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Chair: Mrs. Salma Zahid



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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.)): I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 12 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

Given the ongoing pandemic situation, and in light of the recommendations from the health authorities as well as the directive of the Board of Internal Economy on Thursday, November 25, 2021, to remain healthy and safe, all those attending the meeting in person are to maintain two-metre physical distancing and must wear a non-medical mask when circulating in the room. It is highly recommended that the mask be worn at all times, including when seated. You must maintain proper hand hygiene by using the hand sanitizer provided in the room. Please refrain from coming to the room if you are symptomatic.

As the chair, I will be enforcing these measures for the duration of the meeting, and I thank members in advance for their co-operation.

For those participating virtually, I would like to outline a few rules to follow.

You may speak in the official language of your choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of either floor, English or French audio. If interpretation is lost, please inform me immediately and we will ensure that interpretation is properly restored before resuming the proceedings. The “raise hand” feature at the bottom of the screen can be used at any time if you wish to speak or alert the chair or the clerk.

When you are ready to speak, you can click on the microphone icon to activate your microphone. All comments should be addressed through the chair. When you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

With regard to a speaking list, the committee clerk and I will do our best to maintain a consolidated order of speaking for all members, whether they are participating virtually or in person.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on February 1, 2022, the committee is resuming its study of differential outcomes in Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada decisions.

It is my pleasure today to welcome the Honourable Sean Fraser, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, before the committee.

Thank you, Minister, for appearing again today.

He's also joined by the departmental officials, Caroline Xavier, associate deputy minister; Pemi Gill, director general, international network; and Farah Boisclair, director, anti-racism task force.

I would now like to welcome the minister, who will begin our discussions with five minutes of opening remarks, followed by rounds of questions.

Minister, you will have five minutes for your opening remarks. Please begin.

Hon. Sean Fraser (Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship): Thank you so much, Madam Chair.

I'm joining you today from Newfoundland. It's great to be back, making regular appearances before the committee.

[Translation]

Let me begin by saying that Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, or IRCC, has zero tolerance for racism, discrimination or harassment of any kind. However, we know that these problems exist throughout the public service and in our department.

If we really want to make a lasting difference, we must first acknowledge this reality. That's why creating safe spaces and an inclusive, healthy workplace is a priority for me, for IRCC's deputy ministers, and for the entire department.

[English]

We have an obligation to listen and to act. Our diversity in Canada is a major strength, and we all benefit, in my opinion, when we reflect that diversity in our public service. This is true for all federal agencies, and especially for IRCC, given its mandate to welcome new Canadians.

The department is committed to diversity and inclusion, not only regarding its employees, but in the work that we do as well, including the fair and non-discriminatory processing of applications that we receive from people of a wide variety of backgrounds.

I'd like to outline a few of the actions we're taking to address this ongoing commitment.

The first major step towards this commitment was to create, in 2020, our anti-racism task force. This task force guides the department's strategy to eliminate racism and applies an anti-racism lens to all of the work, policies and programs we're responsible for.

Overall, IRCC has been actively reviewing its human resource systems so that indigenous, Black, racialized peoples and persons with disabilities are better represented across IRCC at every level.

[*Translation*]

To this end, we have made 12 departmental commitments to make IRCC a fairer and more diverse place to work, to hold the department to account for its progress in this regard, and to change the composition of our workforce by 2024.

We have also made six commitments on anti-racism service delivery to measure, analyze and evaluate the impact of bias on service delivery, including a review of the services we provide to our African clients.

These commitments are important because only by measuring these parameters can we make changes.

[*English*]

Also, to deliver on our commitments, we've put in place numerous initiatives and training programs to support decision-makers across our various lines of business. Just a few examples follow.

We've set up a service delivery anti-racism working group that has mandated training to support decision-makers' understanding of procedural fairness and impartiality in the decision-making process.

The department's overseas quality assurance program has been expanded to conduct an annual review of application refusals.

We're mapping available race-related client data to identify possible bias, systemic racism and other barriers.

We're reviewing policies and programs to identify systemic racism or barriers in program and service delivery.

As we modernize and adopt new technologies, we are also developing guidance and implementing measures to mitigate bias and unintended negative consequences.

[*Translation*]

I would like to stress that we are committed to the fair application of immigration laws. As such, all immigration applications received by IRCC are assessed individually, based on the documentation provided by clients.

[*English*]

IRCC also has taken a number of steps to make real and lasting changes within the department to ensure that our actions support our commitments.

We've established the three-year anti-racism strategy, which includes in its plans mandatory bias training, mentoring and sponsorship programs; anti-racism work and training objectives included in their performance agreements; leadership programs for under-represented groups; trauma coaching sessions for Black employees and managers to enable them to recognize the impacts of racism on

mental health; employee trust circles; racial impact assessment tools for policy development; and other initiatives to support workplace cultural change.

We're also focused on targeted recruitment processes to help meet higher representation levels. We are implementing anti-racism commitments in our leader performance agreements. To this end, IRCC is initiating a new three-year hiring and retention strategy to address the diversity of our workforce.

• (1110)

[*Translation*]

We are also preparing a talent management bank, where employees can register to be considered for employment opportunities within IRCC. Through such initiatives, we are beginning to see encouraging trends in employment equity, particularly at the entry level.

However, we need to make more progress in the middle and senior management ranks to make our workforce more representative of the Canadian population.

[*English*]

We need to develop a diverse workforce so that racialized individuals can contribute to our department, especially as leaders, and can inspire others to pursue leadership roles.

Madam Chair, is that the end of my time, or is that a signal that there's a little time left?

The Chair: The five minutes are done. You can quickly wrap up for a few seconds.

Hon. Sean Fraser: If I can conclude with one sentence, I would just say that it's not lost on me that there have been some very serious issues that have pertained to IRCC. I'm not here to suggest that they have not taken place but to commit to improving them. I think it's important for our department, and it's important for Canadians.

I'd be happy to take whatever questions the committee members may have.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. You'll get an opportunity to talk further in the rounds of questioning.

We will now proceed to our first round of questioning. We will start with Mr. Hallan.

Mr. Hallan, you have six minutes. Please proceed.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan (Calgary Forest Lawn, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Minister, it's great to see you at the committee again. Thank you for coming.

In a recent article, IRCC was quoted as saying, “IRCC is committed and believes in creating a workplace free from racism, harassment, discrimination and marginalization of any kind.” Do you believe that this commitment is being met right now?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I think there are lots of examples of the spirit of that commitment not having been met. Frankly, I would be foolish to say otherwise.

That said, when I speak to the leaders within the department, including some who are with us at this committee today, I don't doubt that they're committed to effecting the kind of systemic change that will reduce the racism we see and that has been reported on.

To your question, I believe the commitment is an honest one. I think we have work to do.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: In regard to the commitment and work that needs to be done, there seems to be really no action being taken. Since 2019, IRCC's office of conflict resolution received about 50 cases of racism and discrimination. We know about the Pollara report. According to your own officials, not a single person has been reprimanded or fired. Nothing has changed. We hear about all sorts of disgusting behaviour towards racialized employees still taking place.

Now, it's one thing to commit, but it's another thing to take action on that. According to just the numbers, there's no action being taken. What are you doing? What kind of plan do you have to address what's already in front of you?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I think it's really important that we not shy away from really difficult conversations. The Pollara report included some deeply troubling discoveries. One of the things I would point out, though, is that the origin of the Pollara report was a proactive decision within the department to do something in the wake of the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers, at a time when the world was talking about doing more to combat systemic racism. The department decided it wanted to do something too. It discovered some pretty serious things that we need to address, and that was part of the justification for launching this anti-racism task force.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Respectfully, Minister, definitely there's commitment, but, as you said, the anti-racism task force was struck in 2020. That was two years ago, and not a single person has been reprimanded, according to your own officials.

Do you think there's a breakdown of trust among IRCC employees, when they don't see any action being taken?

In a recent report, a racialized employee says she reported racist attitudes towards immigration applicants from certain countries, including Cuba and Nigeria, and she is quoted as follows:

That came from the top, how we were instructed to deal with people from certain countries. There was a lot of stereotyping going on...“People from this country, people from that country, they're all liars, you know?”

Again, it is one thing to say you are committed, but after two years with no reprimands, do you not appreciate the fact that employees at IRCC don't have any faith that any change has taken place?

• (1115)

Hon. Sean Fraser: I completely appreciate the perspective, and I'm not going to tell you that all the problems have been solved since the task force was implemented, but I don't think it's fair either to suggest that no action has been taken.

Through the opportunities we're creating to provide training for people, so that they come across these kinds of horrible comments less frequently, to the extent we can continue to boost training opportunities to have more members of the senior leadership team at IRCC come from communities that have historically been marginalized, or through trauma coaching sessions that are being offered for employees, there are quite a few different aspects to this that I think are making a difference, but I'm not here to tell you that all problems have been solved.

We have a lot of work to do, but I think that there has been an honest and good faith attempt to start to address some of these very serious challenges.

Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan: Again, Minister, I'm speaking on behalf of the IRCC employees who are on some of these records—obviously they don't want to share their names—and people I've talked to, as was mentioned in the same article, about the pressures on racialized employees of IRCC, who are feeling as though even when they go to the bathroom they need to ask. If they take wash-room breaks that are too long, they get asked about it, and they're being asked to perform at a higher level.

In the same article, another racialized employee said that there are fewer career advancement opportunities within IRCC for people of colour. He said he noticed over the years a reluctance to promote employees of colour within the department. He said he went through a dozen applications before he got a promotion. There are definitely a lot of problems, and it doesn't seem as though they're coming to an end.

I will move on.

I asked you this question last time with regard to Afghanistan and Ukraine and how people are saying, and rightfully so, that there seems to be a big difference in the processing that's going on and in the priorities. About 10,000 Ukrainians have come here to Canada on a priority basis within a month, but there are still many thousands of Afghans who are stuck there. Recently, through an OPQ, we found out that only about 2,385 Afghans have come here to Canada under the government special refugee program, and that's unacceptable. As you know, the Taliban have ramped up their brutal regime. They're not letting women and young girls go to school anymore. Those Afghans are still frustrated with your government and feel that there's a huge bias against them.

What do you have to say to that?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Madam Chair, I think you signalled that my time is out. I hope these conversations come back up, because I have much to say about this issue.

The Chair: I think they will come back.

We will now move to Ms. Kayabaga.

Ms. Kayabaga, you have six minutes. Please go ahead.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga (London West, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Minister Fraser, for appearing here at our committee again, and for addressing the many questions we have.

I also just want to highlight the fact that the reports we're talking about today were released before you were a minister, so I know there are some things you are not able to be accountable for.

However, when we are talking about addressing systemic racism in an organization in a Canadian context, what are your thoughts on some of the ways we can do that using the resources and the people who are already in our country? What representation do we need in order to address that systemic racism?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Your comment was generous off the top, Ms. Kayabaga, to point out the timing of some of these problems. I adopt the view that they may not necessarily be my fault, but they are my responsibility and, frankly, my opportunity to address.

To your question about how we can use folks who are here now—or, I would even suggest, within IRCC already—to help address this problem, there is one thing I am struck by. When I come to Ottawa every week and have conversations with people who have different life experiences from mine, who come from a different country of origin or a different ethnic or racial background, the conversation changes. I talk about things differently with different people. We have more informed discussions, and I would like to think we make better decisions.

I had a conversation at a newcomer centre in Alberta during a visit last week, and I raised the fact that there is an incredible spirit of entrepreneurialism among some of the refugees who've come to my community. One of the employees stopped me in my tracks when she said that it's great there is a spirit of entrepreneurialism but that I may not realize, coming from my life experience, that this is driven by the fact that a lot of newcomers or people who come from her community weren't able to land jobs within traditional employment scenarios because they were subjected to racism at the time. To have my eyes opened to something that is so glaringly obvious in retrospect demonstrates to me that if we bring different people from different backgrounds into the conversations, we're going to have healthier discussions and make better decisions.

To your question, a big thing that I think we can do is to adopt training and promotion exercises within the department to ensure that the senior leadership and middle management in a department are not homogenous. To have people who understand the life situations of the people who are applying to come to Canada from different countries, who come from different religious or cultural backgrounds, I think, is one of the chief things we can do.

I don't want to eat up all the time. I have much to say about this, but I'll leave it for your next question.

• (1120)

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Thank you. I appreciate your answer, and it kind of flows into my next question.

In order to get to the place of addressing discrimination in IRCC and systemic racism, we have to fight for some policies. I remember being part of the group of people who were asking for the UN

Decade for People of African Descent to be something that we implement as a policy. Thankfully, we did that.

Would you agree that we should extend that, because this task force was set up in 2020, and it does not give us enough time to be able to address the issues in IRCC?

Before you answer, I'll throw in another question with that.

I had the opportunity to go to Dakar and talk to IRCC members there, who are currently serving 16 to 26 other countries in the area. They're not able to be physically in the other countries they serve. I wonder what impacts the decisions they're making—which are not informed and have no understanding of the countries they're serving—would have on discrimination or the high refusal rates we've seen in African countries?

Hon. Sean Fraser: One of the challenges I have is that we want to increase cultural awareness by having, to the extent possible, locally engaged staff who understand the intricacies of what a person may be dealing with who is applying to come to Canada from a given country.

On the flip side of that coin, establishing a physical presence in every country where I would like to have that expertise could significantly hamper the ability of our department to process people efficiently and effectively, given our ambitious immigration targets. Trying to incorporate people who have that expertise into a more centralized system is a really challenging thing to do.

I think we have a unique opportunity—and this is not informed by years of policy work in the department but something I've been personally thinking on—to use some learning during the pandemic. We can actually be tapping into expertise that exists all over the world without necessarily putting up a new building in Dakar or elsewhere. This would allow us to understand those 16 or so other countries that are serviced from that location without necessarily compromising productivity.

However, I'm not ready to implement a new policy along these lines, because we have to understand what the consequences of an approach like that might be.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Thank you, Minister.

Would you be open to receiving information or comments from IRCC workers in these places? I think they have something to say. I wonder if there could be a report through which we could hear from them on—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Ms. Kayabaga. Your time is up.

We'll now proceed to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, please begin. You will have six minutes for your round of questioning.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank the minister for making himself available, which frankly is to his credit. He has appeared before the committee on a number of occasions, and that deserves to be noted.

The minister and I have been working together for nearly four weeks, particularly on the issue of Ukrainian refugees and the air bridge. For a change, I'm going to talk to him about another issue that is equally important and causing a bit of difficulty for IRCC.

The day before yesterday, Mr. Gideon Christian spoke about racism at IRCC during his testimony to the committee. He told us that we had to face up to it, even if it was disturbing. Of course, all members of the committee are uncomfortable when it comes to racism, but we can name the problem.

My question is quite simple and I would like a yes or no answer.

Minister, is there racism at IRCC?

• (1125)

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you for the question, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

I completely agree with you.

[English]

In reality, it's obvious that there are examples of racism not just in one department but across different levels of government. It's a sickness in our society that limits the productivity of human beings who want to fully participate in our communities. IRCC is not immune from that social phenomenon that hampers our success as a nation, and we have to do everything we can to eradicate racism, not just from our department but across government and across our society.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Minister.

Are you or are you not comfortable with the use of artificial intelligence and automation, generally, within your department?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: Yes.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Are you aware of the risks this may pose?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: If you'll indulge me, I promise to make it short, but I want to give a 30-second answer, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, if that's okay.

Yes. If we're operating in a 21st-century context and trying to welcome more than 430,000 permanent residents, we need to use modern tools to make sure we don't create a system that can't handle the capacity our communities so desperately need.

We have to build protections into the use of advanced analytics to ensure we're not discriminating against one group or another. The system we use tries to funnel cases that have no complexities to people who can easily handle them, and we've seen with those cases that don't have complexities an 87% increase in efficiency. However, it's really important that we don't compromise in a way that would allow the system to make decisions or something like that, which could have a discriminatory impact. It's essential that an IRCC officer still makes the final decision on all of these cases.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Yes, but the acceptance rate for international students is 90% at McGill University, while the rate is 21% at the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, 29% at the Université du Québec à Rimouski and 40% at the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi. The difference is more pronounced now that IRCC is automating part of the triage process.

Doesn't it bother you that these differences between IRCC acceptance rates for French and English universities are now more pronounced?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I think we have a great opportunity to welcome a lot of francophone newcomers and a lot of francophone international students.

I don't think advanced analytical models are the only source of the problem.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I understand that.

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: Is that okay? I'm not sure of the expression in French.

There are challenges I see when I look at the applications, in terms of where they come from, for students to study at designated learning institutions that are francophone in nature. It's a big issue for me in Nova Scotia with l'Université Sainte-Anne, and in Quebec, of course, as well, but I wouldn't attribute the issue to just advanced analytics.

I think it provides an opportunity for us to actually cure this differential and bring in more international students, who make excellent permanent residents after they arrive.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: So you're telling us that, while the use of these analytical models doesn't fully explain the problem, it is part of it.

Minister, in November 2021, you promised to personally verify that unconscious biases were not causing civil servants to discriminate against French-speaking Africans.

What is the status of this verification?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: For the sake of clarity, I have not been able to identify that advanced analytics is part of this particular problem. When I look at the applications from certain francophone-speaking countries in certain parts of the world, year to year they're in the rough ballpark of anglophone-speaking countries from the same part of the world.

One of the challenges we have, when we look at the requirement for proof of income, for example, when we're dealing with a country whose economy is not as strong—where the average household income is significantly less than Canada's—are that a lot of people are not admissible to Canada as a result of that particular policy. When we're dealing with French-speaking nations in West Africa, obviously the population is disproportionately Black, and it's a challenge when you look at those differential outcomes.

However, in terms of the English-speaking versus French-speaking, the differential year to year is not as great as I thought it would be. I still think there's a massive opportunity for us to make policy changes, including by introducing the student direct stream to some of these countries, to boost the rate of people who come here and ensure that they're set up for success when they arrive.

• (1130)

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Minister.

[English]

The Chair: We'll now proceed with Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan, you can please begin, for six minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the minister and the officials for returning to the committee.

Witnesses have noted differential actions from IRCC, and they noted that emergency measures will vary depending on where they come from. For example, with the special immigration measures for Ukrainians, they noted that it's much easier for them to come to Canada versus those in other regions who are also in need of getting to safety. They all said that they supported the special measures for Ukraine, but they're concerned that it's not being applied elsewhere.

All of the witnesses agreed that the government should extend those special immigration measures to other regions also experiencing conflict, such as Afghanistan, Yemen, Hong Kong, etc.

Will the minister do as the witnesses have suggested?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I need to learn, to see what the impact of this approach is going to be first. However, there is a reason we've designed this specific program in regard to the situation in Ukraine.

If I want to contrast it to Afghanistan, there are really two major differences. One is the ease with which Ukrainians have safe passage outside of Ukraine to the west and can find a pathway where they can be safely processed and go through our biometric screening process as well. There are huge challenges on the ground, but by comparison, in Afghanistan, we're dealing with specific people we've made a commitment to, who are in a territory where the

Taliban are not letting them leave the country and they cannot transit safely throughout or outside of Afghanistan.

The second component is that, from our conversations with European counterparts and the Canadian-Ukrainian community, we expect there is a desire to return amongst the vast majority of those who are coming for a temporary period to Canada from Ukraine.

With respect to Afghanistan, I wish the circumstances were the same. I don't have the same hope that it will be safe for the people we're welcoming permanently as refugees to return home one day, despite their potential desire to do so. That's allowed us to create our different responses for the unique circumstances.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you, Minister.

Surely the minister can ensure, for example, that there are biometric centres in neighbouring countries. Even though Afghans would have a tough time getting to the third country without any help from the Canadian government, nonetheless those measures should be in place to allow and to facilitate that. I hope the government will undertake these measures and not just say that we'll watch and see how it goes. Time is of the essence. People cannot wait, and lives hang in the balance.

With respect to third countries, in fact the minister noted that there are specific targets in Afghanistan that he's looking at. I know of one interpreter. He himself got here, and he's working day and night to bring his family here. He was successful in bringing 15 of his family members here: his mother, his father and some of his siblings. However, of the 15, one brother was left behind in Pakistan. Even though his biometrics have been done and approved—all of the screening has been done—somehow he's been left out. Why is that?

Hon. Sean Fraser: First, on the issue of biometrics in third countries, we have some capacity in different countries and have conversations with partners in the region. We may not have the same prevalence of these application centres that we have pre-existing in certain parts of Europe, but we do pursue and are pursuing that specific strategy. I appreciate your suggestion very much.

I don't have the information for this one specific individual, and I wouldn't be at liberty to talk about an individual case, because sometimes there are complexities on a given file. However, I hate to see families separated, particularly when they've gone through such trauma. If you would like, to the extent that this person is admissible to Canada and we can make some accommodation, then that's something that would be worth following up on.

• (1135)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I will certainly follow up with the minister. I would also note, though, that a number of other families in Pakistan cannot make it to Canada for some strange reason. I would note that for the minister and the officials to look into.

At our last meeting, Professor Christian noted that the Nigerian student express requires Nigerians to prove English-language proficiency, even though English is their official language in Nigeria. It's the official language for all formal studies. Foreign students from Nigeria are exempt from proof of language proficiency in all academic institutions, but not in IRCC. Why is that? Why is there this differential treatment?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'm sorry; do you mean differential treatment for Nigerians applying to IRCC versus their learning institutions?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Well, IRCC requires Nigerians to provide language proficiency in English when they are applying for their student visa, even though English is their official language and is the official language of all of their formal studies. All academic institutions recognize that and do not require proof of language proficiency, but IRCC requires them specifically to provide language proficiency.

Why would we do that? Why is there that differential treatment? Do you make other countries whose official language is English provide language proficiency?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Madam Chair, I apologize. I took up some of the member's time, so perhaps you'll allow me to offer her a response despite the fact that the time has expired.

If this is an opportunity for us to streamline the process in a way in which the vast majority of people don't run into a language barrier when they apply, I'd be interested in doing that. The Nigerian student express system has seen a significant increase in approvals overall. If we can improve it further, then I'm interested.

I want to be careful to ensure that we don't jeopardize, particularly for students whose mother tongue may not be English, the important protections that come with someone satisfying the language requirements. To the extent that we can work together to identify opportunities to further increase the acceptance rates for Nigerian students, I think it would be a very positive thing for Canada.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. The time is up. We will now proceed to our second round.

Mr. Genuis, you have five minutes for your round of questioning. Please begin.

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister.

Minister, following some of the discussion about Afghanistan, I want to ask you about a specific situation. It's a situation I wrote to you about last week. It's one that's very important to people in my constituency.

One of my constituents travelled to Afghanistan, at obviously great personal risk, to help a family that he was acquainted with leave the country. Subsequently, this constituent of mine raised the finances required to privately sponsor this family. They're in Pakistan now, in a very tenuous situation. The couple are human rights defenders. The man is a human rights lawyer and the woman was a teacher at a girls' school. They were prepared to apply. They were told not to submit their application because the navigation unit is not giving pre-approvals right now due to switching systems.

Can you speak to that technical issue? As well, can you advise on whether you'd be prepared to intervene to expedite this case? I think this is a very worthy case and a very serious situation. These folks are in a very tenuous situation in Pakistan right now.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Before I answer, I will say that I have been impressed with your consistency in defending folks internationally for their work to defend human rights. I appreciate it very much.

You'll forgive me, but I'll have to look into the technical issue and provide you with an answer on the back end.

I will go over your letter on the back end of this meeting and provide you with a response. I don't want to prejudge the nature of my intervention, despite the fact that it clearly sounds like a sympathetic case. I would like to apprise myself of all the details and give myself an opportunity to do that in a thoughtful way. I'll use this intervention on your part as an opportunity to dig in deeply and to provide you with a proper response.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you, Minister. I really appreciate that.

I know a week is a relatively short amount of time in terms of turning around correspondence, and I'm not always that efficient myself, but given the nature of the case and its urgency, I did want to highlight it. Thank you for committing to looking into it and following up on those issues.

I found it interesting that in response to my colleague Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe's question about racism at IRCC, you referred to racism as a "sickness". I would be more inclined to describe racism as a moral evil, as opposed to a sickness. I suppose the difference is that one implies that it's something that just happens, whereas another implies that there are specific people who are responsible for the things they do and should be held accountable for them.

I was thinking of that description in the context of my colleague Mr. Hallan's pointing out that there have not been consequences for individuals who engage in racist behaviour. I'd like to know if you would agree with my description of racism as a moral evil as opposed to a sickness—maybe it's both—and then also speak to this issue of whether you believe individuals who have engaged in racist behaviour should be held accountable and should be reassigned or removed. What is appropriate in terms of identifying actors and consequences?

• (1140)

Hon. Sean Fraser: Sure, and look, I cannot disagree with your assessment that racism is a moral evil. That's a fair descriptor. It can also be a sickness—I think both things can be true—particularly in the sense that, left unchecked, it has the potential to spread throughout communities and infect the minds of people who may be developing opinions about the world. I think it's important that across society we work with people, starting at a young age, to provide education about equality rights.

In terms of the second aspect to your question, of course, when somebody takes part in behaviour that constitutes a moral evil, it's appropriate to seek some sort of consequence. I want to be careful, though, because I think there are some opportunities to deal with unconscious bias in a way that's maybe different from how we deal with somebody who's specifically aiming to do harm to another person on the basis of their race—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Minister, I'm sorry, but I have 30 seconds left. I want to say that I agree with the distinction you're making between intentional and unconscious behaviour, and I think that is reasonable.

Another colleague asked about why Ukraine is being treated in a different way from Afghanistan. She also mentioned Hong Kong. You didn't speak to the Hong Kong piece of it. Could you speak to whether the kinds of measures being used in Ukraine are being contemplated for Hong Kong, and why or why not?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Sure, and look, in a few seconds, it will be challenging.

Right now, the situation in Ukraine, based on the temporary nature of people wanting to leave and come back when it's safe to do so and the ability to safely exit.... Those are two of the driving forces. To the extent that this proves to be easier, we may be able to repeat that kind of a response elsewhere in the world, but we will want to make sure that the facts mirror the situation in Ukraine before we take such an approach.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will proceed to Mr. Dhaliwal.

Mr. Dhaliwal, you will have five minutes. Please proceed.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Surrey—Newton, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Minister, welcome. It seems that you are becoming a regular member of this committee.

I will turn the channel towards the students and the temporary foreign workers who are in Canada with the Canadian experience class. One of your mandates is to clear the pathway to permanent residency for international students and temporary foreign workers. IRCC hasn't held an express entry draw for federal skilled workers program candidates since before the pandemic, and the Canadian experience class draws have been paused since September 2021.

I have been asked repeatedly about when these draws will resume, because many workers are concerned about losing their status in Canada. Could you please touch on the plans that IRCC may have to resume the draws, which would help meet immigration level targets for this year?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you very much, Mr. Dhaliwal.

I appreciate the question. This is important. I know that there is an enormous community of interest in watching this issue. It is my intention to do what I can to allow people to stay by extending postgraduate work permits or some proxy that will have the same result and that may be as effective.

One of the challenges we're dealing with is a result of the pivot towards resettling people who were here temporarily during the

pandemic as permanent residents. It hampered our ability to use the federal skilled workers program, to a certain degree. I am very focused on the need to do whatever we can to address the labour shortage. There are significant numbers of people who are here now. I want to create an opportunity for them to stay and to continue to work, and it's extremely important that we do this.

I don't have a specific date for you. We're working as quickly as we can. We have to finalize a bit of policy work before we can roll out the kinds of changes I'm talking about, but our goal is to allow those who are here working to stay and to continue working until they have an opportunity to complete the PR process, whether it's through a federal skilled worker or a CEC draw.

● (1145)

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Recent IRCC inventory showed in the past two months that IRCC was able to process over 4,700 Canadian experience class applications, and there were about 10,000 CEC persons left to be processed at this stage. It looks like IRCC will catch up on this backlog during the summer.

There is also a big backlog when it comes to reuniting family members, whether it's spousal cases or the parents of Canadians.

My question is this: What are your plans to catch up with that backlog?

Hon. Sean Fraser: The processing challenges aren't unique to one line of business or another, though some are impacted to a different degree.

There are three different categories of measures, if I can describe it that way, that we're dealing with to improve the situation. The first is resources; the second is technology, and the third is spaces.

On resources, I shared with you previously that we've hired more than 500 staff, who are now fully trained and working and producing. In addition, the money in the economic and fiscal update, mostly on the temporary side of business, is going to make a meaningful difference.

You would have seen from late January the announcement we made about certain technological features that are coming online, and I believe that was a subject of testimony before this committee previously, so I won't rehash all the details. Suffice it to say that the PR case tracker for family reunification is now online, and people can get real-time updates on their own files. There are a number of other measures I can go into if you wish.

Finally, on spaces, increasing the number of overall spaces will help us play catch-up to a certain degree, but I will say that since January we've now processed more than 143,000 PR applications. By the end of February, in the first two months, we saw more than 100,000 approvals. We are actually processing at a much faster pace than before the end of last year, and it's encouraging to see some of these investments take hold to make a very significant difference in terms of the rate at which we have been able to process in the first few months of this year.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: In the parents class, is there going to be a draw soon? We haven't heard anything on that particular category.

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'll apologize in advance, because I don't have an announcement to make at committee today on the date of the next draw.

Sukh, you have been a huge advocate, I have to say, for the parents and grandparents stream in particular. One of the things you and I have discussed before is to make sure that we're doing this in a way that is fair. It's a real challenge, because we have almost 10 times as many applications as we historically have spaces.

I will point out in the two seconds before I run out of time here that we plan, over the next few years, on increasing the spaces from 23,500 to 32,000. We're going to continue to work to try to bring more people through the stream, including one of our former colleagues, the current mayor of Edmonton, who arrived on the parents and grandparents stream when he was only 18, as he followed his family to Canada.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will now proceed to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you will have two and a half minutes. Please begin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Minister, like my colleague Ms. Kayabaga, I would like to highlight the fact that you have been in office for a short time and there are many problems that existed before you came. However, your political party has been in government since 2015, and in the last seven years, I have not seen many positive changes in IRCC.

I believe you are sincere in your desire to change things. In fact, on several occasions, including last Tuesday at this committee, we were told that the establishment of an immigration ombudsman could ensure that people are better protected from unfair decisions in the processing of their immigration applications.

I have asked you this question twice before, but you seemed ambivalent about it. Today I'm going to ask you more directly, since you say you want to change things.

Do you support the creation of an immigration ombudsman?

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: Look, honestly, I need to do some more thinking on this particular proposal. I would love to come out and say, yes, I have made up my mind—it's this or it's that. It's an area

on which I want to see the benefit of the testimony and the recommendations that come from this committee. I expect, given your question, I know where you may land on this particular issue.

I also want to see an opportunity to determine whether some of the measures we're introducing to address some of these systemic problems can actually make a meaningful difference without necessarily having to go down the path of appointing an ombudsperson.

Until I'm fully seized with the facts and the potential consequences of one path or another, I'll reserve judgment, but I look forward to hearing more of what the committee has to say on this particular point.

● (1150)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Perfect.

I'm still going to keep asking you questions the next time you come in. Trust me, Minister.

You said that there are various mechanisms that can ensure procedural fairness for every applicant.

Where should a student turn if his or her application is rejected for some inexplicable reason, for example?

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: It's really important.... I personally am not making decisions on individual cases, and it's essential that the minister not fetter the discretion of those who are making the—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Please excuse me for interrupting you, Minister. Perhaps you didn't quite understand my question.

I am not asking if you make the decisions yourself. You talked about mechanisms that students can use when their application is rejected for an inexplicable reason.

What are these mechanisms? To whom should these students turn?

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: Largely speaking, the applications can be reconsidered, so there could be a reapplication. You could apply for reconsideration, or you could challenge in Federal Court.

As somebody who practised law before I got into politics, that's not an option for many people. The reality of the situation is that the decision-making process on independent case files has to remain independent from me, but the process to reapply remains available, in most circumstances, to people who are seeking to come to Canada.

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Minister—

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: So it would be a good thing to have an ombudsman.

[English]

The Chair: Your time is up. Thank you.

We will now proceed to Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan, you will have two and a half minutes. You can please proceed.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: To put it on the public record for the minister's information, the NDP has called for an ombudsperson for immigration in our platform for years now. We certainly support that, and I think it absolutely is required. I hope the minister will take that seriously and implement something like that.

With respect to differential treatment, it doesn't start in one place but actually is throughout the system. The committee has been advised that racialized women's organizations are being treated differently. They've been asked for a detailed breakdown of admin budget costs, when other sectors are not required to do so.

Settlement officers have to provide additional information to substantiate and justify their decisions, and this extends to clients as well. In India, there's hyper-scrutiny for marriage fraud. Muslim female clients are being asked questions of a sexual nature with regard to their relationship with their male spouses, as proof of marriage. For China, DNA testing is often required for child sponsorship applications. For Africa, genuine parent and child relationships are often questioned.

Will the minister ensure that there is an independent review into these concerns as part of a larger independent review of systemic racism within IRCC and report his findings publicly?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'm open to digging into this. One thing I hesitate to do, before we have an opportunity to address some of these challenges, is to immediately react to say that the right thing to do is to ship it out to an independent body. To the extent that there are problems we can address, I think it's incumbent upon me, as the minister, to address them before we start delaying by giving it to a third party.

For example, questions about sexual activity for somebody who's trying to prove the legitimacy of their marriage are heartbreaking for that person to go through. To the extent that we can deal with these sorts of things by investing in training for officers, I don't think we need to wait for an independent report to tell us that might be an appropriate thing to do.

To your question, I'm open to building this into a broader part of the anti-racism work going on within the department. Before I would commit to saying that we have to ship it out to a third party for an independent review, I'd have to satisfy myself that we're not able to do it on our own, even though I know we should.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Is the minister admitting that these concerns exist and that they are tied to systemic racism within the department?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I want to be careful. I know there's a temptation for anyone watching these scenarios to latch on to the specific

words I use. I don't believe that the entire organization is a racist organization. I don't believe that the entire organization is perfect. I think it's a large organization—

• (1155)

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Minister. Your time is up.

We will now proceed to Mr. Redekopp.

You will have four minutes, and then we will end our round of questioning with Mr. El-Khoury for another four minutes.

Mr. Brad Redekopp (Saskatoon West, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to address what, to me, seems to be a bit of an elephant in the room. We had the conflict in Afghanistan in the last year, and it continues. In August, the government stated that it wanted to bring in 40,000 Afghans. So far, there have been about 8,500. That's eight months and a little over 1,000 a month. This, of course, is a racialized community in Afghanistan.

We've now had the conflict in Ukraine. You stated that we've brought in 10,000 white Ukrainians in the last three months. That's triple the rate of Afghanistan. Certainly Ukrainians deserve to come here—they need help—but so do the others.

Under your watch, it seems like you've set up a racialized system, a two-tiered system, where white Europeans come in faster than people from Afghanistan. How do you explain that?

Hon. Sean Fraser: It's really important for people to understand that this is not the motivation in any way, shape or form.

With respect to the numbers, there are now approximately 9,400 Afghan refugees who have landed in Canada. I had an opportunity to meet with a number of our new neighbours who live in Alberta during a recent visit.

The situation in Ukraine allows and demands a different response. With respect to Afghanistan, these are people, to use your language, whom we are bringing here. These are people who are benefiting from the full suite of settlement supports. We are doing it through a traditional refugee resettlement process.

With respect to Ukraine, we've made it easier for people to come. We're looking at what appropriate supports may look like. We're looking at how we can facilitate people's entry into Canada. The 10,000 who've come have come from the beginning of the year and have largely come here under their own devices. It has more to do with their ability to leave Ukraine, as compared with those who don't have that ability to leave Afghanistan, than it does a decision by the federal government to be more kind to one group of people than another.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: That's in effect what's happening, though. I mean, both are people who are dealing with conflict and who are in terrible situations. The system you've set up makes it much, much easier; to your point, you've made it very easy for Ukrainian people to come in as visitors, but you haven't extended that same ease of entry to Afghans.

How do you explain that? It doesn't seem right.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Look, I understand the challenge that a lot of people have with it. I share, to some degree, the sensitivities toward the need to do everything we can to support everyone who's vulnerable and fleeing conflict, but I would object to just one piece of your argument, if you'll allow me. It's not the government that's making it more difficult to leave Afghanistan than it is to leave Ukraine. It's the Taliban. The reality on the ground is that it is really challenging for people to leave.

On the temporary nature of the program—which is one of the other challenges we have—we have faith, because of the situation that's playing out, because of the situation being in flux, that there is a really serious possibility that the vast majority of people who want to seek safe haven in Canada actually wish to return to Ukraine. I've heard this from Ukrainians in Canada and from the commissioner of the European Union during a meeting this week. They're doing everything they can to make sure that people go back to Ukraine when it's safe to do so.

I really wish that were true in Afghanistan, but since the Taliban has seized control, I hate to admit that the likelihood that people who are coming here are going to be able to return is just not there. We have to make a plan to support these people and to welcome them on a permanent basis, and that changes the tools we can use.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: The election, of course, threw a big wrench into that. At the end of the day, there are way more ways to process biometrics near Ukraine that aren't available in Afghanistan. I mean, these are things that you as a department can set up, that you can impact, so I believe you're making it more difficult for Afghans to get here as well by not having the systems and processes that need to be in place for this to happen.

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting. Time is—

Hon. Sean Fraser: When we secure safe passage for people fleeing Afghanistan, biometrics will be part of that approach.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Mr. El-Khoury, you have four minutes. Please begin.

[Translation]

M. Fayçal El-Khoury (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for your generosity with us, as you frequently come here to answer our questions and enlighten us.

You were appointed to the position of Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship a few months ago and you have succeeded in making Canada an example to the world. I congratulate you heartily for that.

The department has conducted an algorithmic impact assessment to evaluate the analytical models used for temporary resident visa applications.

Could you provide further details on how this assessment has reduced the risk of bias being built into the advanced analytics program?

• (1200)

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: The key point for me when it comes to the use of advanced analytics is really about making sure that we can process cases as efficiently as possible without compromising the integrity of the process. We want to ensure that every applicant gets a fair chance to make their application and have that application heard.

When we use advanced analytics, essentially what it does is that it identifies the simple cases that don't have any complexity. Think of somebody who has come and returned to Canada many times and has always followed the rules. The use of advanced analytics can identify that application and make sure it's dealt with by someone in the department who will be able to process it fairly quickly.

For situations that have complexities—maybe there was a security flag on a file, or maybe it involves factors that lead to somebody needing to take a deeper look—they will go through the ordinary assessment process and still benefit from an officer who has to go through all the application information.

It is essentially a sorting mechanism that has yielded, for non-complex cases, an 87% increase in efficiency.

If we're dealing with the non-complex cases, which are far more likely to be approved without having to go down and do a deeper analysis, it makes sense to me, because the people who are going into that side of the assessment are not being prejudiced. They're being treated more quickly.

To the extent that there are people who may have more complex cases, every single file still has to be reviewed and approved by a human being who works for IRCC, not a computer system. The system doesn't make recommendations. It doesn't make approvals or rejections, but it allows us, on those simpler cases, to deal with them in a more expeditious way.

[Translation]

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: Thank you.

Minister, could you briefly and more specifically describe how the program designed for the situation in Afghanistan and Syria differs from the one designed for the situation in Ukraine?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'm sorry. My sound is having a problem. Would you mind repeating the question?

[Translation]

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: Could you briefly and more specifically describe how the program designed for the situation in Afghanistan and Syria differs from the one designed for the situation in Ukraine?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: Certainly. Afghanistan is, though, a unique situation, a rather traditional refugee response with some really unique innovations. With respect to Afghanistan, it's traditional in the sense that we will be getting people to Canada and extending to them the full range of settlement supports that refugees typically receive, but it's unique in the way that we've identified the special immigration measures for those who've made a significant and enduring contribution to Canada.

It's unique in the way that we've built in a family reunification component for the extended families of previously resettled interpreters, and then it's again more traditional in the way that we're embracing people who are fleeing persecution based on who they are as a person. With respect to—

Madam Chair, has my time ended? I saw your card.

The Chair: Yes. Can you wrap up in the next 30 seconds?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Certainly.

With respect to Ukraine, the situation is unique because we're dealing with a country where people have maintained access to leave in a westerly direction, and we believe, through many conversations, that a lot of the people are not looking to move permanently to Canada.

Some are, and we are developing a family sponsorship stream for that specific purpose, but the people who are coming here are likely to go back, so in an emergency we created a temporary program that allows them to get here, and we've pulled off almost all the requirements that would normally lead to a person being rendered inadmissible to Canada so that we can welcome more people as quickly as possible.

● (1205)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. With this, our first panel comes to an end.

On behalf of all the members of this committee, Minister, I really want to thank you for taking the time to appear before the committee and for taking questions from the members.

Now we will go to the officials. The clerk has already done the sound check, so we can proceed with our second panel.

Can I ask the officials to please turn on their cameras, so that we can begin our round of questioning?

Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, members. I sincerely appreciate your willingness to dedicate so much time and energy to such an important topic. Thank you, thank you, thank you: I look forward to seeing your report.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you for being here as well.

The Chair: I welcome our officials. We have Caroline Xavier, associate deputy minister; Pemi Gill, director general, international network; and Farah Boisclair, director, anti-racism task force.

We can go directly into our round of questioning. We will start with Mr. Redekopp.

Mr. Redekopp, you have six minutes.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to start with Bangladesh. The high commissioner appeared at this committee, asking for the country of Bangladesh to be admitted into the student direct stream. I specifically asked the minister on March 3 if he could make every effort to have Bangladesh enter into the direct stream program for foreign students, and his answer was that he was certainly open to it.

For the associate deputy minister, it's been 20 days or so. First of all, has the minister talked to you about getting Bangladesh into the student direct stream?

Ms. Caroline Xavier (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): I haven't been spoken to directly by the minister with regard to opening the student direct stream to Bangladesh, but that does not mean it's not something being worked on in the department.

We have many streams we're exploring where that may be possible, and we have to ensure that the country would be able to meet the conditions required for the SDS. Although personally I have not heard—

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Can you confirm that Bangladesh is in the process of being considered for SDS right now?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: I cannot personally confirm it, but I can double-check...unless Pemi Gill has that information, and it doesn't seem that she does. No, I cannot confirm it to you at this moment in time.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Thank you. That's disappointing.

I want to switch over to the Pollara report, and obviously the report of racism in the senior management ranks. In particular, it mentioned this. I know the minister just said that more needs to be done for senior managers, but my colleague, Mr. Genuis, asked if there were consequences, and we didn't actually get an answer to that question.

I just want to ask the associate deputy minister about the bonuses.

Can you confirm that bonuses were paid to senior management in IRCC for the last year?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Yes, I can confirm that executives throughout the organization have received performance pay, as per the normal process of performance management.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: That's good.

Was anyone's bonus withheld or reduced because they exhibited racial bias?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: As the minister said, there is zero tolerance with regard to racism, discrimination or harassment within the department, and we are very committed to doing what is necessary to bring change within the department. With that said—

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Were their bonuses changed or reduced?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: I won't be able to speak to specific cases, but what I can say is that the anti-racism strategy and work we're doing is very much linked to the performance management reviews of all of our managers and executives within the department.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: You don't have to give names or anything, but was there at least one case where somebody had their bonus reduced because of exhibiting racial bias, or is that non-existent in senior management?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: I would not say that it's non-existent, but I cannot confirm to you that there was a specific case to that effect.

Having said that, what I can say is that we take this very seriously as part of the performance review of all of our management discussions with regard to how a person has behaved. The racism aspect of it in terms of the behaviour, or if there were issues within the organization, would be part of the assessment of the performance bonus.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Are you saying, then, that there are clauses or words that speak to the performance assessment and that you can provide that to the committee?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Yes. I can tell you that all of our performance management accords clearly identify what our expectations are with regard to committing to the anti-racism strategy of our department, including taking unconscious bias training. As well, as of April 1, any manager who will have delegated authority must again take unconscious bias training to ensure that they are adhering to the behaviour and expectations we have of them.

• (1210)

Mr. Brad Redekopp: However, there are no impacts on pay, which is very disappointing, from what I'm hearing you say.

I want to switch over and talk about the Filipino community in my riding, which is very significant. There's a Filipino woman who had terminal breast cancer. She had a deportation order against her, and IRCC issued that order mainly because her husband had decided he was done with her and he divorced her. CBSA was carrying out an order made by IRCC that was clearly based on racism, because a white man was dumping his terminally ill wife from the Philippines.

We have human trafficking laws to protect vulnerable women like her. My question is this: What steps is the anti-racism task force taking to address issues of bias in IRCC officers when dealing with issues of human trafficking, like in this case in my riding?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Again, as I mentioned before, the anti-racism strategy is being baked into every part of our organization. That includes policy development, client service delivery and the everyday management of what we're aiming to do in the department.

Training is being provided to all decision-makers, especially those who have to process some of these applications you mentioned, so it's ensuring that those decisions are addressed in a more consistent manner.

There is also the review of how decisions are taken within the organization to ensure that the consistency of the act is applied, in-

cluding looking at what could be perceived as bias in the decisions. It is very much part of the training to ensure that people are making decisions based on the facts before them and not on race.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Thank you. I would strongly encourage you to put pay into that matrix as well.

I asked an Order Paper question on the average time for temporary foreign workers to be approved. For home child care providers, the average is 684 days. That's two years. Sports referees can come in 85 days, or for government public relations it's 40 days.

What steps are being taken to eliminate the racial biases against Filipina women who are coming in as home care providers and to have the approval process sped up?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Again, one thing we're working on really actively is ensuring that our decision-makers are culturally aware and culturally sensitive, and that they have the necessary training required to be able to make the right decisions. The caregiver program is one that is a priority for the department.

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting. The time is up for Mr. Redekopp.

You will get an opportunity in the second round. We will now proceed to Mr. Ali.

Mr. Ali, you will have six minutes. You can please begin.

Mr. Shafqat Ali (Brampton Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, officials, for being here.

In 2020, the approval rate for temporary resident visas for spouses and partners with a spousal sponsorship application was 46%. However, individuals residing in a visa-exempt country, who need only to apply for an electronic travel authorization, had a 90% approval rate.

Please explain to the committee this difference in approval rates.

A further question on this is, why are applicants from visa-exempt countries more successful with their applications than those from countries requiring visas?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Not knowing exactly the specific cases that you're speaking of, it is true that someone who is able to apply for an electronic travel authorization from a non-visa requiring country has to complete that process and has to be truthful in their application and the process.

A person without a visa obviously has a faster way of being able to apply for a temporary visit to Canada. However, once a person—

Mr. Shafqat Ali: I'm sorry to interrupt. I am not speaking about specific cases. It's that overall, in 2020, the application approval rate was 46%, but there was a 90% approval rate in cases in which the person needed only an electronic travel authorization. These are the stats.

Ms. Caroline Xavier: I'm going to pass it on to my colleague, Pemi Gill, who may have a better opportunity to share additional information that I don't have handy.

Ms. Pemi Gill (Director General, International Network, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you for the clarification.

With regard to the ETA, the electronic travel authorization, it is a means for visa-exempt clients to confirm for entry. However, it doesn't have the same eligibility requirements as the temporary resident program.

Clients who are applying under the temporary resident program need to demonstrate the bona fides for their visit, as well as providing the other required documentation. ETA clients are exclusively required to register, such that we have information on who is entering the country.

The two are not comparable from a program design perspective.

• (1215)

Mr. Shafqat Ali: Thank you.

The Immigration and Refugee Act requires spouses going through a sponsorship process to prove to visa officers that their relationship is genuine. What are the factors used to assess the genuineness of the relationship for family reunification or sponsorship applications?

For my second question on the same issue, what might be expected in a western context that might not be appropriate in other contexts? Are officers trained to use culturally sensitive ways to judge the genuineness of the marriage?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: When assessing the relationship between spouses and common-law partners, officers must be satisfied that the relationship that exists is genuine. That's irrelevant of which country the application is being processed from.

The application kit requires that the applicants submit certain documents as proof of their relationship. That could include things such as pictures and things of that nature.

In the case of applicants in the spouse or common-law partner in Canada class, officers must also be satisfied that the applicant is living with the sponsor in Canada.

If documents submitted do not provide adequate proof of that genuine conjugal relationship within the context of a marriage or common-law relationship, or if officers doubt that the applicant is living with the sponsor, for example, an officer may again request additional information or schedule an interview to be able to confirm the genuineness of the relationship.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: When officers suspect that there are certain things, and that it is not a genuine application, are you aware that in that interview they ask certain questions related to the couple's sexual relationship?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: I'm going to ask Pemi to answer your question with more precision than I might.

Ms. Pemi Gill: For family class applications—spousal, conjugal partner and common-law relationships—the requirements under IR-PA indicate assessment of a genuine relationship, and there are different qualifications for each of those three subcategories in family class.

For the most part, the assessment is done based on the evidence that is provided by clients and by the assessments done on paper. If there is insufficient information for the officer to be satisfied, then an interview may be required or additional documents requested. As part of the interview process, officers who undertake those interviews have undergone unconscious bias training. They're also seized with cultural issues and with being aware of the local context in which they are doing the interview.

For the most part, our first attempt is always to have evidence provided by the client that addresses the concerns that are being raised, and it's only in circumstances where that is insufficient that an interview is one of the options looked at for further assessment.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: Thank you.

Do you encounter fraud in these sorts of spousal cases? Do we have any stats? What percentage do you find are—

Is my time up?

The Chair: Yes.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: I'm sorry. I've just had four and a half minutes here.

The Chair: No—it was six. Your time is up.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: Okay. I'm sorry. Thank you so much.

The Chair: We will now proceed to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have six minutes. Please begin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I thank our witnesses for being here with us today and taking the time to come and speak on this extremely important study.

Ms. Xavier, you are dealing with a real problem of systemic racism at IRCC. I think that is a fact. I think the minister has even expressed his desire that unconscious bias not create discrimination against people who come from different parts of the world.

Who do your officers talk to if they witness racism?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Thank you for the question.

As the minister was saying, we take the anti-racism strategy very seriously. We don't want to see harassment or discrimination in the department.

One of the things that is paramount in the department—I've seen it, especially since I've been in the job—is that anyone who sees anything wrong should report it. They can tell their immediate supervisor or the senior officer responsible for internal disclosure of wrongdoing. They can tell our Office of Conflict Resolution, or they can tell our Anti-Racism Task Force.

So there are a number of ways in which employees can report a problem. We recognize that sometimes people may not trust the person they can talk to. That's why we make sure that employees are comfortable bringing these issues to the department.

In my opinion, the situation has improved over the last two years. We are making the process more open and less stigmatizing. It is easier to talk about discrimination and harassment. We are also aware that there are gaps and room for improvement in our department.

• (1220)

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I sense that you are sincere.

Despite everything, as you've probably seen or read in reports, some employees say they don't have the tools to file a complaint without fearing negative effects on their career. This is a very sensitive situation, and it does not help us to overcome the problems of racism at IRCC.

How can we do this?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: You are right. We know that people who are victims of racism or who have had a bad experience are very afraid to speak out about it, for fear of the repercussions on their career.

We have set up what we call trust circles. This refers to a conversation that these people can have voluntarily and directly with senior officials, myself, Deputy Minister Catrina Tapley and others in senior management. We are all prepared to hear from them, to hear about their experiences. This is an opportunity for them to vent. Moreover, no one else knows that they were part of this trust circle. We feel that it is also an opportunity to better understand the problems of the organization.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: If they are concerned that whistleblowing will damage their career, then it means that there have been events where employees have had to blow the whistle on some form of racism and it has affected their career. Otherwise there wouldn't be this fear.

So this means that in the past, people have come forward and reported serious situations, and this had an adverse effect on their career advancement.

Do you agree with me?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: You are absolutely right.

As the minister said, systemic racism exists throughout government, including in our department. We know that we need to improve the way we deal with these kinds of situations. Having said that, there are certainly people who have experienced some things. People have definitely told us that they have had problems with their career advancement.

That's why we are putting in place concrete measures to help better manage the career advancement of racialized people. We are providing development opportunities and appointing them to acting and other positions. In this way, we are enabling the advancement of racialized individuals at all levels of the department.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I find this discussion very interesting.

If there have been times—as you've seen—when people have had their careers held back because they've spoken out against serious racism, then that means there are people responsible for holding them back.

Who are these people? Have they been fired? Have you met them? Do you have their names?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: As I said, we definitely know about the situations. We know about them because we have carried out surveys in the department since 2020. One of those surveys was specifically about racism. We then contracted the company Pollara, as we wanted to go more in depth to understand exactly what was happening. The survey was voluntary and anonymous, so we could not know who the persons involved were.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I apologize for interrupting you. I don't want to be rude, but I don't have much time left.

If the people who are responsible for this situation are known to IRCC, have they been met with or fired? Have they been penalized?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: I can tell you that all the cases that have been brought to our attention have been managed with all the tools at our disposal. We are trying not to ignore the situation. If I or Ms. Tapley are made aware of the situation, we take action.

• (1225)

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you. We will now proceed to Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan, you will have six minutes. Please proceed.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The minister spoke of wanting to ensure that IRCC has equitable representation among his staff—both among agents and among medium and upper management positions. Could the officials provide a breakdown of that representation right now, so that we have a baseline on which to evaluate the outcome of this work?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: As I mentioned previously, we launched our anti-racism task force within the last two years. One thing we did was run a survey. The purpose of that survey was to provide an opportunity to see how we're progressing as a department.

Yes, we're able to provide you with some information with regard to how we're progressing in terms of where the racialized individuals are progressing within their careers. Part of our strategy is to achieve a higher target of individuals throughout the department.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you. I have limited time, so could I just get direct answers to my question?

My question is, can we get the baseline number so we can evaluate this progress? Further to that, will interim progress reports be put on the public record on this work?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Yes, we can provide you with the baseline information that we have in our possession.

Part of our strategy is to be able to continue to demonstrate progress on how we're meeting our targets. One thing we're aiming to achieve is for the labour market availability representation within our department, not just the workforce availability. We're aiming to achieve a higher target than what is sometimes expected.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: When can we expect the interim progress report and the final report?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: I don't want to say that there is a final report, because it's always going to be for us to continue to progress. We have a three-year plan. However, we can at least tell you where we started when we started our strategy, and where we are at this point in time.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Will there be an interim report made public, let's say in a year's time and maybe each year within the three years?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Definitely. We are putting out reports on a regular basis.

If you go on the Privy Council Office website, there are calls to action that the clerk put in place—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you—

Ms. Caroline Xavier: —and we have responded to that publicly as well.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I just needed a quick answer. I'm sorry, but I don't have that much time.

The Pollara report exposed racism and discrimination within IRCC, and witnesses have indicated that there needs to be follow-up with individuals who shared those experiences. Will the department be undertaking to do that work, to ensure there's follow-up specifically with individuals who have identified racist experiences?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: We are not going to be able to follow up with those individuals specifically, because this was a volunteer approach and we do not know the individuals who were specifically met by Pollara. We did that intentionally, so that they did not have a fear of any type of reprisal or of truthfully sharing what they felt, so we cannot follow up specifically on those cases.

Having said that, every case that is brought to our attention we address with the tools we have in our tool kit with regard to reprimand and the necessary steps required to ensure that it is recognized as unacceptable behaviour to have racism and discrimination in our department.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Maybe what the department should do is undertake another independent study with respect to that, so those individuals can come forward, not fear reprisal and share in-depth experience as to where those comments came from. That's the only way you can actually get at the heart of the problem. I hope the

ministry will undertake that work and do a further follow-up independent study in that regard.

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Thank you for that recommendation. I can tell you that further independent studies are planned as part of our strategy.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: If you can table for the committee, then, the timelines of when that further study will be done and the mandate for those studies, I would appreciate that.

Ms. Caroline Xavier: If you like, I could ask Farahldine Boisclair to give you a few of those details right away.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Maybe you could just table it, because I'm going to run out of time.

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Okay.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: A witness indicated that there's been little to no progress since 2019 with respect to processing for the caregiver stream. Can officials advise what is the magnitude of the backlog in the caregiver stream?

As well, IRCC does not have processing standards for these streams, so when can applicants expect their applications to be processed?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: As the minister mentioned, we have been given some funding to be able to really address the processing backlog we have. I can assure you that this is very much a priority for the department and we're working really hard to achieve progress in all of the business lines.

What I can tell you is that in April 2021 the department introduced this ambitious plan for processing applications from caregivers. Applications for nearly 6,000 persons, including both caregivers and their family members, were finalized by the end of 2021. We're going to continue to do some of that ongoing work.

• (1230)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Yes, but because many of those cases are in the backlog, when you say "6,000 persons", that is not so many applications, because each family is more than one person. It doesn't actually give an accurate number.

Also, then, you're not indicating how far the backlog goes. Some of them have been on the wait-list for five or six years. People have been waiting for a long time.

Adding those numbers to it does not actually help provide clarity. All you're doing is trying to whitewash the reality of the backlog, and that's not helpful. Accurate and precise information is required.

What I'm asking now, though, is this: With the new resources, what is the standard processing time? How long do people have to wait to get their applications processed?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Once an applicant has obtained 24 months of qualifying work experience, they have to submit the necessary documents. My understanding is that we aim to have this done within 12 months. That is the standard we're aiming for on these applications.

You're absolutely right, though, in your comment about the fact that the longer people stay in the application, it becomes aged, but that is part of the strategy to address the backlog—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Ms. Xavier, but the time is up for Ms. Kwan.

We will now proceed to Mr. Genuis.

Mr. Genuis, you will have five minutes for your round of questioning. Please begin.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you to the officials for being here today.

In some categories, whether someone is able to come to Canada or not is significantly impacted by determinations by the UNHCR. The minister has acknowledged that he's concerned about systemic racism within the department impacting determinations here. Do you have concerns about instances of systemic bias involving race or religion at the UNHCR? Given that those determinations impact who gets to come to Canada, what is being done to address that?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: We have an excellent relationship with the UNHCR, one that dates back for some time. They are a recognized partner not just for us, but for many like-minded countries in the refugee management stream.

At this point, I am not aware of cases that have been brought to our attention with regard to the possibility that they may have biases [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] the refugee management process. They have a clear definition of what a refugee definition is and they work with us to help us define Canada's priorities and needs. I'm not saying this may not exist; however, I'm not aware of it being a concern that's been raised. It's something, though—and thank you for the question—that maybe we can explore further.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I'm a bit surprised that you haven't heard that. This is a concern that is routinely raised with me in conversation with diaspora communities here in Canada.

Are you in dialogue with representatives of diaspora communities about the UNHCR process? Have you not heard these concerns? Have they raised these concerns but they not been received in some way? What's happening on that front?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: We engage regularly with various stakeholders who are part of our various business lines, including diaspora and other stakeholders who make up part of the support network, for example, in our settlement integration sectors. Ongoing stakeholder engagements are very instrumental parts of how we manage the way we do our business.

I cannot say that I have had this particular situation that you're flagging raised to my attention or to that of my officials. If it had been raised, it would be something we would address. If you have some examples that you think would be pertinent to share, we would welcome receiving them so we can follow up.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you. I will follow up, and I will ask certain communities with whom I've been working on this if and how they would like to follow up with the department directly.

Let me ask about the tracking of data. A lot of the conversation we're having here is about differential outcomes as revealed by country comparisons. That may not, though, show the whole picture in terms of differential outcomes on the basis of race or other criteria. You can't always identify race by country of origin.

What data do you collect in terms of the race of applicants and acceptance that would allow you to analyze other indicators of possible bias besides just country of origin?

• (1235)

Ms. Caroline Xavier: We recognize that data plays a very important part in terms of the management of our anti-racism strategy writ large, from both an internal and an external perspective. In particular, an area we're very interested in pursuing is the aspect of disaggregated data. This comes to the point you're making on how we might collect more detailed information from our applicants. At this point, much of the information related to that type of data is given to us on a voluntary basis. It is not a mandated element related to IRPA, so we have to be respectful of that.

As you said, it's hard to do a comparison one for one, because we have to take into consideration many aspects and criteria. However, disaggregated data, and the ongoing management of that data, is something that is part of the tool kit of where we want to improve.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Okay. If I understand correctly, you're saying the answer is no; you don't collect that data. You don't have that data, but you're sort of thinking about and possibly interested in doing it for the future.

Can I ask whether the same is true of religion? Do you have data fields to identify the religion of applicants, so that you can do those comparisons? Are you considering looking at disaggregated data on the basis of religion as well?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] with regard to disaggregated data, but what I—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I'm sorry, could you repeat your response again? There was a bit of a technical problem.

Ms. Caroline Xavier: I was saying that we very much want to explore what we can do in the space of disaggregated data, but right now, much of this data is provided to us on a voluntary basis. At this point, it's not to say we don't have some of that information, it's just that it's not [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

Mr. Garnett Genuis: You can't analyze the data—

The Chair: Mr. Genuis, your time is up.

We will now proceed to Mr. El-Khoury.

Mr. El-Khoury, you will have five minutes. You can please begin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: Thank you, Madam Chair.

My first question is for Ms. Boisclair.

Ms. Boisclair, IRCC has taken measures to eliminate potential biases in the processing and review of immigration and citizenship applications.

Do you have any other recommendations that may help resolve this issue?

Ms. Farah Boisclair (Director, Anti-Racism Task Force, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you for the question.

[English]

There is a suite of things that need to be done.

One of the things we did early on in the anti-racism task force was to articulate what anti-racism work looks like in different parts of the organization. It's a range. It ranges from policy through program review and developing an anti-racism lens. For example, we've developed [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] analysts and policy development.

These specific actions have been integrated, for the executives and leaders across the organization, into their performance agreement plans, which are tied to their performance ratings. That's one of the things we've done.

[Translation]

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: Given that IRCC has over a dozen ongoing projects with fairness and equality objectives, can you give us a few details on those projects?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Once again, I think this is a good question for Ms. Boisclair. I will let her answer it.

Ms. Farah Boisclair: We have established a number of measures, including a review of employment systems. We are very excited about and look forward to conducting this review, which will begin in the spring.

[English]

Another one that's important is making sure our recruitment processes are targeted, so that we find racialized talent to occupy all levels of the organization.

The work we have done on data collection—the Pollara group included—is us being intentional about looking at and understanding the problem of systemic racism so that we can bring thoughtful solutions to the table. That information collection informs our strategies moving forward.

• (1240)

[Translation]

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: That's great, thank you.

Ms. Xavier, can you give us details on the quality assurance abroad program that was implemented in 2021?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Thank you for the question.

As you said, we have a program that helps us confirm that decisions were applied consistently, especially those made abroad. We could provide you with data on that. That will give you a bit more information on what we have learned through those reviews of decisions made.

Ms. Gill, do you have anything to add on this?

[English]

Ms. Pemi Gill: Thank you.

To add to that, we take oversight of decision-making very seriously at IRCC. Quality assurance exercises are undertaken annually for decision-making. Our officers have all undergone unconscious bias training and are trained on immigration legislation. In addition to that, there are cultural studies for certain case types. For example, for our caseloads out of Africa, all of our decision-makers do cultural studies in advance of starting their decision-making.

With that, we also then have the oversight of quality assurance exercises for their decisions.

[Translation]

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: Ms. Xavier, could you give us more details about the task force created in July 2020 whose members are working full time to provide the department with a strategic direction on personnel management, policy and program delivery?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Thank you for the question.

The task force was created in July 2020, and Farah Boisclair will lead it.

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Ms. Xavier. The time is up for Mr. El-Khoury.

We will now proceed to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Ms. Xavier, I would like to go back to the conversation we were having earlier.

If employees who witness racism report it to their superiors, who sometimes apply pressure to prevent promotions following disclosures, as was discussed earlier, how can we talk about independence in the processing of those cases?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Thank you for the question.

Like I said earlier, there are a number of ways to report wrongdoing. The employee can talk about it with their immediate supervisor, or bring the case to the attention of the senior officer in charge of internal resolutions, for instance, who is independent from the department. They can also report it to the Office of Conflict Resolution, another body that is independent from the department.

In addition, the employee can ask their union for help, depending on the position level, as we are trying to work in partnership with the union, which also has an independent role.

The employee can also reach out to someone in a position at another level, be it the director general or the deputy minister, and not just [*technical difficulties*].

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: We seem to be having a small issue with the sound.

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Can you not hear me?

[English]

The Chair: Is there interpretation?

[Translation]

Ms. Caroline Xavier: I hear you fine.

Can you hear me, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe?

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I can hear you fine now. The sound was cut off for a brief moment.

[English]

The Chair: One second. Let's check.

Madam Clerk, there seems to be an interpretation issue.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Can we continue, Madam Chair?

[English]

The Chair: Okay. Please continue.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: That's great.

I understand that a number of measures are available, and that's good. That is part of your willingness to change things. A number of structures have been put in place to resolve this issue. We know that not all employees in your department are unionized.

Since the measures and structures that have been implemented are specific to the department, don't you think that creating the position of an immigration ombudsman would help resolve all the problems? That ombudsman would be completely independent from the department.

That would help you a lot in your initiatives, wouldn't it?

• (1245)

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Thank you again for your comment and the question, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

As the minister said, we are open to improvement. I repeat that we are very open to the idea of improving the existing mechanisms.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I understand what the minister said, but I would like to get your own opinion on the creation of an ombudsman position. I would really like to know what you think.

Ms. Caroline Xavier: I am not here to talk about my opinions.

However, I can tell you that this is an option we could consider going forward if it interests our minister and the government. We will certainly take the committee's recommendations into account, and they will help us improve the ongoing processes at the department.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you so much, Ms. Xavier.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Xavier.

Ms. Kwan, you have two and a half minutes. Please begin.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Can the officials advise what immigration measures are available to refugees in Ukraine—i.e., Afghans and

other racialized minorities—and how they can get to safety in Canada?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: We are definitely conscious of the fact that it's not just Ukrainians who are fleeing Ukraine. We are working with the countries that are surrounding Ukraine, to which refugees are making their way—for example, to Poland, Germany and other surrounding countries. We recognize that in some cases, some of those who are fleeing may find refuge within the neighbouring countries more directly, or they may return to the country of origin.

Having said that, should they have an interest to come to Canada, the options and pathways exist for them to be able to indicate that, and we would be able to assist them. That is not something we've seen automatically.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Can you table those pathways to the committee, please? I actually have been contacted by refugees in Ukraine who wish to come to Canada, and I don't know where to send them. Even if they made it to Poland or other countries for safety, they still wish to come to Canada.

I would love to get that information from the officials. Can you just table that information? I don't have time to get into it here.

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Sure.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'd also like to ask you this. To what extent has IRCC processed the emails that Afghans were directed to send to the government? How many of those emails have received a response? I don't mean the standard automatic response.

As well, what work is being done by the department to coordinate and facilitate the generosity of Canadians who wish to help Ukrainians arriving in Canada? For example, people are offering their homes to host them. We need a coordinated effort to galvanize the strength of Canadians who wish to help.

I'm running out of time, so if I don't get answers to those questions here, perhaps you could table those responses.

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Just for clarity, I think your first question was on Afghanistan and the second one was on Ukraine. I just want to be certain that I understood that clearly.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Correct.

Ms. Caroline Xavier: On the first part of your question, with regard to Afghanistan, we have a dedicated service channel where people are able to call and also send emails. I do not have those stats with me at this point, but I can definitely follow up and share the statistics with you. We do track the number of calls received. There's a very high percentage answer rate to individuals' calls and emails. They're all acknowledged and responded to.

With regard to Ukraine—

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Xavier. The time is up for Ms. Kwan.

We will now proceed—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Madam Chair, on a point of order, I asked whether I could get the response to those questions tabled if I didn't get a response here. Could I get confirmation on that from the officials?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Absolutely. We can follow up and give you an answer to the Ukrainian part of that question as well.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to Mr. Benzen. You will have five minutes for your round of questioning. You can please begin.

Mr. Bob Benzen (Calgary Heritage, CPC): Thank you, Chair, and thank you, witnesses.

Earlier today the minister said that the main purpose of the AI technology was to filter all of the files into two types, either very simple cases or very complex ones.

I'm curious. Of all the files, what proportion is simple and how many are complex?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: I don't know if I have the stats handy, but perhaps Pemi Gill has them.

Just to begin to answer your question, as was stated by the minister, many applications that are repeat clients, for example, would be potentially seen as something non-complex, because we have a great deal of information on them already: the fact that we issued them a visa already, that they're in good standing, things of that nature.

You're specifically asking for statistics, so I will see if Pemi Gill has some information for you.

• (1250)

Ms. Pemi Gill: Unfortunately I don't have an exact statistic for you. Depending on the program, the models would yield different results. For example, as the deputy minister has stated, when we use advanced analytics for visitor applications, we are looking for low complexity versus more complexity. Low complexity is often that they've previously travelled to Canada; they've previously travelled elsewhere, or other factors that would contribute to low complexity.

Mr. Bob Benzen: Okay. I'm just curious. What I'm getting at here is that we spent a huge amount of money on software. Do we know how much money we invested in this software, this program?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: When you say "this program", are you speaking of the advanced analytics software?

Mr. Bob Benzen: Yes. How much money have we invested in this?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: I can definitely get back to you with that, as I don't have that information with me at this moment. Having said that, it isn't, from my awareness, a piece of software that's extremely complex, so it's not one that I expect we spent a whole lot of money on.

Mr. Bob Benzen: That's good. That's interesting.

We had a professor here on Tuesday who was very concerned that the data that we were putting into the AI system was already tainted, that some of the data, but not all, was biased and maybe already prejudicial.

Do you think his concerns are legitimate?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: As mentioned before, we ensure that our employees are effectively trained to be able to make the decisions they're making. That includes anti-racism and unconscious bias training.

However, I'm going to ask Pemi to give you some additional information.

Ms. Pemi Gill: IRCC's advanced analytics models are compliant with the Treasury Board directive on automated decision-making, and algorithm impact assessments are done on the models. Those are available on the Open Government website.

As part of the development of the model, there is definitely an extensive review process for potential discriminatory impacts. Rules are vetted by subject matter experts to determine that they reflect the legislative and regulatory requirements; and this system is also subject to a host of due diligence activities, including legal review, privacy impact analysis and gender-based analysis plus in order to identify and mitigate risks.

Mr. Bob Benzen: Basically you're saying that you don't think his concerns are legitimate, that the system is working as it's supposed to be. Would that be a fair statement?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: No. What we're saying is that we know that as an organization we continue to have work that we need to do with regard to the training we're providing our officers in terms of anti-racism and unconscious bias. This needs to continue to be a priority for us. We need to continue to explore the outcomes of these decisions and whether or not what the stakeholder has mentioned is definitely something of concern.

Mr. Bob Benzen: That's excellent.

In response to the Pollara report, one of the things you started was this new quality assurance program. You picked four countries to start off with—Colombia, Brazil, Panama and Costa Rica.

Why did you pick those four countries for the pilot program? Why are there no African countries in this group?

Ms. Caroline Xavier: I'm going to ask Pemi Gill to answer your question.

Ms. Pemi Gill: As part of our quality assurance work we do quality assurance across all processing from all countries. Pilots have been done to improve the types of QA done. There has been continuous improvement to ensure that results are accurate in informing future improvements. There is quality assurance done on cases out of Africa as well. As I said, for our global network it is undertaken.

Mr. Bob Benzen: In particular, why were these four countries chosen?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Benzen. Your time is up.

We will end our panel today with five minutes from Mr. Dhaliwal.

Mr. Dhaliwal, please begin.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the officials for appearing here.

Madam Chair, I have one of the highest constituency loads. It's very frustrating to see my staff getting frustrated, particularly when it comes to the super visa and visitor visa applications from India. There was a deadline of September 7, 2021. I think there were over half a million applications. The department failed on that particular issue because none of those applications got processed and then they started accepting on a new portal after September 7, 2021.

It's my understanding that there are now over half a million applications.

Some of the discrepancies I'm seeing are that some people are applying now and getting the results in two weeks. People are waiting for their parents to get to them for [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]. I wonder how they're going to manage this mess that has been created in New Delhi.

● (1255)

Ms. Caroline Xavier: Family reunification continues to be a priority for the Government of Canada. It plays a significant role, as you've outlined, in attracting, retaining and integrating immigrants who contribute to our successful country. We recognize that there are various applications in the backlog. We know that the volumes are high. This is where the funding that we've been provided will help us to address that backlog.

As the minister mentioned, with regard to the parent and grandparent super visas, as you mentioned, these also continue to be part of the applications we're processing. We recognize that in some cases it may be perceived that others are getting a response sooner. That may be because their application came in a digital form, while others perhaps were in a paper form.

Having said that, it doesn't excuse it. This is where the work we're doing with regard to improving the backlogs and addressing the more aged applications is part of the next steps we're taking.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: That is not the case, Madam Chair. Since September 7, 2021, all those applications for temporary resident visas are on the new portal. They're all electronic applications. There should be no excuse.

The reason I am saying it is that, time and time again, people are on our doorstep. They're frustrated. They're desperate to get their loved ones here. I didn't hear an answer from the official that solves that problem. I want to see what the tangible steps are that the department will take to make sure it gets to all those applications that it accepted ASAP.

Ms. Caroline Xavier: I totally understand the frustration. I'm not trying to not answer you. I'm going to ask Pemi to give you some additional details that will be more concrete to give you some information.

Ms. Pemi Gill: For the post-September 7 temporary resident visa application, right now the processing times are approximately 59 calendar days. That's as of February 2022.

We recognize there is a significant backlog predating that, which has built up during COVID as a result of the border restrictions for entry into Canada.

The approach we have been taking is to focus on the newer cases in the immediate term and continue to make progress on the back-

log of pre-September cases as well. We recognize that for some of our clients who are in urgent need of travel, sitting in the backlog is not beneficial. For those clients, we would recommend that they submit a new application, particularly given how dated the application is.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: I can tell you, Ms. Gill, that 59 days is not the answer. I have hundreds of applications that are post-September 7 that have not even been touched. From September to today is not 59 days.

I have talked to IMED myself, and they had no answer there either. I don't think you are providing information that is correct. There are hundreds of applications that I can bring to you that were not processed in 59 days, even though they were post-September 7 applications.

Ms. Caroline Xavier: If it's helpful, we would be able to submit those statistics to provide factual information in our system, so that we can demonstrate what the numbers actually are.

If that's okay with the chair—

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Madam Chair, I would like that submission to include prior to September 7 and also post-September 7, the exact number of days it took to process the applications and the expected numbers that will be processed in the next month or so.

● (1300)

The Chair: Ms. Xavier, if you can provide that information to the clerk of the committee so we can circulate that information to all the members, I think it will be very helpful as we continue our study on this topic.

Ms. Caroline Xavier: We'd be happy to do that, Madam Chair.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: On a point of order, Madam Chair, I want to raise something about our agenda for next week. I have a motion on notice dealing with immigration and the Ukraine conflict. We have also signalled that we're soon going to be putting on notice a production of papers motion related to this study.

I don't like to move those motions when we have witnesses. I think it's better if we have time set aside for them.

I see that the agendas have already been put out for the two meetings next week, so I wonder if it is your intention to set aside some time for consideration of those motions. If not, we're going to be in a situation of needing to consider moving them when witnesses are present, which isn't ideal.

The Chair: I will have a discussion with the clerk to see what has been scheduled—how many witnesses—and then based on that discussion, I will inform all the members what we can do.

If the will of the committee is that we need to set aside some time for the committee business, then we can do that.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Okay. Thank you very much.

The Chair: With this, our panel for today comes to an end. I will take this opportunity to thank Ms. Xavier, Ms. Gill and Ms. Boisclair for appearing before the committee and providing important information. Thanks for all the work that you do on behalf of all Canadians.

With regard to the requests that have been made in regard to the data, if you can submit that to the clerk of the committee, that would be very helpful.

I have one last thing I want to bring to the attention of all the members. The draft report for the acceptance rates of international

students will be circulated to all the members by 3 p.m. today. Thanks to the analysts for their work in preparing that draft report. I'm looking forward to going through that.

Is it the will of the committee to adjourn the meeting?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned. Thank you.

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