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Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

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• (1100)

[*Translation*]

The Chair (Hon. Marc Garneau (Notre-Dame-de-Grâce—Westmount, Lib.)): Welcome to the Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs.

[*English*]

We are gathered here today on the unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe nation.

[*Translation*]

Today, we will continue our fourth study, which pertains to Arctic sovereignty, security and emergency preparedness of indigenous peoples.

[*English*]

On today's first panel we will be hearing from Dr. Heather Nicol, director of the School for the Study of Canada at Trent University, as well as Dr. Heather Exner-Pirot, senior fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules for all of us to follow.

Members or witnesses may speak in the official language of their choice. Interpretation services in English, French and Inuktitut are available for the first part of today's meeting. Please be patient with the interpretation.

The interpretation button is found at the bottom of your screen, for those of you who are attending virtually. You can listen in either English or French. If interpretation is lost, please inform me immediately and we will ensure interpretation is properly restored before resuming the proceedings.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. If you are on the video conference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself. For those in the room, that will be done by the proceedings and verification officer.

When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, please mute your mike.

As a reminder, all comments should be addressed through the chair.

We'll start off as usual, with our two witnesses each having five minutes for introductory remarks. I would ask them to keep that at five minutes. Then we'll proceed with the first round of questions.

I'd now like to invite Dr. Heather Nicol to start us off.

Dr. Heather Nicol (Director, School for the Study of Canada, Trent University, As an Individual): Thank you very much.

I was actually hoping that Heather Exner-Pirot would go first, because she always has, I think, more interesting and more informative things to say than I do.

I'm speaking from the perspective of an educator, somebody who has been involved in the delivery of courses, particularly through UArctic's circumpolar courses, and who works at an institution that has a focus on educating about the north, but not from the perspective of the north.

That's led me to something I would like to share with you today that I take quite seriously, which is how to align the current needs for education, curriculum and educational development in the north—something I'm quite interested in—with the need for maintaining and creating a culturally relevant and co-created curriculum. I would align that more specifically with another great need in education in the north, which I think is underdeveloped, particularly in light of events that have happened both over the weekend on the east coast and, more sadly, in western Canada, on the James Smith Cree Nation. This would be the need for training and a co-development of post-secondary accredited education at existing northern institutions on disaster management, on community policing, on logistical planning and response, all of which require both specialized equipment and highly qualified personnel at the community level.

I know that Canada's Arctic and northern policy framework suggests the capacity of northern communities to face the looming threat of climate change and human vulnerability has to be developed in order to deliver and ensure security in the north, but I don't think, really, that policy framework encourages the development of civilian capacity, in specific ways.

I've made a submission before with Dr. Christian Leuprecht from the Royal Military College on the role of Canadian Armed Forces, but I think it's more than this. I would argue that there's a lot of responsibility.

I've been involved in many activities designed to raise awareness of the need for a civilian and military involvement in delivery of human security in the north. Even at meetings designed to talk about the role of defence and the military, communities' response is that we need to be trained ourselves. We're on the front line of the arc of unprecedented climate change and other forms of disaster created by climate change and vulnerability in other forms of insecurities that are coming about because of increased human activity in the north, and we need to be trained.

We can talk about this later. There are a number of programs from the Canadian government's side that are looking to increase capacity in training. What I'm talking about really is accredited post-secondary education. We have CHARS research lab in Cambridge Bay, the High Arctic Research Station, and that's there to track scientific community to the north and encourage it to interact with northern communities, but we haven't, to my knowledge, developed any kind of sustained, accredited, civic program there for training in disaster response. Again, we can talk about this later.

We speak often about building cultural resiliency in the north and co-creating programs and curriculum for that, but I think that developing capacity in the north is incredibly important. If you note, throughout Canada there are probably nine universities that offer disaster training at both the undergraduate and graduate level along these kinds of lines, yet none of them are oriented towards northern disaster, northern response, northern planning or northern logistics. This is a very different context and situation for training.

There are models for the sort of thing I'm proposing. I'm proposing basically appropriate funding for targeted programming at institutions that could be encouraged to develop appropriate regional training and research from a northern point of view. It's research and curriculum that I think are interesting.

Certainly, there are models in Alaska, centres that have been developed to do this sort of thing, but only two universities in Canada offer comprehensive disaster management curriculum at the undergraduate level, and then there are several more that offer at the graduate level.

In light of those realities, I think a targeted funding focus with program development at federal and provincial/territorial level could serve to increase overall public safety and emergency management capacity and capability in the Arctic and its communities consistent, I think, with the aspirations of the Arctic and northern policy framework.

• (1105)

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Nicol.

We will now go to Dr. Exner-Pirot.

You have five minutes.

Dr. Heather Exner-Pirot (Senior Fellow, Macdonald-Laurier Institute): Good morning, Mr. Chair and committee members.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today. It's a pleasure to follow on the remarks of my colleague Dr. Nicol.

I want to focus my opening remarks on how I believe the Russian invasion of Ukraine has impacted Arctic security and the ways that Canada should respond.

I am a student of the Arctic Council and have long admired and celebrated the ability of that forum and of Arctic co-operation in general to compartmentalize itself from broader geopolitical tensions.

I note, Mr. Chair, that you were Canada's representative at the last Arctic Council ministerial.

I have led a group of fellow scholars to nominate the Arctic Council for the Nobel Peace Prize and have authored peer-reviewed articles describing the Arctic's exceptionalism in international affairs, so it is with a heavy heart that I now consider the extraordinary period of Arctic co-operation between Russia and the West, beginning in 1987 with Mikhail Gorbachev's famous Murmansk speech calling for the Arctic to be a zone of peace, to be over and the work of building a new era—

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill (Manicouagan, BQ): Mr. Chair, sorry to interrupt Ms. Exner-Pirot, but I am told it is impossible to interpret due to the sound quality.

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry to interrupt you, Dr. Exner-Pirot, but we're having a translation problem at the moment.

Can you just hold on a sec? We'll pause. You won't lose any time.

• (1110)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gill, I am told the interpreters cannot do their job because the sound quality of the witness's microphone is poor.

Do you agree that she should continue?

Mrs. Marilène Gill: For the committee's needs, I can certainly agree to her continuing, but I will of course have to note [*inaudible*].

Thank you.

The Chair: Very well, thank you.

[*English*]

Dr. Exner-Pirot, please continue your testimony.

Dr. Heather Exner-Pirot: Thank you.

I have three main recommendations to prepare for this new Arctic security paradigm.

The first is one the government has already undertaken and that is to adequately fund NORAD modernization. I want to express my support for this position and I hope, as I know all of you do, that northern indigenous communities and businesses will benefit economically from the investments being made and be included in the civilian decision-making processes. Nuclear deterrence and continental defence are not luxuries that we can put on the back burner any longer.

The second is for Canada to welcome and support a stronger NATO presence in the Arctic. Both Conservative and Liberal governments have opposed this in the past for good reasons, but the imperative to defend against Russia, especially as the northern flank of NATO will get much larger with Finland and Sweden joining, is now much different. I will say that the probability of military conflict in the Canadian Arctic remains very low but it is much higher in northern Europe and especially in the Baltics and around the Barents Sea. Canada should be prepared to support its allies there.

The third recommendation, which has been less discussed, is how to proceed with the Arctic Council. It is currently on pause and the question of how and to what extent to involve Russia is being debated now in foreign ministries in Washington, Oslo, Copenhagen, Helsinki and beyond. There are no easy answers but I am convinced that the Arctic Council cannot go on as it has and must become an A7. I cannot imagine having ministerial meetings and family photos with Sergei Lavrov or any other Russian minister so long as Putin is in power. Any regime change will take years and Putin may be replaced by someone worse. It will be too long to simply pause, so we must evolve.

There remain issues that require communication and even co-operation with Russia, such as understanding and mitigating the impacts of climate change, managing the development of fisheries in the Arctic Ocean, and regulating marine shipping. I believe we can create space for this to be done at a technical level and on issue-specific concerns without the restraints and concessions that a regional organization such as the Arctic Council would impose.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Pardon me, Mr. Chair.

On second thought, I am wondering what would happen if, on the other hand, there was no interpretation for someone speaking in French only. Would we decide to suspend the meeting or wait?

In the interest of fairness, I would rather wait until interpretation can be provided so I can understand everything Ms. Exner-Pirot says.

The Chair: Of course, Ms. Gill. It will take a week or a few days.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: I'm sorry, but it is a question of principle.

Thank you.

The Chair: So we will stop here.

[*English*]

We will continue with questions.

I am going to have to ask you to stop at that point, Dr. Exner-Pirot, and we'll proceed with a question period, however, if a question is addressed to you, we're not going to be able to have that unfortunately because the translation is not available of sufficient quality.

The quality is not sufficient for the interpreters to take the English that's being spoken and translate it into French unfortunately.

We're stuck in that situation. I would have thought this would have been checked beforehand.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Vanessa Davies): We did check and unfortunately it didn't work out.

The Chair: It didn't work out. We should have been notified.

I'm afraid we have only one alternative, colleagues, and that is to ask our questions to Dr. Nicol.

What say you?

Mr. Gary Vidal (Desnethé—Missinippi—Churchill River, CPC): There's nothing we can do to improve [*Inaudible—Editor*].

The Chair: Apparently, there is not.

We talked to the IT people, but let's wait for five minutes and see if we can do something about it.

We're going to pause for five minutes.

• (1110) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1115)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Everyone can come back.

Ms. Exner-Pirot is wearing headphones. We'll check to see if it's working.

Ms. Gill, if you cannot hear the interpretation, we will stop.

[*English*]

Dr. Exner-Pirot, I understand you're wearing a different headset. Let's give that a go, and if that doesn't work, we'll go to plan B.

Please start off. The interpreters will let us know soon enough if it isn't working.

Please go ahead.

Dr. Heather Exner-Pirot: Good morning, everyone.

I will go through it again so the French speakers can benefit. I will start with the three recommendations to prepare for the new Arctic security paradigm.

The first is one that the government has undertaken, and that is to adequately fund NORAD modernization. I want to express my support for their position and my hope, which I know all of you share, that northern indigenous communities and businesses benefit economically from the investments being made and are included in the decision-making processes. Nuclear deterrence and continental defence are not luxuries that we can put on the back burner any longer.

The second is for Canada to welcome and support a stronger NATO presence in the Arctic. Both Conservative and Liberal governments have opposed this in the past for good reasons, but the imperative to defend against Russia, especially as the northern flank of NATO will get much larger with Finland and Sweden joining, is now much different. I will say that the probability of military conflict in the Canadian Arctic remains very low, but it is much higher in northern Europe, especially in the Baltics and around the Barents Sea, and Canada should prepare to support its allies there.

The third, which has been less discussed, is how to proceed with the Arctic Council. It is currently on pause, and the question of how and to what extent to involve Russia is being debated in foreign ministries in Washington, Oslo, Copenhagen, Helsinki and beyond. There are no easy answers, but I am convinced that the Arctic Council cannot go on as it has and must become an A7. I cannot imagine having ministerial meetings and family photos with Sergei Lavrov or any other Russian minister as long as Putin is in power. Any regime change will take years, and Putin may be replaced by someone worse. It will take too long to just pause, so we must evolve.

There remain issues that require communication and even co-operation with Russia such as understanding and mitigating the impacts of climate change, managing the development of fisheries in the Arctic Ocean or regulating marine shipping. I believe we can create space for this to be done at a technical level and on issue-specific concerns without the restraints and concessions that a regional organization such as the Arctic Council would impose.

I want to conclude by reiterating for the committee that Russia has taken the choice of pursuing Arctic co-operation away from us. The West did everything possible to make it work and maintain a zone of peace for three decades, but now they have pushed us into a position where we can no longer paper over our differences. Russia has started a war of aggression. Russia has committed war crimes. Russia has threatened nuclear warfare, and Russia has plunged Europe and the world into an energy crisis.

There is a fine line between co-operation and appeasement, and, in retrospect, I fear we crossed it with our reaction to Russia's invasion of Crimea in 2014. Because of our muted response, Russia was emboldened to invade Ukraine and commit its war crimes, and now the world is in crisis.

It is not business as usual anywhere, least of all the Arctic. Canada can lead in creating new processes, institutions and co-operation without them, not to antagonize Russia, but to deter them from future aggression.

Thank you.

• (1120)

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Exner-Pirot.

We'll now proceed with the first round of questions beginning with the Conservatives.

Mr. Vidal, you have six minutes.

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank both of the witnesses. I'm going to try to get to both of you in my time, but I'm going to start with Ms. Exner-Pirot.

Your third recommendation talked about the Arctic Council becoming an A7 going forward. You talk about the status of it currently being on pause as the reason that we must evolve.

I would be curious to hear your perspective on how that plays out in the element of what I understand on the Arctic Council to be the indigenous permanent participants process, where there are a number of organizations and entities that are represented there, and they don't have any kind of legal standing, but they are able to have significant input. Some of those organizations include representation from Russia as well, if I look at the history of that.

In the context of the Arctic Council becoming an A7 going forward, how does that translate through to the indigenous permanent participant process in that council in your opinion, please?

Dr. Heather Exner-Pirot: That's a great question. I was at a workshop in Boston when there were members from Gwich'in and also from the Sami, and they had some opinions on this that I'm happy to share.

That is obviously to the benefit of the Arctic Council, so there is concern from the indigenous side that, if you get rid of the Arctic Council, where will be the place that indigenous peoples are included to the level that they have been in the Arctic Council? In the status quo right now, it is not safe for Russian indigenous participants to speak out and to participate. The Sami and Gwich'in members remarked that they were not sure how they could approach or talk to their Russian colleagues without compromising their safety. I'm not sure what their Russian colleagues can say.

There are six permanent participants. Four of them have Russian participation. One of them is exclusively Russian, RAIPON, and they have come out in favour of the war in Ukraine. There isn't a lot of sympathy, I guess, to entertain RAIPON's inclusion, but with the other three current participants, that's a question that remains. That would be why I would favour having an A7, and it would be up to the indigenous permanent participants how they can maintain that collaboration with their Russian colleagues. That would be the reason you don't want to just get rid of all our Arctic Council or not have an A7, because everything would just kind of devolve into bilateral state institutions and not have that strong indigenous component.

• (1125)

Mr. Gary Vidal: Thank you for that. I appreciate your very thoughtful and intelligent response to any of the questions we have.

I'm going to flip over to Ms. Nicol for a minute.

You opened up a line of questioning for me that I wasn't thinking about today, Ms. Nicol, when you talked about the James Smith Cree Nation events of the last few weeks here. You talked about community policing. I had the privilege of meeting with one of the vice-chiefs of the tribal council of which James Smith Cree Nation is a member nation. We talked about community policing, but beyond that we talked about a community safety program that's more than just first nations policing. We also talked about the need to educate local people to be part of both of those components.

I would like to give you an opportunity to flesh that out a little based on what you spoke of in your opening comments and give you more time to talk about that specifically, please.

Dr. Heather Nicol: Again, although I'm by no means an expert in community policing, I do understand there are several ways to approach community policing from an educational and training perspective. I know in my experience with northern Canada that's a little thinner on the ground than in the southern parts of Canada.

Some of the examples I have seen involve sending people for training out of the communities. Training is one thing, and training can be a couple of weeks long for community policing, but there are also community policing programs. I know we have one at my institution. It's not northern focused, but we have had discussions with some agencies about trying to flesh that out and create a greater focus.

But I don't think Trent University is necessarily the place to do community policing for the north. I think there are programs, there are curriculums, and with any curriculum, particularly in northern Canada, it has to be contextualized and it has to be co-created for communities themselves.

Broadening that out to thinking about public safety, it's very much the same issue. It's not just knowledge of logistics and planning. It's also knowledge of equipment, and how to manage that and understanding all the different agencies that are involved. I think this is a much bigger project—

Mr. Gary Vidal: Dr. Nicol, I'm going to interject quickly because I have about 30 seconds.

I want to really quickly maybe speak to the cultural component that would be so very relevant in the training aspect of either community safety or community policing.

Dr. Heather Nicol: Yes, I think in giving a sense of the goals, the point of policing, the objects of policing, the problems...these are local, these are culturally contextualized, and they have to be addressed from local community cultural perspectives. They will be quite different from community to community.

I think this is an opportunity at a community level to co-create and work with educational partners to tailor courses at post-secondary institutions that already exist in the north. It's an opportunity to tailor them more specifically. There are a number of them so it doesn't have to be one-size-fits-all, but it builds cultural resilience as well.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Vidal.

We will now go to Ms. Atwin.

Ms. Atwin, you have six minutes.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin (Fredericton, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to our two witnesses this morning.

I would like to preface with an acknowledgement that I'm coming to you from the unceded unsundered Wolastoqiyik territories here in Fredericton, New Brunswick. Of course, in conversations around emergency preparedness I'm very much thinking about our colleagues and communities in the Atlantic. We're doing okay here in New Brunswick, but all Maritimers are connected so we're very much thinking about everyone who has been seriously impacted by Hurricane Fiona.

Dr. Nicol, I would love to begin with you. I very much appreciate the educator perspective you brought to the conversation today as that's also where I identify.

You have also opened up a new line of questioning: how do we characterize what a disaster is or what an emergency is? James Smith Cree First Nation certainly would fit in that category. I didn't previously anticipate that, so I want to thank you for bringing that into our discussion today.

You mentioned the need for research and programming. That's certainly where my headspace was, prior to coming into politics. There have been so many studies with incredible recommendations that have come out about supporting indigenous communities in the north, in terms of all these topics we're dealing with.

How can we be more effective in better communicating findings and actually implementing those recommendations, so we're not seeing these reports just collect dust on a shelf?

• (1130)

Dr. Heather Nicol: That's a great question. If we say the horse is out of the barn, maybe some of the reports are already collecting dust and we won't be able to go back and dust them off and hand them out.

I've seen some really interesting models being used in northern education in the institutions that are there. Certainly proceeding from the notion that it's a shared research project, a shared curriculum, there are precedents of co-created research shared, and there is knowledge about that. I think the problem is shifting that northward. The big projects and big reports generally come from southern institutions, and that's just fine, but the knowledge doesn't get institutionalized in northern universities.

I think the biggest message is to prioritize and fund northern institutions—and not just one or two. I know there's a smaller population base than in the south, but if you look at places like UNBC, you see a student population of roughly 3,000 to 4,000 students. That is a very effective, world-class institution. You don't have to have something the size of one U of T in the north. You need to have a number of high-calibre institutions that offer a culturally relevant, co-created curriculum. It's a two-way street. That information comes south. It isn't just us informing, because we don't have a sense of the ins and outs. The experts are there in the north.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Excellent. Thank you very much.

I'm going to completely switch gears, which I think characterizes the complex nature of this study.

Dr. Exner-Pirot, I'm particularly interested in what you brought forward today on the role of the Arctic Council. More specifically, you mentioned the idea of indigenous voices being adequately included in that space. Can you talk a little bit about what that looks like, and how we can safeguard that?

The Chair: Dr. Exner-Pirot, are you with us? We'll take a pause.

• (1130)

(Pause)

• (1135)

The Chair: Dr. Exner-Pirot, can you hear us?

Dr. Heather Exner-Pirot: Yes. My sincere apologies. Now I'm on a laptop and the Wi-Fi is poor, which is why I tried the other computer and set-up before.

The Chair: Mrs. Atwin, we have a minute and 37 seconds. Please go ahead.

Mrs. Jenica Atwin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm glad you're back with us, Dr. Exner-Pirot. My question was for you, around the role of the Arctic Council. You mentioned specifically how indigenous voices had been included. I'd love to learn more about that process and how to ensure that, as it moves forward in this new paradigm, we also include indigenous voices.

Dr. Heather Exner-Pirot: The Arctic Council is not a treaty organization; it's a forum. Notionally it works on environmental protection and sustainable development, but its main benefits have been co-operation with Russia, frankly, and including the indigenous voice. The question is how can it go forward with Russia, or not go forward as it is. I made my thoughts on that clear. How can it go forward with indigenous voices is the next step, if there was agreement that something has to change with Russia.

There are six permanent participants that are not exactly representative of all indigenous peoples and all northerners, but those six groups have some international indigenous coverage. They are very influential. Although it's a normative...there are no votes. They don't get a vote, but no one votes. All the senior Arctic officials are very respectful and inclusive, and appreciate the perspective of the indigenous people.

You can't just go into NATO, you can't just go into the International Maritime Organization, because those don't have the same level of indigenous participation. That's why retaining something of the Arctic Council is worthwhile. From my perspective, we have ei-

ther an A7 with exactly the same rules of procedure and exactly the same declaration, or we take this opportunity to create a new A7.

• (1140)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Atwin.

[*Translation*]

I now give the floor to Ms. Gill.

Ms. Gill, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I apologize for what happened earlier. I did of course want to hear what the witnesses said, but out of respect for our interpreters' work, it is important for the sound to be good.

Ms. Nicol and Ms. Exner-Pirot, your two presentations were very interesting.

Let me start with a question for Ms. Nicol regarding programs.

Ms. Nicol, you are in the north and I represent a northern riding, so the subject really interests me. We like research to be conducted in the field, on our territory, because we have the land and the expertise, as you said so well.

What weaknesses do you think need to be addressed in order to respond adequately to emergency situations in the north?

If we are asking for undergraduate or graduate programs, that means there is really not enough emergency management training offered even though, as you pointed out, a number of universities in southern Canada—nine, if I am not mistaken—offer that kind of training.

Which different programs are really needed to change the situation in Arctic communities?

[*English*]

Dr. Heather Nicol: I didn't get that in translation. Could I have a translation of the question? I caught the gist of it but not much at the end.

The Chair: Dr. Nicol, do you have your little interpretation symbol, which is a globe, at the bottom?

I won't count the time.

[*Translation*]

Please start again, Ms. Gill.

[*English*]

She's going to start over. Hopefully, you will hear the English translation.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Nicol.

Let me say to both of you, Ms. Nicol and Ms. Exner-Pirot, that I really liked your presentations.

I have two questions, first for Ms. Nicol, regarding programs.

Ms. Nicol, you said that undergraduate and graduate programs should be offered in the north, precisely because that is where the expertise is.

Since I come from a northern riding, I am very interested in the possibility of conducting research in the field.

You highlighted weaknesses in emergency response management and the whole issue of Arctic security.

What are the weaknesses or needs, if you wish, that such programs could address as compared to the undergraduate and graduate training that is offered at nine universities in southern Canada?

[*English*]

Dr. Heather Nicol: That is a good question. Thank you.

I will begin by saying that there is not a total lack of understanding of what I would call human security, which is this broadly defined way of seeing security and safety in the north as related to the spectrum of climate change, increased human activities and environmental changes that are happening rapidly. These notions of what human security is and education around human security are not entirely lacking at all. The UArctic, for a number of years, has had a circumpolar curriculum that involves northern students. Also, there are institutions now with northern studies and Arctic and sub-arctic studies that bring these basic ideas of the need and of the changing capacity and changing way in which security could be understood.

There's scientific research going on. There's research into cause and effect and research into what is happening. What is missing is this piece in the middle that would bring that knowledge and those results into a comprehensive, accredited training program within the curriculum of both new institutions that are being proposed—and I know that's the case—and existing accredited institutions. Memorial has its new Labrador Campus. YukonU has moved from being Yukon College to being Yukon University. There are, I think, appropriate post-secondary institutions.

I think below that—not below hierarchically, but below in the level of intensity—there is clear room for shorter, more vocational training in specific areas. That, I think, is probably under way as I speak. It's this notion of creating a generation of northerners who can envision—and bring that vision of security needs of the north to their institutions—and train further experts to make it normative

so that security is a career option, a service that you can provide for your community, and a way of building knowledge and resilience, and supporting and preserving your communities in the future. It's a situated curriculum based on a very important need.

● (1145)

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you.

Ms. Exner-Pirot, I have a question about the Arctic Council, which also interests me. Russia is not represented right now, for the reasons you mentioned, but there is also the whole issue of the first nations permanent members. I am not sure if it is a problem that Russia is not represented, because the Sami people, for instance, are not all represented.

If the Arctic Council were to become an A7, as you said, how could we make sure those nations were also included? We see that, even though they are permanent members, they do not have the same access to the various bodies. You mentioned a forum with regard to the Arctic Council, but it is not necessarily easy for them to participate.

How do you see this renewed version of the Arctic Council? How could you more readily include the first nations members?

[*English*]

Dr. Heather Exner-Pirot: Thank you. I appreciate the question.

From my perspective, it's not necessarily true that if the Russian state is not represented, Russians in the Saami Council, the Aleut or the ICC are not represented. I would think it would be up to those organizations—the ICC, the Aleut and the Sami—to decide how to converse, communicate and work with their Russian colleagues and represent their interests to the Arctic Council.

I will say—

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Ms. Exner-Pirot, I am returning from the Conference of Arctic Parliamentarians, and that is what happened with regard to the Sami people. That is why I asked you the question. That is what is happening right now.

[*English*]

Dr. Heather Exner-Pirot: It is my observation that it's rare. The people who attend Arctic Council meetings are generally not the Russian members of those organizations. It will be up to the Russian state whether they allow Russian indigenous members to travel internationally or whether there are any sanctions against any of this travel.

You could easily have the Arctic Council and the five other permanent participants at the A7. That wouldn't be an issue.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Gill.

[English]

We'll now go to Ms. Idlout.

Ms. Idlout, you have six minutes.

To our two witnesses, if it's not spoken in English and you want to hear it, choose "English" on the interpretation.

Please go ahead, Ms. Idlout.

• (1150)

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut as follows:*]

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[*Inuktitut text interpreted as follows:*]

From my perspective, Inuit indigenous leaders are already experts on the land where they have lived since time immemorial. When you talk about capacity building, what do you actually mean?

My question is to Ms. Nicol.

[English]

Dr. Heather Nicol: We have government agencies such as Public Safety and we have the Canadian Armed Forces responding. We have the RCMP and other agencies that respond to disaster, to events.

There isn't as much opportunity for those in the north to exercise their own agency in ways that are part of that disaster response scenario, particularly on a large scale. There's a need to both bring together the resources that some of our governmental agencies, both federal and territorial, have and match them with exactly that knowledge that Inuit and others who live in northern Canada have, and to create appropriate programming that develops that and brings that capacity to the forefront.

It's a question of security and safety for people who live there, and it's a question of involving people who live there rather than externally organizing a mandate and having all the training come from outside of the north or even from other countries. That's part of the problem too. I think it's bringing it home to integrate knowledge that is already there.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:*]

Thank you.

My [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

How can Canada argue better its legal position on Arctic sovereignty based on Inuit use and occupancy?

Dr. Heather Exner-Pirot: That's a very good question. It depends on how you define sovereignty.

On the question of the Northwest Passage, it's more of a maritime issue.

On the question that is most pertinent, the extended continental shelf, that is the seabed. It's not an area that has been occupied or that ever could be occupied by humans. It goes beyond 350 miles into the Arctic Ocean. Human occupation is not a condition of extending your sovereignty for that seabed.

Certainly Inuit contributions and representation in the Canadian Arctic are important, but in the most near-term disputes on Arctic sovereignty, that human use and occupation will not be of importance. It's not even about the marine column. It's simply about the seabed and the ability of a country to be able to regulate that seabed of its extended continental shelf.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [*Member spoke in Inuktitut as follows:*]

?, ??? ?????, ?, ?????????, ??? ?? Heather Nicole.

[*Inuktitut text interpreted as follows:*]

Heather Nicol, would you also like to answer that?

[English]

• (1155)

Dr. Heather Nicol: I think this is a really important issue. I firmly believe there is a tremendous role and it is a very effective argument currently that's been advanced by... I've done some reading on some of the work that I think came before the Senate committee on this. I forget the law firm that was doing some work on the issue. I think, first of all, that people have to understand. It has to be known that this comes under the sorts of conversations we've been having about the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, on the rights of indigenous peoples to participate in conversations, because they are indeed sovereign of their territory, and they have had that right since time immemorial.

To reassure you that I think there is tremendous support for this, I went to a conference in Australia and said something about the archipelago being ceded from Britain in 1880. One of our big defence leaders—I won't say who—was there and stood up to say, excuse me, just to note—and he was right—the Canadian archipelago and the Northwest Passage are Canadian, because Inuit have lived there since time immemorial. I think the message is there. I think the idea is to continue to vocalize and challenge this notion that the rights of Inuit people in the Northwest Passage and archipelago area are constrained by documents and attitudes towards the role of indigenous people that are probably set from deliberations in a different century.

I don't know if that's helpful.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

This brings us to the end of our panel. I'd like to thank Dr. Nicol and Dr. Exner-Pirot for being with us. Despite the technical challenges we had during this past hour, it was very important for us to hear from you and to get your answers to some of our questions. We very much appreciate your presence and helping this panel with the current study.

We'll recess very briefly to configure for the next panel.

• (1155) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1200)

The Chair: Colleagues, welcome to the second panel for today.

Today in the second panel, we will be hearing from three witnesses: Minister David Joanasié, Minister of Community and Government Services, Government of Nunavut; Chief Darcy Gray from the Listuguj Mi'gmaq Government and Chief Joe Alphonse of the Tsilhqot'in first nation.

For the benefit of our witnesses, you will each have five minutes to make opening remarks, and we'll follow that with a question period. Some of the questions may come in a language other than English. It could be in French, or it could be in Inuktitut. To make sure that you understand it, if English is your language, use the interpretation symbol at the bottom of your screen. It looks like a globe. Hit that and choose English so that you will hear the question.

With that, I would like to get things going and would invite Minister David Joanasié to open up with five minutes.

• (1205)

Hon. David Joanasié (Minister of Community and Government Services, Government of Nunavut): Thank you and good day from Nunavut, Chairperson Garneau. Thank you for the invitation to present to you and your committee.

[Witness spoke in Inuktitut, interpreted as follows:]

...member for Nunavut.

[English]

Allow me to provide opening comments with an overview about emergency management in Nunavut. First of all, let me paint a picture.

Nunavut's land mass is huge, representing roughly 20% of Canada, and our population distribution is roughly 0.02 Nunavummiut per square kilometre, so it's a vast, vast territory. Our population of approximately 39,000 Inuit and northerners is distributed across 25 fly-in communities, and each of these communities is resilient. They begin at the local level and expand outward through coordination and collaboration.

While logistical challenges are many, the spirit of Nunavummiut is filled with resilience. Northern Canadians are most able to care for themselves and their communities in times of hardships and emergencies, and we've experienced a few of those in recent years.

Nunavut Emergency Management is responsible for the emergency measures organizations and the support of search and rescue operations in Nunavut. These are guided by the the Emergency

Measures Act, which empowers the minister responsible for Nunavut Emergency Management to facilitate the development of emergency management programs in both territorial and local government. We continue our efforts to complete the territorial business continuity program to see the coming into force of the Emergency Measures Act here in Nunavut to protect Nunavummiut. We assist both territorial and local governments to mitigate, prepare for, respond to and recover from the impacts of emergencies and disasters.

Nunavut Emergency Management is focused on building relationships and learning from partnerships with northern jurisdictions. We are in constant communication with our partners in the Northwest Territories, as well as in Yukon, to restore the northern round table on emergency management. Additionally, we're working closely with Yukon to support the development of their emergency management framework.

We, like our northern counterparts, contend with factors that lower accessibility, increase costs and wear out our critical infrastructure, with the heightened impact of risks. Our critical infrastructure is outdated, and the dependencies within our systems must be carefully considered.

In 2022, the community of Clyde River enacted a local state of emergency stemming from heavy equipment maintenance program issues, which escalated quickly with a series of blizzards. The resulting state of emergency left homes without heating fuel, water tanks without water, and community members without access to emergency services, among other critical needs. Successful response efforts ended the emergency there.

I'd like to say that emergency preparedness is the thin line between successful mitigation and disaster. Issues can compound quickly, and the challenges our population faces can magnify. Broken machinery quickly leads to issues of access to food and security. We face a tipping point where strained housing infrastructure suffers damage and leads to loss of homes and contributes to overcrowding. The risk factors for communicable diseases like tuberculosis climb. The health system strains to respond to surging needs. The impact is large and varied, dispersing across the entire territory. Territorial emergency preparedness brings an about-face to the cascade.

Our emergency preparedness in Nunavut is a combination of 72-hour community preparedness and the all-hazards plan approach. Geography, distance, age of infrastructure, runway length and sealift season are consistent considerations in our approach to territorial risk management.

• (1210)

We support short- to medium-term response by stockpiling equipment capable of handling scale and being transported on small aircraft. Nunavut's all-hazard plan reflects community-identified risks using a hazard identification and risk assessment.

Nunavut Emergency Management aims to deliver biennial training to each municipality. Training and program development sessions include review, update and testing of community plans. We ensure that roles and responsibilities are clearly identified and defined within each hamlet. The result of our training effort is an up-to-date emergency response plan in each of the 25 communities. The next step of our municipal training program is to ensure that comprehensive planning is in place for all identified hazards.

In closing, I want to recognize the importance of emergency response in protecting Nunavummiut from disaster and recognize that our federal and northern partners are important contributors to protecting Nunavummiut. When issues scale beyond territorial capacity, we can rely on Public Safety Canada to deliver lifelines to the territory.

At this time I'd like to thank everyone for your time and our federal partners as well for their ongoing support during times of emergency and disaster.

Qujannamiik.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We'll now go to Chief Darcy Gray.

Chief, you have five minutes.

Chief Darcy Gray (Listuguj Mi'gmaq Government): Good afternoon. It's an honour to speak with you today.

My name is Darcy Gray and I'm the chief of the Listuguj Mi'gmaq Government. I want to share that on behalf of Listuguj, our hearts are with our Mi'gmaq brothers and sisters and all those who have been affected by Hurricane Fiona.

In the spring of 2018, our community experienced significant flooding in several homes due to a perfect storm of events—heavy snowfall in the winter, rapidly warming temperatures and heavy rains. It was a Friday evening around the end of April when a few calls came in because of basements flooding. Help was sent. Then, as more calls kept coming in, it wasn't long before we realized we had to act on a much larger scale.

The next morning we established a command centre in our Natural Resources building, bringing in staff from public security, capital and infrastructure, communications, health and various other departments. A call centre was created. Our rangers and fire department were doing initial assessments and check-ins, delivering and setting up sump pumps when needed. The responses were swift and rather well coordinated with a touch of chaos.

I can remember at one point handing my personal credit card to one of our social workers to drive to Bathurst, New Brunswick, an hour away, to buy all the pumps they had because locally there was nothing else available. Staff from our health department ensured proper self-care for those responding and helped to flag which homes may have had special circumstances or additional risks be-

cause of health concerns. Larger pumps were brought in to move the water out of key areas and hopefully lower the risks of additional flooding. Community members volunteered and offered pumps or generators, whatever they could, to help. We did what we had to, coming together as we often do in times of crisis. We were also in contact with emergency management at ISC. The support was greatly appreciated. They helped us to find equipment and supplies. They provided guidance and support during the initial response and throughout the work that followed.

After the initial crisis response, assessments were done by a third party project management firm. Approximately 55 homes had been identified and assessed for repairs because of the flooding. The report outlined the scope of the repairs and approximate cost and indicated that basements would need to be gutted and cleaned, and that at a minimum such things as mould remediation, membranes and waterproofing were needed. In many cases the entire foundation needed to be lifted and rebuilt because of high groundwater levels. The instructions received at this time from emergency management were to get things moving and get things done as quickly as possible and to build back better. We hired teams to clean and clear out the basements that had flooded. We documented, tracked and supported to the best of our collective ability. We moved and we got things done.

After several months the project shifted within the ISC regional office from emergency management to infrastructure. The switch brought new criteria to determine which houses qualified for repair, now limited specifically to homes that flooded because of the increased groundwater levels that occurred in the spring of 2018. The new criteria reduced the number of qualifying homes to about 40; however, we had already cleared out most if not all the homes identified in the first assessment. We needed an answer for those 15 homes.

LMG Capital and Infrastructure worked with ISC infrastructure to find a solution, and ISC agreed to cover the cost of repairs but not of the cause of the flooding, thereby creating a problematic gap—the basements would flood again if we could not address the main cause. Our capital and infrastructure team found solutions to this gap and addressed the causes of flooding for the remaining homes as well. We completed the various phases of the remediation efforts in 2020, and none of the homes have flooded again, but we hold our breath every spring while we monitor closely.

These events and efforts placed tremendous stress on the staff intervening and on the families affected. Those who helped in the cleanup found themselves also supporting families who had lost irreplaceable items such as precious photo albums. Our health staff provided support to the families dealing with trauma while helping complete forms to replace items lost or access subsidies to offset the cost of being displaced from their home for weeks or months. We had dedicated staff in finance working with the support workers in health to track, monitor, record, report and process payments and meet reporting requirements while also trying to meet the expectations of those affected.

Our people felt the strain. Our staff felt the strain. Our organization felt the strain. Furthermore I must highlight the efforts of everyone involved, from those who first responded to those who helped rebuild and repair the homes and get families back home, and all those who collaborated and provided support along the way at ISC and LMG and everyone in between. Our response was not perfect, but overall we viewed it as a successful one. Since then we've continued to work with ISC to provide training on emergency management for staff and elected members of council. We've also recognized the importance of good communication and collaboration internally within LMG and with ISC, which helped tremendously during our pandemic response.

I should also note that assessing the root problems has led to many flood mitigation projects in the community to deal with the high groundwater levels.

● (1215)

I thank you for the opportunity to share this with you today.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Chief Gray.

We will now go to Chief Joe Alphonse.

Chief, you have five minutes.

Chief Joe Alphonse (Tsilhqot'in National Government): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

On behalf of the Tsilhqot'in National Government, we would like to thank the committee for the invitation to appear on this important topic.

Today I will be speaking to the need for emergency preparedness within the Tsilhqot'in Nation, the only nation in Canada with aboriginal title as recognized by the Supreme Court of Canada in 2014.

In 2017, Tsilhqot'in Nation experienced multiple wildfires that burned land the size of Vancouver Island within their area. We had two of the three largest fires in the history of Canada. Eighty-five per cent of my caretaker area was burnt. Nobody has better black trees than Tsilhqot'in Nation.

The hardest things with a disaster like this are the issues of jurisdiction and remoteness of our communities. In the face of outside agency-imposed evacuations of our communities, many communities decided to manage their own people. We're the only nation in the history of Canada to say no to an evacuation order. We're going to stay behind and we're going to fight this ourselves.

Our nation is seven hours north of Vancouver with one main highway in and out. We have one power distribution line to all six

bands and no cell service. The repercussions of power going out include having no Internet access, home phone or cold storage and the dying of gathered foods.

Coming out of the 2017 wildfire, Tsilhqot'in Nation released a report called "The Fires Awakened Us". This report has 33 calls to action.

One of the best ways to ensure preparedness for indigenous communities is to recognize their jurisdiction in preparing and managing emergency situations. This takes an investment by Canada and by British Columbia to establish emergency infrastructure training for all members. This has begun, with the first tripartite management agreement in Canada between the Tsilhqot'in Nation, Canada and B.C. This agreement was again renewed this year.

Some of the issues we faced during 2017 included ISC coming to our territory, coming to our community and promising that they would cover all costs related to protecting our community. Since 2017, it has been a fight. Every last financial detail has been argued and argued again to the point that out of the \$800,000 that was owed to us, \$500,000 remains outstanding.

We went into the court system. When it became absolutely crystal clear that there was no hope that they would win that case, they paid us in full with no questions asked.

I would say that during times of crisis like that, the fires were never a threat to my community. Our region is dependent on forest fires. We see a lot of forest fires. We have all grown up and fought fires as indigenous people in our area. We know the area. We know this area better than B.C. firefighters do, better than all of the fire help brought in from throughout Canada and throughout the world. We had Australian and Mexican firefighters who had never seen forest fires reach the height that they did. We know all the game trails, the highways, the roads, the back roads. In times of emergency, our guides know that territory better than anyone else.

It's crucial that that be recognized. We have hired our own trainees. That has to be recognized and incorporated in times like this.

We believe the crisis of 2017 was the result of poor forestry management practices. We have come to know that we will be involved in every decision from this point on.

● (1220)

What we did in 2017 was an act of self-government, and that jurisdiction has to be recognized and respected.

Sechanalyagh.

The Chair: Thank you, Chief Alphonse.

We'll now proceed with the first round of questions, beginning with the Conservatives.

Mr. Shields, you have six minutes.

Mr. Martin Shields (Bow River, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

First I would go to the minister with a very specific question about communications. Can you describe to me the level of communication that you have now and where you would need to go in the sense of broadband to get the coverage you need?

Hon. David Joanasié: I believe that in terms of communications, all of our communities are serviced by satellite right now. We are working on a fibre optic cable to connect Iqaluit over the coming few years. It can't come soon enough. That's going to help tremendously to ensure that communication is solid and useful for every community. Going further, this is an area in which technology is advancing, so we want to tap into that resource as soon as we can.

• (1225)

Mr. Martin Shields: Thank you. I think what you're suggesting is that “years” is too long, and that with technology going quickly you need to be at the forefront to receive that kind of technology to make it work for safety. I'm guessing that's what you mean.

Hon. David Joanasié: Well, we make do with what we have. Our emergency response team has all the communication devices, whether it's satphones or what have you. We harness those tools and communication devices to the best of our ability and make them available to our communities as well. In particular, SPOT devices have been quite successful and useful in mitigating search and rescue efforts.

Mr. Martin Shields: Thank you.

Chief Gray, where are you with your communication systems and what do you need next?

Chief Darcy Gray: For us, the important part is continuing to build the capacity internally to address the issues. I think the other witnesses spoke to that as well.

We have a lot of capacity in our community, and it is the collaboration and support of ISC and other governments that helps in these times of crisis. I would say that we don't have the ability to have a team on standby or to have people on standby who can react in these times, and it's having that extra expertise or those extra people who can come in, whether it be equipment.... We're not so remote, but at the same time, there are still concerns with accessing certain equipment because of where we are.

I would say that through these events what we realize is that having that solid plan of communication—taking a unified command approach internally and that one contact person at ISC or with other governments—reduces a lot of the confusion that we experience.

Mr. Martin Shields: Thank you. I appreciate that.

Chief Alphonse, when you describe forestry management practices, can you just briefly explain the difference between what we've had in the past and what you believe should be done?

Chief Joe Alphonse: Yes. I think the way forestry is managed is for profit for today and really nothing else. We have beetle epidemics that are killing trees out there, and trees that are falling. The amount of fuel on the floor is unreal, and when 2017 hit, that's what created the intensity of the fires. There has to be more prescribed burning in early spring, as our ancestors used to do, so that there is no fuel, there is no forest floor and there is no threat from fires. We live in a semi-desert region of the province. We don't see a lot of rain, even in a normal year, so fires are something that our people have grown accustomed to and live with.

Mr. Martin Shields: What would you implement that would make a difference?

Chief Joe Alphonse: I think I did just finish saying that you implement fires in early spring, small, regional fires, to eliminate as much as possible areas of a lot of forest floor debris. In some cases, the dead wood that would be lying on the forest floor would be as high as 10 or 12 feet. That's not good management.

Mr. Martin Shields: That's the point that I wanted you to re-emphasize—that the fuel on the floor creates the fires, and there is a burning process to deal with that, rather than just letting it grow.

Chief Joe Alphonse: Yes, that's the case to some degree. You can also log different areas that are problematic and stuff. You should have a good inventory of the stock that you have. A store owner is going to do the same thing for what they want to sell in their store. If we're generating revenues from our natural resources, we should know what's out there and manage it.

Mr. Martin Shields: Thank you.

The Chair: We'll go to Mr. Powlowski for six minutes.

• (1230)

Mr. Marcus Powlowski (Thunder Bay—Rainy River, Lib.): First, Chief Alphonse, maybe you could submit to the committee a written copy of your 33 calls to action coming out of your “The Fires Awakened Us”. That way they can be part of the committee report. You don't have to tell us now, but they can be included.

Second, to Minister Joanasié, you talked about Clyde River and you said that because of aging infrastructure, you had an emergency there—no fuel and no water. Can you quickly tell us what the problem with the infrastructure was?

Hon. David Joanasié: It was regarding a heavy equipment maintenance program issue that we were helping manage with the hamlet. The fuel that they were using was not adequate per se, and this was hindering their service to the community for plowing roads and whatnot. However, once we got that state of emergency declaration from the hamlet, we immediately provided the support that was needed at the time, looking immediately at what was there. For instance, the airport has heavy equipment on site that is owned and operated by the government, and which we provided to the hamlet. We flew diesel in to ensure that the equipment could run smoothly.

This goes to show that when our houses are not serviced in a timely and regular manner.... I mentioned that there were water tanks that were left empty, while, of course, the sewage tanks were left full, so this had an impact on the housing and the situation that individuals and families faced. The community was in great stress and the infrastructure also suffered as a result.

Mr. Marcus Powlowski: For Chief Gray, it was flooding; for Chief Alphonse, it was fires; for Minister Joanasic, it was more of an infrastructure problem. I would suggest—because I've had problems like this in my riding with flooding as well, record flooding this spring in the Winnipeg River system in northwestern Ontario—that these sorts of happenings will become more frequent as a result of climate change. Within your communities, have you looked into the possibility that you will have increasing problems because of climate change? Do you have the resources to look at that and to make preparations while expecting that you'll have more of this to come? Do you have the resources? Have you done the studies?

I don't know who wants to start.

The Chair: Why don't we start with Chief Gray, then Chief Alphonse and then Minister Joanasic.

Chief Darcy Gray: We've done some assessments of our risk for flooding, obviously. We share the same concerns that you raised.

With this specific flood, it was because of spring runoff, a lot of snow and warming temperatures. I think it's something that we can anticipate is going to continue, but one of the issues that we ran into was that the runoff had nowhere to go. There were key culverts, there were key streams that would naturally divert the runoff in the spring that had been blocked, and so we've done a lot of remediation work over the last number of years to fix those and reduce the risk.

We're also working on a shoreline restoration project and looking at how we can beef up some of those houses that are close to the shore or may be a little lower in the water table. We do what we can. We have, I think, two or three homes that have been recommended to be moved. Throughout, we're fortunate that we have had the support of ISC, and most of these projects or remediation efforts have been funded.

Again, I think we're fortunate that we have a lot of capacity here and the ability to do these projects, but we continue to be very concerned and monitor what's going on around us.

• (1235)

The Chair: Chief Alphonse.

Chief Joe Alphonse: I think to be prepared is one thing.... We're prepared. We live here. We've lived here for generations. If fire comes, we know what to do. Nowadays, we go from flood season in the spring to fire season and pandemics. We're well rehearsed.

The issue I see here is with government officials. As I said earlier, the fires were never a threat to us. It was government officials who were a threat. The first response of every government official who came into our community in 2017 was to ask questions like, "Do you guys even know how many people you have in your community? Do you guys even have a plan?"

Why is it that every non-aboriginal person automatically thinks a first nations community doesn't know what they're doing? We have the best policies and more experience than any community in Canada in dealing with fires. We would put our fire crews up against any crew in B.C. or in Canada. I'll guarantee you right now, my crews would win hands down.

ISC, after the fact, told us, "We're not paying you guys. The federal government is not fiduciarily responsible for first nations communities in emergency situations."

Tell me where—

The Chair: Thank you, Chief.

Minister Joanasic.

Hon. David Joanasic: There are many threats through climate change, particularly around our infrastructure. In my department we do a lot of site assessments and investigation of feasibilities, whether building anew or repairing and renovating existing infrastructure. We also want to include information to ensure that there is, for instance, permafrost, or if there's more spring runoff, that the effects of climate change are considered.

We want to have more resources around that, not just from my department. Looking at the Nunavut Department of Environment and also at the federal government, if there are those resources available, then we want to tap into them. By all means, we want to tap into opportunities where we can make sure that our buildings and the people that they serve are structurally sound and are able to withstand the climate that we live in.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Gill, you have the floor for six minutes.

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the three witnesses for their presentations.

First of all, like you, Chief Gray, my heart really went out to the people of Listuguj, Quebec and the Maritimes as a result of hurricane Fiona.

Chief Gray, you also felt for the people during flooding in recent years. The first of my two questions is for you and all the witnesses. It pertains to something you mentioned in your opening remarks regarding criteria that were changed during the crisis.

What can you suggest to the committee, while everyone is alert and concerned, so the communities do not have to worry about the future and are assured of support?

[English]

Chief Darcy Gray: We went ahead with the work with the direction, from the emergency management part of ISC, to get things done, to repair those homes and to make it happen quickly. So we did that, and surprisingly quickly. We had a number of homes up in the air. We were demolishing and repairing foundations. We were doing what we were told, building back better. That became the expected standard.

So whenever the shifting criteria came in—and from our perspective it was understandable that perhaps the cause of flooding in some basements was not specific to rising groundwater in 2018 but was perhaps a cracked foundation or an old foundation made out of cinder blocks, which still needed to be repaired—these things just didn't fall under those criteria.

For us, what would be really important would be knowing clearly up front what those criteria would or wouldn't be and then, when almost a double standard has been created because of those criteria, what other programs could supplement and support something that's very much needed. We had people who were displaced for months, living in hotels, expecting this work to be done and then the criteria shifted and they were saying that home shouldn't be up in the air right now, that we should not have started working on that home, that the flooding was because of a crack in the foundation, not because of high groundwater. That put a lot of strain on people.

Having good communication and clear guidelines would have done a lot to reduce those concerns and hardships.

• (1240)

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: Thank you, Chief Gray.

If I understand correctly, you are saying that not having criteria that are known or constant could limit the types of work done and endanger people in the future.

My next question is for all the witnesses.

Something that comes up in all your testimony is that each community has experience and expertise relating to best practices. Chief Alphonse talked about forest fires, for instance. Chief Gray, for his part, talked about flooding along the shores of Chaleur Bay, which is his. Of course, all the communities have expertise.

Is there somewhere that expertise can be pooled?

Chief Alphonse said that, in addition to dealing with forest fires, his community is now having to deal with flooding, as well as other challenges. I am wondering if it would be helpful for all the first nations to pool their best practices.

So would it be helpful to have a structure where the first nations which have knowledge of the territory could share their various practices, in light of what Chief Alphonse said?

[English]

The Chair: The question is addressed to all three.

Perhaps, Chief Alphonse, you can kick it off, and then we'll go to the minister and then to Chief Gray.

Chief Joe Alphonse: Thank you.

We, again, are more than prepared to take on issues that are common in the Tsilhqot'in country—floods, fires, mainly fires—but it's a matter of recognition.

We are advocating the establishment of an evacuation centre. You evacuate communities, and a lot of times they're evacuated to big city centres. Their centres are set up in gymnasiums, not after school. This often reminds our people of residential schools. That's not appropriate. The food that's served is not culturally appropriate. Our people want meat and salmon, and they want meat and salmon well cooked. They just want it with rice or potatoes. It should be culturally appropriate. I know those people mean well, but they're missing the mark. They have to listen to indigenous leaders.

As I said, my plan, my emergency preparedness and governance in my community are probably better than that of any other community.

Our biggest obstacle is to recognize.... Their guidelines in 2017 were constantly moving. Even in terms of getting a reimbursement, they have one standard for B.C. wildfires and another standard for indigenous peoples. We just want to know what the regulations and rules are. We'll do that. We'll follow that. We have chartered accountants on staff to track every last detail of our expenditures and all of that, yet we still have to fight all of this. It's embarrassing, to tell you the truth.

• (1245)

The Chair: Minister Joanasie.

[Translation]

Mrs. Marilène Gill: If I may, Mr. Chair, since time is short, I would like to ask the witnesses to reply in writing as to whether they think such a structure would be useful for them. They could reply more fully than during my speaking time, which I have already exceeded.

[English]

The Chair: To our witnesses, a request has been made to provide to the committee answers to the question that was asked, perhaps in writing. Would that be a possibility?

I see Chief Gray nodding, and Minister Joanasie as well.

Thank you for your answer, Chief Alphonse.

Ms. Idlout, you have six minutes.

Ms. Lori Idlout: [Member spoke in Inuktitut as follows:]

There's going to be heavy investment that we're putting toward the water infrastructure, recognizing that there's a great need in this particular community. It's not just about turning the tap water on, but also the growth the communities are experiencing around other facilities that are being built or are slated to be built.

In the long haul, the water treatment plant was in need of an upgrade, so that will be part of the process. We're looking at a three-pronged approach to Rankin Inlet.

To answer the question, yes, we have response plans in Kangiqłiniq, as well as in other communities, to ensure they know what to do in case the tap water runs out.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much to our witnesses. That concludes our panel.

I know I speak on behalf of the committee in thanking you for your testimony today. You have all been living real emergencies, and you've described them very accurately and very vividly. You've also made some important recommendations, so we very much appreciate you taking the time to meet with the committee today.

Thank you very much.

The next meeting is a discussion of the non-insured health benefits report. Please come with your questions and comments.

This meeting is adjourned.

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