think that something should be done to try to help defuse the situation. It's not going to be easy, as I said, but when I asked many people during my last visit what causes these restrictions of movements, I was told that it was a mixture of orders by the authorities, people being stopped at checkpoints, Rakhine Buddhists threatening the Rohingya that if they go out of their villages they will be attacked, and also fear among the Rohingya community. So addressing that of course is a key problem; and access to health care, and also education and livelihood, are all related to this issue of freedom of movement and access to services.

●(0940)

The Chair: Ms. Zahid, I understand that you'll split your time with Mr. Virani.

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Yes, Mr. Chair, I will be splitting my time with Mr. Virani.

The Chair: You have seven minutes.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: I want to thank both the witnesses for providing this information to us, and for all the work they are doing. My first question is for Ms. Lewa.

You have mentioned that there are about 120,000 Rohingyas in different camps. In addition to that you mentioned that there are a number of people who are not listed by the government. What are the ways you recommend that those people who are not listed can be identified? What are the best ways to identify those people?

Ms. Chris Lewa: First, I just want to clarify something. In my presentation, I focused quite a lot on the unregistered refugees outside Myanmar. Here you're mostly talking about the IDP in the camp, the internally displaced persons camp inside Myanmar.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Yes, the IDPs.

Ms. Chris Lewa: Right. This is an extremely complicated issue. The first group of people who were displaced by violence in June 2012 have been sort of accepted by the government. The government actually organized their transfer to those camps. Then there was a second wave of violence, as you know, in October 2012, and some of the people came from the south of Rakhine state, where there was also violence, to Sittwe. Initially, the authorities did not want to recognize them or let them even stay there because they wanted them to return to the area and set up a camp near their place rather than in Sittwe. But in the end, I understand that these people have been recognized and now receive food assistance from the WFP, but through the government.

The problem is a third category of people, who are referred to in Rakhine state either as “economic IDPs” or “livelihood IDPs”, according to which organization one talks to. These people were not displaced by the violence, but by their lack of access to a livelihood in the villages. Since they can't move, they can't go to markets and can't find work outside, and thus have decided to sell their houses, leave their villages, and go to the internally displaced camps to try to get assistance there because they can't otherwise survive. That's an ongoing process. These are the main problems nowadays. The authorities do not want to recognize these people. They want them to go back to where they came from, to their villages, not to start adding to the the numbers of people in the camps grow.

The situation is actually very complex there. They have received a donation so far—that's all.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: What can Canada do, as part of the international community, to make sure that its international development aid reaches these people in those camps, as well as the other IDPs? You know resettlement is not the only solution. There are many other ways. What can Canada do as part of the international community?

Ms. Chris Lewa: Well, as I mentioned in my recommendations, I think there is a need for strong advocacy with the Government of Myanmar to make sure that they are committed to addressing the situation and finding a solution to resolve at least the situation of the Rohingya, which includes, of course, citizenship, freedom of movement, and resettlement or relocation of these people to their place of origin. As I said, as you can understand, it's not going to be easy. But the advocacy part, to put pressure on the Myanmar government not to fall short on this, is absolutely important—and, of course, supporting, perhaps financially, the provision of services. I understand there is a big shortfall in funding both from the WFP and.... When I was visiting, I was told that the rations were going to be cut down because of lack of funding. I think Canada already contributed, but perhaps it could increase some contributions, or at the same time.... I don't know. It has to be seen in Myanmar, of course, how best to help. But the international community also have produced a “Rakhine Response Plan” to try to get some funding for different activities, not only food, health care, education for the children, but also for water and sanitation, etc.

As you know, also, there was a head of mission group set up in Yangon after the election in 2015, which is led by the Danish ambassador, but also with the participation of the U.S. ambassador, the EU, Australia, and Turkey. Interestingly, Canada is not part of this. They have tried to get a common message to the government. I know that the two key messages from these discussions have pushed for freedom of movement and access to services, and also that the citizenship issue be addressed. It is trying to get a common platform to join that advocacy by government, the diplomatic community, as well as by the UN agencies and international NGOs in Myanmar.

• (0945)

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you so much.

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

Mr. Arif Virani (Parkdale—High Park, Lib.): Ms. Lewa, thank you very much. I understand you were a witness here in Canada at the Subcommittee on International Human Rights, where you talked about the issue of the Rohingya at the time. They produced a study,

which I've read. It relates to a question asked of you by my colleague Mr. Tabbara. At that time, as well as during the course of the study—so in 2012 and 2015—the study indicates that “Human Rights Watch...produced two reports documenting the violence [against the Rohingya and] concluded that the violence against the Rohingya during those clashes amounted to ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity.”

What I want to ask you about is the response of Canada in 2012 to that Human Rights Watch report. Was there any change in Canada's response at that time to this report by Human Rights Watch that crimes against humanity were being committed against Rohingya Muslims?

Ms. Chris Lewa: I'm sorry, but I'm unable to answer this question because I haven't followed all the different actions that Canada has been taking over the past few years. Perhaps Human Rights Watch would know better than I, but definitely, yes. I want to point out—perhaps Mr. Tabbara also mentioned it—that recently I was in Geneva for the lunch of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Prince Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein. He released a report on the situation of Rohingya and other minorities in Myanmar to the Human Rights Council. As you know, this report again raised questions about the situation in Rakhine state that amounts possibly to crimes against humanity.

The Chair: We're over time.

Mr. Saroya, for five minutes, please.

Mr. Bob Saroya (Markham—Unionville, CPC): Ms. Lewa, what is the difference between Bengalis and Rohingyas? I understand they're the same people. Burmese want to call them “Bengalis”, and Rohingyas want to call themselves “Rohingyas”. What is the difference? What is the confusion? Why is that?

Ms. Chris Lewa: I think its origin is in history, because during the British colonial rule, which started in 1823, there was a large migration from India. At the time, India was part of the British empire, including what is Bangladesh and Chittagong today. Muslims have been living in Rakhine state for much longer than that. These are the original people who call themselves Rohingya, but many others also migrated during this British colonial time. Of course, that was 200 years ago. I think they should be considered as citizens, as they are in many other countries where there was colonial rule in Asia and other parts of the world.

In Myanmar you have the Rakhine community, which is strongly Buddhist and extremely nationalistic. That region, before the British, used to be a separate kingdom. The Rakhine claim that this kingdom was theirs, and because of the British, there was this migration of Muslims or Rohingya, but they don't call them "Rohingya". They call them "Bengali" because they are similar in religion, in culture, and in language to the people from Chittagong in Bangladesh. They are born in Myanmar. Their families, parents, and grandparents are born in Myanmar. Even today, for the Rakhine and most Burmese, the public—it's not just the government—wants to see these people as foreigners and outsiders. They came here to invade our country, and for the Rakhine it's an existential threat. That's why they push the term "Bengali", because although Bengali is anthropologically an ethnicity and not a nationality, in Myanmar it is understood as being Bangladeshi. That means you are an outsider and a foreigner, and that you should go back to Bangladesh.

As you know, there has been tension with Bangladesh when the Myanmar government claimed that the Rohingya are Bangladeshi, and Bangladesh claimed the Rohingya are from Myanmar. I think the whole issue is that Myanmar, and the Rakhine in particular, do not want to accept Rohingya in Rakhine. I have to say that from my various trips in the region, I think the main issue, beyond the fact of ethnicity, which is by law, is religion. In the camps I mentioned, among the 120,000 internally displaced, there are also a small number—I didn't mention them because they are not very significant—10,000 or so, of Kamein. The Kamein are Muslim, and they are a recognized ethnic group in Myanmar, but they face exactly the same fate as the Rohingya. They are also pushed into IDP camps. They have citizenship, but they cannot move.

That's why I have always suggested that citizenship alone is not going to solve the problem. It has to be approached holistically, and tensions have to be reduced. I think the government has to take steps at the national level, and not just in Rakhine, to stop all this hate speech and the incitement to violence against Muslims. I'm happy that last Friday the government set up a committee at the national level to address hate speech and incitement to violence. Maybe that's the first step, which hopefully is positive.

I just wanted to mention that.

● (0950)

Mr. Bob Saroya: They were denied voting rights for the first time. What was the reason given?

Ms. Chris Lewa: Initially, there was a vote in parliament to allow it, because at the time they were holding temporary ID cards. In the past, holders of these temporary ID cards were allowed to vote, because they were considered by the government as not really being stateless, but as being doubtful citizens that need to be verified. So during all of the past elections in the 1950s, 1960s, and even in the 1990s, the Rohingya have been allowed to vote. However, just before the election in 2015, there was a discussion about organizing a constitutional amendment referendum, and the law for that included temporary cards.

Suddenly, the Rakhine, especially the monks, started leading protests and demonstrations throughout the country, saying they would use violence if the government did not stop the Rohingya from voting. Of course, the next day, on February 11 of last year,

then president Thein Sein, suddenly announced that from then on, the white cards, the temporary ID cards, were cancelled. So now the Rohingya cannot vote because they have no ID cards.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Fragiskatos, you have five minutes please.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos (London North Centre, Lib.): Ms. Lewa, I wish to pick up on the question by my colleague, Mr. Virani. In their study of the Rohingya, the subcommittee studying international human rights proposed or suggested in their report "the establishment of a formal office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Myanmar, in part to facilitate independent inquiries into potential human rights violations and violence against ethnic and religious minorities."

Do you think this is a sensible approach?

Ms. Chris Lewa: Absolutely.

I think that is a common goal of many of the NGOs, together with UN agencies. Yes, it would be very important. However, so far the government, including the Suu Kyi government, has not yet given any clear sign whether or not they would allow this office.

However, if the office is opened, I hope it will do more than just provide technical assistance, but also have the power of investigation into violations of human rights in the country. In some countries, the OHCHR is only set up for technical assistance, but that's not enough. I think that in Myanmar there is still a need to address many other challenges and problems related to human rights.

● (0955)

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much, Ms. Lewa. I don't mean to cut you off, but I only have five minutes and I do want to address some very important issues.

In 2011 and 2015 as we just heard, Human Rights Watch put forward the position that ethnic cleansing was taking place in Myanmar with respect to the Rohingya minority. Did the Government of Canada at that time reach out at all to the Arakan Project, or to you, to express concern in any way?

Ms. Chris Lewa: Actually, no. I have been a bit surprised because I used to be funded by Canada, and in the last couple of years I haven't had any contact at all. I'm glad now that some of the parliamentary committees have invited me to testify. Thank you.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: I'm very happy about that too.

Mr. Boyd, statelessness is an issue that has a direct link to vulnerability. If you're stateless, you are vulnerable by definition.

You mentioned Kenya in your presentation. Could you speak about the Nubian minority? Do you have any details, in terms of the consequences of statelessness for the Nubian people and the Shona people? I know that their plight is of concern to human rights advocates within Kenya and outside of Kenya.

Mr. Drew Boyd: Where we work, on the coast, we are interacting mostly with the Swahili people, who are their own separate ethnic group or tribe, as well as pastoralists from Somalia and their descendants. In terms of the Nubian group, I can't comment directly because they are not within our purview.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: My final question is for Ms. Lewa.

Is there a direct connection between statelessness and internal displacement? Is the international community equipped with the mechanisms to deal with these sorts of problems? There is, as you know Ms. Lewa, a UN convention dating back to 1960 to deal with the plight of stateless peoples, but I wonder if you could comment on that.

Ms. Chris Lewa: Well, obviously there is. As you see, to be a citizen is to at least have access to basic rights, and it is the case that stateless people don't have that.

As to how to solve this problem, of course I don't have a straightforward answer, but it's interesting, because the 1982 citizenship law in Myanmar itself is not in line with international standards and creates statelessness rather than trying to avoid it. Also, for the Rohingyas it's not just the law itself. There are provisions in this law that would allow Rohingyas to be recognized as citizens, but the problem is the implementation of the law. The way the council of ministers is supposed to take decisions on citizenship has so far never provided any answer. Of course, then, there is a link to vulnerability, as also in terms of refugee movement, which I covered particularly in my presentation. As I said, you can be a refugee, but at least you have a hope to go back to your country, whereas when you are a refugee and stateless as well, this is more difficult.

I have to say that one of the biggest problems in Myanmar is the fact that if a Rohingya is caught in detention, as are those in Thailand, for example, even if they wanted to go back to Myanmar—they shouldn't really have to, because they are refugees, but even if, in some cases, people don't care and just say that they want to get out of detention—Myanmar has systematically refused to readmit any Rohingya.

That means that the problem of indefinite detention is not just in Thailand; it's also in India and in Bangladesh. When governments are not providing refugee status, these people also end up in detention.

Mr. Peter Fragiskatos: Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Lewa.

This is a question for Mr. Boyd. The Arakan Project has an early warning system to identify groups that are at risk of potential genocide. Are there currently any such groups, and if so, could you provide documentation to this committee at your earliest convenience so that we can consider it in the future?

I'd like to thank all the panellists for appearing today.

At this point, we will suspend for two minutes to allow the next panel to appear.

Thank you.

• (1000)

(Pause)

• (1005)

The Chair: Welcome back. Our committee hearing will resume.

We have before us on this second panel, Mr. Rabea Allos, director of the Catholic Refugee Sponsors Council; Reverend Majed El Shafie, founder and president of One Free World International; and from Operation Ezra, Nafiya Naso and Lorne Weiss.

I welcome all the panellists. We will begin with Mr. Allos, with seven minutes for your presentation, sir.

Mr. Rabea Allos (Director, Catholic Refugee Sponsors Council): Honourable members of the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, good morning to you all.

I would like to thank you for the kind invitation. I'm honoured to be here today to speak on behalf of the Catholic Refugee Sponsors Council, CRSC.

CRSC provides a national voice to respond to the needs of the world's refugees for resettlement. There are about 100 sponsorship agreement holders or SAHs across Canada, and about 30 of them are Catholic agencies. In 2015, combined, the Catholic SAHs privately sponsored more than 7,500 refugees; about 50% were Syrian nationals. Iraqi nationals were the second-largest group, in addition to Somali and Afghan refugees. Brochures about the organization are available in French and English.

In the time I have today, I'd like to talk about two things. First I will talk about the persecution of the most vulnerable refugees: religious and other groups. Second, I will talk about the protection of the indigenous peoples of Iraq.

In any refugee crisis, we need to distinguish between protection needs and resettlement needs. The first goal for the international community is protection of all refugees locally until a durable solution is available. A durable solution would be voluntary repatriation after the end of the war or crisis, or local integration in the host country, or resettlement in destination countries. The option for resettlement in destination countries is usually preserved for the most vulnerable, who cannot be repatriated to their homeland or locally integrated in the host country simply because they cannot go back to their normal lives.

In the case of Iraq and Syria, the vulnerable groups are ethnic and religious minorities, political activists, women at risk, LGBT communities, atheists, converted and secular Muslims.

Historically, the problem of the most vulnerable groups in the Middle East is compounded whenever the government of the day is too weak to implement the law or condones going after certain groups. In the 1940s, for example, the Iraqi government condoned attacks on the Jewish community, and many were forced to flee after their properties were confiscated. According to an Ottoman census in 1917, the Jewish community in Baghdad was about 20% of the total population. Today, there are only five.

Historically, going after religious and ethnic groups was common. It happened to the Jewish community before happening to other religious groups today. The Iraqi Jewish community were mostly resettled in Israel and other countries and managed to remain vocal and strong. That is why resettlement of minority, ethnic, and religious groups needs to be prioritized, to ensure that they live on.

From 2003 on in Iraq, the government was too weak to preserve law and order, and this allowed militias and extremist groups to go after ethnic and religious minorities, as well as other vulnerable groups mentioned earlier, without fear of punishment. The same occurred in Syria after the civil war of 2011. The rise of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, ISIL, made matters worse, and ISIL went on a religious cleansing war against all minorities and other vulnerable groups. Christians were forced out of their ancient homeland with the help of their historical neighbours. Yazidis and LGBT community members were killed and their women enslaved. Those groups will find it extremely difficult to be repatriated to their homeland, because their lives will never be the same. They know they will be targeted as soon as the government is weak.

As far as indigenous people are concerned, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by the General Assembly in 2007 by a majority, 144 states. Four voted against, and there were 11 abstentions. Canada officially adopted and promised to implement the declaration in 2016. In January 2016, Minister Carolyn Bennett announced:

...we are now a full supporter of the declaration, without qualification. We intend nothing less than to adopt and implement the declaration in accordance with the Canadian Constitution.

This support does not apply to the indigenous people of Canada only; Canada now is committed to indigenous peoples worldwide.

• (1010)

The declaration sets out the individual and collective rights of indigenous people as well as their rights to culture, identity, language, employment, health, education, and other issues. The goal of the declaration is to encourage countries to work alongside indigenous people to solve global issues like development, multi-cultural democracy, and decentralization.

The indigenous people of Iraq are being targeted by ISIL and other extremist groups not only because of their religion but because of their culture and ethnicity. Canada and other countries should prioritize their protection by resettling them in safe countries, because there is no foreseen solution in the immediate or long term.

The Aramaic-speaking Chaldeans, Assyrians, Syriacs, Mandaeans, and Yazidi are the indigenous people of Iraq. They are the descendants of those who ruled ancient Akkad, Assyria, and Babylonia. More generally speaking, they are descendants of ancient Mesopotamians. They speak dialects of the Aramaic of the Assyrian and Babylonian empires and have their own written script.

They began to convert to Christianity in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, formerly having followed the ancient Sumerian-Akkadian religion known as Ashurism. The same groups were targeted by Turkey during the Armenian genocide of 1915, which was recognized by the Canadian Parliament in 2004.

The Canadian government, as well as other governments, needs to give special attention to ethnic and religious minorities in Iraq and Syria, in particular Syrians, Assyrians, Mandaeans, and Yazidis, because they are the indigenous people of the land. Without this protection and resettlement, those communities will disappear forever.

• (1015)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Allos.

Mr. El Shafie, seven minutes, please.

Reverend Majed El Shafie (Founder and President, One Free World International): First of all, Mr. Chair, I would like to thank you for this opportunity. As I told you yesterday, you were one of the four Liberal MPs in Parliament who voted for the recognition of genocide, and I want to thank you for that.

Ms. Michelle Rempel, I thank you for being one of the engines behind this committee.

Mr. Arif, it is always a pleasure meeting you.

For the rest of the members, it is always a pleasure and honour meeting all of you.

The last time I was here we discussed the different issues of how we can help the refugees not just through their resettlement and the immigration movement, but also on the ground, such as dealing with the source of the problem, ISIS and what they are doing on the ground, and confronting some of the forces in some of these areas. We discussed as well the creation of green zones for minorities in the land where there is conflict. We also discussed the original resettlements. We talked about how Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar do not take any refugees, and that we have to put more pressure on them to do more.

I also discussed that one of the main problems we are facing is that the Canadian government does not have a mechanism or a vehicle to deal with internally displaced people. We have a mechanism to deal with refugees if they are outside their countries, but the Canadian government has not dealt properly with internally displaced persons until now, or does not have a proper mechanism for doing so.

We have to realize that if we are counting on UNHCR to choose the refugees for us, that is not good enough. I used to be a UNHCR refugee. I love the UNHCR. They did save my life, but they cannot be the only source we have. In order to choose our refugees, we have to co-operate with local groups and local organizations on the ground and with other international organizations that also have experience with the different regions we are dealing with.

We also discussed that the Canadian government does not want to choose refugees based on their religious or ethnic background. While I understand this principle, and I understand where this is coming from, we also have to understand that this example doesn't work in every case. When we are saying that the Yazidis are being killed because they are Yazidis, we have to look at their religion. When we say that the Christians are being killed because they are Christians, we have to look at their religious background. We cannot leave the most vulnerable minorities behind simply because we want to be politically correct. This is not the time to be politically correct. They don't have the time, and we have to do as much as possible.

We were talking about the Rohingya. I think it was two or three years ago when the Canadian government took some of the Rohingya refugees from the refugee camps in Bangladesh, based on their being Muslim refugees. They were persecuted because they were from the Muslim community in Burma. If we did this for the Rohingya, I think we can do the same thing for the Yazidis and other minorities.

The last time I spoke about a proposal that we presented to the Canadian Minister of Immigration, and I believe we indicated in the last hearing that our proposal was ignored. After the hearing, some Canadian media outlets, including *The Toronto Star*, took up the story.

The next day we received a phone call from the chief of staff. On June 17, the chief of staff came to our headquarters in Toronto. We presented the proposal to him, and we had a discussion with him. At the end of June, we enhanced the proposal and presented it. All of you have a copy of the proposal in English and French.

Just as a quick summary of it, instead of pointing a finger at the problem, we are trying to lend a hand. The proposal is being presented by One Free World International, Dr. Martin Mark, and Ms. Chantal Desloges. Both of them were witnesses on this committee in the last two days. It is based on what we call JAS—joint assistance sponsorship—meaning that the government and the community would work together, hand in hand, to sponsor more than 400 Yazidi girls as a first step to bringing them here to Canada. I'm not talking about private sponsors.

• (1020)

If you have the money to bring in 25,000 refugees, I think you can bring 400 Yazidi victims to Canada as a symbol of that. It's the government and the community working together to bring in 400 Yazidi girls who are victims, working on the ground with the locals to pinpoint who they are and how we can bring them here. You have all of this in the proposal. Please feel free to ask me any questions with regard to the proposal.

In conclusion, in 1939, there was a ship full of Jewish refugees under the name of the *St. Louis*. At that time, we had Prime Minister Mackenzie King, who stated that none was too many. Most of the 900 refugees on that ship went back to Nazi Germany and were killed.

What's happening to the Yazidis today is the second *St. Louis* ship in our Canadian history. Let's not repeat that mistake again.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. El Shafie.

Now we'll here from Operation Ezra.

Will Mr. Weiss or Ms. Naso go first?

Mr. Lorne Weiss (President, Shaarey Zedek Synagogue, Operation Ezra): Ms. Naso.

The Chair: Ms. Naso, you'll be splitting your time with Mr. Weiss.

Mrs. Nafiya Naso (Representative, Yazidi Community of Winnipeg, Operation Ezra): Good morning, ladies and gentlemen.

Today I am here to tell you that my people are a victim of genocide based on their religious beliefs. On August 3, 2014, ISIS attacked the region of Shingal and began one of the most atrocious killing campaigns of the 21st century. Hundreds of thousands of people were forced to flee their homes. Many Yazidis were captured. Men, women, and children were separated from their families.

Boys were forcibly converted and trained to become suicide bombers and soldiers for ISIS. As many as 5,000 Yazidi girls were taken as sex slaves by ISIS and resold across the Middle East. Girls as young as nine years old were raped, and often more than 30 times a day. This continues, and some 3,000 remain in captivity. Many have committed suicide, and others have been murdered. Yazidi babies were taken away from their families and given to Muslim families. Men were either converted or executed on the spot in front of their families. Older women were executed while younger women were kidnapped and forced into widespread sexual slavery industry.

ISIS justifies its campaign against the Yazidis under the banner of radical Islam. It considers the Yazidi as infidels and devil-worshippers whom they view as subhuman.

How is this not a genocide? This is a systematic elimination of my people based on their religious beliefs.

The Yazidis who were lucky enough to escape the Shingal attack fled to Mount Sinjar in August of 2014. Thousands died of starvation or dehydration or exposure to the elements. Young mothers dug graves to bury their children who did not survive.

Following the intervention of western nations, tens of thousands of Yazidis were finally able to flee and settle across Syria, Iraq, and Turkey. This tragedy has left over 500,000 Yazidis as displaced persons, with well over 100,000 in UNHCR refugee camps.

Did you know that these camps are segregated? This is because we are a religious minority that the Muslim world does not accept. The UN keeps us segregated to protect us, even from other refugees.

The situation of my people is desperate and it is dire. I implore you to act to help save my people from extinction.

The Yazidis have held a unique and terrible religious status in Iraq and Syria, which is different from any other group. It means that we can be murdered and raped and enslaved with moral and civil impunity. Without your intervention, my people will not survive.

Our religion is over 6,000 years old, and we used to number 23 million people. However, after 73 recorded massacres, we now number fewer than 700,000 and we are scattered across the world. We are homeless. We are hopeless. We are looking for refuge in a country that will accept us for the peaceful people we are. Please do not make my people a history lesson for the future.

My name is Nafiya Naso. I was a Yazidi refugee who came to this great country with my family over 16 years ago. Canada gave us a future. My people need courageous leaders to give them a safe haven. Canada is that country. You are these leaders, and the time is now.

•(1025)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Weiss.

Mr. Lorne Weiss: Thank you.

We are here today to tell you that the private sponsorship of refugees is limited in its effectiveness.

Operation Ezra is a Winnipeg-based private sponsorship program launched by the Jewish community of Winnipeg, now involving 20 partners including Christian, multi-faith Yazidi and Jewish groups. Over the last 18 months, we have raised over \$250,000 and are sponsoring a total of seven families, or 41 people altogether. To the best of our knowledge, we're the only private sponsorship program focused on the Yazidi people.

We welcomed our first family of eight people on Monday, July 11. Bringing them to Winnipeg took us a year and a half. It will likely take us another year or more to bring the remaining six families. The complicated and time-consuming private sponsorship refugee and immigration process has just too many obstacles to be an effective solution. Applications are complicated and time-consuming. They are also limited and capped in numbers. Our project is currently on hold because of this. As well, serious bottlenecks exist in the process. There are significant wait times to get interviews and medical and security screening scheduled. Refugees have to be transported to visa offices that can be hours or days away from the camps.

Finally, the responsibility to save the people from genocide cannot be left in the hands of the private sector only. We cannot do enough and we cannot do it fast enough. We need your help.

Our third and last point is that government intervention in the form of a large-scale government program is desperately needed to save the Yazidi people from extinction. The plight of the Yazidi people needs to be given priority in the face of this tragic genocide. We are proposing a hybrid program wherein the government brings in a large number of Yazidi families to Canada and the private sector becomes primarily involved with settlement integration of the refugees.

Any sponsorship of refugees who are in extreme danger, such as the Yazidis, whether private or hybrid, must be given the highest priority and processed with the same speed as government refugees. Canada has a unique opportunity to take action on behalf of the Yazidis and offer refuge to a people who are facing extinction.

I hope and I pray that our government will see that the fate of an entire people rests on our ability to do the right thing. Please, let's bring these people to safety.

Thank you.

•(1030)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Weiss.

Mr. Ehsassi, seven minutes, please.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): I'd like to thank every witness for being here today and providing us with their moving testimony. I think I can say that I speak on behalf of every member of this committee that we are obviously very much concerned not only about the Yazidi community but also about other communities that are suffering atrocities.

Perhaps I could start with Reverend El Shafie. Welcome back, sir.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Thank you.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Reverend El Shafie, you actually referenced in your remarks that Canada does not have a mechanism to deal with displaced people, in the sense that our refugee regime does not have any provisions that deal with them. Do you know of any other country that has legal provisions in their refugee nomenclature or legal framework that does deal with displaced people?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: I would say that Germany does. Off the top of my head, Germany took over 1,100 Yazidi girls immediately. The process was very fast. It happened in Kurdistan. It didn't happen in Syria or Turkey. I will say that Germany would be the lead country in this matter.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Other than that, you don't know of any other country that has a legal regime that allows them to assist internally displaced people.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: I believe that maybe Germany and Geneva.... I'm not sure. I'm sure of Germany. I'm not sure about other European countries.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: I understand that One Free World has been very active on the issue of Yazidis for some time. Would it be fair to characterize your group as a non-partisan group?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: That's correct.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Have you ever received any funding from the government?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: No.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Nothing through the Office of Religious Freedom?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: No.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: I understand that you previously arranged trips abroad for various issues that you've been advocating. Is that correct?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: That's correct.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Have there been MPs who have gone along on any these trips?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Absolutely, Liberal and Conservative MPs.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: I understand that obviously your interest in assisting Yazidis is longstanding. Of course, it probably stems back to August 2014 when atrocities first occurred, as we heard in the testimony today and read in various reports.

I take it that you have actually submitted proposals. Could you tell me how many proposals you've submitted to assist these people?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: This is the only proposal that we submitted. We enhanced it. You have the original proposal, and after the meeting with the chief of staff we enhanced it, improved it.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Okay, so there have been several iterations—

Rev. Majed El Shafie: There have been several what, I'm sorry?

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: —of the same proposal.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: There has been just one.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Okay. In 2014, when the terrible atrocities were happening, did you not submit a proposal?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: We were working on the ground. We did not yet submit a proposal, because our legal team was looking for a partner to make a proper proposal. It takes time.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Okay.

I'm looking at one of your proposals, which I believe is dated June 30—

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Yes.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: —and you talk about the process of screening individuals on the ground in northern Iraq. As you can imagine, many of us are concerned that a private group without a lengthy record of support, should they go to war-torn regions.... As much as they're there to do good work and to assist, when you're helping vulnerable groups it's very important to make sure that they are protected after they have been screened.

I look at the proposal that you have provided us, and it says that your group is proposing to provide “local protection and accommodation” to people you screen. What would that entail? It's just a passing reference in the letter, but given how vulnerable the population you're dealing with is, what exactly did you have in mind?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Do you mean with regard to protection, with regard to security?

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: This is after screening. First of all, it doesn't specify exactly what type of screening you have in mind, but also it goes on to say that you would provide “local protection and accommodation” once you're there.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Just to make it clear, this is a proposal to the Canadian government.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Okay.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: They will have their own ways of accommodation. They will have their own ways of screening the refugees. We are not here to do their job; we are here just to propose —

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Absolutely.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: —what the process is, in order for them to follow this process or, having a map, how to proceed in dangerous areas, as you indicated.

With regard to security, it was very clear in the proposal that many areas in Kurdistan, such as Erbil, are very secure areas. We have more than 400 Canadian soldiers on the ground. Many international delegations go back and forth. There is always a system, the same as we had in Lebanon, whereby we have a refugee centre where we can interview the people.

The bottom line here is that this is a pilot project. There will be gaps in it, I can assure you. But we are not here to sit down with regard to the small details or the logistics. Before we start all of this, we need the green light from the Canadian government. Without the green light, this is human trafficking. Do you understand what I mean? If we did this without the approval of the Canadian government, this would be human trafficking. We need the Canadian government to approve in order to start the logistics and the steps, and then we can look at the details.

• (1035)

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Sure, but you would also require the approval of the Iraqi government and the Kurdish regional government, isn't that correct?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Absolutely, yes. We have their co-operation.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: You do?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Yes.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Okay.

Obviously, I think the objectives that you have set out are incredibly laudable, but you refer to such things as “small details”. These are small details that are very significant, when one is dealing with individuals on the ground in a war-torn region. You would admit that these are significant things to consider, by any—

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Absolutely. It's important, absolutely. If you read the proposal, we covered as much as we can—

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Sure.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: —but in the last two years, quite frankly, at least we are doing something about it; at least we are on the ground. I am going to the region in a few days. We are dealing with the locals. We have gone there many times. We deal with ORAT, which is an organization that has its own reputation. We have our lawyers, such as the lead, Ms. Chantal Desloges. At least we are doing something to start and to help these people as soon as possible.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Absolutely, and I think everyone shares that concern. It's just a question of the means that are adopted.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. El Shafie.

Ms. Rempel, you have seven minutes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: On behalf of us all, I want to thank all of you for the work you're doing to try to solve this situation. Sometimes the temptation for us here is to get bogged down in partisan politics. I know I take the bait sometimes, but my hope is that this committee will actually come up with some recommendations that the government can take to accelerate the applications of persecuted minority groups. Certainly at the top of that list would be the Yazidi people, who have been deemed to be victims of genocide.

We've now heard hours and hours of testimony on this issue, and there are a few recommendations I've taken away from various groups. I just want to put them out there, and with the time I have remaining, get you to respond to them to see if the list is comprehensive, if it makes sense, and if there's anything you have to add to the list.

First, we very clearly heard that we need to accelerate the refugee applications of Yazidi victims of genocide.

We need to prioritize refugee applications from persecuted and ethnic minority groups and LGBTI people in Canada's response to the Middle Eastern migrant crisis.

We need to ask the United Nations to make changes to the refugee selection process to accelerate applications for victims of genocide, highly persecuted ethnic and religious minority groups, and LGBTI people.

We need to restore the exemption from the mission cap for Syrian and Iraqi refugees under the privately sponsored refugee program.

We need to identify between 5,000 and 10,000 Yazidi victims of genocide and bring them to Canada as soon as possible as refugees and ensure that adequate support frameworks are in place for integration. Mr. Weiss, this is where your hybrid program is compelling. We can also look to Germany and Australia for best practices on how to do this quickly.

We need to examine and implement innovative ways to identify persecuted ethnic and religious minority groups for resettlement in Canada. Mr. El Shafie, you're not the only one who's talked about the difficulties.

I accept my colleagues' comments about security. Certainly, that's going to be an issue. But if the UN can't get this done quickly, how can Canada look at innovative ways to ensure that we are identifying people on the ground quickly and safely?

We need to ensure that adequate resources are deployed to process applications from these persecuted minority groups so they're not waiting in our system for five years.

One of the things I'd like to add is that I think many of you have significantly more expertise than we do, so one of the recommendations I would make to the minister is to establish a formal ministerial consultation group that's convened immediately to look at solutions for doing this, since many of you have results on the ground.

One of the things we've heard that my colleague, Ms. Kwan, has also been advocating is to ensure that we're tracking the number of people we're bringing in through these programs so we can measure the success and adequacy of the program changes we've made.

Do you think that's a comprehensive list of recommendations? Would you care to comment on it?

• (1040)

The Chair: Perhaps we'll proceed in the sequence the panellists spoke initially, so we'll go to Mr. Allos first.

Mr. Rabea Allos: I believe that it is. Regarding identification of the government-sponsored refugees, or government-assisted refugees, instead of going to the United Nations and looking at their

pool, Canada should consult other organizations in Canada to identify refugees rather than following the agenda of the UNHCR.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: I agree, and I have no comment.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Ms. Naso and Mr. Weiss.

Mrs. Nafiya Naso: Thank you, Ms. Rempel.

I agree with everything you said. It's a good way to start, but everything we do we have to do fast to save these people.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Weiss.

Mr. Lorne Weiss: If I could just build on my colleague's comments, I think the problem with the United Nations' definition of a refugee has been a stumbling block. I think we have to look beyond that and get away from definitions and look at the fact that Canada has played, for the last number of decades, a strong role acting in a humanitarian way, and we have to disregard the definition and move quickly. The most accessible refugees right now are in Turkey, and the situation in Turkey is unstable. If we have to wait a year to get these folks out, I'm not sure we're going to have access to them.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: The genesis of this committee and the impetus for us to sit here on a beautiful summer day at the end of July is that, and certainly I feel, we can't wait until the House resumes in the fall to take action. Given your experience with the direness of the situation on the ground, what timeframe do you think is acceptable for action?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: I believe the time is immediately, but the time frame in the next two months if we can start to move. If we can start right now, and we start to receive the first refugees within a timeline, I would say between a month and a half to two months.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Weiss.

Mr. Lorne Weiss: We have to move very quickly on the ground. We just got notification that our fifth and sixth families had their applications approved by the government. Those applications were made in November. They still have to go through an interview process and other checks.

We have to move very quickly. I would say two months is a time frame to begin. We've shown that we can move quickly in dealing with the Syrian refugees. We're not creating something new. We're just applying that same model to a different group of people.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Very quickly, typically the committee would produce a report that's tabled in the House of Commons. We actually don't have the mechanism to do that, because Parliament is in recess. My hope is that the committee can produce a letter to the minister with recommendations. Is the list of recommendations that I just put forward comprehensive? Is that something you'd like to see government members support in a letter to the minister?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Yes, from my side.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Weiss.

Mr. Lorne Weiss: Yes, most definitely.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Ms. Naso.

Mrs. Nafiya Naso: Absolutely.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Allos.

Mr. Rabea Allos: Definitely.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you.

Those are all the questions I have.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Kwan, you have seven minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I thank all the witnesses for their presentations.

I'd like to add a number of other suggestions for consideration by the government, just as we've heard from many witnesses on this important issue. Here are my thoughts. One is for the government to take immediate actions in response to the declaration that genocide is being committed, and that under section 25 of the IRPA on humanitarian and compassionate considerations, we support the recommendations of the witnesses to immediately begin bringing Yazidis to Canada, with an ultimate target of 5,000 to 10,000. I would recommend that in the very near term, utilizing the databases compiled by the groups who have appeared here, that 3,000 to 4,000 could be brought to Canada, and that they include victims of genocidal actions such as human trafficking, sexual slavery, rape, torture, and widowed women, and orphans. Also, it is estimated that there are 3,000 to 4,000 Yazidis in the Turkish camps right now, and action needs to be taken with respect to them. Due to the extraordinary event that is genocide, groups brought over in response to a genocide would not count as part of the immigration prime levels, so as not to prevent other individuals from making legitimate claims.

On the question around humanitarian aid, significant food shortages have been identified in refugee camps in the region, and the asks are quite light in that regard, in fact. They are asking for flour, rice, and oil. Electricity by way of generators is also a significant issue, due to the extreme conditions like heat. Medicine and clothes are also issues in terms of the immediate need for humanitarian aid. It was also brought to our attention that there are issues with the distribution of humanitarian aid due to corruption and discrimination, and that the aid is not reaching the most vulnerable. In light of that, the government should work more closely with credible, established NGOs in the region to deliver the aid directly into the camps.

There was also an ask from the Yazidi groups that appeared before the committee—and this took place in a private meeting with me, so it wasn't before the committee—for direct cash resources to be provided to the victims. They were recommending \$1 million of direct cash resources to be spread amongst the Yazidi population as an initial action.

There's the issue of processing delays. Canada still lacks the ability to process cases in northern Iraq, which is where many Yazidis—amongst many other refugees—are located. The UNHCR has already processed many of these peoples and it is the additional Canadian screening slowing everything down, because it cannot take place as we have no processing centres there.

On best practices abroad—and this was brought to our attention by the representative from the UNHCR—we could actually waive the Canadian processing process to expedite the arrivals of families and adopt that best practice of other jurisdictions in this regard. For family reunification cases in Canada, this additional level of screening only occurs if significant flags are raised, so if advocating

for the waiver of the whole screening is not acceptable, then I would suggest that it apply only in cases where screening cannot be done. I ask because it's creating such delays.

For the LGBTQI community, there are an estimated 63 countries in the world that criminalize people based on their sexual orientation and gender identity. This discrimination and vulnerability coded in law is different from vulnerability due to conflict, and in many cases if a person leaves their country to be able to make a refugee claim, it puts them in an even more vulnerable situation because they end up in another country that criminalizes them, and where they have no supports. So their leaving could also put their families at risk. Providing a program similar to that of the source country class program, but one that is more adaptable and responsive, would allow individuals to connect with Canadian NGOs, to make claims in Canada or with local groups on the ground while still being in their country of origin. There are human rights organizations that could assist in that regard.

And we recommend the creation of a subcommittee to continue to work on internally displaced persons for solutions in the future.

• (1045)

Those are some of my thoughts on how we can move forward in the immediate sense, in addition to what my colleague, Ms. Rempel, has provided.

I wonder whether or not those are items you would support as well.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: A point of order, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I know I'm running out of time, so a quick answer from all of you would be appreciated.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: A cheeky point of order.

I would like to echo our support of Ms. Kwan's recommendations.

The Chair: I'm not sure that's a point of order, but—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I said it was a cheeky one, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Rabea Allos: One thing the government could look at doing to speed up the Yazidi applications is to bring the people over here to Canada on a temporary visa, go through the screening, and then issue the permanent residency. That would be the best way to do it.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: That's an alternative.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: I agree with you.

All of the recommendations we read today are wonderful, but it's a matter of action. It's one thing to say, "Yes, we agree with your recommendation", but it's another thing if the government will listen to us or not.

• (1050)

Mrs. Nafiya Naso: Yes, I agree with everything you said.

There are a couple of things we've bumped into. Access to health care and the humanitarian aid is a huge issue in these refugee camps and the fact that they are segregated.

Through our project, Operation Ezra, in one of the families we're sponsoring, one of the ladies had a baby a few months ago. She had her baby in the camp, and we had to send her money through Operation Ezra to get medical attention for her and her baby, and to buy her baby clothing and blankets, etc.

Through Operation Ezra we're sending these families money to buy clothing, and food, etc. Our two families who came required interviews and medicals, and to get them on a plane we had to send them to Istanbul. They were funded through Operation Ezra, whereas for other refugee groups who were sponsored by the government, Canadian officials went into the camps to do the interviews, medicals, and things like that.

The Chair: Ms. Weiss, very briefly.

Mr. Lorne Weiss: For just two minutes, if I may, or two seconds. I'm sorry about that.

The Chair: Two seconds is probably more likely.

Mr. Lorne Weiss: A New York minute, then.

The on-the-ground issue is important because those people are being segregated, and they're not getting the same attention as the Syrian refugees in the camps.

I also want to point out that through our information, there are 25,000 Yazidi refugees in Turkey, and looking at getting people out is, quite frankly, the low hanging fruit. They're accessible. We don't have to go into Syria to find them. Let's start there. Let's start with people we can get out in a hurry and get them to Canada to a safe haven.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Weiss.

Mr. Sarai, seven minutes, please.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: I want to commend all three groups and all four of you for your great work. Some of you are refugees, have been imprisoned and have survived some of this stuff, and the others have helped out a tremendous amount for hundreds of refugees.

Mr. El Shafie, you have spoken passionately in public about the plight of the Yazidis. In my hand I have a copy of your testimony before the subcommittee in 2014. You testified that you had led delegations to Iraq with parliamentarians such as Conservative MPs Brad Butt, Russ Hiebert, and Leon Benoit.

You testified that with these MPs you visited a Yazidi refugee camp. In your own testimony you said that what was happening to the Yazidis was a genocide, yet none of your recommendations or your statements called for the Canadian government to resettle any Yazidi refugees. In fact, what you recommended at the time was that we co-operate with the Iraqi government and that we push other neighbouring states to stop funding terrorism, but none of them ever called—despite seeing a genocide—for the Yazidis to be brought here.

At that time, none of the three government members of Parliament called it a genocide, nor did they ask for refugees to be brought to Canada or took any action in that regard. In fact, now we've learned that only a careful, maybe four people, from the Yazidi community ended up being refugees during that time.

You also called for more military intervention, but not resettlement. You criticize this government for not bringing in enough Yazidis, yet there was no criticism of the past government whatsoever.

My question to you is, can you tell us if you ever recommended bringing Yazidi refugees to Canada prior to this government's coming into power?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: You're talking about the first trip we did, when the attacks on the Yazidi were starting. We were there at the very beginning. One of our main concerns was that we didn't know how the Kurdish region would deal with the refugees. In the beginning, our first choice always is not to have anybody emigrate, but to leave them at home in their culture and their environment. That is always my first choice. If you ask me if I prefer to be here or in Egypt, of course, it's my home country. This is not something that we'll disagree on. But as the years went by, and as we kept monitoring what was happening to the Yazidis on the ground, we discovered an amount of corruption, an amount of discrimination, that led us to believe that their lives there, even in Kurdistan, would not be easy, safe, or secure. The stigma facing those girls when they returned back.... We were hoping that they would be treated as victims, that they would receive the proper health care, mental health care. Sadly this didn't happen on the ground. So in the beginning we were definitely hoping that we could work with the Kurdish community on the ground in order to improve their lives and their situation after their rescue. When this didn't happen, and we kept monitoring the situation year after year, we found that having them emigrate would have to be part of the solution. So this is number one.

• (1055)

Mr. Randeep Sarai: You witnessed a genocide. You saw women raped, a man murdered being trained. It was the worst atrocity happening at the time. You first-hand saw it with members of Parliament, yet you thought that it was okay to just leave them in camps at the time, that there was no need to bring them to a safe haven at all, that there was no cry for help at that time. I would assume if I saw that, it would be one of the most passionate and compassionate moments of my life where you would want to bring them right away, but you felt more...about working with the Iraqi government and not once, until late 2015 or early 2016, ever brought up that we should bring Yazidis to Canada, or that they were not being brought to Canada.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Before you use my report against me, I would ask you, have you been there before? Have you seen the situation yourself?

Mr. Randeep Sarai: No.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: You haven't been there, okay. I've been there. So when this happened, once again, we were hoping that through the Kurdish community we would be able to have a stable life for them. So we brought medication. We started a project—

Mr. Randeep Sarai: It's not in your recommendations.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: I have to respond to you.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: They were not your recommendations.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: I'm sorry, but I just have to respond to you if you don't mind.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: I think I've gotten your response. My next question is—

Rev. Majed El Shafie: I cannot answer your next question unless you allow me to respond to you.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: I'm not asking you the next question, but asking another witness.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: I will respond to another part of your question, sir. You said I never went to the previous government and criticized them for the Yazidi situation. I presented my proposal to Minister Chris Alexander twice, two months before the election. So I went to the previous government and I gave them the same proposal, and I was working with them to bring the Yazidi girls here. That's with the previous government, and two months later the election happened.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: I commend you for doing that, but I'm saying that you never critiqued them or never had any problem with the fact they took no action.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: It's because they approved our proposal. Minister Chris Alexander approved our proposal.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: My next question is for Mr. Weiss or Ms. Naso. I have a shortage of time so I have to ask my questions.

You have now received 41 Yazidi families, or members of Yazidi families? Am I right or close?

Mrs. Nafiya Naso: We're sponsoring seven families, but we've only received two families, a total of nine people.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: And they're remaining or in process?

Mrs. Nafiya Naso: Yes.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: I just came to hear from Mr. Weiss that you know of no other privately sponsored Yazidi applications in the process. Do you know of any sponsorship agreement holders applying for any Yazidi refugees?

Mr. Lorne Weiss: As far as we know, based on the comments and the questions we've had from across the country, we are the only organized group that is focused on privately sponsoring Yazidi families in Canada, maybe in North America.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: So it's not a government stall by any means. It's just that there hasn't been any sponsorship holder who has applied for any Yazidi families to come into Canada that you know of.

Mr. Lorne Weiss: I would like to qualify that by saying that we would apply for a lot more, and I know that our community would put up more money if we could find quota to bring more families in.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: I appreciate your work—don't get me wrong. I'm just asking. But there have been no others and nobody else has applied for these?

Mr. Lorne Weiss: Not as far as we know.

Mr. Randeep Sarai: My second question—

The Chair: Thank you, but your time is up.

Mr. Saroya, I understand that you'll be splitting your time with Ms. Gallant.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Once again, thank you to everybody. I commend all of you for going out of your way and doing all the work yourselves and for all Canadians.

My question is for Mr. Allos. You mentioned Carolyn Bennett and her announcement on indigenous people and that it doesn't apply to Canadians. What are you talking about?

Mr. Rabea Allos: The commitment Canada made to protecting indigenous people, according to the United Nations, applies to all indigenous people, not only to Canadian first nations. So now Canada is committed to protecting all indigenous people across the world, the Yazidis in addition to the Chaldeans, Assyrians, and Syriacs, who are the indigenous people of Iraq.

• (1100)

Mr. Bob Saroya: I understand.

My next question is for Mr. El Shafie. When you're talking about creating a green zone for the minorities, how do we create this green zone? I'm assuming that we're talking about protecting the Yazidi people as well as the Christians in Iraq and Syria. How do we create a green zone?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: The green zone came from a request from the refugees themselves. Once again, many of the internally displaced persons don't want to leave their homes. Nobody wants to leave their home. Some of them have found that their lives there are absolutely impossible at this point. They have a stigma against them. They're persecuted, and that persecution does not stop. The Kurds are unable to protect them. The Iraqi soldiers are unable to protect them. The Shia militias within the Iraqi army are not protecting them.

So the idea came to have the immigration option and/or to have a green zone where the refugees could be protected if they chose to stay in their homeland. But if they chose to leave, they would be free to request to be refugees.

Mr. Bob Saroya: In your mind, do you think the Yazidi or the Christians or any other minorities can live in peace and harmony in Iran or Syria?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Right now I would say that I doubt they can live in absolute peace and harmony, because with the Kurdish troops and their agendas, the Iraqi soldiers and their agendas, and the Shia militias and the Sunni groups, a lot of the minorities do not have militias to protect them. They would always be a target, even if we defeated ISIS and other extremist groups. They would always be a target, because they are different, because they are a minority.

However, this green zone I was talking about would be under international protection, not local protection.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Go ahead, Cheryl.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Mr. Chairman, through you to Mr. El Shafie, the former immigration minister, Chris Alexander, had approved your proposal and the process was going forward until the door was slammed shut at the election.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: That's correct. I had two meetings with minister Chris Alexander. I had one meeting in Ottawa with his department. We presented the proposal. They liked the proposal. I recall the wording of minister Chris Alexander. He said that we have to do this, that we have to save these people.

That was two months before the election. After the election was over, we had to start from the beginning.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Is it more difficult or time consuming to process Yazidis than other refugees?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: I think the main problem, once again, is that there is no vehicle or system to process these internally displaced persons. They have to find the mechanism, and once the election hit the ground, the election became the focus.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: You mentioned the stigma against them. Are there Canadian immigration officials on the ground in Turkey who would be sharing that sort of stigma? Why would they not get through the system, when people displaced from other countries who are situated in Turkey are able to come through?

The Chair: Ten seconds, please.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: The stigma, as Nafiya said, is that they see them as devil worshippers, which has caused them to be discriminated against everywhere they have gone. They are different, and that's really what has caused this stigma. Besides, if you are a victim of rape, all of society will look at you differently in the Middle East.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Tabbara, take five minutes, please.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: My first question is for Mr. El Shafie.

Can we get a hard copy of that proposal that you gave to Chris Alexander?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: It's in front of you. It's the same proposal, sir.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Is it the same proposal that you submitted?

Rev. Majed El Shafie: It's the same proposal. We just enhanced it at the end of June, but it's the same essence.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: I'm going to give Mr. Ehsassi one minute to finish his last question.

• (1105)

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you. I just want to follow up.

I want to emphasize once again that I very much applaud your concern about the Yazidis, but of course I think we should be concerned about the means that are used. This is a very vulnerable population. It is incumbent upon us to proceed, in our attempts to help, in a very responsible fashion.

One reason I bring it up is that I saw an interview you conducted back in 2011 in which, obviously in your keen interest to get things done, you are sometimes skirting around things, legal means of getting things done.

I have an interview here with—

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Could you repeat the last statement?

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Yes. I have an interview here that you conducted with the *Christian Telegraph* in 2011—

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Yes.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: —in which on two occasions you admitted to actually engaging in bribery when you were trying to undertake operations abroad.

Rev. Majed El Shafie: Absolutely, yes; that's correct.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Do you now understand why I am very much concerned about making sure, given the sensitive nature of the mission that you have in mind, that your safety and the safety of those you—

Rev. Majed El Shafie: When we're talking about rescuing Yazidi girls or rescuing many of the minorities from ISIS territory, we are not dealing with Canadian officials; we are not dealing within a system that respects the law. In order to save these girls and to rescue them, sometimes we have to use other means to get them out as soon as possible, for their safety and their security. If this were your daughter or your sister or your wife, you would do everything in your means to get them out safe and sound.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you.

The remainder of the time I would like to share with Mr. Tabbara.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Operation Ezra welcomed its first family of sponsored refugees last week, and the government has made great commitments to welcoming the Syrian refugees. There are many Canadians here who are eager to help.

My one question is to Mr. Weiss. You mentioned that private sponsorship is limited, that there are too many obstacles, that it's complicated, that there are significant wait times. That's one of the main things the minister is working on, processing times, which have increased dramatically. His number one priority is to reduce wait times.

If you can, just elaborate on some of the obstacles you've experienced.

Mr. Lorne Weiss: Perhaps I can give you a case study of the families that my synagogue is sponsoring through Operation Ezra. We filled the papers in November of last year and they were approved, in terms of their content being correct, in December.

We just received notification that the process is beginning now. They haven't had medicals or interviews yet. They are living in a refugee camp in Turkey in a situation that is very unstable. Realistically, based on our experience with the family just arrived, we probably won't see these folks until late 2016 or 2017.

Under a normal private sponsorship refugee program, that's probably not so bad, to get access to a country like Canada, but when people are living in constant danger, when they don't have medical supplies, don't have access to services, when in fact Canadian officials aren't even coming into the refugee camps, it's not acceptable.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Cuts made by the previous government to this department are the reason we're having such an increase in wait times. The department needs to be funded properly to reduce these wait times.

You also mentioned the hybrid program. Could you elaborate more on that and give the committee members more detail on the hybrid program you propose?

Mr. Lorne Weiss: We're at a point now where we're looking at it conceptually, so we haven't drilled down to.... In essence, the concept is that we have volunteers and people who are knowledgeable and experienced in settlement and helping these folks and their families after their arrival. Also, particularly in Winnipeg, we're very fortunate that we have an established Yazidi community of approximately 200 people, who are very welcoming of other Yazidi families coming here. We have, then, a good support system. Our problem is the frustration of having to wait this length of time, in comparison with—and I'm not saying instead of, but in comparison

with—the speed with which we've been able to bring in 25,000 Syrians.

The fact is, we have brought into Canada, over a year, nine people. That's it.

●(1110)

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm sorry, but our time is up.

I'd like to thank all of the panellists for the tremendous work that all of you are engaged in and continue to do. Thank you for bringing your insights to this committee.

At this point, the committee will adjourn.

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