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• (1530)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. Brad Redekopp (Saskatoon West, CPC)): Welcome, everybody, to the meeting of the immigration committee.

The chair is not here. As the vice-chair, I will begin the meeting. I call the meeting to order.

Welcome to our witnesses.

I see that a couple of hands are raised.

Go ahead, Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Before we start, I would like to move my motion, which reads:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee invite the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship and departmental officials to update the committee on the 2022 Annual Report to Parliament on Immigration, including Canada's immigration levels plan 2023-2025.

The Chair (Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.)): Go ahead, Ms. Rempel Garner.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): I am very pleased that my colleague moved this motion. I think it's very important that we have the immigration minister here to testify on this issue, particularly given the tremendous amount of testimony we've heard on how the backlog in the immigration system has impacted Canada's ability to meet its immigration targets.

I have heard over the last few weeks from stakeholders across the country their deep concerns about how this backlog has not been addressed in the immigration levels report, and concerns about how there's this huge delta between the number of people and the targets the government has set and the actual structural ability of the government to deliver on that.

I'm very pleased that my colleague from the NDP has put forward this motion. I'm sure the rest of my colleagues here would like to articulate the same in support of this motion. I look forward to Minister Fraser's attendance swiftly at this committee so that we can hold the government to account.

The Chair: Next is Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Madam Chair, I just want to make sure that the sound tests have been done for the witnesses who are appearing by video conference.

[English]

The Chair: Yes, they have been done.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, that's nice of you.

That said, I support my colleagues from the NDP and the Conservative Party when it comes to the motion.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Kmiec is next.

Mr. Tom Kmiec (Calgary Shepard, CPC): Madam Chair, I was just going to add my voice in saying that I think it's important that the minister come in based on the report that was tabled to Parliament before November 1, the annual report on immigration. If you go through the report, it's a very rosy picture of what's going on, but we're all getting inundated in our offices and our constituencies with people who are facing enormous backlogs for just the simplest of applications.

I was made aware just a few days ago of a case where a family is trying to bring in a newborn from Brazil, and they were told by IR-CC that they're facing a 500-day wait time to have that processed. By the time the newborn's application gets through, they're not a newborn anymore; they're a toddler. Also, obviously a cuteness factor is directly related. The longer it is from being a newborn, the less cute it is, and the grandparents may not be as enthusiastic, but I'm sure they want to see this newborn immediately.

Also, there's an Order Paper question response that was tabled just yesterday, I believe, for one of our colleagues, Ziad Aboutaif, the member of Parliament for Edmonton Manning, which shows that the department is able to meet its service standards for only something like 46% of the time. It's abysmal, especially for employers. When we're facing critical shortages and a million jobs are going unfilled—I'm sure we all get this in our constituency offices—employers are desperate to get people in to fill critical jobs.

This report is much more.... It paints such a rosy picture, but then we're getting this data back contradicting the department's ability to meet any of these targets into the future. If we're going to meet the labour shortages, if we're going to reunify families and if Canada is going to do its part to make sure we can keep protecting people who are being persecuted overseas, we have to have the minister in to explain himself on how he's going to meet these targets.

I just don't see it, based on the data we're receiving back through Order Paper questions, question period and in other ways. I would like very much for the minister to come in. I'm very much in support of my colleague from the New Democratic Party on this motion.

● (1535)

The Chair: Thank you.

We have a speaking list.

Mr. Dhaliwal is next.

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

I would also like to add my voice to Ms. Kwan's motion. I would love to support it.

When it comes to meeting the targets, Madam Chair, we all know that our government has either met or exceeded the targets over the past many years. I remember that the first time I got elected in 2006, the Conservative government was there, and in fact it was the Conservatives who put in cuts to the family class.

Now we're talking about parents and grandparents. In fact, if we look at our government, our government took 20,000 applications every year. That is a great achievement over what the previous government was doing. In fact, the targets we set up are for 435,000 immigrants to come in next year, 465,000 the year after and half a million in 2025. I have had discussions with the minister.

Look at the past record of the Liberal government. We will meet those targets.

The Chair: Thank you.

Next we have Mr. Maguire.

Mr. Larry Maguire (Brandon—Souris, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to add my congratulations to my NDP colleague for bringing this motion forward. Any time we can get the minister before the committee to understand the significance and the importance of the numbers that need to be dealt with through the processes we're dealing with for refugees and immigration is very important.

My colleague across the way was just talking about what the government has done, but that was seven years ago. We're dealing with a completely different situation in Canada today, where so much labour force is needed, and it is needed more immediately.

While we look at the different mechanisms for bringing people into Canada to do work here, we need to look at whether it's skilled labour that's required and make some changes with regard to how those people can get into the country and get to work as quickly as possible.

I want to back my colleagues here, and the Liberal colleagues who are supportive of this motion, and say that I think it is imperative to have the minister appear before us on this. I appreciate the fact that he will. We'll have to work with the committee to find the time with the minister's office when he can attend this. I know he's going to be away for some of the early part of next week, so I

would like to see if we can do this and get him to this committee as quickly as we possibly can.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Maguire.

I have four more people on the speaking list before we can go into today's agenda. I have Mr. Redekopp, and then Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, Mr. El-Khoury and Ms. Rempel Garner.

Go ahead, Mr. Redekopp.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Thank you, Madam Chair.

One of the things I wanted to mention was that there was some talk about the multiple times we have the minister coming to this committee. I think it's important. What we're talking about here is a different issue, because of the numbers issue.

The other things that we're going to be bringing him in for are all specific. For example, there's the Roxham Road study. That's a very specific thing we want to talk to him about.

I think it is important that, on this issue of the report, we bring him to talk about these numbers, because this is a very critical issue. There's more to this than simply the numbers that are there. There's a lot more information in that report about some of the other streams of people who come in. Many of the groups are not treated fairly. I have some questions for him in that regard about who ranks over whom and how that all fits together.

That's all part of what I see in that report and in the numbers. I think it's really important that he comes to speak to just that, as long as he comes for the other reports.

We're going to have supplementary estimates (B). I assume we're going to get him for that at some point as well. That's a whole other discussion that we'll have. There are the Afghanistan reports as well.

There are many different topics we need to talk about. I think it's very important that we have him here specifically on this report, because it's a very significant report and it affects very many people. As my colleague said, each of us, as an MP, deals with this every single day in our offices back home. There are lots of questions that we have about that.

Thank you.

● (1540)

The Chair: Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*Translation*]

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

We've just wasted 10 minutes discussing a motion that everyone agrees with. We have an important study to do, for which witnesses have travelled here and others are appearing by video conference. Everyone has said their piece on the motion, so I think we can move on.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

I have a speaking list.

Next is Mr. El-Khoury.

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

I would like to welcome our witnesses here.

I welcome positively the motion of Ms. Kwan.

I would like to assure everyone here that the priority of this government and the Minister of Immigration is to fill the gap of the workforce shortage. That's why, if you know that the money is allocated... We have more than half a million dollars allocated in order to bring other resources to be able to treat and process the demand.

We have given a chance to the students who have graduated to apply to work here in order to grow our economy. I believe our target, Madam Chair, is to have half a million well-qualified persons here in Canada by 2025 to integrate into our society.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. El-Khoury.

Now we will go to Ms. Rempel Garner.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Briefly, Madam Chair, I would note for my colleague Mr. Dhaliwal, who talked about the government meeting immigration targets, that it's all well and good to set targets, but it's another thing to be able to process those targets. The government could say they want to bring the entire population of the globe to Canada and create an endless list, which many people—2.8 million—are languishing on right now.

It's very important for the government to both set targets and establish processes that can, in a just and timely fashion, process these applications, which is to me what the subject matter at hand is.

I wanted to note that for the record, Madam Chair, before we proceeded to a vote.

The Chair: Thank you.

Seeing no further hands raised, we can take a vote.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Okay, it's adopted.

Mr. Maguire, go ahead.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Thanks, Madam Chair.

I, too, have a motion that's been tabled, and I want to put it forward today. That's the one I gave a notice of on October 21.

It reads as follows:

That Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada table in both English and French with the committee, until further notice, the previous month's number of people entering Canada, through non-official points of entry who claim asylum, not later than the 5th of the month succeeding the data.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Redekopp, go ahead.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: For the information of the committee, this information is readily available—we had this discussion last time—but we need this information at committee. Unless we have it given to the committee, we—

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga (London West, Lib.): I have a point of order, Madam Chair.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: That's the whole point, so that—

The Chair: On a point of order, we have Ms. Kayabaga.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga (London West, Lib.): I'm really confused about what's happening right now. There's a motion that's been tabled by Ms. Kwan, and that you were calling a vote on. Are we moving another motion on top of Ms. Kwan's motion?

The Chair: Ms. Kayabaga, we have adopted the motion that was moved by Ms. Kwan. The members didn't want to have a recorded vote, so it was a show of hands.

That motion has been adopted, so Mr. Maguire has tabled another motion.

Mr. Redekopp, go ahead.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Thank you.

That's the point. I believe this information is readily available. If we have it tabled to the committee, then it's accessible to the committee to use in the report. That's the intent of this. It's not meant to create work or anything; it's meant to bring it to the committee for our use.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Redekopp.

Ms. Rempel Garner, go ahead.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Chair, I would like to echo my colleague's comments. This is a motion that has been adopted by this committee in previous Parliaments—I believe unanimously. It's a tremendous data point for the committee to deliberate and also to contextualize recommendations. It's also of use to the clerk and the analysts.

Certainly I support my colleague's motion on this and would like to note, for Liberal colleagues as well as other opposition colleagues, that this has been a standing practice of the immigration committee to adopt in previous Parliaments.

Thank you.

• (1545)

The Chair: Mrs. Lalonde, go ahead.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde (Orléans, Lib.): I'm very sorry we have to do this in front of our witnesses, because we're anxiously waiting, but I wanted to know if my honourable colleague would be receptive to this. I would like, Madam Chair, to move an amendment that instead of five days, it will be 20 days.

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Lalonde.

Mrs. Lalonde has moved an amendment to the motion moved by Mr. Maguire, so we have an amendment on the floor.

Mr. Kmiec, go ahead.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: I'm sorry, but what did you mean—from five to 20 days? I just don't understand the amendment.

The Chair: Madame Lalonde, could you please repeat your amendment?

[Translation]

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: I apologize.

I propose that, instead of it being the fifth day of the month, it be the 20th day of the month.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Kmiec, go ahead.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Chair, what's the impact of making this change? I'm trying to understand what the departmental reason would be for not being able to provide it earlier in the month, as opposed to the 20th of the month. Does Mrs. Lalonde know the answer to that?

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kmiec.

Mrs. Lalonde, go ahead.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: As we've discussed with some members, the 5th of the month is maybe premature. Not that we have anything.... It is already online, as you know. By the time everything gets to be aggregated, it's a collection of information from another department, as the member very much knows. CBSA also works.... It's not just IRCC.

What we're asking for is a very reasonable approach, just to say that instead of on the 5th day of the month, it would be the 20th, so the department, in consultation with their other ministries, would have a chance to ensure the information that is posted online is relevant, but also factually well informed.

Actually, we're looking forward to it, because it's already online, but we would like to present a friendly amendment, therefore allowing the ministry to look with all the other ministries to aggregate that data on the 20th of the month. It would just make a best practice.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Maguire, go ahead.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Yes, thank you.

The reason it's the 5th of the month is that we're giving them five days to post information to us that they already have available on the first day of the month. They don't need 20 days. That would be my off-the-cuff comment on that.

I appreciate my colleague's raising the number of days, but this information is available on the first day of the next month and we're giving them five days into the month to be able to assemble it. All they're doing is transferring it to this committee. The point of having the motion in the first place is so that the committee gets the information directly and we can deal with it at our meetings.

That would be my initial thought. I'll take other people's comments.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Maguire.

Mr. Redekopp, go ahead.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: My thought is that if it is published, it's published, and if it's wrong or there's an error, I'm sure it will get corrected. I think the same process could be applied here too. I guess I don't see why we can't just go with the data as published online on the 5th. If there's a mistake in the previous month, it's an easy thing to fix it.

The Chair: Mrs. Lalonde, go ahead.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: For the record and factual information, that information is collected by three departments. It is already online and posted on the 20th of every month. What you're asking for is the 5th, and what you're saying is that you're okay that we, as a government, and you, as a member of Parliament, are aware that we may post information—because of the length of the information we need to gather—that will be wrong. I'm sorry, but I don't think that's the kind of government Canadians want to see.

With all due respect, what we're asking for is a friendly amendment, as the information is already widely available. In Mr. Maguire's motion, I'm asking for consideration for our hard-at-work public servants, who will need, from three departments, to collect, aggregate that data and then make sure that it's posted for all of us to see.

I don't think it was wrong for me to ask for this amendment in terms of making sure that the information is factually relevant.

[Translation]

We have to make sure that information is relevant, but also verified.

• (1550)

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Lalonde.

Mr. Dhaliwal, go ahead.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thanks, Madam Chair.

I think Madame Lalonde has already explained it very well.

The Chair: Ms. Rempel Garner, go ahead.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Chair, I'd like to point out perhaps a bit of a fallacy that my colleague Mrs. Lalonde may have made inadvertently.

When the department undertakes to provide data to a parliamentary committee, there is a legal onus on the department to provide correct and factually verified information. It is misleading to say that the department would provide the committee with so-called wrong information, as the parliamentary secretary has characterized to this committee. I do realize that it may take some effort on behalf of the department to provide the committee with this information.

However, to my colleagues, particularly in the NDP and the Bloc, I'd like to note two points. We are embarking on studies where this data is relevant and pertinent, and having this information by the 5th, provided to us factually correct by the department, as this motion would compel us to do, is important for us to contextualize our information.

The second thing I would like to note is that the public service acts at the behest of Parliament, not—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Ms. Rempel Garner, but the bells have started ringing. A vote is being called.

If the members want to proceed, I need unanimous consent.

Some hon. members: No.

The Chair: I don't have unanimous consent. The meeting will have to be suspended and we will come back 10 minutes after the vote.

To all the witnesses who are here, I am very sorry. I know you took time out of your busy schedule to be here, and I'm really sorry for that. We will have to suspend the meeting for the vote.

The meeting is suspended.

• (1550) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1640)

The Chair: I call the meeting to order.

Welcome back to meeting number 41 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

We had an amendment on the floor, and I had two people on the speaking list when we suspended the meeting.

Before we go on, just for the sake of clarifying what we are proposing today for the witnesses.... First of all, on behalf of the committee members, I really want to thank you and apologize to you for the delay because of some motions being brought forward and because of the vote. I know that you are really busy and that you took time to come and provide us with your testimony.

Having talked to the witnesses.... Because some have travelled from far away and some are really busy and cannot come back, out of our six witnesses—and just to make sure we have a fulsome discussion on this important topic—some of the witnesses are willing to come back to the meeting.

Based on my discussion, today we will have one panel. We will have Ms. Janet McFetridge, mayor of Champlain, New York; and

Appolonie Simbizi, secretary general, Alliance des Burundais du Canada. The third witness for today will be Rema Jamous Imseis, representative in Canada for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

I really want to apologize to the other three. We will reschedule the session. The clerk of the committee will be in touch with the other three witnesses to reschedule the meeting.

My request to the members is that we quickly go through that amendment and that motion so that we can at least have the opportunity to hear from the three witnesses today because it will not be possible for them to come back. We have the mayor all the way from New York.

• (1645)

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Let's take a vote on the amendment.

The Chair: We have an amendment on the floor.

I have Ms. Kwan next on the list.

Ms. Kwan, go ahead.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay, we're ready to vote.

The Chair: We have an amendment on the floor brought by Mrs. Lalonde.

(Amendment agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

(Motion as amended agreed to [*See Minutes of Proceedings*])

The Chair: We will now get to our witnesses.

First of all, I thank you for your co-operation. We will be hearing from our three witnesses and then going into our round of questioning.

Thanks to the other three witnesses for adjusting to come back again.

First, we will hear from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, represented by Ms. Imseis and Mr. Tamjeedi.

You will have five minutes for your opening remarks. You can begin, please.

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis (Representative to Canada, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees): Thank you for the opportunity to appear on this very important subject. As the UN agency serving refugees and asylum seekers in 134 countries and territories, providing technical advice to improve the situation of asylum seekers is an integral part of our advisory role worldwide.

I'd like to begin with some critical figures on the state of global forced displacement to put Canada's current situation in the broader context. In the first six months of this year, an unprecedented 103 million people have been forcibly displaced by persecution, conflict and violence. Two-thirds of this population are hosted by bordering nations that are low- to middle-income countries, often struggling with their own political, economic, and social challenges. While displacement figures continue to rise around the world, solutions have, unfortunately, not kept pace with the average length of displacement, which spans 17 to 20 years.

Regrettably, the absence of meaningful political action to address the root causes of displacement, along with increased conflict, insecurity and the effects of climate change, means that this trend is unlikely to be reversed soon. Included in these statistics are approximately 4.9 million asylum seekers. In this larger context of global displacement, it is important to note that Canada currently receives less than 1% of the world's refugees.

For those refugees who are able to find a solution in Canada, research demonstrates that they make several contributions to this rich and vibrant multicultural society. Census data provides strong empirical support for the claim that Canada's investment in refugees pays off. For instance, after 20 years in Canada, refugees contribute more to income tax than they receive in social supports. Other key metrics, including home ownership, job creation and educational achievements, all point to the conclusion that refugees make substantial contributions to Canada.

Ensuring safe and unimpeded access to asylum is a legal obligation that Canada, along with 148 other states, has committed to honouring. We understand that there are always challenges in receiving asylum seekers and ensuring that these critical rights are safeguarded.

Each time I visit Roxham Road—the most recent occasion being 10 days ago—I am struck by two observations. The first is the humane and dignified approach of authorities and the organized fashion in which Canada processes these claims. The second equally compelling observation that comes from my interactions with asylum seekers on each of these visits is that these are human beings, each with their own individual story to tell, often linked to experiences of trauma, devastation and loss. When they come forward seeking Canada's protection, irrespective of how they arrived, they are exercising their right to do so.

It is critical to note that, when irregular asylum claims are evaluated by Canada's robust system, 61% are accepted as refugees. In human terms, that is six in 10 lives saved from persecution, all unique stories of suffering, survival and resilience. Given Canada's strong and sophisticated system, I have no hesitation in saying that it is well equipped and resourced to continue ensuring safe access to asylum.

As communicated to our counterparts, continuing to strengthen triaging and processing efficiencies to enable flexibility in the face of this increase in claims is a key priority. In this regard, we continue to provide support and work with authorities on possible improvements to eligibility processing at the border, which has seen some delays due to the increasing claims.

While this ongoing effort to strengthen processes is under way, consideration may be given to allowing temporary work permits for asylum seekers who arrive at the border before they are referred to the Immigration and Refugee Board. Canada has had an excellent track record in ensuring that asylum seekers obtain work permits, but recent increases in arrivals have led to delays in eligibility processing and waits of up to 18 months. This is important not only for the economic self-reliance of those who are crossing, but also for their well-being, dignity and overall prospects for integration, not to mention being an important resource for Canada, which is still experiencing labour shortages across many sectors of the economy.

Canada continues to be a source of good practice and positive examples relied on by other countries around the world, and UNHCR remains committed to working with government bodies and civil society to ensure that asylum seekers continue to be received in a manner that upholds international legal obligations.

● (1650)

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to Ms. Simbizi, secretary general, representing Alliance des Burundais du Canada.

Ms. Simbizi, you will have five minutes for your opening remarks.

Please begin.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Appolonie Simbizi (Secretary General, Alliance des Burundais du Canada): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Honourable members of parliament, the Alliance des Burundais du Canada is honoured to testify before this committee today on such an important and vital issue for people in difficult and even distressing situations at a point in their lives. Asylum claimants have started using Roxham Road in Quebec en masse in hopes of finding a home in Canada, and for some time now, their numbers have been steadily increasing at the point of entry.

Some people believe that the government is lax at the point of entry, while others believe that there is a disturbing humanitarian situation that Canada cannot turn its back on. Unfortunately, there has never been a conclusive debate about the causes of this massive influx of asylum seekers, nor about what response would be appropriate and in line with Canada's responsibilities to protect asylum seekers.

All candid observers, as well as migrant and asylum-claimant rights organizations, including the Alliance des Burundais du Canada, agree that this situation stems from the protection system for asylum seekers in the United States, which has been broken for a number of years. Delays are also causing huge problems, which contribute to putting asylum seekers in an untenable situation on a human level.

Most of the asylum seekers who have taken Roxham Road have lived in the United States and claimed asylum there, but have waited for a response without seeing a way out at the end of the tunnel. We must never lose sight of the fact that these asylum seekers are, for the most part, mothers, fathers and children who left their home countries alone, believing that they could be reunited with their family once they are welcomed in a new country. Unfortunately, after arriving in the United States, the uncertainty of the protection system puts them in limbo and they become another source of problems.

Unfortunately, there is testimony that these claimants who have been turned away at the Canadian border are sometimes put in detention in the United States, further complicating their situation.

If Canada were to close Roxham Road without a tangible alternative to address the problem of asylum seekers at an impasse, it would be using its geographic location to partially escape its responsibilities to protect asylum seekers.

As has been reported in the past, desperate asylum seekers sometimes take unfortunately perilous paths, risking their lives. Some even die.

It is the untenable situation in which these asylum seekers find themselves that has provoked the debate over the controversy surrounding the Safe Third Country Agreement.

We applaud the efforts of the federal government, which has established basic infrastructure just off Roxham Road to care for these asylum seekers and continues to help refugees in general better integrate. While additional efforts are still needed to accommodate these claimants, we encourage any action that moves toward practical solutions, rather than action that would worsen the living conditions of these already vulnerable claimants.

For example, more resources should be allocated to the RCMP, the Canada Border Services Agency and all relevant agencies to support more effective and safe work. Hearings could also be granted much more quickly to claimants, especially those who qualify, so that they can access the labour market.

• (1655)

On the other hand, there is evidence that claimants who have come through Roxham Road and have been well accommodated as refugees are integrating well into society and actively participating in the advancement of our country in the same way as other citizens.

When faced with facts, we—
[English]

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

There are five minutes for all the opening statements. You will get another opportunity to speak further when we go into the rounds of questioning.

We will now proceed to Ms. Janet McFetridge, mayor of Champlain, New York.

Welcome, Ms. McFetridge. Thank you for travelling from that far away.

You will have five minutes for your opening remarks. Please begin.

Ms. Janet McFetridge (Mayor of Champlain, New York, Plattsburgh Cares): Thank you all for inviting me to speak.

Roxham Road is better known in Africa than it is in the United States.

I'm likely the last American these refugees meet on American soil as they continue this journey. I cannot walk in their shoes, but I can walk beside them. As these refugees lean into me whispering, "I am scared. I am running for my life. People are trying to kill me. I have no other options", I listen attentively and I join in the last few steps of this journey.

Refugees arrive via taxis or private drivers and are sometimes on foot, in families, alone, in small groups or in van-loads of more than 15. Their looks of confusion, apprehension, fatigue or sadness—a vast array of emotions—are visible as they climb out of the taxis. Strangers help strangers with luggage. Children serve as interpreters for their parents. Mothers hand babies to teens or even to me, so they can get organized, and toddlers wander as toddlers do. It is a microcosm of humanity working together regardless of language, nationality or appearance, all under a cloud of fear as they see the RCMP waiting a few feet away.

For the majority of these refugees, their prior interactions with police officers have not been positive. I have seen people walk down the path with their hands in the air. Others have fallen to their knees with their hands raised in the snow. Some have said, "Arrest me; I have no other choice but to come here." One woman from Turkey ran down the path, sobbing, right into the arms of the officer. He very quietly told her that this is Canada, that she doesn't need to cry and that she won't be harmed.

Allow me to share a couple of stories from Roxham Road with you.

Very recently, a car pulled in with Connecticut plates on it. The young man, all alone, asked me if this was where he could get into Canada. He said his plan was to leave the rental car, but he was very nervous. His hands were shaking and he had tears in his eyes. He wanted to know if the police would beat him or harm him in any way. I told him no.

As I spoke softly trying to calm him down, he explained that he was gay. He was disowned by his parents, fired from his job, and his choice right now was to leave or die. He would be stoned to death if he returned home, so he decided to try Roxham Road, but now he was terrified. I said to him, “Look at you. You did it. You're here with me. You're safe. You did it.” He smiled and said yes. After a few more minutes he walked away from the car and down the path.

On a frigid day last February, a large van arrived and out poured a dozen people. Among this group were two little girls, sisters, dressed in matching pink sweatsuits. Do you know how you dress your children up for a special occasion? These girls were ready for their new life in a new country in brand new clothes and they were shivering uncontrollably. It was about 5°F that morning. I had no children's coats with me, so I wrapped them in large, adult-sized jackets. They were so bulky the girls had trouble walking, but I put my arms around them and steered them toward the trail where they slowly walked into Canada.

Day after day, people from all around the world travel on Roxham Road seeking safety and a place to call home. Young men have hugged me, saying they left their mothers behind. There are old women all alone, a pregnant woman in labour, elderly men who can barely walk, strong mothers who will do anything to protect their kids, and then those precious children who have no choice in this journey.

One of those youngsters recently told me how much she liked the stuffed animal I had given her. She asked me how long she could keep it. I said that it was hers forever. As she skipped down the path into Canada, she turned around and said, “Thank you. See you later.”

Humans are naturally rooted to where we were born or have spent time. We need to feel that we belong. The writer Maya Angelou expressed it so well by saying, “The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned.” Many times the refugees have told me that they did not want to leave home, but it was due to violence, drug cartels, threats of starvation, the effects of climate change, persecution for their sexuality or their religion, and protection of their daughters from FGM.

• (1700)

Humans have a strong will not only to survive but to thrive, a dream that most of us share regardless of where we were born. The ties that bind us together as humans are stronger than our differences. May each of us do what we can to help all of humanity find home.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to our round of questioning, and we will begin our first round with Ms. Rempel Garner.

Ms. Rempel Garner, you will have six minutes. Please begin.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you. I'd like to direct my questions to the UNHCR.

Thank you for your attendance today and for your work.

Some civil society groups have characterized the United States of America as not safe for many refugees. Do you agree with this characterization?

• (1705)

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: The ultimate determination on whether or not the U.S. is a safe country comes down to the two countries that are signatories to the bilateral agreement called the safe third country agreement. There is a responsibility on the countries that enter into that agreement to do periodic reviews and to determine that the safeguards required in order to make sure that the agreement upholds the basic legal standards that are applicable—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Does the UNHCR believe that the standards are in place with the United States?

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: UNHCR is charged, as I said at the outset, with providing technical guidance and support to governments around the world, including the United States, on areas for strengthening asylum systems—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I have five minutes left. I'm just looking at what UNHCR's position is on whether or not the United States meets standards set by you that would determine if the United States is safe for refugees.

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: There is no perfect asylum system in the world. All asylum systems can be strengthened. UNHCR has communicated on the occasions when we feel that certain gaps exist in the UN system. We do that on a bilateral basis.

You can also check the public record where we have expressed concerns about certain practices.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you.

I will take it on the record here that the UNHCR is not making a determination at this committee in the study on whether or not the United States is a safe place for refugees.

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: I am not making that determination right now.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Could you provide some clarity on the UNHCR's position?

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: Certainly. I'm happy to do so.

There are gaps in asylum systems in every country, and where those gaps exist, we provide technical guidance and support to help strengthen those systems. We have done so on a bilateral basis, sometimes privately, sometimes publicly—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Okay. I might try a different line of questioning.

How many refugees did the UNHCR refer to the United States for resettlement in 2021?

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: I'm afraid I don't have that figure handy, but we did make referrals. We refer refugees to be resettled in the U.S. annually, and we continue to do so.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Has the UNHCR asked the United States to increase its acceptance of refugees for resettlement?

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: The UNHCR asks that of every single country that's a signatory to the refugee convention. It is the one thing that I repeat on a day-in, day-out basis, as do my colleagues around the world. We need more resettlement.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: With the UNHCR recommending refugees for resettlement to the United States, would it be right to characterize that the UNHCR has determined the United States to be a safe place for refugees?

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: UNHCR would not refer refugees to be resettled in a country that is determined to be unsafe.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you.

I note that there was a report on activities of the inspector general's office, a report of the High Commissioner, which was tabled in October, so about a month ago. There were some fairly alarming statistics that have come up in previous Parliaments in this committee around abuses in UNHCR refugee camps, including 259 cases of sexual abuse and rape in UNHCR refugee camps—a 20% increase from the previous year.

I am wondering how the UNHCR can reconcile some of these figures when pronouncing whether or not a country is safe or unsafe for refugee resettlement, given some of the grave abuses that this committee has heard about within UNHCR refugee camps.

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: I'm afraid I haven't had the opportunity to review the report. I'm sure that there are a number of facts and figures in context in there, which would be important for me to review before giving you an answer to that question. However, I can tell you that there is a zero tolerance policy for any kind of abuse, either within our organization or with the organizations that we partner with.

Beyond that, it's very difficult for me to answer that question because I haven't had the opportunity to review the material you are citing.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I would ask you to do so. I remember sitting here in this committee about seven years ago listening to recent survivors of the Yazidi genocide talk about the discrimination they faced in UNHCR refugee camps from the ethnic majority that was charged with running the camp and how it affected them. Those abuses stay with them today, and it's quite disappointing that the leader of the UNHCR or the representative sent to testify in this committee is not aware of these statistics.

What this committee needs to hear from the UNHCR is a commitment to accepting these abuses and also to moving countries like Canada and the U.S. away from suggesting that one of the safest countries in the world is somehow not a place where refugees can find safe harbour.

I would ask if the UNHCR feels that it is beneficial to the integrity of upholding support for immigration in Canada to see the Roxham Road border crossing continue to function as is, particularly with a 2.8 million-case backlog in the immigration system in Canada.

• (1710)

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: I need to unpack that a little bit, because I think there were three questions embedded in one. I would like to correct the record: I didn't say I wasn't aware of the report. I said I didn't have the opportunity to review the report. Our inspector general's office issues a lot of reports, so it's difficult for me to answer on one particular point in a report that I have not had the opportunity to review.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I would ask you to avail yourself of doing that.

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: I would be very happy to do so if you would share the details—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, but time is up for Ms. Rempel Garner.

We will now proceed to Mr. Ali.

I know Mr. Ali and Ms. Kayabaga will be splitting time. Mr. Ali, you will have three minutes, and then we will go to Ms. Kayabaga.

Go ahead.

Mr. Shafqat Ali (Brampton Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being with us today to share their knowledge and experience.

My question is directed to the witnesses from UNHCR. What are UNHCR's views on agreements in which two countries work together to share responsibilities when it comes to welcoming asylum seekers and avoiding duplications and inefficiencies?

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: UNHCR has no objection to safe third country agreements or agreements designed to ensure there is responsibility sharing and regional approaches so long as certain safeguards are built into those agreements and minimum criteria are present, including things like ensuring there is access to safe and efficient asylum systems in either country that is a signatory to the agreement, and that neither country will return people to situations of danger. Those are just two of the criteria that would have to be present.

UNHCR has no objection to such agreements, which seek to improve protection and asylum, being concluded by two independent sovereign states.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: Thank you.

Could each of the witnesses share with us if they think there would be any negative result if either Roxham Road were shut down or if the safe third country agreement were amended to shut the entire border to all irregular crossings?

Ms. Janet McFetridge: As an observer who is there daily, I will say that my fear would be that if Roxham Road were shut down, people would just cross the border at any place in the woods, in the fields and in all those remote areas. I think it would really be a safety issue. I say that just from my experience of watching it.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: Thank you.

Does the witness from UNHCR want to comment?

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Mr. Ali, I think it's my turn now. Thank you.

Thank you to our witnesses for taking the time to be here, specifically for your compassion and for your very compassionate testimony.

What would you suggest the U.S. and Canada could do to better support asylum seekers crossing these borders?

Ms. Janet McFetridge: You're looking for a suggestion as to what the two countries can do to better support the asylum seekers. Did I understand that correctly?

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: That's correct.

Ms. Janet McFetridge: I'm just an American private citizen who is trying to be helpful. The American system, to me, is extremely broken. At our level with our numbers on the southern border, which you are seeing coming into Canada because that's the pipeline right now, I'm not really sure what the answer is to that, how they could work better together.

I think maybe my friends sitting next to me might have a better idea.

• (1715)

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Thank you for your response.

I will go to Ms. Simbizi for my next question.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Simbizi, you talked about the stories of people to whom your association provides services who have surely gone through this border crossing.

What do you think we could do to better support these people? What kind of feedback are you getting from community members who have gone through this border crossing?

Ms. Appolonie Simbizi: We have indeed heard from members of our community who have gone this route. We can say with confidence that, once they were accommodated here, they integrated well. Some come here to study and others to work. They really manage to integrate well into the community.

I think the problem is in how these people are accommodated. The proposal of the Alliance des Burundais du Canada, as I mentioned in my opening remarks, is to give more resources to agencies like the RCMP and the Canada Border Services Agency.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Do you know why people choose to go through this route, rather than the normal route that is already open to them to cross the border?

Ms. Appolonie Simbizi: I have not done a formal investigation, but from what I have heard, I would say that these people are at an

impasse—that is, they have no other choice. As another witness said, if these people are risking their lives by going through these roads even in winter when the conditions are harsh, it is because they have no other choice. What we need to understand is that the people who take—

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Ms. Simbizi. Time is up.

We will now proceed to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for six minutes.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you can please begin.

[*Translation*]

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

I thank the witnesses for joining us today to participate in our important study.

As I would like to address all three witnesses, I will proceed fairly quickly.

I would like to answer Ms. Kayabaga's question: the reason people are not using regular border crossings is because they will be turned away under the Safe Third Country Agreement.

Ms. Simbizi, some migrant advocacy groups and immigration law associations have told us that the agreement should be suspended, at least until the discussions between the U.S. and Canada lead to something positive. That way, people would be accommodated in a dignified manner at border crossings, rather than having to take a road through the woods.

Do you tend to agree with this proposal?

Ms. Appolonie Simbizi: I think that the proposal to accommodate these people in this way may not be the best way. Anyway, at the moment, the safest way is that way. Otherwise, they would probably be forced to go down much more—

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: So you agree that these people should be accommodated in a dignified manner at border crossings. If the agreement were suspended, that would be the result. So you would agree that the agreement should be suspended, so that people could be accommodated at regular border crossings.

Ms. Appolonie Simbizi: Are you saying that the agreement needs to be suspended so that people can enter using Roxham Road?

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: No, no. If the agreement was suspended, people could go through the regular border crossings located all along the border and be accommodated in a dignified manner. So they would no longer have to go through Roxham Road.

Ms. Appolonie Simbizi: In fact, they use this route only because they do not have the means or do not meet the necessary conditions to go through the usual route. They are people who are in a desperate situation. I don't think it would be feasible—

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Ms. Simbizi, I don't think we understand each other very well, but that's okay.

If the agreement was suspended, these people would be allowed to go through the border crossings. They would file the same claim, but they would do so at a border crossing instead of at Roxham Road.

Would you agree with that?

Ms. Appolonie Simbizi: If Canada gave them the opportunity to do so, yes, I would agree.

• (1720)

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much, Ms. Simbizi.

Mayor, I congratulate you on your work. I have even seen you on television.

You mentioned vans. In fact, we heard from a television report that some of these vans are used by criminal smuggling rings that charge anywhere from \$600 to \$10,000 per person to bring people who need help to Roxham Road. They are outright robbed of their money.

Are you aware of this situation?

[English]

Ms. Janet McFetridge: No. I'm not aware that they are trafficking, that they are charging that much money. There's no way that I can know anything about the money. I have my suspicions, but, honestly, when people arrive and it's that many people—there could be 30, 40, 50 people at once, usually families—my concern is whether they have winter coats, whether they have hats, whether they have gloves. That's all I can say.

But I agree that's a big problem and it needs to be shut down.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Of course, people don't want to openly say that they had to pay criminal smugglers. It would break our hearts to know that this is the case. I commend you again for your work.

I will turn to you, Ms. Jamous Imseis and Ms. Tamjeedi.

We have learned that migrant advocacy groups and immigration lawyers' associations support suspending the Safe Third Country Agreement. We have also learned from various news reports that smuggling rings were outright robbing these poor people to take them to Roxham Road. Moreover, once they enter Canada, they have to wait more than 14 months before they can get a work permit. These people are living in extreme poverty, since their only income is social assistance, which is really not much.

At the end of the day, 50% of the asylum seekers who enter the country through Roxham Road will be deported when their case is finally settled, four or five years after their arrival. These people will have integrated into Quebec, learned French, and worked here, only to be deported back to their country of origin.

In your opinion, is this a good way for a G7 country to welcome people?

[English]

Ms. Azadeh Tamjeedi (Senior Legal Officer and Head of Protection Unit, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees): I will address a part of that question and I will let my colleague complement as well.

First, I have just a small correction in terms of 50% of those people actually being returned once a determination is done: 61% of irregular arrivals are accepted as refugees in Canada currently. That's quite a high statistic in terms of understanding that these people have merits in their claim.

Then the ones who do not get accepted have to go through an appeal process. From the irregular arrivals that do go through an appeal process on the merits of their claim, a third of them are either accepted as refugees or returned for another refugee hearing because there was a problem in the process before.

If all of the appeal process has been exhausted, then UNHCR recommends states to return people to their countries of origin to maintain the integrity of the asylum system.

I will let my colleague address a few other parts of your question.

I'm sorry. I'm going to have to ask you to repeat which parts you wanted answered.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: We don't have the same numbers.

Be that as it may, do you find it normal that, after four years, when these people have integrated into the country, are now speaking French and working, they are told to go back to their country? Do you find this timeline normal?

[English]

Ms. Azadeh Tamjeedi: That part is not necessarily something for UNHCR to comment on. We do note that, to keep a very sound asylum system that is strong, it should be used only for asylum. Once someone has exhausted all their levels of appeal, they should be either regularized through another immigration pathway, or returned to their country of origin.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You who work with—

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe. Your time is up.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: It's a shame, we were having a nice discussion.

[English]

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

Ms. Kwan, you will have six minutes.

Please proceed.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for your presentations and for your patience today.

My first question is for the representative from UNHCR.

Given that some 61% of the asylum claimants crossing over to Canada actually succeed in proving the claim that they are genuine refugees, do you think Canada should keep the safe third country agreement, because all that process is doing is forcing people to go through unsafe means to get to safety? If the government suspended or lifted the safe third country agreement with the United States, then people would be able to cross over in regular border crossings, get to safety and still make their claim.

Wouldn't that be a better option than to force people to trek through snow in terrible conditions and possibly lose their lives?

• (1725)

Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis: It's not for UNHCR to comment on the particular mode that Canada wishes to use for controlling its border. It's an independent sovereign state. As long as the process upholds their international legal obligations, that is our primary concern.

As I said, on my visits to Roxham Road, which are fairly regular, those that I make and that my colleagues make, what we have observed is that notwithstanding the fact that we are using an irregular entry point, the process is handled with a significant degree of care and it is meeting the minimum legal requirements.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

The matter is being challenged in courts right now in Canada. We'll see what the Supreme Court of Canada says about violations of basic human rights.

Going back to a more human level, I'll turn my question to the mayor.

Given that's the reality, you see first-hand the people coming through and the desperation that they're in through the story you just related to us. It's not necessarily for you to tell Canada what should be done, but from a human perspective, do you think that it would make sense if Canada were to suspend the safe third country agreement so that people would be able to get to safety in a safe way and not put their lives in jeopardy?

Ms. Janet McFetridge: It's very hard for me to really make that statement. It does seem like it would be safer if they could go to the regular crossing and ask for asylum there, but I don't know if that's going to happen. I have no way to influence the decisions in Canada—or in my own country, for that matter—at that level. That's all I can really say about that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much for that very diplomatic response.

To all the witnesses, I get it that you're not here to tell Canada what to do; however, as a Canadian, I'm seeing what's happening, and I vehemently disagree with the Canadian government's approach to this by creating the safe third country agreement, putting it in place, forcing people to go through irregular means and putting their lives in jeopardy. I don't think it's the right thing to do, nor do I think it's a humanitarian thing to do, even though we have pro-

cesses to allow for people to make a claim afterwards. There's a better way forward, and we don't have to put people through that process.

In the United States, part of the reason people choose to cross over irregularly to Canada—especially in the beginning when the Trump administration was in power—is that people who are faced with exploitation as a woman or who are faced with challenges in that way have fled their country because they're being persecuted because of their gender. Some are being persecuted because of their sexual identity. As a result of that, they're trying to get to safety.

The United States has a right to refuse these individuals as asylum claimants. Is that still happening in the United States? Maybe the UNHCR can share that information with us.

Ms. Azadeh Tamjeedi: I will address that question.

Recently, in 2021, UNHCR welcomed changes in the U.S. to their decision-making process related to gender-based and gang-related violence claims.

They walked back and repealed a decision called the “Matter of A-B-”, which had made it more difficult for these populations to make asylum claims in the U.S. Currently, there are improvements in the system related to gender-based violence claims and gang-based violence claims in the U.S., and we continue to work with U.S. authorities to improve their system related to these types of claims.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: When you say you're working with them to improve the system, what does that mean?

Ms. Azadeh Tamjeedi: That is in line with our role internationally, as it is here in Canada. We work on a bilateral basis with the U.S. government to make recommendations on the way they determine refugee claims, and we put forward ways to strengthen that system. A lot of those recommendations are publicly available on our websites, and they're also included in a lot of the amicus briefs that we file in various court applications as well.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: For the people who fear for their lives, who have declared that they are gay, for example, and who are being hunted down and disowned by their own families, do they know that they would be able to make a claim in the United States? What information do you have that you can share with us? How many of those individuals' claims have been rejected?

• (1730)

Ms. Azadeh Tamjeedi: I don't have that statistic on hand with me, but I will say that the U.S. does have a system where people could access counsel or get information on the asylum claim process, and information is also readily available online. That's all I can say at this moment in answer to your question.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Would you be able to provide those stats to us?

Ms. Azadeh Tamjeedi: I will undertake to see if we have those statistics first and then provide them to the committee.

The Chair: Thank you.

With that, this panel comes to an end.

On behalf of all the members of this committee, I really want to thank all the witnesses for appearing before us and for their patience. Thanks for adjusting your schedule with that of the committee. It was great to have you all.

If there is anything that you would like to bring to the attention of the committee and because of a lack of time you have not been

able to discuss it, you can always send a written submission to the clerk of the committee, and that will be circulated to all the members.

Thank you once again.

The meeting is adjourned.

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