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• (1640)

[English]

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

Welcome to meeting number 49 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

Before we proceed, security is here now, so are all members comfortable with having this person remain?

Some hon. member: Yes.

The Chair: Okay.

Today, we will be commencing our study on the government's response to the final report of the Special Committee on Afghanistan.

On behalf of all the committee members, I would like to welcome the Honourable Sean Fraser, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, and officials from IRCC.

Along with the minister, we are joined by Christiane Fox, deputy minister; Jennifer MacIntyre, assistant deputy minister, Afghanistan; Catherine Scott, assistant deputy minister, settlement and integration; and Pemi Gill, director general, international network.

We will begin with opening remarks from the minister.

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

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

It's good to see you all again, colleagues. It's a pleasure to have the opportunity to appear before the committee. I have joined you before—not only at the immigration committee, but at the Special Committee on Afghanistan as well—to discuss some of the issues regarding the government's response in terms of the refugee resettlement initiative and trying to provide a second lease on life to some of the world's most vulnerable people.

Our effort in Afghanistan represents one of the most difficult and largest resettlement initiatives in Canadian history. We're doing what we can to help a number of different groups. We are helping people who've served alongside the Canadian Forces and worked with the Government of Canada during our mission in Afghanistan. We are reuniting families for people who've previously been resettled in Canada; and we are helping promote a pathway to Canada for people who are being targeted as a result of who they are, or perhaps of what they contributed.

The challenges associated with this resettlement initiative are unlike any other effort, certainly, that I've been a part of, or, I would suggest, that has taken place in recent history in Canada or most other places in the world. The kinds of challenges we're dealing with range from the chaos that took place during the evacuation as the Taliban closed in on Kabul; the lack of international capacity when it came to refugee resettlement as a result of a number of years where states around the world withdrew from refugee protection during the COVID-19 pandemic; and the lack of a Canadian presence on the ground after the Canadian withdrawal of Canadian Forces. Over the course of the resettlement initiative, there has been a lack of diplomatic presence as well.

Of course, certain continued challenges persist. In particular, there is difficulty in securing safe passage for people who remain inside Afghanistan. I'd remind you that we're dealing with a territory that has been seized by the Taliban, a listed terrorist entity in Canadian law. It can be extraordinarily difficult in the shifting landscape of requirements for people who seek to move throughout and outside of Afghanistan. It presents challenges that are unique to this particular mission.

Despite the intensity of these challenges, there are some successes that we're proud of, though the job is not done. To date, there are approximately 28,000 Afghans who've been successfully resettled in Canada, who have been given that second lease on life. I've had the opportunity to meet a number of them. I'll tell you folks, it's a special experience when you get to join families on the tarmac when a plane arrives. I've watched parents kiss the ground with their kids—the same age as my kids—as they arrive in Canada, because they've finally come to believe that they're safe after the horrific traumas they've suffered.

We're dealing with people who were targeted because they were trying to build a better life for themselves, their families and their community in Afghanistan. They were working as human rights defenders or journalists. They were targeted because of who they were. They were members of the LGBTQ+ community, religious minorities, women leaders and other groups. I often think of women judges who've been seeking to make their way to Canada, who were often responsible for putting members of the Taliban behind bars. They are now persecuted and facing threats of torture or death as a result of their desire to contribute.

I can tell you folks, this is probably one of the things I'm most proud to ever have been involved with. It's one of the most difficult things with which I've ever been involved, but it's the kind of thing that, in my mind, makes the job that we sign up for worth doing.

The opportunity to use my life to contribute to making a difference in my own small way in this role, to protect the lives of others, is something I relish.

[*Translation*]

I apologize for expressing myself in English. It's a difficult and emotional issue for many people. And yet it's very important to continue to support the most vulnerable of these people. There are now almost 28,000 people who are now safely here in Canada.

[*English*]

This is something I'm proud of. It's something Canadians are proud of. However, challenges remain. There are difficulties for people who are still in Afghanistan. There are difficulties for people in third countries who haven't been able to secure the necessary documents from their current hosts to exit those third countries. Whatever challenges remain, we're not going to waver in our commitment to resettle at least 40,000 Afghan refugees. It's a commitment I'm proud of, but work that we will continue to move our way through until we complete this goal.

Thank you very much, Madam Chair. I'd be happy to take questions from members of the committee.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will go to our round of questioning, and we will begin with Ms. Rempel Garner for six minutes.

Ms. Rempel Garner, you can please begin.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Minister, I'm aware of the magnitude of the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. As the wife of a U.S. veteran who served in Afghanistan, this issue cuts close to home for me.

My questions relate to recommendation three of the report and the creation of an emergency mechanism to enable fast evacuations of persons in a crisis zone. I'm trying to ascertain if one already formally existed but wasn't disclosed to Parliament.

Evidence exists that a parliamentarian and others within the government felt that the government was so woefully unprepared to evacuate persons from Afghanistan that they resorted to issuing fraudulent documents and used a process by which political staff and a senator got to choose who got on evacuation planes. With nearly one million Afghans who expressed interest in being allowed into Canada, this undermined the fairness of Canada's immigration policies, while putting Afghans like the family of my constituent at risk. My constituents were involved in this, as you know, and will be the object of some of my questions.

Minister, on July 26, you wrote a response to a letter that I wrote on July 7. The subject of the letter related to a family of Afghan nationals my office was assisting, who had allegedly been issued official documentation stating they had been granted a visa to enter Canada. They received this documentation from Senator Marilou McPhedran. In your response, you stated that these letters were inauthentic and that your department had undertaken a review of the matter.

In your investigation, was it determined whether the minister at the time, any IRCC department official or any of the IRCC minister's office staff ever advised any third parties—including ministerial office staff or parliamentarians—to issue official travel documentation to Afghan nationals for the purposes of allowing them access to evacuation flights or to otherwise gain entry into Canada?

• (1645)

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you very much for the question—I appreciate it—and thank you for the letter you sent me this past summer.

The issue that you.... First, the preamble to your question touched on whether there was an emergency evacuation strategy that was available and not used in the instance. No. There was an effort made in that instance to move people as quickly as possible, through the use of these facilitation letters. It's worth exploring, perhaps in a separate question, what we should do going forward to build surge capacity to respond in emergencies.

The facilitation letters you're referring to were issued by the government at the time for people who were intended to come into the program.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you. I appreciate your giving background. I'm wondering if your investigation into my letter ever determined whether any of the department officials or political staff advised any third party, including parliamentarians and other political staff, to issue these facilitation letters.

Hon. Sean Fraser: No. The investigation internal to IRCC concluded that the letters at issue did not come officially from the Government of Canada. There was no information that I received as a result of that investigation along the lines you've suggested.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Senator McPhedran asserted in the other place this week that she issued these visa facilitation letters in coordination with the former chief of staff to the defence minister, George Young, and a group of persons who included former cabinet minister Maryam Monsef.

Did your investigation ascertain whether or not her allegation in the Senate was true?

Hon. Sean Fraser: No. However, it's important that we understand that IRCC is very good at detecting the use of documents that are unofficial. We don't have functionality built into this department to be investigating political staff and parliamentarians. That's why, when we concluded that the letters at issue were not officially offered by the Government of Canada, we shared that with law enforcement—not to make an allegation, by the way, against any particular individual, but to put the documents in the hands of someone who had the ability to investigate as they saw fit.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: You mentioned that IRCC has the capacity to detect inauthentic documentation. My office was in coordination with your department as early as August 2021, showing them copies of this documentation. Why wasn't it detected that it was inauthentic until after I wrote you the letter in July of last year?

Hon. Sean Fraser: The cases that you raised with me regarding your constituents helped inform some of the process. The reality was that we first became aware of a media report about this time last year—late January, I believe—that started asking some questions tied to a particular organization. That's when we started the investigation. It took a number of months to reach the conclusion, but your outreach actually helped to facilitate the investigation.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you.

As part of your investigation.... There are numerous media articles talking about how Senator McPhedran's letters helped facilitate getting people into the country. How many persons gained access into Canada using Senator McPhedran's letters?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'm not aware of any. I think it's important to understand that the facilitation letters were used only to allow people to clear Taliban checkpoints and move throughout Hamid Karzai International Airport. Even people who received legitimate letters from the Government of Canada still had to go through the ordinary application process to qualify for the program.

I'm not aware of anyone who accessed Canada on the basis of these letters.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: The letter I'm in possession of states that the person it was granted to has been granted a visa to enter Canada.

Ms. Fox, has your department begun an investigation into how many persons were granted entry into Canada using an inauthentic letter issued by a parliamentarian, or anyone else Senator McPhedran raised in the Senate last week?

• (1650)

Ms. Christiane Fox (Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): I would say that there were none. The facilitation letters were just that: facilitation letters that had the word "visa" in them. However, these were to get through checkpoints. Visas were issued to our clients.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Should I have been issuing fake visas to get my constituents into Canada? Do you believe the people who now have these letters should be allowed access into Canada?

Ms. Christiane Fox: It is really important that when the department issues official Government of Canada letters, the letters are used officially. Therefore, any time we get a suggestion that there is an inauthentic letter in circulation, we have to conduct a review.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Minister, do you realize the message this sends? All of us here had constituents trying to flee war zones. They didn't have the luxury of getting these letters. I worked with a family for a year, trying to find out what was going on.

Do you believe the letter Senator McPhedran used...? We know, through media reports, that there are people who got into Canada using these letters. Do you believe people holding them in Afghanistan should be allowed access into Canada? It sends the message that the system is so broken that we should be issuing fake visas to get people into the country.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Madam Chair, I see time has run out. I would be happy to respond. I'll take—

The Chair: Perhaps you'll get an opportunity to respond in the next round.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Ms. Rempel Garner, I would be happy to respond, should you have more time, because I think this is a very important issue to deal with.

The Chair: We will now proceed to Mr. Dhaliwal.

Mr. Dhaliwal, you will have six minutes.

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

First of all, Minister, I want to thank you, Deputy Minister Fox and the other associates for appearing today. One thing the honourable members on the other side will agree with is that you are very accessible. Any time we have asked you to come to a meeting, you have promptly responded and been here. I want to commend you, and I hope you will continue to do that.

Afghan issues are very near and dear to me and other members of the Special Committee on Afghanistan, and to many of my constituents as well.

You mentioned that nearly 28,000 of the 40,000 expected Afghans have already arrived in Canada. Are you confident we will meet our target of 40,000? If so, what more needs to be done to ensure the target is met? You also mentioned that this is one of the largest and most difficult efforts we are making. If you had to identify or summarize them, what are some of the key bottlenecks, in terms of reaching the 40,000 personal target?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you, Mr. Dhaliwal. I'm happy to make myself available. I think the work this committee does is extremely important.

Yes, I'm confident we can achieve the goal of resettling at least 40,000 Afghans by the end of this calendar year, but there are challenges that keep me up at night.

Securing safe passage for people who are still inside Afghanistan is extremely difficult. The shifting landscape we experience on the ground poses challenges that would have been beyond my imagination before I had the privilege of sitting in this position. In particular, we're dealing with people who are being hunted, persecuted every day and targeted by the Taliban on the basis of having tried to do good for their community, or by virtue of their service with the Canadian Forces or the Canadian government.

The challenges that exist, which are unique beyond this kind of persecution, include the changes at the border. After we had worked to secure a pathway for some of those destined for Canada—to make their way towards Pakistan, for example—the Taliban responded by insisting on exit documents that prevented people from leaving.

There are challenges for people in third countries who are unable to access the documents they need to leave, and for which we need to work with international partners. I've learned of families inside Afghanistan... Some family members have a passport, but they don't want to leave without other family members who have not yet secured those travel documents. If you place yourself in the shoes of these families, of course they have reservations about approaching the Taliban to access a passport, given the fact that it's their persecutor who has the authority to issue those passports.

There are challenges at every turn. The biggest challenge I see is securing safe passage for people who are deep in the approval process but can't access a safe pathway to move throughout and outside Afghanistan.

Whatever the scale of the challenges, we're not giving up on these people. We're going to do everything we can to provide a pathway to Canada. It's a commitment we made to them and one we intend to make good on.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Thank you.

Minister, many groups and settlement agencies here in Canada, some of them in my constituency of Surrey—Newton as well, are doing some great work when it comes to helping the most vulnerable who come to our land. What are you doing to ensure that Afghan refugees have the support they need to succeed when they start their new lives in Canada?

• (1655)

Hon. Sean Fraser: First of all, let me take this opportunity to say thank you to the people who are engaged in settlement work across Canada. They are heroes, dealing with people who are often experiencing severe mental health needs and who have been through traumatic experiences. The level of support they need is extraordinary, in many instances.

We work with settlement agencies to ensure that they have the financial resources necessary to provide the services that they are expert in providing. Of course, there are programs that provide things like income support and temporary accommodations for people as they become established in Canada. It's going to take a long time for a lot of families to feel safe and whole in their new communities. I find that some of the best supports come not only from government or settlement agencies but also communities. Look at the role that private sponsorship has played in both the Syrian and now Afghan refugee resettlement initiatives. When we see Canadians coming together to provide support for our newest community members, it's extraordinary what personal benefits accrue to families who have that kind of wraparound support.

It can be challenging. I'll tell you that the capacity of some of the organizations we're dealing with is stretched pretty thin. They're doing so much heavy lifting, helping not only Afghans but also Syrians who continue to arrive, or more recently Ukrainians, who've been granted access to settlement services. It's not easy, but by contributing financial resources to help settlement agencies that are providing support directly to families, and continuing to assist Canadians who want to provide support for those they sponsor to come here, we can set people up to have a good chance at success here in Canada.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: Minister, you mentioned Ukrainians. There has been a lot of confusion among the public when it comes to the difference between the situation of people who are trying to leave Ukraine and those attempting to leave Afghanistan. Could you briefly explain some of the differences?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Sure. I think I've given you a sense of some of the challenges from a resettlement perspective and the safe passage perspective that are unique to Afghanistan. The situation in Ukraine is also horrific for so many families who are facing a war of aggression, with missiles being dropped on their neighbourhoods. For many Ukrainians who sought to flee, they had access to the western border. They could access transportation networks once they got into other European countries. Within a day they could be in one of many countries where they were permitted to travel. Many of them had access to commercial flights, which they could access on their own.

There are parts of Ukraine where moving throughout the country is extremely difficult, there is no question, but when you saw—

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

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you, Madam Chair.

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

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

[*Translation*]

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

I'd like to thank the minister and the people from the department for being with us today.

Minister, you may be expecting the question I'm about to ask you, but you are fully aware of the fact that Canada's Criminal Code currently has restrictions on Canadian humanitarian aid in Afghanistan. We spoke about this in committee and I introduced a motion on this matter that requires unanimous consent, which was blocked by your colleague Mr. David Lametti, the Minister of Justice.

Everyone appears to acknowledge a problem that needs to be dealt with. It's been a year now. Why has it not been dealt with and what are you planning to do for it to be settled by tomorrow morning?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I understand your question, but before answering it, I need to report that there's a problem with the volume on the interpretation channel.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Madam Chair, can I have my speaking time back so that I can ask my question again?

[*English*]

The Chair: We will stop the clock. Go ahead, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: We'll start over.

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: Madam Chair, the issue is that the volume is just spiking on and off in my ear.

[Translation]

I nevertheless understood the question and thank the member.

The question is a very important one. I'd also like to thank the committee for its recommendation concerning the Criminal Code.

[English]

It's an important issue, as my colleague Minister Sajjan indicated previously. The government intends to advance a legislative solution to overcome some of these barriers, which I think will be important.

It's important as well that we recognize the unanimous nature of the endorsement from this committee to include such a recommendation. My hope is that when we come forward with legislation to solve this issue, it maintains the support of all parties.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I've been given the same answer for a year, Minister. But there is a problem with Canada's bureaucracy. The United States changed their legislation, as did European countries. The UN voted resolution 2615 to address the issue, and in the meantime, Canada has continued to give me the same answer: we're working on changing the legislation.

Do you believe that Canada's Minister of Justice is more powerful than the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and citizenship when the time comes to assist destitute people in danger?

• (1700)

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: No. I think it's important that we recognize that ministers all represent the Government of Canada. We all work on behalf of the Government of Canada. When I advance a particular measure, it's not a measure of my own ministry exclusively, but a measure that's supported by the cabinet and government.

We need to move forward to clear whatever bottlenecks exist to provide humanitarian assistance and to potentially move people throughout Afghanistan as well.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Everyone is in agreement, but no one is taking action. It's unbelievable.

Hon. Sean Fraser: That's not true.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: It's a good way to fuel cynicism.

Minister, with respect to managing the crisis in Afghanistan, the processing of many current files was put on hold at IRCC because 15% to 25% of staff were assigned to processing Afghan crisis files. Needless to say, these had to be dealt with, because people's lives were in danger.

The Bloc Québécois made a proposal to the government last June, and it is also among the recommendations in the report. It was to establish a permanent emergency mechanism in the event of international crises like armed conflicts or natural disasters.

Are you going to implement this recommendation? Can you tell this committee that the emergency mechanism will indeed be established in the near future?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: I support notionally the idea of the creation of some surge capacity within the department. I think getting the details right is going to be very important. This issue is going to be one of the subjects that we address as part of the strategic policy review that's just getting under way, which we hope to complete by May, to understand how we can protect surge capacity if we're going to continue to respond in real time to migration crises.

One thing that I have come to understand in this position is that Canada's system and, in fact, global refugee resettlement systems have been designed over many years to respond to protracted refugee crises to resettle people who've often been displaced for many years after they were first displaced.

There has been a change in approach over the past number of years. We are now trying to respond in real time to crises as they unfold, and I very much like the idea of building in permanent capacity to respond. Over the course of the next few months, we're going to be consulting Canadians to understand how to design such a system in the right way.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Fantastic. It just goes to show how the Bloc Québécois is a party of proposals.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you. It's a good idea.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: In connection with the Afghans file, following the tabling of the committee report, an article in *La Presse* reported on a situation in which some applicants found themselves, in countries like Pakistan and Uzbekistan, waiting for so long for their application to be processed by Ottawa, that their visa expired and they were returned to Afghanistan, where they are currently facing retaliation from the Taliban.

What do you or the department plan to do for these applicants whose visas have expired because of problems at the department?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: One of the challenges I see with responding to these crises in real time is that you're often reliant on third party partners who have their own rules about visa policy.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I don't want to know what happened, but just what you plan to do about it now.

Hon. Sean Fraser: We are working closely with our international partners to deal with situations like this.

[English]

We work with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Pakistan when we're dealing with people who are destined for Canada. We are usually able to receive assurances or find solutions to make sure that the people we made a commitment to who are in our program will be able to come to Canada. It can be difficult in some instances, but we will not give up on a single person that we have made this commitment to.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: So you are reassuring people whose visa has expired. You are stating today that you are going to do everything within your power to reactivate their visas so that they can come here. A yes or no answer please.

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: Depending on the arrangement, we can reach them with a third party partner. In some instances, people never had a visa to begin with because, as they fled, they crossed in an irregular way, but we still try to receive assurances from their host country that we will be able to take them to Canada. We expect and hope that they will treat them with compassion and respect along the way.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: About two weeks ago, Minister, you were telling us that there was no categorization of applicants benefiting from Canadian programs. And yet we know full well that interpreters and people who worked at the Embassy are separate categories in terms of selection. I have a list of 65 Afghan judges who were not selected.

When I hear things like that, I ask myself whether the department is really making an effort...

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting you. You will get an opportunity in your second round. Your time is up.

We will now proceed to Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan, you will have six minutes. You can please begin.

• (1705)

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

On the Afghan file, I would first like to touch on the issue around the cultural interpreters. They've been excluded from the program, and it requires legal counsel representing the families to take the matter to court. I think that, just before we started this meeting, one of the cultural advisers spoke with you about the lack of action from the government.

From that perspective, why is it that cultural advisers are excluded? I know there's work in place to try to include them, but there are still extended family members who are excluded, who are being targeted and hunted down by the Taliban because of their work for Canada.

Will the minister confirm that the extended family members of the cultural advisers will be brought to safety?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Ms. Kwan, thank you for your advocacy.

Obviously, there are people who are facing very vulnerable circumstances. I want to be careful commenting on any specific cases, particularly when there may be legal proceedings involved. I don't want to breach confidentiality and I want to protect the integrity of any legal proceedings that may be at issue with a specific—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Maybe I can just interject here.

I am not asking about any specific case, but about a class of people. As you know, there is a class of people who are excluded and who are taking legal action against the government. It shouldn't have to come to that. I hope the minister realizes that.

Now that this issue is before us, the question here is, what is the minister going to do about it? Will you ensure that those family members are brought to safety, including their extended family members?

Hon. Sean Fraser: There are just a couple of things.

We made a decision on certain categories for bringing extended family members here. We've expanded the definition of "family" across many aspects of this program to recognize cultural differences whereby people who may not be a nuclear family still consider themselves to be a family unit.

We rely on referral partners to place people into our programs in most instances, based on their contribution to either the Department of National Defence or Global Affairs Canada. We accept their referrals, but people can be referred into the program based on vulnerability, through private sponsorship or government-assisted programs.

I see that you want to take this in a different direction.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Well, actually I want to get to the crux and to the answer, and not this background, which I already have. I have only six minutes. I don't have that much time to get to you on direct questions.

My question here is this: Going forward, will the minister take action to ensure that these family members come to safety?

In addition to that, you have a limit of 40,000. With that limit, the reality is that the maximum number has been reached, which means that a lot of the family members have not been processed through this system and are not going to be able to get to safety.

I have spreadsheet upon spreadsheet of people who served Canada, and their family members, who have been left behind and ignored. They are in hiding and being hunted down by the Taliban. Some of them are in Pakistan, where their visas have expired and the police are knocking on their doors because of the expiry of their visas.

This is very real. If you don't lift the 40,000-person quota that the government has set arbitrarily, which is preventing Afghans from getting to safety, you are handing them a death sentence. That's the reality. The only reason they are in danger is that they served Canada.

My question here is twofold: Will you help to bring those families to safety—change the policy if that's what's required—and will you lift the quota?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I want to be careful not to make guarantees to people whose files I may not be fully aware of, because people often hang on to every word I say.

I am open to flexibly applying definitions of “family”, as we have for other programs throughout this process, to bring more people here. We have made a commitment to welcome at least 40,000 Afghan refugees. I am always looking for ways to continue to do more to help more vulnerable people get here.

The reality of the situation is that I know there are people who are vulnerable because of their work with Canada. We've created these programs to try to bring more of them here. I am happy to work with you and others, and members who want to speak to me, including the gentleman who spoke before this meeting began, to understand the situation and how we can improve policies to support more vulnerable people.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Minister, I appreciate that. You've offered that before. I have raised these questions before. I have submitted letters to you. I've written to you. I've sent the spreadsheets to you. I have brought them to your staff for attention. Do you know what? They all just sit there, saying that there is nothing to move forward on. There is no progress and nothing has moved.

I have another situation, in which a family member of one brother was left behind. Supposedly they applied under the wrong stream, so that was being corrected. Since then, there has been no progress. We don't know what's happened to that family. I don't even know if they have been approved under a new stream.

You can understand the anxiety that the families feel. I feel the anxiety, and that's only one-thousandth of how they feel. That's the reality of what they are faced with.

I appreciate the offer, but the reality is that there is very little follow-up. What do we do with that?

What we're waiting for and what I would like to see is a policy change and a public announcement. It shouldn't be just one-offs that we're working with.

I think the situation that my colleague, Ms. Michelle Rempel Garner, raised might be exactly the problem. There is this situation whereby some people got preferential treatment. I don't know how it is that some people got facilitation letters and others didn't.

I also had spreadsheets of people who needed to get to safety and never got one. Nobody told me that there were these facilitation letters you could get. How do you get them?

• (1710)

Hon. Sean Fraser: Madam Chair, do I have time to offer a response?

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Hon. Sean Fraser: There was a lot built into that question, obviously.

If the question is how people got facilitation letters, they were issued to people who were being brought into the program for a time-limited purpose during the evacuation of Kabul. The ones that were officially offered by the Government of Canada were limited to individuals who were supposed to be coming through part of our resettlement effort.

I'd be happy to chat further if we have an opportunity for follow-up questions in a subsequent round.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will now proceed to Mr. Redekopp.

Mr. Redekopp, you have five minutes. Please begin.

Mr. Brad Redekopp (Saskatoon West, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister and officials, for being here.

I want to pick up on that question about the Human Rights Tribunal case. I know you can't comment on the case specifically.

I was reading in the Star about that. The individuals are alleging that you neglected your role as Minister of Immigration, that you're letting families swing in the wind, that you have settled two of the cases—which implies there is some agreement you have with that—and that there are two more cases yet to go.

Part of what I read is that IRCC will be publishing a new public policy related to the language and cultural advisers and their families. Where is it and when will it be made available?

Hon. Sean Fraser: It will be published online very soon.

I can't speak, obviously, to the details of the settlement. It's important, before we publish anything that might have revealing personal information, that we be very careful that we don't put people at risk.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Very soon is....

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'll turn to our officials, in case they have a better sense of the precise timing.

Ms. Christiane Fox: I would say within the next couple of weeks. We're just finalizing the details.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Okay. Can you forward that to the committee once it's published?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Thank you.

Also, I want to pick up on what Ms. Rempel Garner was speaking about.

I have a quick question, Minister. Do you agree that it is illegal for anyone other than officials delegated with authority by you under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act to act on your behalf?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'm not here to project legal conclusions about what people may have done for what reasons. I can tell you there were particular documents that were authorized from the Government of Canada. The letters to which Ms. Rempel Garner referred were not officially offered by the Government of Canada.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: If I were to issue a document that purports to be from the Government of Canada on this issue, you would say that was wrong and I shouldn't be doing it.

Hon. Sean Fraser: Look, the context, I think, depends greatly on what you're sending, to whom and for what purpose. I don't think it's advisable for me, at this committee, to start reaching conclusions about the illegality of a fictional example.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: You're aware, though, of these fraudulent visas that Senator McPhedran was sending to individuals. Are you aware of whether IRCC had any instrument of delegation of authority to the Minister of National Defence, Harjit Sajjan, anyone employed by the Department of National Defence or the senator in question to issue these documents?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'm sorry, Madam Chair. Could I ask the member to repeat the question? I had an interruption with the audio, and it was hard to hear.

The Chair: Mr. Redekopp, please repeat. I've stopped the clock.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Are you aware of whether IRCC had signed any instruments of delegation of authority to the Minister of National Defence, Harjit Sajjan, anyone employed by the Department of National Defence or the senator in question to issue any documents on your behalf?

Hon. Sean Fraser: There was some authority given to the Canadian Armed Forces on the ground during the airlift. To my knowledge, if you're asking about whether there were third parties who were authorized at a political level or amongst parliamentarians, no such authorization to issue facilitation letters was given by IRCC.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Okay. Regarding your exempt staff, and I'm thinking in particular of your former chief of staff, Olga Radchenko, and others, did they give written or verbal permission to anybody to bypass the minister's authority and authorize the issuance of these travel documents by the senator in question?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Not to my knowledge, and out of respect for people who have been responsible for saving as many lives around the world as any Canadian I have met in the last number of years, I would ask us to be very careful about attributing malice without evidence to any political staff.

Not to my knowledge.... I don't believe anyone in my office has given such direction or assurances.

• (1715)

Mr. Brad Redekopp: I agree totally with you on that. I think it's a bit of a shame, though, that the policies of your department and the slowness of bringing Afghans to Canada caused somebody to do something that may have been or was outside the norm. I think that's what the concern is. If the department had been working more

efficiently and if these people had been coming, maybe that situation wouldn't have had to arise. What do you think of that?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Look, I disagree with your characterization, respectfully, of course. At the time—and of course, I don't have personal experience, because I came into this position shortly afterward—it was apparent that it was a chaotic situation as the Taliban closed in on Kabul. There were many people who were trying to save as many lives as possible.

Where I have some serious concerns is about the idea that someone may have been given the indication that they would be permitted to come to Canada without the person giving it having the authorization to give such direction. It's very serious, because if you look at the potential for a few hundred people, plus an average of eight family members per person, the idea that those people should somehow displace others who have been referred into the program based on their vulnerability is something I think we need to take seriously.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Exactly.

Hon. Sean Fraser: I don't want to make allegations about a particular person's behaviour under what may have been a circumstance in which they were trying to save lives.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Yes, that's fair enough.

Do you think Canada owes anything to the people who received that documentation, who thought they were coming to Canada?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I think we need to have a full understanding of the expectation that was created by the Government of Canada in these instances.

It's really important that we don't substitute an official process that was designed to bring people based on their vulnerability with one that would allow some people, based on a relationship they may have, to access the program. All the permanent residency programs we're dealing with have a finite number of people, including refugee resettlement. I think it's very important we respect the integrity of the process.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Time is up for Mr. Redekopp.

We will now proceed to Mr. Ali.

Mr. Ali, you will have five minutes for your round of questioning. You can please begin.

You are on mute.

There are some audio issues to figure out. Mr. Ali, we will come back to you. I'm proceeding to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: The Conservatives nevertheless asked some interesting questions.

Do you think that it's reasonable that ple should have to circumvent the rules because your department is unable to guarantee that they will get to Canada quickly?

If they circumvent the rules to save lives, then estly, I'm not going to hold that against them.

Should people really have to break the laws of their government to succeed in saving lives?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: First, I want to be careful to say that I've not made a conclusion or assertion that people are out breaking laws.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: That's not what I said.

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: There is nothing normal about what happened in Kabul. There was a chaotic situation in which the Taliban was closing in to overtake a city that had not been under its control. Thousands of people's lives were saved during that phase. About 3,800 or so from that initial evacuation are actually now living safely in Canada.

I don't think anything about the effort of evacuating a city as it's being overtaken by a listed terrorist entity can be described as normal. There were many people involved who were trying to do their best to help some of the world's most vulnerable people in that moment.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: In short, you think that's all right. Great.

Two weeks ago you told us that you would not be operating on the basis of categories. At the same time, interpreters and people working at Canada's embassy in Afghanistan were taken care of.

I mentioned 65 Afghan judges. In fact I'm going to send your department the list I received from an NGO. You may already have it, but I'll send it to you again.

How can you say that were selecting interpreters and people who worked at the embassy, and then at the same time claim that there are no categories?

Isn't that a paradox?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: No. I appreciate the nature of your question, but if you'll indulge me I can explain.

There are certain categories that we developed to target people either based on their contribution to Canada's effort in Afghanistan, or based on features about them or their activities in life, before the Taliban takeover, that made them particularly vulnerable.

When it came to people's contribution to Canada, we relied on referrals from the Department of National Defence and Global Affairs to identify the people they wanted to refer into the program.

We also created a program for an additional 5,000 extended family members of previously settled interpreters. The other categories that exist include members of the LGBTQ2 community, human rights defenders, journalists and others who are vulnerable—

I'm sorry. Go ahead, Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe.

• (1720)

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I only have 10 seconds left.

You have discretionary power. In the past, your predecessors used this power for Kosovo and Syria, among others.

Why haven't you used it for Afghanistan, Minister?

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: There are certain exceptional examples. I know there are some that you and I have spoken about before, where we needed to use some elements of discretion.

Developing the response to Afghanistan involved a great deal of discretion across the creation of new programs that did not exist. We have innovated to bring new referral partners to welcome certain vulnerable communities. We've created new programs that allowed government departments to refer people into our refugee resettlement program in a discretionary way in order to respond to particular needs—

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

Hon. Sean Fraser: I'd be happy to carry on the conversation offline.

The Chair: Mr. Ali, you can begin, please. You will have five minutes.

Mr. Shafqat Ali (Brampton Centre, Lib.): Thank you for being here today, Minister, to share the progress of your work on the Afghan plan.

Minister, over the past few months I have had the opportunity to greet Afghan newcomer families arriving at Toronto Pearson Airport on chartered flights from various locations. Could you share with the committee the successes and challenges of providing support for the journeys of vulnerable Afghans from third countries and information about the assistance provided by various organizations?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I received a similar question from one of our other colleagues earlier in this conversation. I think I canvassed some of the challenges of moving people throughout Afghanistan. There are unique challenges for those who find themselves in third countries.

The kinds of challenges people run into sometimes depend upon the circumstances under which they entered that third country. I think about people who may have travelled to Pakistan, for example, who had a valid visa, versus people who crossed in an irregular way; both categories potentially qualify for Canada's immigration programs. The uncertainty that some people have if they don't have a legal immigration status in a host country on their way to Canada creates extraordinary concern for them and their families. We have other unique challenges when it comes to working with international partners to secure the ability to allow safe passage from Afghanistan into those third countries.

With regard to the second part of your question, I think that some of these supports that organizations provide.... There are so many heroes living in our communities. I think about Fariborz in Calgary, which has been responsible for providing services welcoming thousands upon thousands of vulnerable Afghans. There are people who are dedicating their lives to the well-being of some of the people who are fleeing unimaginable circumstances. We work with them to help fund the settlement activities that they provide, and we work with them to better understand the unique challenges that people who are living in these communities are now facing.

There were quite a few elements to your question. There's no shortage of challenges, but the successes, to me, are apparent when I meet people in communities. The real mark of success I think we'll observe half a generation from now. When I'm long retired from politics and I see a generation of girls who get to go to school, that's when I'll be able to celebrate success.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: Thank you, Minister.

We know from the Special Committee on Afghanistan's study and report that there are unique challenges to the Afghan resettlement effort, specifically regarding finding ways to help people exit Afghanistan. What has the government been doing to work with neighbouring third countries to ensure safe passage out of Afghanistan?

Hon. Sean Fraser: The safe passage issue requires partnerships not just with states in the region, although it obviously requires that as well. It also requires work on the ground inside the country with third parties that can help move people through the country. This is an enormous challenge. We do not have a military or diplomatic presence on the ground in Afghanistan; moving people through the country remains the biggest obstacle to success, but we have the ability to work with third parties.

I hesitate to speak too openly about some of the current conversations we're having for fear that we may shine a light on some of the strategies we're pursuing, which could jeopardize the potential for success of those strategies. When we're looking to work with partners to facilitate not just the travel of vulnerable individuals to those countries but permission for them to stay long enough to complete whatever process may be remaining to secure chartered flights that may bring people from a third country to Canada, all of this requires constant conversations with countries in the region through which safe passage could be possible.

We have not put all our eggs in any one basket. If there is a state partner we can work with on the international stage in the region, we have been taking calls with them, taking meetings with them and working continuously in partnership to secure opportunities for vulnerable Afghans, not just to flee Afghanistan but to be safe temporarily in a third country before their onward travel to Canada.

• (1725)

Mr. Shafqat Ali: Thank you, Minister.

Can you tell us if there has been any progress made by your department on the recommendation of the Special Committee on Afghanistan with respect to allowing Afghans to use other pathways, such as study permits, the economic mobility pathways pilot

and economic immigration streams, without assessing their intention of returning to their country of origin?

Hon. Sean Fraser: This is an extraordinary opportunity, in my view, to do good for additional vulnerable people. In fact, last night I was meeting with a group involved in private sponsorship that is trying to help us scale up the EMPP program. What's unique about this program, for those who aren't familiar with it, is that it provides a pathway to permanent residency for people who happen to be displaced, on the basis of their economic migration.

There are more recommendations that I want to dig into, including the potential to examine opportunities through the study permit system, but I'm out of time, Shafqat. Perhaps we'll get an opportunity to discuss that in greater length soon.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. We will now move to Ms. Kwan.

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

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'd like to go back to the cap of 40,000. It's clear that they are people who served Canada, and they and their family members are at risk and in danger. They are not part of the system at the moment, because of the cap. Knowing that, will the minister lift the cap so that those applicants can get a chance to get to safety?

Hon. Sean Fraser: I don't have an announcement on a new target to make at today's committee hearing. To the extent that we can find complementary pathways that allow us to do more good, of course I'm interested.

Any time we're dealing with permanent residents who come to Canada, it's essential that we plan as part of our annual immigration levels plan or specific decisions that are taken through an official process of the government, so that we can work with settlement agencies toward capacity.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you, Minister.

Of course, the minister knew—or should have known—that there are these Afghans who served Canada and who, with their family members, could not get to safety before this moment in time. The minister has known this for a long time now. I have certainly written enough letters to the minister to fill a cabinet drawer full with respect to that. This is not new to the minister. That information was there before the minister, prior to the immigration levels plan that was released.

I bring this to the minister's attention because people's lives are at risk. Until it happens, these people will not get to safety—that is the reality—and the Government of Canada is giving them a death sentence. That's also a reality that they will face. I'm sorry to say that, but that's how people are being treated on the ground.

On a different question, I asked officials for information regarding biometrics. I have the information back to indicate that “3,486 unique applications, representing a total of 10,568 persons, have at least one person on the application waiting to have their biometrics completed as of December 23, 2022.” That means they can't get their biometrics.

Because they cannot get those biometrics, will the minister consider alternatives so that they can get to safety? Can they not do that outside of country and, for some of them, actually in-house when they arrive in Canada?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Let me address your first point briefly, and then answer your question directly.

One of the things that's important when we're talking about the number we're trying to resettle is that we have received expressions of interest from more than a million people who want to come to Canada—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm sorry, Minister. They're not expressions of interest. I'm talking very specifically of people who served Canada and their family members.

• (1730)

Hon. Sean Fraser: I understand, but I think it's important that people understand the scale of interest from people who are seeking to take part in this program.

On your question about biometrics specifically, we've actually implemented a different security screening process that starts with enhanced biographic screening. We allow people to move through that process and complete their biometrics in a third country. We are now seeing that biometrics and security screening are not the bottleneck that they were a year and a half ago in this mission. It's proven to be somewhat successful, in my view. It ensures that we can have a rigorous security screening process pre-arrival, but it doesn't compromise the ability of a person to go through the process while they're still inside Afghanistan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: It remains that 10,568 people are still stuck in the system, so—

Hon. Sean Fraser: And nearly that many are actually still in Afghanistan—

The Chair: I'm sorry to interrupt.

We will now proceed to Ms. Rempel Garner for five minutes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you, Chair.

I'm looking at an article that was originally published in the Edmonton Journal in November 2021, entitled "Afghan impostors cutting into line". It talks about the special immigration measures the government put in place to evacuate persons out of Afghanistan, particularly persons who have had a relationship to the Government of Canada, and says that there may have been many people who were on the evacuation flights who actually were not approved under this program.

Has your department, Ms. Fox, done an audit of how many people were on these evacuation flights who had not been authorized through the special immigration measures?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Of course, as the minister has described, this was a pretty volatile environment. We can confirm that as we provided facilitation letters for our clients, the people we had relationships with, we contacted them about the purpose of the letter, the objective of the safe passage and their entry into obtaining a visa and getting on a flight—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: That wasn't my question. My question was, have you audited the people who got on the flight

against the people who you asked to apply for this special immigration letter—

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: —and whether or not they had that authorization?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes. A full assessment occurred when they got here, and they were on flights with visas issued by the Government of Canada.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Okay.

In this article, it talks about how.... This is a woman named Lauryn Oates, who is an NGO director. To give credit to her, she did a lot of work to get people out of Afghanistan, but she talks about a family of 14 people who were on an evacuation flight, who were not authorized.

Did you have any indication of something like this occurring?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I don't know the specifics of that case, but I think, as I indicated, we did a full evaluation of who was on those flights, and they were clients through the SIM program.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: The same article says, with regard to.... She doesn't name a particular senator, but she goes on to talk about how a senator was.... This is her quote. "People she"—the senator—"didn't know were writing to her and saying 'You gave a letter to these people, can you give a letter to me?'" And she would just issue a letter to anyone who would ask."

How many instances of letters issued by Senator McPhedran has your department come across?

Ms. Christiane Fox: What we were able to determine is that we know exactly how many letters the department issued, but—and this is why we did the internal review—we then referred the matter to law enforcement, which is looking at the next steps in this process. Given the fact that we did not issue the inauthentic letter, it would be impossible for me to determine exactly the numbers that are circulating, but we are aware of cases that are circulating.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Can you table a copy of the results of your internal review with the committee?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes, we can do that.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you.

Also, can you table a copy with the committee of what an authentic facilitation letter looked like during this?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes, absolutely.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you.

I'll cede the floor to Mr. Redekopp.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: For what it's worth, I think it would go with the obvious caveat of not revealing the personal information of someone taking part in the process.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Of course.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: On the issue of numbers, I have many people in my riding who are trying to sponsor people to come to Canada from Afghanistan. There's an organization called Nest that's tried to sponsor four different families. Everybody is waiting longer than what's there. Nest, for example, got a letter saying that the allocations are full, yet we are not anywhere near 40,000. You, even today, said "at least 40,000".

I'm curious. Are the allocations full? Why aren't we continuing to process people so that we can get to that 40,000 number?

Hon. Sean Fraser: Thank you.

I think what's important to understand is that even though... There's a significant majority of people who have now arrived. There are close to 28,000 of at least 40,000 who we will be seeking to bring to Canada, but of the remaining spaces, we can talk about approximately 8,000 people who are deep into the approval process who are still in Afghanistan.

We can look at some of the allocations that have been given to sponsorship agreement holders. From the federal government's point of view, the spaces may be allocated to the organization that will be helping to facilitate the travel of someone here, but it may not be the case that the organizations have allocated each of their spaces to every individual who may be coming.

I appreciate that it's a bit of a nuanced explanation, but it's important to understand that we know most of these spaces have been allocated to organizations that will help refer people into the program, even though not all of the people have arrived yet in Canada.

• (1735)

Mr. Brad Redekopp: I want to go back into the investigation for a minute.

You said earlier that you didn't have the resources to investigate parliamentarians. Do you have reason to believe that there should be some additional investigations done into parliamentarians, or others, to look more widely for some of these false documents?

Hon. Sean Fraser: When this issue first came about, I wanted to make sure....

Madam Chair, can I take 20 seconds?

The Chair: Yes, please.

Hon. Sean Fraser: We wanted to make sure we dealt with this in a responsible way. The department conducted the internal investigation, which was the appropriate first step. When it ran its course and got to the end of what the department is capable of, sharing the information with law enforcement was an appropriate step, so that they can determine whether a further investigation is warranted and, if so, how it should look.

I don't think it's appropriate for the government to necessarily be doing it in a way that is not independent. To provide documents to an organization that has that independent status is, I think, important so that it can determine the next appropriate steps.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will now proceed to Mr. El-Khoury. We will end this panel with you.

You have five minutes. Please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

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

Thank you, Minister, for always being so generous with your time on behalf of our committee.

Could you take a few moments to finish answering the question that Ms. Kwan asked about biometrics?

[*English*]

Honestly, I'm interested in the two-step process you mentioned before.

Thank you.

Hon. Sean Fraser: When I was first appointed to this position, Afghanistan quickly became the initiative on which I spent the vast majority of my time. One of the biggest bottlenecks to having people move was the lack of ability to conduct biometric assessments to understand and assure that the people who were coming to Canada passed the ordinary security screening process. The lack of a presence on the ground made that exceptionally difficult.

We came up with an alternative plan that gathers whatever information we can find about a person—we call it an "enhanced biographic screening"—to allow them to move to the next step in the process. That will get us to a position where we can allow a person to move outside of Afghanistan, should they have the ability to do so. We can then complete the biometric screening process there, so we don't compromise on the security screening. It also doesn't delay the ability of a person to come through the process and to exit Afghanistan, which they're so desperate to do under extraordinary circumstances.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: Thank you, Minister.

We know that the issue of third countries is a very thorny one for our western allies, who tend to close ranks on the Taliban and help refugees who are still in Afghanistan. The report mentions that the operational context remains complex and dangerous.

Could you give us further details to explain the problematic situation?

[*English*]

Hon. Sean Fraser: Yes, and just to put it into perspective, I deal with not only the partners we seek to assist us in our resettlement efforts but also the partners who are conducting similar efforts so we can share best practices and understand common challenges.

The challenges for the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia and others who were participating in it around safe passage reflect precisely the same challenges Canada is experiencing: the difficulties we're encountering around safe passage, around the lack of access to travel documents for people seeking to flee, and around the challenges for people who made their way into the third countries, whether through ordinary or irregular ways. These are common for all countries that have resettlement efforts.

We're working together as an international community to share these understandings so we can improve the quality of our resettlement process. However, it's not easy. We're dealing with a territory in which the Taliban, a terrorist organization as per our laws in Canada, is in control. There are no easy strategies here, but we're going to continue to co-operate with partners to overcome these barriers.

I want to save time, because I don't know if the committee would allow it, but our colleague, Ms. May, has shown up, and if time allows after Mr. El-Khoury finishes, I would be happy to extend my stay by a moment or two should committee members allow it.

• (1740)

[Translation]

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: Minister, recommendation 22, on the hiring of additional staff, states that IRCC was working to hire 1,250 new employees by the end of the fall 2022. We are now in 2023.

Have you reached that number?

If you haven't, do your targets remain the same? Are you getting close to meeting them? If there are problems in doing so, could you tell us about them?

Thank you.

[English]

Hon. Sean Fraser: We have now hired more than 1,250 staff and are continuing to add more staff. We've seen the expected increase in productivity, with a reduction in wait times across various immigration streams. This was a big part of the strategy to overcome some of the challenges that the pandemic and our humanitarian responses placed on our system.

We have planning to do in the years ahead to develop that surge capacity that Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe raised in one of his questions. To answer your question directly, yes, we've completed that hiring initiative and continue to add more staff now.

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: Did you see some positive results that improved the service provided by our embassies around the world by hiring those people? To what degree would you say that was the case?

Hon. Sean Fraser: It depends on which immigration stream you're talking about, but the progress we've seen has allowed us to return to ordinary service standards across most immigration streams, whether family reunification, express entry.... Work permits are shortly going to be back to the service standard we enjoyed before the pandemic. Study permits are more or less there now. We have a bit of work left to do on visitor visas.

Now the bottleneck to having people arrive in a timely way is really impacting the programs for which the bottleneck is the number of spaces available annually, given the extraordinary demand in certain programs, rather than the processing capacity of IRCC, with the exception of visitors' visas, which we expect this year will be back on track.

The Chair: The time is up for Mr. El-Khoury.

The minister mentioned Ms. May. I've checked with the clerk. Either one of the members has to give their time, or we need unanimous consent from the committee members to have her ask a question.

Do I have unanimous consent from the committee?

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: On this side, we are fine.

Mrs. Rosemarie Falk (Battlefords—Lloydminster, CPC): No.

The Chair: We don't have unanimous consent, so with that—

Ms. Elizabeth May (Saanich—Gulf Islands, GP): One of the members was willing to give his time, I believe.

The Chair: He took his whole time. Mr. El-Khoury took his whole time. His five minutes are done. I have to go with the way the rules of the committee are.

With that, I would like to thank the minister for his appearance before the committee. On behalf of all the members, I would really like to thank you, Minister.

We will suspend the meeting for two or three minutes, so that the minister can leave, and then we will go into the round of questioning with the officials.

Thank you.

• (1740)

(Pause)

• (1745)

The Chair: I call the meeting to order.

We have the officials with us for the second round, and we will go directly into the round of questioning.

Ms. Rempel Garner, you will have six minutes. You can please begin.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you. I'll ask my colleague to time me.

Ms. Fox, on Thursday of last week, Senator McPhedran gave a speech in the Senate, which outlined some pretty serious allegations. In it, she said that there was.... I'll read it to you:

Key within the kinds of communications that were happening day and night was a small circle of high officials into which I had been invited by Minister Monsef, and I asked to bring in a consultant who had been working with me for a number of years because she was a member of a national team here in Canada. I had been asked to help hundreds—many more—athletes than I was already trying to help parliamentarians and human rights defenders, and I just didn't have more hours in a day. That email circle—I have every email. They are dated and stamped. The authorities are named within them. I can tell you here tonight that template that we used to try and help—and we have succeeded—and when I say “we”, I mean a network from Denmark to Zurich to Australia to Canada to the United States, everyone doing their best. But we used what's called a visa facilitation letter.

With regard to this, do you have any evidence, or have you investigated whether then minister Maryam Monsef was involved in producing the facilitation letters that Senator McPhedran described?

Ms. Christiane Fox: First, I would start by saying how, because of the Government of Canada's efforts and because of the time on the ground to get people to airports, the facilitation letters issued by IRCC and GAC to our clients helped get 3,700 people out. That's an important fact to raise at the committee. We needed to use those letters—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I'm asking if you have any evidence of whether then cabinet minister Maryam Monsef was assisting in issuing facilitation letters.

Ms. Christiane Fox: What I can tell committee is that I looked at the organization, IRCC, in terms of the review of whether or not any inauthentic letters came from our department. I can say that as a result of that investigation we have found no evidence that any inauthentic letters came from the department. The next step was to refer the matter to law enforcement agencies, and they take it from there.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Okay, so you haven't reviewed some of the claims that are in here that the then minister of defence's chief of staff was helping to produce these inauthentic facilitation letters. Is that correct?

• (1750)

Ms. Christiane Fox: That's correct. We've only reviewed IRCC internal.... Our investigation was limited to our department.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Are you aware of any investigation into whether or not the allegations that Senator McPhedran made are true as they pertain to then chief of staff George Young and then cabinet minister....

Actually, I'll ask a different question.

Do you have any documentation or awareness that Senator McPhedran, then cabinet minister Monsef or George Young had contacted IRCC to perhaps expedite certain cases?

Did Senator McPhedran ever reach out? Do you have documentation of her reaching out to IRCC, saying please help this list of people? Did Senator McPhedran attempt to do that?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I do not have any evidence that she sent any documentation to IRCC staff.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Okay. You have no record, within your department during this time period, of Senator McPhedran asking IRCC for facilitation letters or assistance with certain cases.

Ms. Jennifer MacIntyre (Assistant Deputy Minister, Afghanistan, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Maybe, Madam Chair, what I would just add to what the deputy has said is that many members of Parliament, including senators, were reaching out to IRCC to see how they could help.

One of the honourable members has mentioned today that lots of folks had lists. Certainly, in terms of whether IRCC co-operated to help with facilitation letters, the answer is no, but we did talk to lots of members of Parliament during the crisis.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Okay. Thank you.

Why was this referred to the RCMP before there were questions?

In your internal review, did you ask Senator McPhedran what happened personally? Did you have conversations with her?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I did not.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Did anyone in your department?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Not to my knowledge, no.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Okay.

Why was the decision made to refer this to the RCMP as opposed to discussing this with Senator McPhedran or anyone she may have alleged was involved?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think that when a matter of the use of inauthentic letters surfaces in a department, it is important to take the next steps. In our view, the next steps were to refer the matter to law enforcement in light of the fact that the use of inauthentic letters can lead to very difficult outcomes for the government.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Finally, my office was in contact with IRCC for over the course of a year with these letters. I'm just going to be really blunt. They fooled me. I've sat on this committee for years. I never once thought they could be inauthentic.

At any point in time when my office was corresponding with you on my file, when you reviewed this particular case, did anyone flag that these could potentially be false?

Ms. Jennifer MacIntyre: Maybe what I could add, Madam Chair, is that inauthentic letters started to pop up in the system—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, but time is up for Ms. Rempel Garner. You will get an opportunity in the second round.

We will now proceed to Mr. El-Khoury. You will have six minutes. You can please begin.

[Translation]

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

I'd like to thank those with us today for having agreed to appear before the committee and answer our questions.

My first question is for Ms. MacIntyre.

In your response to recommendation 3, which was to create an emergency mechanism ready to be deployed in the event of future humanitarian crises, can you tell us more about any of IRCC's findings in its review of these emergency measures and crisis management?

If not, could you give us some details about what will be looked at later?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I'm going to answer that question, Madam Chair, because the organization of the department is managed by the deputy minister.

To begin with, thank you for your recommendation Mr. El-Khoury.

I also pointed out that we were experiencing lots of crises at IRCC. There were the recent responses to what has been happening in Afghanistan and Ukraine; not so many years ago, there were crises in Syria and Haiti.

We closely reviewed the committee's recommendations to see whether we were properly organized and equipped to respond to the crisis. While looking at your recommendations, we told ourselves that there might be lessons to be drawn not only for the department, but also for our work with other partners: Global Affairs Canada, the Privy Council Office, the Department of National Defence, etc. We are looking at our structure, and what's needed in order to have a team with the right experience to get the job done.

Every crisis will have its own specific aspects and require a particular response; at the same time, some factors are common to all crises. The question is knowing how we can organize ourselves, as a department, to do a better job of responding to a crisis.

A review of options was carried out. There was some brainstorming within the department ensure that we would be in a better position to respond to crises and learn lessons from what we experienced.

That period was extremely difficult and chaotic. It's hard to compare our Afghanistan response to how we responded to other crises in different circumstances. The fact that the Taliban invaded and took control of Kabul made people's movements extremely difficult. It's still difficult. That's why working with partners in the region continues to be extremely important.

All of which is to say that we are examining our organization in order to be in a position to respond to crises, while continuing with the operational work of the department at a pace that will enable us to continue our efforts.

Thank you very much for your question. It was very apt.

• (1755)

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: You said that you had appreciated our work. Thank you for that. The report is the outcome of several months of effort on the part of this committee to come up with our recommendations.

You mentioned the difficulties involved in getting to neighbouring countries. Do you call upon services from our allies, like Qatar

or the United Arab Emirates? Based on your experience, what could facilitate the task of getting the people we want out of there?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Thank you very much for your question.

We are working closely with our partners, not only those in that region, but also in the United States as well as our federal departments. One very important point is that to leave Afghanistan, people need a passport. To leave neighbouring countries, exit permits are often required to take a flight to Canada or another country. That means that it's very important to have discussions to establish ties, partnerships and agreements that will truly facilitate transportation for them.

Since the tabling of your report in June 2022, 43 flights have been organized, with approximately 13,000 arrivals from Pakistan and Tajikistan. We have certainly made serious efforts since the tabling of your report.

Now, the real problem is finding ways of reaching people who are in Afghanistan. We need to work with our partners in the region, because it's not easy.

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: Thank you.

I can tell you that your work is certainly appreciated by everyone: the international community, members of this committee and the government. We are exceedingly thankful.

I have some other questions. The response to recommendation 15 says that one of the few options for the safe passage of Afghan refugees through a third country is to maintain ongoing cordial diplomatic relations with that country to keep the exit routes secure. You clearly explained the situation earlier.

Can you tell us more so that we can determine whether it has been working successfully, and to what extent? If not, what are you thinking about doing?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Thank you for your question.

Neighbouring countries are in fact becoming an important factor for the safe exit of Afghans. It's also important not to forget the key relationships we have with international groups like the United Nations and the International Organization for Migration. These partners...

• (1800)

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Ms. Fox. The time is up for Mr. El-Khoury. We will come back in the second round, if you want.

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

Please begin.

[Translation]

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

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

I'd like to point out in passing that I'm very proud of the structure of the emergency plan I proposed, and which I've been promoting for some time. It made its way into the recommendations that were taken into consideration. I understand that you are in the process of establishing this plan.

The plan was needed because a gap had to be filled. It should have already been in place. It must have had an impact on crisis management in Afghanistan and on IRCC management during that time. That's my understanding of it. Otherwise, a plan of that kind wouldn't be under development now.

Ms. Christiane Fox: Thank you very much.

There was outstanding teamwork in several departments on introducing a crisis management structure, one that made it possible to go and retrieve the most vulnerable people from Afghanistan.

When a new project is undertaken, whether to create a new program or to deal with a crisis, I think the responsible thing to do is remain open-minded and identify what has worked well in the past and where things can be improved.

I am in no way implying that the efforts were inadequate. I'd rather say that there's always room for improvement. International trends around the world are changing and as deputy minister, it's my role to learn from the international response and to apply lessons learned in any future crisis.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Would you agree with me that if there had already been a plan like the one you are now formulating, the approach to managing the crisis would have been different? That's only to be expected. It's not a matter of assigning blame. I'm simply saying that's the reality.

Ms. Christiane Fox: What I'm saying is that the teams met to implement a crisis management plan, one that yielded tangible results we can learn some lessons from.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: That wasn't my question, but thank you. I didn't get you to say it, but at least I tried.

Did you have discussions with other departmental offices? Did you have cross-departmental discussions when analyzing reports, or did you work in silos?

Ms. Christiane Fox: No, we worked closely with our colleagues in other departments.

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

So there were discussions with deputy ministers or your counterparts in other departments on reports like the one on the crisis in Afghanistan.

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: All right.

Did you discuss recommendations 9, 10 and 11, about how the Canadian Criminal Code should be changed urgently, with your colleagues in other departments? I believe the report was released in June.

Can the words "on an urgent basis" be interpreted loosely in the various departments, or are they understood to mean what my fellow citizens and I think they mean?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes, we had conversations with our colleagues about all the recommendations, not only in connection with our response to the report, but also for coordination purposes. We had to decide on who would undertake the various aspects of follow-up action.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Where do things stand on recommendations 9, 10 and 11?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes, we discussed them. In connection with the Criminal Code, we discussed legislative options that would enable us to work with non-profit organizations on the ground.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: What's your definition of the word "immediately"?

Ms. Christiane Fox: It could mean different things, depending on the circumstances, but I think it means making changes once all aspects of a file have been studied and the consequences and implications have been understood.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: In that case, I'll give you some context by reading out the following sentence: "That the Government of Canada act immediately to implement United Nations Security Council Resolution 2615."

How would you interpret the word "immediately" in this context?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I interpret it within our working context, in which the work is done across several departments in a parliamentary system. It therefore means as quickly as our parliamentary system allows.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: United Nations Security Council Resolution 2615 was adopted on December 22, 2021. I remember it because it's the date of my parents' wedding anniversary. Six months after the adoption of the report and almost a year and a half after the adoption of the resolution, it still hasn't happened.

Do you believe it's reasonable for a G7 country to be unable to simply act upon a resolution adopted by the UN?

• (1805)

Ms. Christiane Fox: I'd say that we are working closely with the departments to make the changes required to allow us, on the ground, to do whatever we have to do to help the most vulnerable Afghans.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Are you aware of the fact that the NGOs on the ground who are trying to help women, girls, and destitute people in Afghanistan, are unhappy about this response, which I've been hearing for over a year?

This answer, about how you are working to make changes, is the same one we've been fed for a year. Other countries around the world have managed to change rapidly, even though they too are democracies with parliamentary systems.

In your discussions with other deputy ministers, is there anyone who is getting impatient? Or at least tell me that some departments are unhappy about the inaction of the Department of Justice. Are you telling me from on high that everything's just hunky dory, and that these delays are only to be expected?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Everyone is working on this and we're working with some key partners as well. The conversations you've had are also the conversations we've had with them. They understand our desire to resolve the problem.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: What's preventing you from solving the problem?

[English]

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

We will now proceed to Ms. Kwan for six minutes.

Ms. Kwan, please begin.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

To begin, can I ask officials to provide a briefing document to the committee on these facilitation letters? I'm looking for basic information. What are these facilitation letters? Where did they come from? Who issued them—i.e., which ministry is authorized to issue them? Who is authorized to distribute them? Who received them? What evaluation and eligibility considerations were given to the people who were in receipt of them? If the media's report is correct, how is it that, for example, a senator would have gotten hold of a facilitation letter for distribution, or that a former political aide got a letter for distribution?

You may or may not have these answers. I'm asking these questions just so that we know what the lay of the land is. You mentioned earlier that you know how many facilitation letters were issued from your department, and yet there are so many other ones that are out there. Could we get those numbers as well, so that we can have a sense of what is going on with respect to that?

These are just some of the questions I'm asking. If you could provide to the committee any other relevant information relating to the situation of the use of these facilitation letters, it would be much appreciated.

Ms. Christiane Fox: Okay. Maybe I can start.

The facilitation letters—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm sorry. Could I get that in writing to the committee? I have six minutes, and I have many other questions that I need to get into. This is just background information, really, that should be provided. It sounds like you already have the information at hand. Can you get this information to the committee by the end of next week, if that's reasonable?

Ms. Christiane Fox: We will definitely give you the information. I will check with the translation and other measures to make sure, but I think next week sounds reasonable. I will confirm with the committee clerk.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: That's appreciated. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Just as a reminder to the members, all questions should be addressed through the chair. Thank you.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I would like to actually go on to the next question.

On the issue around Afghans who have been stranded, we know that some of them are in Pakistan. Some of them have visas that

have expired. Since the end of December of last year, the Pakistani government has been actively pursuing people with expired visas.

Since that time, how many Afghans have we brought to Canada to safety? Have any of them had expired visas from Pakistan? As well, how many flights are being put in place to continue to bring Afghans to safety? If you could give us a general average of how many flights we can anticipate are coming out, that would be appreciated as well. It would be useful to know how many flights and how many seats.

Ms. Christiane Fox: Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

Arrivals to date from Pakistan are 9,806. As I noted, about 43 charter flights have been organized since June 2022, but it's not limited to charter flights. We also have commercial flights. That's not just from Pakistan, but from Tajikistan and other neighbouring countries.

In terms of how many flights are being organized going forward, I think it would be very challenging to have specific data, as these details are still being worked out.

• (1810)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Can we get in writing to the committee the breakdown of those numbers of how many of those have actually come since December 31, 2022? If you have the breakdown of those, how many of them were from Pakistan? I am particularly interested in whether any people made it out of Pakistan, for example, with expired visas.

Is the department entertaining bringing people to safety with expired visas or even invalid visas, for whatever reason?

Ms. Jennifer MacIntyre: Madam Chair, I might just jump in to add a couple of things regarding the question of visas and Pakistan.

The Government of Pakistan, like those of every country, has exit requirements, which have to be met by all foreign nationals who are departing. A valid visa is very important.

We're working very closely with the Government of Pakistan, through our high commission, to have streamlined processes for IR-CC clients who have expired visas, so that we can facilitate having a renewed visa for them, which will facilitate their departure from Pakistan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Individuals on the ground are telling me that if people who have an expired visa at the moment are caught, they would have to come up with money to renew their visa. On average, that is \$700 U.S. per person. That is only for a short-term visa; it's not for a full year. If they have to look for a full-year visa, they are looking at over \$1,000—like \$1,200 or \$1,500. Sometimes they are faced with a situation in which they have to pay money that is not authorized towards the visa.

People are faced with a lot of challenges, and of course they don't have money. These are people who are in hiding and have not been working. Coming up with that kind of financial capacity is almost impossible. Consequently, people are in real dire situations.

In the discussion with the Pakistan government and authorities, where there is some special dispensation being allowed for those whom Canada would bring to safety, how do you ensure that those without visas are not going to be caught out, and that they will be included?

Do you have a list of those people? Do you provide it to the authorities in Pakistan to ensure they are not going to be faced with challenges?

The Chair: I'm sorry. The time is up for Ms. Kwan. Maybe you will get an opportunity when we come back in the second round.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Maybe I can get that in writing, then.

The Chair: We will now proceed to Mr. Redekopp.

You will have five minutes. You can begin, please.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to return to Ms. MacIntyre.

You were answering a question from my colleague, Michelle Rempel Garner. It was: Did anyone flag that these visa letters could be fake?

You had just started answering and then the time ran out.

Ms. Jennifer MacIntyre: Madam Chair, just to back up a bit, I would say that IRCC and Global Affairs, as we all know, were issuing facilitation letters, but these letters did not confer status on any person who received them. A full eligibility and admissibility assessment was done on all individuals before they would come to Canada.

It's just a protocol of IRCC. When an inauthentic document of any sort pops up in the system, there are multiple protocols in place to be sure that such documents are not being used in a way they're not supposed to be. For example, these letters were not meant to facilitate boarding a flight to Canada. They were not meant to be a visa to Canada.

When you see any document that someone has attempted to use for a reason that is not intended, there is a flag in the system. That's just a protocol.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Recommendation 26 of the report speaks to the role of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and specifically asks that IRCC waive the requirement for Afghanistan.

We heard testimony during our backlog study about the UNHCR and its ineffectiveness in dealing with certain religious or sexual orientation minority groups in countries such as Pakistan. In the government response, there is an acknowledgement of the ineffectiveness of the UNHCR program when it comes to Afghanistan.

Has IRCC engaged in talks with representatives of the UNHCR, either here or in Canada, about efforts to reform this organization, Ms. Fox?

• (1815)

Ms. Christiane Fox: It's important to the question around how do you effectively respond. Through the humanitarian stream of our programming, we have been able to work with a number of organizations that have secured the safe passage of LGBTQ2+, journal-

ists, politicians, etc. We are in very close contact with the UNHCR for a lot of our work. We continuously try to improve the work that we do together in a partnership.

The answer to your question is yes, we are in touch with them, and yes, we are always looking at ways to be more nimble and to be more responsive to a particular crisis.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: I'm going to talk a bit about some local groups.

I mentioned to the minister the group called Nest Saskatoon. They're working to bring Afghans to Canada. They submitted applications. They were told that the slots had been filled. They sent out applications the very next day, on October 17, 2022.

Was there a quota for approved applications for each province and territory?

Ms. Christiane Fox: It was not a quota by province or territory. We definitely have data in terms of the settlement efforts by province or territory.

What I would also note, as we have done, is that we continuously look at innovative ways to respond and pivot. That's something the department has done continuously. One way we have done that is through the groups of five sponsorship, where 3,000 places were allocated to people for whom we waived the requirement for an UNHCR refugee determination. That allowed a little more flexibility for groups who wanted to take part in welcoming Afghans.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Thank you.

Madam Chair, I will cede my time to Ms. Rempel Garner.

The Chair: You have one minute and 15 seconds.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you, Madam Chair. I move:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2):

(a) the committee extend the total number of meetings currently allocated to the current study regarding the government's response to the final report of the Special Committee on Afghanistan by a minimum of three meetings, to be held prior to March 31, 2023; and

(b) Senator Marilou McPheeran, MP Marc Garneau, Minister Harjit Sajjan and Minister Marco Mendicino be invited to appear separately before the committee prior to March 31, 2023, for two hours each, to discuss matters related to the current study; and

(c) Dr. Lauryn Oates, of the Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan group, be invited to appear individually before committee prior to March 31, 2023, for one hour, to discuss matters related to the current study; and

(d) summonses do issue for the appearances of former minister for women and gender equality, Maryam Monsef; Laura Robinson; and George Young to appear separately, for two hours each, at dates and times to be fixed by the chair but no later than March 31, 2023, to discuss matters related to the current study; and

(e) summonses do issue for the appearances of senior departmental officials from the Department of National Defence to appear before the committee, at a date and time to be fixed by the chair but no later than March 31, 2023, to discuss matters related to the current study.

I have sent this motion to the clerk in both official languages. This motion is in scope, as it relates to the current matter that the committee is studying.

I will begin my rationale for this motion by stating that I am certain Senator McPhedran acted from a place of good intent in issuing these facilitation letters.

I ask my colleagues to listen to my rationale carefully. I'm not moving this out of political motivation, but out of a very human face that I have been acquainted with for over a year now. I believe we should have rescued more Afghans than the government did.

I want to explain to this committee why I believe that this motion should pass, by sharing the story of my constituents. The letters that were issued by Senator McPhedran put the family of one of my constituents in danger and later stymied their efforts to come to Canada. I think it's important to put their case on the record. I will not be disclosing their identity, due to safety and privacy concerns. I am sharing information that I have previously received permission to disclose from them.

On August 23, 2021, a constituent contacted my office on behalf of her cousin and his family of nine, who are Afghan nationals. She relayed to my office that her cousin was a member of an NGO that was supported by the Canadian government. He was able to provide IRCC with contribution agreements between the NGO and the Canadian government that substantiated a working relationship. She explained to my office that her cousin and his family had been trying to flee Afghanistan to Canada because their lives were at risk due to their work on democracy, equality and freedom of speech in partnership with the Government of Canada. They were being threatened by the Taliban.

My constituent contacted my office because of confusion as to why her family wasn't being assisted in resettling to Canada and issues with communication with IRCC and GAC officials. She requested that we inquire about these issues and assist in providing closure to her case.

Upon this request for assistance from my office, we asked for my constituent's cousin—who I'll refer to as Mr. X—to consent to our inquiring about his status. We were provided with consent forms, third party authorization and documentation of the applicant's connection to the Canadian government.

When my constituent began communicating with my office, she sent us an email that Mr. X said he received from the IRCC department in Islamabad on July 27, 2021, suggesting that he apply for a temporary public policy to resettle Afghans to Canada. He provided my office with the emails he said that he sent to IRCC to apply for this measure within the time constraints outlined therein. This application was submitted to the IRCC department in Islamabad by Mr. X on July 29, 2021, as per instructions he said he received in the above-referenced email from department officials.

My constituent was also able to provide evidence that he had in fact provided services to Canada. He was in possession of a Government of Canada service contract with an NGO he was affiliated with, and documentation—apparently issued from that NGO—of his relationship to the work that was the subject of that contract.

They were also able to provide evidence of the Government of Canada officials who were working with them.

In August 2021, Mr. X's family was also corresponding directly with Senator Marilou McPhedran on Mr. X and his family's potential passage from Afghanistan to Canada.

• (1820)

My constituent made my office aware of this correspondence with the senator after the federal election on October 15, 2021. She told my office that Senator McPhedran and her office had directly provided Mr. X with letters of facilitation, which stated that a visa had been granted to certain members of Mr. X's family and could facilitate their passage to Canada.

Until this point, my office was acting on the assumption that Mr. X's family had received some kind of official documentation directly from Canadian government officials in IRCC or GAC. These documents, which include the Government of Canada logo and a seal bearing the appearance of a Government of Canada department, appear to be sent to Mr. X and his family via email by the senator and her office on August 26, 2021. The email also suggested that the family present themselves at the Hamid Karzai International Airport, specifically at Baron Gate, and not discuss with anyone that they had received this correspondence.

My constituent told my office that upon receiving these documents, and based on advice contained in the above-referenced email from Senator McPhedran and her office, Mr. X's family attempted to reach the Hamid Karzai International Airport on August 26, 2021, but were faced with extremely unsafe conditions and were forced to turn back.

She also expressed to my office that having been in receipt of these documents, and having applied for the temporary public policy to resettle Afghans that was outlined in the email from IRCC Islamabad, my constituent told my office that she and her family believed they were able to gain passage to Canada, but were unclear as to why they were unable to get assistance to leave.

Between August 2021 and June 2022, my office has corresponded with GAC and IRCC over 30 times through email and telephone calls to determine the status of Mr. X's family resettlement status. Throughout, we continued to update IRCC and GAC on Mr. X's family situation in Afghanistan, which they expressed had significantly deteriorated and had included Taliban interviews and harassment.

My correspondence with my constituent began during the middle of a federal election, when the government was in caretaker mode and there was little clarity on what processes or documentation the government was using to evacuate persons. Given these roadblocks, and upon receipt of this correspondence, my office began trying to understand why Mr. X's family resettlement process was delayed, given the efforts they had already undertaken and the documentation in their possession.

After multiple inquiries, IRCC was not able to confirm with my office that it was in receipt of the application submitted by Mr. X on July 29, 2021, for the temporary public policy to resettle Afghans, even when presented with documentation my constituent forwarded to my office, corroborating her family's claim that an application was submitted within the time constraints allowed. IRCC would not confirm that such a referral was made to Mr. X in late July 2021, even after IRCC was provided with documentation that seems to corroborate the same.

While the documentation provided to my office seemed legitimate, and corroborated that Mr. X's family actually applied in July 2021 for this temporary public policy, IRCC never acknowledged it was in receipt of this application, or that it had taken any action on it.

Subsequent to Mr. X's application to the measure outlined in that email, the government announced an additional immigration program to resettle Afghans. To me, there seemed to have been a lack of coordination between the temporary public policy contained in the email that Mr. X initially responded to from IRCC Islamabad and this new program, which in turn seemed to have led to much confusion in Mr. X's family. They thought they were already engaged in one valid application stream for assistance in evacuating to Canada, and they made assumptions that their application was still in process. My office certainly didn't hear otherwise for some time.

The lack of resources for Afghan evacuation and direction in IRCC at the time of the initial application to the temporary public policy measure, coupled with the fact that the government was in caretaker mode during a federal election, is a matter of public record.

After some time of trying to ascertain the status of Mr. X's original application, an IRCC official gave advice on January 18, 2022, months later, for the family to apply again, this time to the special immigration measures program for Afghans, and with a service provision relationship with Canada. They did so on February 5, 2022.

Several months later, on May 27, 2022, they received a decision on this application. They were informed by IRCC that while Mr. X and his family may have been eligible for the special program, IRCC was not moving forward with their application, citing program space constraints.

I have to wonder if they had known that these documents were inauthentic, and if they could have actually made it into the country under this program.

• (1825)

Additionally, during these interactions with GAC and IRCC, my office was never able to substantiate the official status of the so-called letters of facilitation and instructions Mr. X's family had received on August 26, 2021, from Senator McPhedran and her office. My office had begun this process by trying to understand why some of Mr. X's family had been granted documentation, but not others.

Again, when my constituent began corresponding with my office, they were operating under the assumption that they were in

possession of some sort of official documentation issued in the haste and chaos of the Government of Canada's efforts to evacuate certain persons during the fall of the country.

Many of the traditional abilities that my office would normally use to verify information in casework weren't readily available in this instance, given the opacity of government processes for evacuating Afghanistan and the fact that Canada was in the middle of a federal election and the government was in caretaker mode.

My office became aware only in October 2021, after the federal election had concluded, that Mr. X's family had obtained this documentation directly from the senator and her office as opposed to direct correspondence with GAC or IRCC officials. This caused a significant amount of confusion for my office as, after initial discussions with my constituent, our correspondence with GAC and IRCC was to try to understand why only a few of Mr. X's family had been issued documentation to travel, as opposed to all of them.

Since discovering that Mr. X's family had received these letters from the senator and her office, we went back and forth with GAC and IRCC, trying to ascertain their official status.

After speaking to multiple officials with IRCC and GAC for months, no officials confirmed to my office that the documents and instructions sent to Mr. X by Senator McPhedran and her office were actually issued by any official in any department of the Government of Canada.

After Mr. X's reapplication to the special settlement program was formally declined, citing space constraints, in May 2022, I spoke directly with Senator McPhedran in early June 2022. This was the first and only time I have communicated with the senator regarding this matter.

During this call, she verbally confirmed that she had indeed corresponded with Mr. X. I did not ask her where she had obtained the documents that she and her office sent to Mr. X during this call, because my office had not received a definitive answer from IRCC or GAC on the status of the documents. Typically, we get clear answers on these situations. We assume the delay in getting confirmation was that it had been unclear to my office what processes and documentation the Canadian government was consistently using, if any, to facilitate departures during the chaos of the evacuation that occurred in August 2021.

I had reached out to see if there was something I had missed in the file and to reaffirm the validity of my constituent's claim. Never once did I think that a sitting parliamentarian would have issued inauthentic documentation.

I had no reason for concern until, subsequent to my call with Senator McPhedran, I was made aware of an article published in the Edmonton Journal, asserting that an unnamed Canadian senator had been directly issuing documentation to Afghan nationals from their office, and that formal diligence may not have been undertaken to ascertain the veracity of claims of some persons for whom these letters had been issued.

As such, my office redoubled efforts to press IRCC and GAC to determine the actual origins of documents sent to my constituent's family, as they expressed they had material influence on Mr. X's family's efforts to leave Afghanistan. When I received no response and had no further recourse, I wrote a letter outlining the situation to Minister Fraser. I received a response from Minister Fraser to my letter of July 7 on July 27, which outlined that he had undertaken an investigation, that the documents were deemed to be inauthentic and he had referred the matter to authorities.

Subsequent to this response, in September 2022, The Globe and Mail published an article entitled "Canadian senator sent documents to Afghan family that weren't authentic, Ottawa says", which outlined allegations that Senator Marilou McPhedran had issued inauthentic travel documents to Afghan nationals.

Last week, on Thursday, February 2, Senator McPhedran rose in the Senate and delivered a speech. She alleged that, while she did in fact issue what she referred to as visa facilitation letters to certain Afghan nationals, she did so in coordination with the former minister for women and gender equality, Maryam Monsef, a consultant and "a small circle of high officials", including unnamed persons in other nations.

● (1830)

In this speech, Senator McPhedran also alleged that hundreds of potentially inauthentic letters may have been issued that had allegedly been provided by template documentation that bore the appearance of official Canadian documentation by George Young, then chief of staff to the then minister of Defence, Harjit Sajjan. Senator McPhedran made these allegations under the cone of parliamentary privilege afforded to her in the Senate, and none of these allegations have yet been proven.

A subsequent article was published on February 3, 2023, by the Toronto Star, entitled "A Canadian senator helped save Afghan women. The immigration department called police on her". Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada stated, "In order to facilitate the evacuation of vulnerable Afghans, the Government of Canada sent letters directly to Afghan nationals who were eligible to come to Canada in order to help them clear checkpoints on the way to and at the airport in Kabul. IRCC did not authorize any third party to issue these facilitation letters on [their] behalf."

Therefore, we have a problem, colleagues. The public assertion by IRCC that it did not authorize anyone, including persons named above, to issue travel documentation for Afghan nationals raises numerous questions that our committee should be considering. This situation is extremely concerning and involves very serious allegations.

It raises questions about whether, among unknown others, a Canadian parliamentarian, a consultant she retained using tax dol-

lars, a sitting cabinet minister and the chief of staff to the Minister of Defence purposely issued inauthentic documents to Afghan nationals, which may have resulted in their evacuation or, in other cases, consequences resulting from being led to think that they were in the possession of official documents, when, in fact, they were not, as was the case with my constituents.

It raises questions about who within the government knew about this issue, when, and what, if any, remedy has been taken yet.

It also raises questions about why a workaround, inauthentic process may have been used by senior persons in the government to evacuate Afghan nationals, as opposed to official processes.

It also raises questions why this process wasn't made public or wasn't made available to more parliamentarians.

It also raises questions about the integrity of the government selection process for Afghans with connections to Canada and the impact the issuance of inauthentic documents would have had on an untold number of Afghans who wished to come to Canada, should have come to Canada, but were not able to.

It raises questions about queue jumping, identity verification and, most importantly, the equity of our immigration selection process.

The 2021 fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban created a dire humanitarian crisis that precipitated an immediate response, even though the government had called a general election. I myself had the experience of watching my Afghan veteran husband see this news and knowing we were in a position where we could respond.

Every member of our committee has members of their community who are affected by this crisis. Many members work to address devastating cases of family members who were left behind and still lived in hiding under constant threat from the Taliban while struggling with a government in an election-necessitated caretaker mode.

We all desperately want these persons to be afforded a safe haven in Canada, but none of us issued fake visas. Parliamentary figures, be they members of Parliament or senators, are not legally allowed to independently make these decisions. They are not part of the executive branch of government unless they hold an active appointment to the same. Similarly, ministers or their staff do not all hold the same powers and authorities. As such, these persons do not necessarily have the automatic power or authority by virtue of their own legislative office to do things like issue visas or bind the government to action on their behalf. This is true no matter how well intentioned the person is, as I'm sure Senator McPhedran was, or how dire the circumstances are.

Doing otherwise could have massive negative implications, including circumventing the necessary non-political, arm's-length nature of things like Canada's immigration systems, which keep our processes safe for everyone, impartial and fair. These things can and should only be done by appropriately empowered officials, by the executive branch of the Canadian government or by officially legislated and regulated processes.

This doesn't mean the government shouldn't be held to account when the system fails. In fact, the role of parliamentarians in these situations is to inquire about processes and to hold the government to account to ensure processes are properly functioning, especially during times of crisis. This is what Senator McPhedran and then cabinet minister Maryam Monsef should have used their powers to do. If these processes aren't working, it's Parliament's role to further hold the government to account and press for change.

It's not our role to do things we are not duly authorized to do. It's not our role to use back channels through the government to do things like this. In fact, the government has a responsibility to prevent such back channels from existing. This brings me to the substance of the motion, and I will close.

• (1835)

Given the potential significant consequences and implications of allegations outlined within Senator McPhedran's speech and in multiple media articles, I believe it is of urgent importance to explore the extent and veracity of these claims and to ensure that the appropriate remedy, if necessary, is taken by the government.

My constituent, I found out today coincidentally, had a happy outcome. The American government helped him. Even though he had more of a connection to Canada, he is now in the United States. I wish I could have helped him. I wish I could have written a letter off the corner of my desk instead of spending a year spinning my wheels with government officials who weren't telling me what was going on while my constituent was under attack from the Taliban. That's what we're dealing with here. This isn't a joke.

Why are summonses necessary? There are summonses in this motion. This government has taken Parliament to court over a parliamentary order to issue documents. I have little faith that these types of officials will appear before this committee on a matter of this seriousness without a summons. That is why I included Department of Defence officials on a summons, because they cancelled a meeting that was supposed to happen in front of this committee on Monday after this story broke. Why all of these officials? These are the officials that Senator McPhedran has levelled allegations against in the Senate, and I would like to give them an opportunity to either clear their name or explain why they chose to engage in a workaround inauthentic process, instead of pressing for change as the position that they hold affords them.

The bottom line here is we can change the system. That is what each of us can do. I know each of us tried to bring people into the country by trying to change the system. I know that even Liberal colleagues were likely pressing the government in the middle of an election to do better. I know that. This is not a partisan issue. I know that everybody was well intentioned here, but at the end of the day, the rules were broken and it hurt people. It hurt a lot of people, and it affected the integrity of our immigration process.

I think we need to bring more people here. I think the government shouldn't have gone to an election without a plan to deal with this.

We need to examine what happened here as Parliament. This is why this committee exists. We need to know how the system failed, why this was allowed to happen and what happened, so that we can recommend recourse to the government and so that the government can effect change.

For the sake of any outstanding casework that you have with Afghan nationals, for the sake of Afghan nationals who have not received a response from IRCC, we need to understand why the best bet for somebody to get into Canada was to have a parliamentarian, a senator, issue a fake visa to them off the corner of their desk.

Thank you.

• (1840)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Lalonde.

[*Translation*]

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde (Orléans, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

With all due respect for my opposition colleague, I am extremely disappointed and saddened. We worked very hard to have the minister and four senior officials from the department to be here today, and I know that several of you had prepared questions. That's what we had agreed on.

Yet again, things got derailed on an important topic. It is indeed important to continue to discuss things and that's exactly what we had intended to do today.

[*English*]

Madam Chair, I would ask to adjourn this debate.

[*Translation*]

Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Ms. Lalonde has requested to adjourn the debate. It's a non-debatable motion. We will have a vote.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 7; nays 4)

The Chair: The debate is adjourned.

Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I know we're out of time, because I'm told we lose this room at 6:38. However, that said, I note that I and my colleague Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe lost our opportunity for a second round of questions to the officials. I would like to submit written questions, through you, Madam Chair, to the officials, so those questions can be answered.

The Chair: Would the officials be okay to do this?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes, Madam Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

I would like to take this opportunity, on behalf of all the members, to thank the officials for appearing before the committee.

Thank you for all the work you do on behalf of Canadians. I know it's not an easy file.

With that, the meeting is adjourned.

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