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Chair: Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal



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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Surrey—Newton, Lib.)): I would request that members take their seats, please.

Before I officially welcome the minister to the committee, I will ask members to please refrain from crosstalk. That will make the interpreters' lives much easier and make my life easier as well. I know this because I sat at those desks for many, many years, on the opposition side as well as the government side. It's very important for the member to ask the question, and the minister then to answer, so that they can use that clip for their constituents. They have their constituents' views to be represented here.

With that said, welcome to meeting number 78 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

Yes, Madam Kwan.

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

Before you get under way with the proceedings, I would like to put on notice the following motion:

That, in the context of the ninth report of the Auditor General of Canada to the Parliament of Canada, titled Processing Applications for Permanent Residence-Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, and pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), the committee invite the Minister of Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship to appear before the committee for one hour and officials from Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada to subsequently appear before the committee for one hour, for a total of two hours.

The Chair: Thank you.

For the first hour of today's meeting, we will be holding a briefing on the minister's priorities and objectives for IRCC.

I'm pleased to welcome the Honourable Marc Miller, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship. He's joined by two officials from the department. We are very well familiar with the deputy minister, Ms. Fox. Also joining us is the senior assistant deputy minister of strategic policy, Ms. Baird.

Welcome, Minister and officials, to the committee.

You have five minutes to start.

Hon. Marc Miller (Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship): Thank you, Chair.

Good afternoon. I really am pleased to appear before you to discuss my priorities and objectives as Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship.

Mr. Chair, I want to start by acknowledging that we are gathered here today on the traditional and unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

Canada's immigration system has been facing changing realities and growing pressures, even more so in recent years. Multiple humanitarian and public health crises, rising asylum claims and an increased interest in Canada all require a clear plan so that we can continue welcoming newcomers while addressing the backlog of applications.

We are also navigating domestic pressures, such as housing, infrastructure and labour shortages. Newcomers require a clear path so that they can contribute meaningfully to their communities and be part of the solution to these challenges.

Mr. Chair, one of my top priorities is international students. We're currently reviewing the international student program to strengthen its integrity, support universities and colleges, and protect students from unethical recruitment and unreliable consultants.

[Translation]

This study will ensure that the program continues to attract and retain the most brilliant students by helping them become permanent residents, and extending the benefits of immigration to all regions in Canada while helping us meet our francophone immigration targets.

It's essential to factor in the capacity of communities to host newcomers and to provide them with appropriate services and housing, while supporting those caught up in humanitarian crises.

[English]

While Canada's housing challenges require a whole-of-government approach, we need to align immigration with other planning while upholding our humanitarian commitments. We also recognize that newcomers with in-demand skills can be part of the solution to housing and other challenges.

• (1540)

[Translation]

Owing to the increase in refugee claims around the world, we are enhancing the capacity, integrity and efficiency of Canada's refugee determination system and investing in temporary housing assistance for refugee claimants.

We are also simplifying access to work permits, which enables refugee claimants to enter Canada's labour market more quickly and helps meet their needs while awaiting a decision on their claim.

[English]

It's likely that many of you have seen the Auditor General's report on processing permanent residence applications. As of August 31, Canada welcomed 339,000 permanent residents—up from 310,000 during the same period in 2022. Our goal is to process 80% of all applications within service standards in order to welcome newcomers and reunite families faster. We continue to reduce backlogs through staffing and technological improvements.

We've made significant progress. Since September we've surpassed our standard for processing federal high-skilled worker applications received since July 2022. We're approaching our standard processing time for provincial nominee applications received in express entry, and for processing spouses, partners and children applications.

As part of our modernization efforts IRCC is restructuring to improve day-to-day operations and integrity and expand expertise in asylum refugee resettlement, international affairs and humanitarian crises response.

[Translation]

We are establishing an international affairs and crisis response framework as a permanent structure to deal with these crises.

We are also making an effort to improve the overall client experience, which is essential to attract and retain the workers Canada needs if it is to compete globally.

[English]

We do continue to provide direct contact with clients, which is important, and funding announced in the past budget has helped us increase our client support centre's capacity, doubling access rates from 15% last year to 30% or more now. These are just some of the steps we're taking to ensure that Canada's immigration system is equally fast, agile and reliable, which I believe is critical to responding to changes in the immigration landscape. It's really critical to newcomers contributing to Canada's long-term success.

I am at this point happy to take your questions.

[Translation]

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. Well done; it was four minutes and 30 seconds.

We will start with the first round of questions of six minutes. We will start with Mr. Kmiec.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Tom Kmiec (Calgary Shepard, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Minister, back in August you were quoted as follows: "Canada 'absolutely' can't build more houses without more immigrants, minister says". In that article you were quoted as saying "The fed-

eral government is making housing more affordable and bringing in the skilled workers required to build more homes".

I'm going to ask you this question. This year how many workers were brought into the federal skilled trades program?

Hon. Marc Miller: Do you mean construction workers, or just workers generally?

Mr. Tom Kmiec: I mean federal skilled trades in general.

Hon. Marc Miller: We could provide you with that number in due course.

What I can say is that if we want to build the houses that we ambitiously have set our targets for by 2030, we're going to need about 100,000 workers. Those cannot be—

Mr. Tom Kmiec: I'm sorry, Minister, the answer is 80 so far this year.

Hon. Marc Miller: We will provide you with the complete answer.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: It's 80. It's on your website. I checked it.

Hon. Marc Miller: If you want to testify you can.

The Chair: I said earlier that if there's a crosstalk I have to intervene and it's not going to look good.

Mr. Kmiec, I will give you the floor now. Go ahead.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Actually when you sit down and you begin to total the total amount of persons brought in through the federal skilled trades program it's something like 15,000 people. Then when you look at the number for retail sales and supervisors by NOC codes—which is how we classify people by job—it's 12,350. How is it possible that in the past two years you've brought as many retail supervisors as you did construction workers in the past seven years when you said it yourself that we need workers to build homes? I thought this was the priority.

Hon. Marc Miller: You've only named one program first and foremost. Second, I do concede that we've never been particularly great outside temporary foreign workers to match supply and demand. That's why we've made a number of innovative policy announcements in the last few months, notably in ensuring under our global express entry program that we are actually bringing in the workers whom we need and that industry is asking us to do. As I mentioned before, we need about 100,000 workers to build the homes that we want to build. They aren't in this country right now. It's work that we'll have to do in the very short term if we want to actually get this done.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Minister, how many workers then did you bring in under the federal skilled worker program?

• (1545)

Hon. Marc Miller: We can provide you a complete answer at a later date.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: This year so far it's 23,415. As you've just said, and Benjamin Tal from CIBC has also said, we are short 80,000 to 100,000 construction workers. Out of those from the federal skilled worker program, how many of them were NOC codes for construction?

Hon. Marc Miller: We can provide you that full answer at a later date.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Minister, you just said how important it was. The cabinet had a whole cabinet retreat just to talk about housing. It's been now three months since then. I would have thought the immigration department would have these numbers available for us at this committee since housing is the number one issue we all hear about.

Hon. Marc Miller: You seem to already have them now, Tom. I don't think you're asking me a question; you're making a statement. I'll gladly give you the time to make it. This is your time, but if you want complete answers, we're here to give you complete answers.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Minister, if you don't like being held accountable, you didn't have to come here.

Hon. Marc Miller: I'm not the minister of NOC codes. We can give you those numbers, if you need them, and we'll provide them to you, but if you're acting in bad faith, I can sit here and just listen to you all day. That's fine.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Let's get the numbers that I can't have, because there is a mix of numbers provided through the provinces to IRCC and, therefore, these numbers aren't available on your website. Again, you've had a few months to prepare. These are all NOC codes. I'm going to refer to them, because these are important jobs for construction workers. For example, NOC code 75110 is construction trades helpers and labourers. That's an occupation that's very much in demand. How many are there?

The Chair: Go ahead, Minister Miller.

Hon. Marc Miller: Thank you, Chair.

Again, we can provide you those numbers in due course.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Just in case, I want to make sure, so I will read out the NOC codes I would like, and your department could then provide them to this committee. I would like all members to be able to have them. These are the numbers that should have been provided

to this committee right now. NOC code 73102 is plasterers, dry-wall installers and finishers and lathers. Plumbers are NOC code 72012. Carpenters and cabinet workers are NOC code 72013. NOC code 72014 is for concrete finishers, roofers, painters and bricklayers.

I'll just remind you, Minister, that the CMHC says that we need 3.5 million homes built by 2030.

Then the NOC codes continue. I'd like you to provide this committee down to the granular level and also for groupings: NOC code groupings 70, 71, 72 and 73. This is the basic information that I would expect we could receive.

More generally, Minister, how many construction workers have you brought in this year in 2023, and how many last year in 2022 in all programs, whether it's express entry, the Canada experience class or any one of them?

The Chair: Minister, you have the floor.

Hon. Marc Miller: Again, MP Kmiec, you seem to already have these answers yourself, but, again, our teams will get back to you and give you full ventilation of those numbers that are in our possession.

The Chair: Mr. Kmiec, you have the floor.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Is housing a priority, then, if you haven't come prepared to answer those questions? At the granular level how many construction workers are we bringing in?

Hon. Marc Miller: Absolutely, but surely you didn't bring me in here to ask me about individual NOC codes. It sounds like you're more in the business of making a political statement, which I invite you to make. Again, if you want the facts, we're glad to give them to you.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: It's not a political statement. I asked you how many you brought in.

The Chair: Mr. Kmiec, the Minister has the floor.

Minister Miller, continue please.

Hon. Marc Miller: We don't deny.... Look, this is not the only program where we bring in skilled workers. I have conceded readily that in the past we have not been able to match supply and demand properly outside the temporary foreign workers class, which has its own problems. Clearly we have to do better, and matching NOC codes to the jobs that are out there is absolutely something we need to do. The unions are asking for us to do it, but that isn't homegrown demand.

At time when winds are turning and people are asking us to reduce numbers, I think it's important for purposes of a more general discussion as opposed to citing granular numbers with respect to NOC codes, which we could provide you at a later date, that we all agree that we will not get the things done we need to do in this country without bringing skilled immigrants into this country. It's something we're going to do. We started doing this under the global express entry streams, as well as the provincial nominee streams. Those are all numbers that you're absolutely welcome to, and we'll provide them to you. We will get this done. I know that Minister Fraser is very eager to deploy some of these.

Again, we can't just announce houses without having people to build them, and the federal government is there to help.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister. The time is up.

Now we will move to Madam Zahid.

Madam Zahid, go ahead, please.

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Chair.

Thanks, Minister, for appearing before the committee.

Minister, my first question is in regard to caregivers. I have many caregivers in my riding. The majority of them are women from the Filipino community. They are compassionate and dedicated and have come to our country to do vitally important work to take care of our loved ones, our parents, our grandparents and our children. They have made many sacrifices, often spending much time away from their own families. Unfortunately, due to changing caregiver programs and rules and through no fault of their own, they have fallen out of status.

Minister, these are hard-working people who have done so much for our community and are making important contributions to Canada. They deserve to keep doing so. Will you commit to a program of amnesty and regularization of these caregivers so that these caregivers can stop living in fear and continue contributing making Canada the best country to live in?

• (1550)

The Chair: Mr. Miller, you have the floor.

Hon. Marc Miller: Thank you, MP Zahid.

I think it's important to note for purposes of this discussion that in 2022 we welcomed over 4,300 caregivers and their families through dedicated pathways to permanent residence, and about four months later we reduced the amount of work experience required to qualify for permanent residence from 24 months to 12 months.

I don't deny that there are some people who have fallen out of status, and I think that is work that we are trying to do generally in order to regularize a stream of people in this country who do not have regular status. That comes with a number of policy choices that are tricky. We are also fighting the perception that, in some cases, these people are perceived as cue jumpers, which I think is not the case—but in all of this we must have a humane and humanitarian approach to how we regularize people who have fallen out of status, whether it's allowing them to go back into status or have a pathway to permanent residency. Again, work that the Prime Minis-

ter has written in the prior minister's mandate letter needs to be done, and I firmly believe that it should be completed.

The Chair: Madam Zahid.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you, Minister.

I am really proud that Canada has welcomed close to 40,000 Afghan refugees since the fall of Kabul, since August 2021, in different streams. Many of them have settled in my own riding, in my own community, and I have met many of them. They are committed to contributing to their new homeland here in Canada, but they also worry about their families and loved ones and all who are still trying to survive in Afghanistan under the brutal Taliban regime. They worry that as Canada reaches our initial target of 40,000, and as the world focuses on Ukraine, they will be forgotten.

Minister, will you assure us that the 40,000 refugee number is a floor and not a ceiling, and that we will continue to welcome Afghans needing protection here in Canada?

The Chair: Minister Miller.

Hon. Marc Miller: Thank you.

I would draw your attention to the latest number we have, which is publicly available, that shows that we are very close to our 40,000 persons target. That's important. I don't think we can necessarily fall too beholden to a target when there are humans behind, waiting to be evacuated, whether or not they are currently in Afghanistan, where, you will appreciate, our ability to operate is very, very limited, given the current regime, and even less so our ability to speak to it publicly. It does not mean we won't deploy the efforts to make sure that the people we have committed to are safe, whether they are in Afghanistan, or, for the purposes of this discussion, currently in Pakistan, with some very difficult deadlines looming over their heads.

I can confirm to this committee that the taps will not be shut off at 40,000. Again, we need some sense, for all government purposes, as to what that planning is, but again, it's not a question of simply turning off the taps at 40,000.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you, Minister.

I will share the rest of my time with MP Morrice.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Morrice, go ahead. The floor is yours.

Mr. Mike Morrice (Kitchener Centre, GP): Thank you, Chair, and thank you, MP Zahid.

Minister, I'd like to follow up on conversations we've had as well as a letter I wrote to your predecessor earlier this year. IRCC did a really important thing in putting in place a series of temporary immigration measures to support immediate family members of Canadian citizens and permanent residents in the midst of the crisis in Sudan. The issue we've been pursuing since is how "immediate" family member is defined in the underlying regulations. As of now, it excludes parents, siblings and grandparents. It means that Sudanese members of my community continue to live in fear over the safety of their brother or sister. I think we can both agree that they are immediate family.

Can you share more, Minister, about what is being done to address this?

The Chair: Minister, you have one minute to address this.

Hon. Marc Miller: I'll sort of break this down into two parts. I'll try to answer rapidly about some of the work.

We've not announced anything on Sudan yet. I have taken to heart the criticism of the policy, which, in the context of more extended families and even more nuclear families, probably should be expanded.

In the Sudan context, I cannot announce anything publicly at this time. I'm very open to your suggestions and your forceful recommendations.

On the Afghanistan portion, I will ask DM Fox to respond quickly so that we don't take up more of your time.

• (1555)

Ms. Christiane Fox (Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): For interpreters and for language and cultural advisers, we did kind of expand that family definition to include children, grandchildren, parents, grandparents and siblings. In the SIM program, I think you're familiar with some of the...but I think you're right that we can have a conversation around Sudan to make sure that we're consistent in our definitions and flexible to respond to a particular need.

The Chair: Thank you. Time is up.

Now we will go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Do you, Minister, believe that French is in decline in Quebec?

Hon. Marc Miller: I'd like a few moments to answer the question, because—

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: A yes or no will do.

Hon. Marc Miller: It's important for me to answer this properly because the statistic you are quoting has to do with mother tongue. This statistic does not include me as a francophone. By extension, I'm someone who is a threat to French in Quebec.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I didn't quote any kind of statistic, Minister. I just asked you a simple question.

Hon. Marc Miller: It really bothers me, because it affects me personally.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Did I quote a statistic? I did not quote a statistic.

Hon. Marc Miller: I know what the statistic is based on. In any event, go ahead.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You're insinuating things.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, there is no crosstalk, please.

Can you please give me a second?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I'm sorry, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: You know that I have always been reasonable. I will give you the time. If the minister has the floor, let him finish. Then I will give you the floor. If I see that you need a few extra seconds, you know that I am able to accommodate that.

Thank you.

Minister, the floor is yours.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marc Miller: Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, I will admit that there are threats.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Sorry?

Hon. Marc Miller: French in Quebec is threatened in a number of ways. Allow me to explain. I have always thought societies that allow minorities to retain their language and culture are richer and probably more equitable. I'm sure you agree.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I am 100% in agreement with you.

Hon. Marc Miller: It was Camille Laurin, the father of the Charter of the French Language, who said it, not me.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: That's why I said I was 100% in agreement with you.

Hon. Marc Miller: I know that you agree with me, but there are people in your party who disagree with you.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: So, according to you, there is no decline in French in Quebec. Okay.

Hon. Marc Miller: French in Quebec is threatened.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Let's get to the heart of the matter. On September 25, power shovels dismantled a building at the far end of Roxham Road. We know that the federal government spent \$28 million on leases with a generous Liberal donor, Mr. Pierre Guay, without going through a bidding process.

In December 2021, we learned from news reports that a new lease had been signed for the next five years. We are now in 2023. A little mental arithmetic shows that there are still three years remaining on this lease. As these buildings are no longer being used, what's going on? Is rent still being paid to Mr. Guay?

Hon. Marc Miller: First of all, I don't know. Secondly, I don't know him, but I think he was a Conservative donor for eight years. I happen to know this because I had to answer a question from the Conservatives at the time.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Possibly.

Hon. Marc Miller: So I don't know what's happening, but we did our research and found that the contract had been arranged independently.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: We're going to look into these donations to the Conservatives, because that's something I'm interested in as well.

So you don't know whether the Canadian government is still paying for the Roxham Road facilities, even though they are now closed. That's good to know.

Recently, Mr. Rodriguez, the Liberal Party of Canada's Quebec political lieutenant said that Quebec was controlling all of its temporary immigration. And yet, according to Quebec's Minister of Immigration, Ms. Christine Fréchette, "most temporary immigrants in Quebec come in under programs controlled entirely by the federal government". She added that Quebec "only controls workers admitted under the temporary foreign worker program and foreign students". It would appear that some workers also come in under the international mobility program, for which Quebec does not intervene in the bureaucratic immigration process.

I would just like to be clear on this: who is right, Mr. Rodriguez or the Quebec Minister of Immigration?

Hon. Marc Miller: The truth lies somewhere between the two. What's ironic is that during the COVID-19 pandemic, when there was a shortage of foreign workers, the Bloc Québécois was the first party to ask for more.

The current discussion is about the volume of immigration and ways of reducing it. I think there's work to be done on our way of considering the value of these people and what they bring to Quebec, because—

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I wasn't talking about anyone's value, but rather just asking whether it was Mr. Rodriguez or Ms. Fréchette who was right.

Hon. Marc Miller: My deputy minister can clarify things, but—

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: It's because that would get us into something else.

Ms. Christiane Fox: The short answer is that there are basically two temporary worker programs. Under the temporary foreign worker program, the provinces issue a nomination certificate to se-

lected applicants. For the second program, the international mobility program, it's true that the federal government controls certain things.

I therefore think that both of the people mentioned are right, depending on the program under discussion.

• (1600)

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: All right. We'll have an interesting discussion about it with Mr. Rodriguez.

The CBC recently reported that there is a Mexican cartel problem at our borders. Is the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship aware of this problem, and should something be done about visas for Mexican nationals?

Hon. Marc Miller: To begin with, Canada does not require Mexicans to have a visa. But then, whether or not a visa is required, we are always very much aware of potential criminality. There are certain facts I can't disclose publicly, but we are looking into them.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: So we can discuss it privately.

Hon. Marc Miller: I don't know whether I would speak about it with you, but I am involved in private discussions.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: In short, there are current concerns at the border with respect to Mexican cartels.

Hon. Marc Miller: There are concerns about all forms of criminality at the border.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: But Mexican cartels at the border are a part of it, are they not?

Hon. Marc Miller: Yes, among others.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Are you done?

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Not if you're willing to give me some more time.

[English]

The Chair: Your time is up, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe. Thank you.

One thing I mentioned earlier was, please, no cross talk. If you can go through the chair, I will be very happy to accommodate you fellows. You know my style, and I personally do not like the cross talk.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I apologize, Mr. Chair. But it's not often I get to discuss things with a minister who speaks French. Things certainly go more quickly when I can.

Hon. Marc Miller: I am nevertheless a menace in Quebec, but I don't know why.

[English]

The Chair: Madam Kwan, the floor is yours.

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

Thank you to the minister—congratulations, I think—and welcome to the officials.

With the devastating crisis in Gaza, Canadians are deeply worried about the safety of their loved ones. Some had applied for family reunification prior to the war. Will the minister expedite these applications and put in place measures to allow their extended family members to be part of those applications? Will the minister also automatically extend the visas for those who are already here?

The Chair: Go ahead, Minister Miller.

Hon. Marc Miller: Thank you for communicating to me the issues of importance to a number of your riding's members. It is very difficult to operate, to take any decisions right now, in Gaza. Those humanitarian corridors, if they are at all open, close quite quickly or they're not opened at all.

We are doing our utmost to safeguard Canadians and family members. I have asked my team to be as flexible as they can as to the concept of family members, and to do their utmost in getting people out. I hesitate to speak publicly about it, but I think if there are people worried about their loved ones in Gaza, they should know that the Canadian government is doing its utmost to expedite things.

As to some of the work that we need to do, you mentioned a permanent resident who has a sponsor in Gaza. This is work that we are continuing, and again, operating under very difficult conditions.

The Chair: Go ahead, Madam Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I would urge the minister to extend the measures that have been offered to, for example, Ukrainians. It is not any different. People are in crisis and they need these measures to be in place. We need to hear the government say publicly that it will, in fact, do that.

I do appreciate very much the minister's taking on the cases that I've advanced to his office, but we need a broader policy.

Hon. Marc Miller: Yes, and I would also add the operational nuance that some of the host countries where these people will go first need to be consulted, and we need to be on the same page with them as to how to proceed. Again, it is extremely tricky, given the circumstances.

The Chair: Go ahead, Madam Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: That's understood, which is why I said it's for families who have applications in place already: They already had applied for their families to come to Canada before the war. Then, of course, extended family members would be able to do so as well—

Hon. Marc Miller: I'm extending the decision.

The Chair: Minister Miller, the floor is with Madam Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: —and for those who are already here in Canada, extend their visa so that they're not sent back when their visas expire during the war.

I'm going to leave this now because I'm two and a half minutes in.

Hon. Marc Miller: Just to clarify, we can do that. We can extend the visas.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

The Pakistani government is escalating pressure on Afghan refugees and is warning that, come November, they'll be deporting Afghans without status back to Afghanistan. Our community contacts say that Pakistani people are receiving letters from the government, indicating that it will be illegal even to provide a home to Afghan refugees, and that those who continue to do so will face consequences, including fines or arrest. Persecuted Afghans are being targeted, arrested, and forced to pay bribes.

What plans is the minister making to help bring to safety the Afghans who put their lives and those of their families at risk to serve Canada?

• (1605)

The Chair: Go ahead, Minister Miller.

Hon. Marc Miller: We are doing our utmost. As I mentioned in my answer to MP Zahid about people we made commitments to, a good number of them are in Pakistan. The threat that you have highlighted is real, and it's one that we are working as hard as we can to make sure that we safeguard the people we have made a commitment to and, perhaps, extend further protection, if we can, to people who are actively being threatened to be deported to Afghanistan. Sadly, we can't do everything, but we are doing our utmost.

I do, again, hesitate to speak publicly about this.

The Chair: Go ahead, Madam Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I have a stack of files—I had been writing to the minister, and to former ministers, prior to your taking this post—and they have just been sitting there. Actually, I brought some of those files here with me. I'm going to hand them over to you at the end of this exchange. Hopefully, your officials can look into these files and provide an update to my office, because we have heard nothing from successive ministers, and that's not good enough.

I'm going to move on to the next piece, if I may.

The Chair: Minister, would you like to say something?

Hon. Marc Miller: I can take the stack of files.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

As part of the Roxham Road agreement with the Biden administration, the government promised to take in 15,000 migrants from the Americas on a humanitarian basis, but the government has stripped 4,000 of those for the temporary foreign workers stream. Is the Biden administration aware of this and are they in agreement with this change?

The Chair: Mr. Miller.

Hon. Marc Miller: Yes, they know this, and they've known this from the beginning of the Prime Minister's commitment in March.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: If they knew this, why wasn't that part of the announcement to say that the 15,000—4,000 of which would actually be for the temporary foreign workers' stream...? It's deceptive. I'm sorry to say it, but it's deceptive not to provide that information on a transparent basis, Minister.

I'm very sorry that you have to take this file now at this juncture, but your predecessors were not forthright, and the Prime Minister was not forthright with Canadians, with that information.

Hon. Marc Miller: That is your opinion, MP Kwan.

The officials were very clear at the outset that there would be an economic portion related to this. We had until September to flesh out the details. To the credit of the civil service that help me with my job, they've been working for months to get out something that would be acceptable, and we've worked with the U.S. to make sure that they're on board.

In my communications with both Ambassador Cohen and Secretary Mayorkas, they are thrilled that we are actually helping them as a safety valve for a problem that is much larger for them at their southern border.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: With the exception that the minister must know—

The Chair: Thank you, Madam Kwan.

Your time is up. It's already at six minutes. If you want to make a quick comment, I can give you the floor for 30 seconds.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The minister must know, though, that the change in the policy has put a lot of people in danger and is further pushing them into darker places to get to safety. That cannot be acceptable.

The Chair: Mr. Miller, do you want to respond quickly?

Hon. Marc Miller: Again, any commitment that is limited in nature does have effects, and these are commitments that were stated outright. The U.S. has made commitments as well. I think being able to orchestrate the global flow of migrants in the Americas by two of the most important countries is a very good step, and something to be quite proud of as a country.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister Miller.

Now we will go to the second round.

Again, we have Mr. Kmiec for five minutes.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Thank you, Chair.

Minister, in the first two months that you've been in the role, I noticed there was a decline in express entry admissions from the level under the previous minister. The average was about 10,000 to 11,000 per quarter, and now it's gone down to about 8,000 so far.

Do you think there's any reason for this 3,000 drop?

Hon. Marc Miller: We will have the ability over the coming months to clarify those figures. They may not be as entirely accurate as you're portraying them to be.

• (1610)

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Why were they not accurate?

Hon. Marc Miller: My officials inform me there was an IT glitch. We look to fix and clarify that.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Can you explain the IT glitch?

Ms. Christiane Fox: As you noted, with category-based selection—now express entry—we have the capacity and ability now to do targeted draws—draws for tradespeople, draws for francophone immigration. At the onset of launching that, we ran into a few IT glitches, and so we delayed a couple of the draws, but we're going to make them up as we go. In fact, in August we launched a draw that saw a skills trade draw—welders, construction workers—and that's 1,300 draws from the express entry pool.

We have another skills one coming before the end of December, so I think we're actively using these flexibilities that we have now on francophones, on health human resources and on tradespeople to try to address some of the gaps in the Canadian economy.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Do you have an estimate on how many construction workers are coming in through the express entry program?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Over the last five years I have 38,000, but I can give you the specifics on draw to draw and what we're seeing. We'd be happy to share data in real time with you.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Is that a commitment to share it with me in real time?

Ms. Christiane Fox: Yes.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: I'll take that.

My next question is on the express entry schemes for construction workers. I'd just like to know, then, what the numbers are for this year so far.

Hon. Marc Miller: I don't have those.

The Chair: Madam Fox, do you have those numbers?

Ms. Christiane Fox: I think I've rhymed out some numbers here, and I can reiterate them.

There were 1,300 in the August draw for construction—for welders, machine operators and carpenters—so very specific trades, very specific NOC codes.

I would say that is complemented by what we're doing through the provincial nominee program, which has a skills component; through the rural and northern immigration program; and through the Atlantic immigration program.

It's a combination of what the regional needs are, the provincial input and what the federal government can do. That's how you respond to the caps across the country.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Is there a target for the end of year for how many construction workers we've brought in through express entry, and for next year?

Hon. Marc Miller: I wouldn't say really. We're actually looking to increase the policy authority so we are much more flexible, perhaps working with industry to make sure, Tom, we are getting those NOC codes properly captured and perhaps sponsored by unions. So we are expanding a lot of programs we have piloted, but to other parts of the country.

The Chair: Mr. Kmiec.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: So those numbers that were recited are far below... Just in July, there were 45,000 construction jobs lost, so it doesn't sound like we're going to be able to offset those with new construction workers coming in.

Hon. Marc Miller: We're facing an aging of the population we need to address in that particular trade, Tom, and if your proposal is that this should be done entirely through immigration, I probably wouldn't agree with you, but immigration is a huge part of this. We actually need to train people in-country, people who are already here, so there's a component there we have to game for.

The Chair: Mr. Kmiec.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: That's why I was asking in the first round all those questions about construction workers, because if you hold a whole cabinet retreat just on this one issue, I would have thought the numbers were compiled in preparation for that one meeting.

I asked a question at the official languages committee a few weeks ago about the Yeates report. That committee has not received a report yet, so I'm wondering whether you will make a commitment here to give that report to this committee.

Hon. Marc Miller: I don't see why not.

The Chair: Madam Fox.

Ms. Christiane Fox: Could I address that? I commissioned the report.

I think what was important... The Yeates report became public because it was released, but I wanted to make sure that prior to giving it to this committee, every employee at IRCC had a chance to read it, absorb it and talk to me about it. It will be submitted to this committee as well, but I wanted to respect every employee who works at IRCC.

The Chair: Mr. Kmiec.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: When will this committee get it?

The Chair: Madam Fox.

Ms. Christiane Fox: I can commit to giving it to committee within the next two weeks. I wanted people to have a chance to read it.

Thank you.

The Chair: Mr. Kmiec.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Thank you, Deputy Minister. You are very well informed.

Those are all of my questions.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we will go to Mr. Ali for five minutes.

Please go ahead.

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

Thank you, Minister, for being here today.

I have many constituents in my riding in Brampton Centre from the Indian diaspora, and they are concerned about the current situation between Canada and India where 41 of our diplomats were expelled from. Could you expand on the efforts your department is making to compensate for the forced reduction of your workforce in India? The constituents are concerned about their visas, their travel and so on. Could you expand on that, please?

● (1615)

Hon. Marc Miller: First, I can understand and appreciate that whether you're Muslim, Sikh or Hindu our relationship with India can create some fear about what your status is here in Canada, whether you're a student, permanent resident or a Canadian citizen. My job as immigration minister—any cabinet minister or MP's job, for that matter—is to make sure people are safe and feel safe in a country that is there to protect them, especially against a foreign power. That is our primary responsibility.

In the face of a really unfortunate diplomatic issue with the Government of India where the Prime Minister and cabinet are standing up for our principles, it's important to understand the effects this can have. I am not an expert on the Government of India, but we know that the measures it took breach international law in making Canada reduce its capacity to operate in India. That means only five IRCC members are now able to do the on-the-ground work that is essential to process applications, whether it's international students or others.

There are some things we have to be on the ground for, and that is undeniable. We can't game and adjust entirely for it. What that means is that while we're able to adjust, whether it's in Manila, here or through our global network, the processing times will be impacted. The number we have offered publicly is that with respect to about 38,000 applications we had planned to process by December we will only be able to process 20,000, which could have effects and carry-on effects in Canada.

I think anyone watching this should know we're there to make sure people in Canada are kept safe and that we protect our own abroad. That, essentially, Shafqat, is our number-one priority.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: Thank you, Minister.

Talking about being on the ground, our government invested \$74.6 million through Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy to enhance Canada's visa processing capacity within Canada's centralized network, as well as in New Delhi, Chandigarh, Manila and Islamabad to support people-to-people ties.

Since the announcement, I constantly hear from many of my constituents in Brampton Centre and stakeholders across Canada that have close ties to Pakistan about the additional resources allocated to improve processing times in Islamabad.

Minister, can you give us an update about what has been done so far to increase the IRCC staff capacity to improve visa processing times in Islamabad and TRV processing times in Pakistan?

The Chair: Minister, you have 60 seconds to respond.

Hon. Marc Miller: When it comes to Islamabad, we are actually sending, physically, more people to help with processing on the ground.

I would encourage the committee to read the Auditor General's report. It has some good, bad, and ugly, but it has shown and noted a marked improvement in processing times, which was an important part of my role as one of the presidents of the services committee when we had real challenges coming out of COVID.

It should not be a surprise to anyone that this is a department, as with others, that has had challenges adapting to the 21st century, particularly in the face of the overwhelming volume that we've seen post-COVID and in the last year. That is something that we are still struggling with, but if you look at some of the progress that the Auditor General noted, as well as the carry-on progress that has occurred since the reference date that the Auditor General examined, there's some really positive stuff going on. There is also some work that we need to do in a little more integrated fashion.

Digitization is one of the ways to go paperless. That has allowed us, essentially, to process 89% to 90% of applications outside of, for example, India. We want to continue along that path.

There's some stuff we need to do on the ground.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will move to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for two and a half minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Minister, on February 1, 2023, the House voted unanimously in favour of motion M-62, which basically requires the government to receive 10,000 Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim refugees beginning in 2024. Where do we stand on that? Do you feel we are going to reach the two targets, which is to receive 10,000 refugees, beginning in 2024?

• (1620)

Hon. Marc Miller: Thank you.

We were indeed all in favour of the motion. The challenge is to implement a plan to make sure we bring 10,000 Uyghur refugees to Canada. I won't deny that there are problems, but it's a target we expect to meet properly. Every challenge has its impediments. I don't want to hesitate, because it's something that has to be done. The devil is in the details, which we would like to itemize—

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: So the will is there, but—

Hon. Marc Miller: The will is there and what we need to do is make the required effort.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:—it may not be a priority at the moment. Is it still a priority?

Hon. Marc Miller: It's not a question of priority but rather implementation. I'm hoping to be able to announce something over the next few weeks.

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

As was discussed at your impressive retreat, is it still about a cap on foreign students?

Hon. Marc Miller: As you know, the cap issue was problematic. Minister Fréchette claimed Quebec jurisdiction in protest of the introduction of a cap. I feel that this cap was a rather clumsy way of proceeding with surgery that was deemed to be necessary.

I also hope to be able to announce something next week in connection with this. It won't be a detailed announcement, but it will be a start.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Something is coming on that score and you can rest assured, Minister, that we are listening.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have 20 seconds.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I just did the calculations, and I have 30 seconds left.

As for your department going into an “emergency mode” during international crises, you're telling us that officials are working on it. I made this proposal in June 2022 as an offering to the then minister. I was told that it was a good idea and that they would work on it. That was a year and a half ago. Where do we stand on it now?

[*English*]

The Chair: Minister, the time is up. The officials can respond when it comes to the next round, so I'll give you the time.

Now we'll go to Madam Kwan for two and a half minutes, please.

Go ahead.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm glad to hear the minister say that he doesn't like caps. I hope the government realizes that the housing crisis is not a result of newcomers. The housing crisis is a result of successive Liberal and Conservative governments failing to have a proper housing plan to address the needs of housing for Canadians and newcomers alike. That's where we need to be. We need to actually put forward a proper housing plan and not scapegoat immigrants like me and say that it is our fault.

I'd like to turn to the issue of the backlogs. The backlogs continue to exist. Families remain separated. Privately sponsored refugees are waiting for more than three years to get their applications processed. It's disturbing to learn that the government is ignoring its own Treasury Board directive to put in place service standards for refugees.

For caregivers with more than two years of experience, under the home child care provider pilot program, the average wait time for processing is 29 months. For those with less than two years of work experience, it's 35 months. The average processing time should be 12 months, but that's not the reality. This is going to carry on.

The quickest way to move this forward would be a regularization program. My question for the minister is this: Will he actually implement a regularization program for caregivers?

The Chair: Minister Miller.

Hon. Marc Miller: MP Kwan, I agree with a large part of your working premise that we should not be scapegoating people who are helping to build this country and, at times, coming here for economic reasons, to reunite with their families or as a result of desperate situations.

What I do disagree with is the use of thresholds and caps. In a position like mine, where we are in the business of planning, preparing and establishing financial amounts associated with the need to properly welcome people and to integrate them....

The people to my left need a sense of planning. Often an unlimited cap creates the opportunity and the ability not to have a sense of where the country is going and to indicate to Canadians what we expect to bring in.

We are coming under heavy criticism for some numbers that I think are actually very reasonable and are important to create a population that isn't aging out of the essential services that we need to provide to those who are aging into an area where they need more services.

What we fail to appreciate as individuals and as a country are both the supply and the demand sides of immigration, which colours a lot of the conversations and makes them very frustrating ones.

On regularization—I realize that I didn't answer your question—this is still my plan, and I want to do something within the next year.

• (1625)

The Chair: The time is up. I'm sorry, but I have to stop right now because the time is very tight. I have to make sure I'm fair with other members as well.

I will go to Mr. Redekopp for five minutes.

Please go ahead.

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

Two years ago I asked your predecessor Sean Fraser at this committee about including Bangladeshi students in the student direct stream. At that time, I was told it was a priority and, after my ask-

ing multiple questions, I was told that it would eventually be done by the fall of 2022. Well, obviously, it's the fall of 2023. This hasn't been done yet.

My message to the Bangladeshi community at this point is that your government doesn't care about you because you have no intentions of implementing this.

Will SDS be in place by December 31 of this year, or will you be honest and stop stringing Bangladeshi students along?

The Chair: Mr. Miller.

Hon. Marc Miller: First of all, I welcome your initiative.

I don't know why Bangladeshi students would be treated any differently from similarly situated students.

I think the issue we're facing as a department is what we do with the student direct stream currently in the context of the large volumes we are seeing with international students and the work I have to do to maintain the integrity of the system, including addressing fraud.

This is something that is up for review, but I agree with your working premise that we should be treating people in an equitable fashion in this context.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Are you saying that the entire SDS program is at risk of being shut down?

Hon. Marc Miller: Again, it has not been decided yet, but I am reviewing it with a critical lens.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: My understanding is that you'll not be getting a new mandate letter and that you're going to continue with the previous one that was issued to your predecessor, which basically means that you're completely interchangeable with Sean Fraser.

Hon. Marc Miller: He's a little taller.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: A month after your appointment this summer, Sean Fraser spoke to reporters about putting a cap on international students, which you just said you don't necessarily agree with. Last month, Housing Minister Fraser also suggested that he might want to decrease the overall immigration target.

With Minister Sean Fraser still speaking for immigration, I'm trying to understand how this works. Is he still the senior minister of immigration and you're the junior minister? How does this whole structure work? I'm just trying to understand it.

The Chair: Minister Miller, you have the floor.

Hon. Marc Miller: They always told me I had big shoes to fill, but I think it was just a literal statement rather than a figurative one. Sean is free to say whatever he wants on immigration. He's free to say whatever he wants on the economy, as am I on other matters, so I wouldn't put it as a competition.

What I would say is that we are prepared to announce some more robust measures to make sure that we preserve the integrity of the system when it comes to international students. I don't think putting a cap on is necessarily the wisest thing in the context. I have to figure out, notably, what I'm trying to solve for, and it is a bit of a rudimentary instrument, as I mentioned to your colleague in the Bloc, for solving a problem that would and could inevitably punish the good actors as opposed to the bad actors.

What I will say, Brad, is that I will retain it as an option if what we put forward in the next couple of weeks doesn't work.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Redekopp.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Minister Fraser also said that he thinks that the ambitious immigration targets need to be revisited. Do you agree with him on that?

The Chair: Minister Miller, you have the floor.

Hon. Marc Miller: We're currently in reflection as a cabinet as to what we indicate to Canadians about our immigration targets. I think these need to be maintained. I think that the focus needs to be on how, as your colleague MP Kmiec alluded to, we bring in really skilled workers and talk to Canadians about how important these workers are to the net increase in the gross domestic product as well as net entrants into the workforce.

When we talk about reduction of immigration, no one ever asks, by that same token, "Are you ready to reduce the gross domestic product of this country?" They don't associate the two, and I think we need to start associating them, because there are consequences from actions. I don't think we will grow as we expect and need to grow as a country currently with the population demographics, which I need to solve, not for the next election, but for the next generation, by reducing numbers.

• (1630)

The Chair: Mr. Redekopp, you have the floor.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Minister Fraser also said that the government needs to better align its immigration policies with the absorptive capacity of communities. Do you agree with him on that?

The Chair: Minister Miller, you have the floor.

Hon. Marc Miller: I don't like treating people like sponges. The word is a bit odd when we use it. I think what we're hearing from Canadians, Brad, is that we need to be a little more coordinated in how we deal with newcomers to this country. It is, I think, the seamless thread that I've heard in the last three months of being the minister, that we need to be more coordinated with provinces and municipalities. I just spoke to the big city mayors today, and they all agree that we tend to not match supply and demand. We match demand with hope, and often that hope gets dashed.

A lot of these global express streams that I was getting questions on in a rapid fashion from MP Kmiec are really good solutions to dealing directly with the express demand that exists within industry and that, in fact, people are crying for.

In that context, I don't know how we reduce in any significant measure.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Redekopp and Minister.

Now we will go to my dear friend Mr. El-Khoury for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Welcome to our committee, Minister.

Our committee is also conducting a study on the exploitation of foreign students. As you know, some foreign students have been victims of fraudulent immigration consultants, who use fraudulent letters of acceptance for their student visa applications.

Can you tell the committee about the work being done by our government to counter abusive behaviour by bad actors posing as immigration consultants?

[*English*]

The Chair: Minister Miller, you have the floor.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marc Miller: Thank you, Mr. El-Khoury.

That's a key question in the current context, particularly as it relates to your comment about bad actors. I would definitely not want us to draw the conclusion that we should be blaming individuals. There are some people who have been given false hopes of coming to Canada, perhaps by obtaining permanent residency through below average or misrepresented education. However, someone who's willing to pay \$40,000 to learn how to drive an Uber taxi is not the kind of person we're looking for when we try to recruit brilliant people from abroad to come here to contribute to Canada's reputation, whether here or elsewhere around the world when they return home.

I don't want people to think that we are against foreign students. In cabinet, there were at least a dozen members, including me, who had studied abroad, were enriched by the experience and even learned a foreign language. In no way do I wish to diminish the importance of that.

Nevertheless, there was a highly lucrative system, not only for institutions that do good work, but also for a number that are fraudulent. Frankly, it varies from province to province. Some don't do their work as well as others, while certain provinces have taken action against some of their own institutions to do damage control. Something needs to be done so that the institutions being affected, particularly private colleges, but also some major institutions, do their homework with respect to the accommodation, integration and recruitment of quality students from abroad.

The federal government also has a role to play. I can't be there for everyone, but I have to try and eliminate fraud. Over the coming weeks, we are going to announce improved measures to counter fraud in letters of acceptance and to ensure that we have reliable institutions that do their homework. These institutions could be entitled to a fast-track process, unlike others that require—and I'm putting this very diplomatically—a little help from the federal or provincial government to comply with standards of integrity for their students.

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

[*English*]

I have a a multi-diverse riding, and the huge number of tourist visa refusals is unbelievable. I always face constituents who have received the same answer—I could assure you it's copied and pasted—that the department is not convinced that the tourist visa applicant is going to leave Canada.

I had a discussion with someone, and he told me, “I provide more than a million dollars. My wife is here. My children are here. I have a business here. I am going to investigate again for the future if I will move my business over”.

What can I do in this case?

This problem occurs repeatedly—on a daily basis—so I ask if there is some miracle in the ministry of immigration that, with you as its head, you could recommend with some ideas and send it to the staff, who treat the applications abroad. How can it be satisfied? Give us some guidelines and that I, too, can send to the applicants. How can they satisfy the agent?

How will the agent be satisfied with the applicant?

• (1635)

The Chair: Minister, you have 30 seconds to respond.

Hon. Marc Miller: You know, you're my friend, so, as soon as they visit you, I'm surprised they don't leave.

In all seriousness, my job is to treat people in a equitable fashion. Clearly, we need measures in place to make sure that people who intend to come to this country have the capacity and willingness to leave. That is sometimes in doubt. I don't deny the fact that it has led to some really odd consequences at times and that they do accumulate.

We do our best. I will say that there is no miracle. There really is no miracle. What we can do is constant review to ensure that the public service acts in the independent and professional fashion that it is expected to when triaging different applications.

It's surprising at times, the source countries where people get rejected. When I see trends, I do have the duty to raise that with my deputy minister and her team to make sure that we are not pursuing systemic discrimination and bias.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

On behalf of the committee members and this chair, Minister, thank you for coming. We are looking forward to seeing you often here at this committee.

Thank you again, and we wish you the very best.

The meeting is suspended.

• (1635)

(Pause)

• (1640)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

We will now turn to our study of exploitation schemes targeting certain international students. Officials from Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada and the Canada Border Services Agency are here to provide an update on the situation.

I am happy to welcome Ms. Kingsley, assistant deputy minister of economic, family and social migration at IRCC; and Mr. McCrorie, vice-president of intelligence and enforcement at the CBSA. The panel has five minutes to make an opening statement before we go to questions.

The floor is open to the panellists.

Go ahead, Ms. Kingsley.

• (1645)

Ms. Michèle Kingsley (Assistant Deputy Minister, Economic, Family and Social Migration, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Thank you, Chair.

I want to start by acknowledging that we're meeting today on the traditional and unceded territories of the Algonquin Anishinabe peoples.

[*Translation*]

Thank you for having invited me to appear here today.

Foreign students make important contributions to our communities. They support local economies and strengthen skilled workforce across Canada.

To be able to study in Canada, foreign students must have received a letter of acceptance from a Canadian learning institution, submitted a study permit application, and have the application accepted.

[*English*]

This year alone we have received and processed over 600,000 study permit requests. These students benefit our communities, campus life, as well as contribute well over \$20 billion to our GDP annually.

Media reports surfaced earlier this year of fraudulent letters of admission being used by international students, unbeknownst to them, to come here and study. Concerns were raised by this committee and by others that genuine students were being taken advantage of by unscrupulous actors. That is why a task force was struck to review the facts of cases for individuals connected to fraudulent letters.

[*Translation*]

The task force reviews cases once the IRB, the Immigration and Refugee Board, has completed its procedures. The task force made an effort to identify legitimate students who had been defrauded, from a practical standpoint and with a view to facilitation.

For example, if a student enrolled during the three terms prior to arrival, and the application raised no concerns or problems related to things like criminal activity, the task force determined that the person in question was genuinely a student.

[English]

Earlier this year we reported to the committee that there were 309 cases of interest to the task force. Further review reduced this number to 285 after removing duplicates. The task force prioritized the review of cases of students in Canada at risk of removal. We also reviewed cases still before the IRB so that action can be taken swiftly as the IRB concludes hearings.

In all, the task force has reviewed 103 cases and determined that 63 were genuine students. To date, 30 have been approved for temporary resident permits of up to three years. In the 40 cases where we deemed them not to be genuine students, individuals have the opportunity to present additional information to support their case.

[Translation]

The remaining cases identified are still before the IRB and the task force will take action where required once the procedures have been completed. That's why these figures will continue to change.

Progress was also made by law enforcement authorities seeking fraudsters to bring them to justice. In June, the Canada Border Services Agency charged a man involved in the facilitation of fraudulent letters of admission.

[English]

The work of the task force continues in parallel as we work to improve the international student program more broadly. We've added information on our "How to report fraud" web page with specific support and instructions for genuine international students, who may have been duped by unscrupulous actors.

[Translation]

We are now focusing on the program's integrity and on making students less vulnerable.

Work on developing a model for recognized learning institutions is ongoing. We asked for advice from the provinces, territories, educational associations and post-secondary learning institutions with a view to further enhancing the model's framework.

[English]

To conclude, I would reiterate that the impact of international students in our communities is significant, and the task force continues its important work to ensure that genuine students impacted by fraud have the opportunity to continue their journey in Canada should they wish to do so.

[Translation]

Thank you for your interest in this matter.

We will now be happy to answer any questions.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kingsley.

Mr. McCrorie, do you have anything to add?

• (1650)

Mr. Aaron McCrorie (Vice-President, Intelligence and Enforcement, Canada Border Services Agency): No, we thought that we'd just have a joint opening statement and give the maximum time for questions.

The Chair: That's fine. Thank you.

We'll go to the honourable members. We'll start with the Conservatives.

We have Mr. Redekopp for six minutes, please. Go ahead.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thanks for being here today. I'm disappointed that the deputy minister wasn't here, but that's okay.

I recently met with a group of 20 students to check to see if your task force was actually doing the job that you described. Out of the 20 students, nine had no IRB decision yet and 11 had removal orders. Out of the 11 with removal orders, eight had received their TRP, but three had not. They hadn't heard anything. That's including Lovepreet, one of the students who testified here at this committee in June.

My first question is this. Does it make sense that three students with removal orders have not heard anything from the task force?

The Chair: Mr. McCrorie.

Mr. Aaron McCrorie: Yes, I'll start.

By way of the process, the committee has looked at each of these individual students. I think we've provided an update. Sixty-three so far have been deemed to be genuine, and 40 not to be genuine. For those who are deemed to be non-genuine, CBSA is doing a follow-up and reaching out to them. We'll see if there's additional information they can provide to demonstrate that they are a student. If they are a genuine student, then—

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: Then IRCC issues a TRP. Yes.

The Chair: Do you want to say something, Ms. Kingsley?

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: I was just going to pick up where my colleague was ending to say that if there is a determination that a student is genuine, then IRCC would issue a TRP.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Redekopp.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: I understand that, I think. The point is that these three students haven't heard anything. They haven't been asked a question or communicated with in any way by IRCC. They are still in the limbo that we found them in April, before the task force was set up.

It seems like communication is a big problem here. In fact, all 20 students expressed the same concern that they hadn't had very good communication. Even the ones who received a TRP said that they just had a TRP, and that was it. There was no information on how it was going to go from this point forward. Communication is an issue.

Is it possible for you guys to communicate concerning all 285, just to let the people know where these cases stand? There's a lot of confusion and concern in the community.

The Chair: Ms. Kingsley.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: Absolutely, we can increase communications. In the cases of genuine students who have TRPs, if they have specific questions they're welcome to reach out to us as well, of course. In the cases of non-genuine students, they will be contacted. There's a possibility that people have not been contacted immediately. During this time they're not at risk of removal.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: I have a list that I'll leave with you. There are UCI numbers that you can check out afterwards.

Another problem we have is that some who have received their TRP have had their passports seized by the CBSA. It seems like the CBSA agents have no idea what the task force is. Even when one of the students showed the CBSA agent the TRP documentation, they still were not able to get their passport back.

Does that make sense? Are students with TRPs allowed to have their passports, or are they confiscated by CBSA?

The Chair: We have Mr. McCrorie or Ms. Kingsley.

Mr. Aaron McCrorie: Again, it's the theme of communication. We need to do more outreach and communication with our own staff within CBSA to explain to them what this task force is doing and what the results of it are.

What I would say is that under normal operating and policy considerations, it is normal for us to take those passports and hold onto them. In part, it's because there are other immigration processes at play, for example, that may have an outcome where we may need to remove them. It's not because of their fraudulent student behaviour, but because of other processes that are in place.

This is new territory for us. We're working through that. We are reviewing that practice right now.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Should the students, who did receive a TRP through the task force, get their passports back, or not?

Mr. Aaron McCrorie: We need to look into that. I'm newly aware of that issue, and we need to look into it.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: It's good to see the IRCC and CBSA working together on this task force. One of the biggest problems we have in my office is with immigration case work and security clearances. A permanent resident applicant waits months, and even years. IRCC blames CBSA. In fact, there even seems to be some frustration within IRCC for CBSA.

Are there internal procedures for dealing with CBSA delays? What specific steps, Ms. Kingsley, are you taking to eliminate the delay?

The Chair: Ms. Kingsley.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: I would say that IRCC and CBSA do work together on all of those fronts. We do have strategies in place and meetings and exchanges to address the backlogs in our systems. We work together on those.

● (1655)

The Chair: Mr. Redekopp.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Often, when we talk to IRCC, there is a frustration that even comes back through the IRCC agents that's it's over in CBSA land. We don't have a clue what's going on, and they take forever to get it done. Have you ever heard of this from your perspective in IRCC?

The Chair: Ms. Kingsley.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: I haven't heard of frustration directed at CBSA colleagues. No, I think we work collaboratively together on security screening and other issues such as this task force.

The Chair: Mr. McCrorie, do you want to make a comment?

Mr. Aaron McCrorie: I would just echo that it is a very collaborative and strong working relationship. There are any number of reasons why it takes a while for security screening to get done. Those security screening results are a recommendation that feeds into a broader decision.

To Michèle's point, we work very closely, on a very regular basis, in addressing backlogs and delays.

The Chair: Mr. Redekopp.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: The task force identified 15 or possibly more applicants who were, in fact, cheating the system and who needed to be removed from the country. How long will it take CBSA to get them out of the country?

The Chair: Mr. McCrorie.

Mr. Aaron McCrorie: To date, we've identified 40 individuals who were deemed to be "non-genuine", with 17 of them in the country. As we discussed previously, we are giving them an opportunity. We're going to follow up with those 17. If there's information we've missed or weren't aware of, we will seek that information from them. Then the committee would have an opportunity to reassess if we got new information.

Above and beyond that, as with any other individual subject to removal, they do benefit from all the other protections that are in place. For example, they can make appeals to the IRB. They can make appeals to the Federal Court. They can also apply to IRCC for pre-removal risk assessment. It's only after all that due process is completed, with that additional layer we've added with this task force, that we would then begin to contemplate actual removal.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we'll go to Parliamentary Secretary, Mr. Chiang, for six minutes.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Paul Chiang (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here.

In a previous meeting, Deputy Minister Fox explained that the CBSA had identified 1,485 suspicious cases of student permit applications. Of these cases, 976 had already been refused based on fraud, 150 have a link to criminality and 300 cases of concern remained. How are these applications reviewed and refused based on fraud, and how did these 300 cases slip through the cracks?

The Chair: Ms. Kingsley.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: I would start by highlighting the fact that two-thirds of the applications were, in fact, refused based on fraud. Also, I would point here to the multi-layered approach that IRCC and CBSA have in fraud prevention and detection. It starts abroad with media campaigns and information sessions for potential students so that they are made aware that they should be working with authorized agents, and they have information that would inform the decision-making in being able to spot potentially fraudulent, unscrupulous actors.

We do encourage newcomers to work with authorized, recognized agents. Once in the processing realm, officers are trained to spot fraud. We do have a tool that identifies potential fraud trends in our caseload, and we do have a letter of acceptance verification process, which the minister indicated in the previous part of the meeting, that we'll be enhancing soon.

Then, of course, once students are in the country, there's a compliance-reporting regime that kicks in.

There is a multi-layered approach to detecting and finding fraud, but it's an ever-changing sector that's always in evolution. The reality is that fraudsters are very sophisticated and are constantly changing their processes to stay ahead of and to try to game the Canadian system. That's why we are imposing a multi-layered approach to try to catch them and stay one step ahead all the time.

The Chair: Mr. McCrorie, did you want to add something?

Mr. Aaron McCrorie: I would just echo that with regard to the multi-stage approach, we contributed to it at the port of entry where our officials do review documents and are trained to detect fraud. We have documents specialists who can support them. As well, there is the work we do in inland enforcement, either through administrative reviews, which led to this particular investigation, as well as criminal investigations that resulted, for example, in the spring of this year in charges against an individual involved in this fraudulent behaviour.

• (1700)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Chiang.

Mr. Paul Chiang: Thank you, Chair.

This committee also heard that if a student did not have knowledge of fraudulent documentation, they would be issued a three-year temporary resident permit.

To date, how many temporary resident permits have been issued this way? Could you please provide this committee with an update on this process.

The Chair: Ms. Kingsley.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: Thank you, Chair.

The process we undertook was a very facilitative one that was based on determining whether a student really came here to study. A very basic test we used was to consider whether that student was in fact studying at an institution within three terms after they arrived. If they were, then we considered them to be genuine, and we did issue that three-year temporary resident permit.

So far, 30 temporary resident permits have been issued. Twenty-six are to "in-Canada genuine students" who were issued removal orders. Four were to people who had been removed prior to the striking of the task force. That's 30.

The Chair: Mr. Chiang.

Mr. Paul Chiang: Thank you, Chair.

Can you provide this committee with some specific information about the current IRCC-CBSA task force. How many members sit on this task force from IRCC and CBSA respectively?

What is the frequency of communication between members of this task force? What does the transfer of information look like between the two agencies? Are you guys working in silos, or working—

The Chair: Ms. Kingsley, and then Mr. McCrorie.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: Thank you.

The agency and the department are working very closely together. The sharing of information, I would say, is heightened and very seamless.

The task force is composed of an assistant deputy minister at IRCC and an assistant deputy minister at the CBSA, and there are four directors general involved and, I would say, over 20 to 30 officers from both departments working really closely together.

The task force has been doing a mix of meeting in person, or through Teams, to discuss specific cases that are a little bit more complex, but the team is also doing a great job of triaging cases that are maybe a little more straightforward and that the task force is considering secretarially.

There have been 14 meetings so far. The work of the task force continues and the collaboration has been very good.

The Chair: Mr. McCrorie.

Mr. Aaron McCrorie: I have nothing to add. We are in constant collaboration.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Chiang, you have seven seconds to thank the members.

Mr. Paul Chiang: Thank you very much for your time.

The Chair: Now we will go to my dear friend, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, for six minutes.

Go ahead, please.

[Translation]

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

I'd like to welcome the witnesses.

To begin with, of the students who were deported, had any been studying in Quebec? Just a yes or a no will suffice.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: I don't have the information needed to know whether there were any in Quebec. I could provide an answer later.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Okay. You can send it to the committee.

I have more questions. I'm going to ask them and if you don't have an answer, please have them sent in writing to the committee later.

If any students in Quebec were deported, I'd like to know how many there were. I'd also like to know how many among them were enrolled in anglophone institutions and how many in francophone institutions. I'd also be grateful for the number of deportations by province.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: Okay. It may not be clear for the institutions because the name of the institution on the fraudulent letter of admission may not be the institution that the student is actually attending. We're going to look at the data we have and get back to you with an answer on this.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: All right. I'm not asking a trick question, because I really want as much information as possible in order to be able to document all of this and get an accurate picture of the situation.

• (1705)

[English]

The Chair: Mr. McCrorie, did you want to say something?

[Translation]

Mr. Aaron McCrorie: I'd simply like to add that some students who began their studies in, let's say Alberta, may afterwards decide to continue in Quebec. It's therefore not only a matter of students registered in a specific province, but across the country. Our discussions are intended to shed light on their educational history.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: If it were possible to obtain information that tracks the itinerary of students targeted by fraud, whether they arrived in Alberta and then went to Quebec afterwards, or anything else of note, it would help us. By analyzing all the variables, it might eventually be possible to obtain a more accurate picture of what is currently happening. That would help all of us here understand what is going on.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: We are going to review all the data we have about any pattern to determine whether there's a simple way of giving you an answer. However, I understand that your interest is in students who went to Quebec at some point, and how many attended francophone and anglophone institutions.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Yes, but I'm also interested in something else. As part of this study on students being defrauded, we've spoken at length about the immense anxiety and stress they experienced, and the impact of all this on their mental health. What

they went through was extremely difficult from the psychological standpoint. Do you know whether they were offered any psychological counselling?

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: No, I don't know if they were offered psychological counselling.

Mr. Aaron McCrorie: From my side of things, I can say that every time an officer has dealt with a student who had been defrauded, it was done compassionately and sensitively.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I understand. However, I don't think it would be asking too much to offer a service that could be provided by someone with specific training in mental health or psychology to students who have been victims of fraud.

I don't know if you remember, Mr. Chair, but some of the students who appeared here before us were in a dark place. We heard some of them speculating about perhaps committing suicide. As my colleagues have all discussed it on this committee, I believe I'm echoing their feelings by saying that offering psychological counselling to these students, or rather these victims, would be appropriate in the future, if it hasn't been done already.

How much speaking time do I have left?

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have about a minute and a half.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Okay.

Mr. Fraser, the former minister of immigration, stated clearly in his government response to the report on the unfair treatment of foreign students tabled in May 2022, that there had been racism within the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, or IRCC. It wasn't only unconscious bias, but outright racism. If memory serves me correctly, the response came at the end of September 2022.

I am therefore somewhat worried for students from India who are required to comply with IRCC criteria for dealing with applications considered fraudulent. As I mentioned, there has indeed been racism towards francophone foreign students from Africa.

On a scale of 1 to 10, in which the number one means that there is no problem at all and 10 represents a major problem, how would you score the number of students subjected to racism in the issue we are looking into?

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: I believe that the root of the problem stems from unscrupulous agents operating abroad. There is no doubt about it, and you heard the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship say earlier during his appearance, that there were systemic racism problems.

However, in the matter we are addressing, the problem stems from the fact that some students did not know that their letters of acceptance were invalid when their applications were approved. I therefore have trouble understanding the link you are making, but we could look into it more closely.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Okay. Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Madam Kwan, we'll go to you for six minutes. Please go ahead.

• (1710)

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

Thank you to the officials for coming to our committee today.

I have a group of questions, namely, what it means for those who have been found to be genuine, and what it means for those whose status is yet to be determined. I'm going to focus first on the students. I'm aware of at least 25 who have not yet had their case reviewed by the task force, but they're scheduled to be in the coming days, meaning after September 19, 2023.

Is that work yet to be completed? Is there an update of the findings to be presented about these students?

The Chair: Go ahead, Madam Kingsley.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: Maybe I can go through the current numbers of where we are in the review—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: No, I'm sorry, please don't go through the current numbers. I just want to know, for the people who have not yet had the opportunity to meet with the task force because no determination has been made, what happens to those cases? When can they expect to actually have that meeting with the task force to determine the outcome for their situation?

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Kingsley.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: In terms of the in-Canada population that has already been the subject of a removal order, everyone who is genuine has been contacted and issued a TRP.

In the cases that are still before the IRB, a number of those have been assessed, and notes have been left on the file so that the moment those come out of the IRB we will be able to intervene, either with a TRP for a genuine case or to ask them for more information if we didn't have enough information to consider that they were genuine.

The Chair: Go ahead, Madam Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I understand the categories of what you have put out. What I'm hearing—from my office being in touch with the people whose cases are being reviewed—is that some of them have been found to be genuine. I have a set of questions for them, but I'm not going to ask them here because I only have six minutes. Most importantly, the people are still waiting for the process to complete have not had a hearing, for example. Therefore, they have not had the chance to meet with the task force because they are still waiting for the hearing to occur. In the meantime their study permit's going to expire and their work permit's also going to expire quickly, so they may not be able to get through to getting that hearing and then having their case assessed by the task force. What happens to them? Right now they're stuck and they're no better off than they were in April. They're just stuck.

The Chair: Go ahead, Madam Kingsley.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: In terms of the people who are still before the IRB, there is no risk of removal for them. The task force

has been very clear that we intervene when the case has been heard and concluded at the IRB. At this point—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm sorry, but I'm going to interrupt you. I understand that. My question, though, is about the fact their work permit's going to expire. One student's work permit has already expired, and you can imagine the difficulties they're in as a result of that. As they're waiting and waiting and waiting, what happens to them? They're not anywhere ahead from where they were in April.

The Chair: Go ahead, Madam Kingsley.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: My understanding is that while they wait at the IRB their status remains—the validity of their status remains. That's why, once the IRB has made its decision, that's the point at which the task force would intervene.

The Chair: Mr. McCrorie, do you want to add something?

Mr. Aaron McCrorie: I would just add that for those individuals, we've made it very clear that we will not be.... In part because they haven't been to the IRB yet, we will work to schedule them. In some instances we do our own review: We make a decision that there's not enough evidence and it won't go to the IRB.

The numbers are very active, very dynamic and changing all the time, but we are very seized with addressing these issues as soon as they emerge from the IRB. It takes time for that to get scheduled, but I don't think people are stuck or in limbo prior to that. They're being protected.

The Chair: Go ahead, Madam Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm aware of one student who's out of status due to their PGWP being refused, and they're still waiting on the CBSA to schedule the admissibility hearing. They have had no word. They said that they got a call from CBSA to confirm their information, but no hearing date. They're now in a very vulnerable position.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. McCrorie or Ms. Kingsley.

Mr. Aaron McCrorie: I apologize, but I'm not familiar with this particular case. If you provide us details, I'd be more than happy to follow up to understand it. It may not even be part of our universe of students, part of the 285 we've been looking at. There are thousands of cases we're dealing with at any given time. We'd be happy to look into that in more detail subsequent to this meeting.

• (1715)

The Chair: Go ahead, Madam Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: This student was part of the group of people who came forward when this whole issue emerged, so I'm assuming they're part of the fraudulent case situation.

Mr. Chair, maybe I can do this: I have many questions—some of them are quite detailed—with respect to that, but we're pressed for time. I wonder if I could get authorization from the committee to submit written questions to the officials so that we can get clarity on this.

Many of the students we've been in touch with have no idea what's happened to them. Even those with "genuine" findings are still confused about what it means for them. Those who have not been processed are definitely confused and very worried with respect to that.

Some of them left voluntarily. The previous minister said those who left voluntarily would have an opportunity to prove their case. How are they going to do that? I haven't heard any information from the officials on how people can follow through on those cases, when they left voluntarily, without actually having gone through the process.

I would appreciate it, Mr. Chair, if you can advise me as to whether I could submit these questions to the officials in writing and receive the response. This could be shared with everybody, because these are questions that I think everybody has from people they're trying to work with.

The Chair: Does the committee give its consent?

Go ahead, Mr. Redekopp.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: As long as we can all submit questions, I say yes.

A voice: There's no objection.

The Chair: If there's no objection we are fine.

The time is up, Madam Kwan.

Now we'll go to the next round. Here we go to my dear friend Mr. Maguire. Finally, it's your turn.

Mr. Larry Maguire (Brandon—Souris, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

One of the most troubling aspects, Ms. Kingsley, that has come to light is the ability of fraudulent immigration consultants to exploit the current system of IRCC issuing study permits. When the deputy minister of IRCC appeared before the committee here this spring, she confirmed there is no actual data-sharing agreement between the designated learning institutions and the IRCC. Is that still the case, yes or no?

The Chair: Go ahead, Madam Kingsley.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: Right now, in the processing of applications, if an officer has a doubt about the validity of a letter of acceptance, we do actually reach out directly to the DLI to ask them to either validate that letter of acceptance or invalidate it, so we do have an "ad hoc based on officer review" sharing of information with the DLIs. We also have a compliance reporting regime whereby DLIs report to us twice a year on student attendance. As the minister said earlier this afternoon, we are looking at enhancing that system, and he will be making an announcement later this week.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Maguire.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Is there no automatic way to determine if the student has been issued a study permit, without someone manually contacting the designated learning institution to confirm the letter of acceptance?

I have a number of questions, so can you be concise in your answer, please?

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Kingsley.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: Currently that is based on officer review on an individual basis and not done automatically.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Maguire.

Mr. Larry Maguire: There's no automatic process.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: No, there currently is not.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Has the minister of IRCC directed the department to create data-sharing agreements between designated learning institutions and IRCC if there isn't one now? Is that what they're announcing or is it...?

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Kingsley.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: We are right now looking at sharing more information with designated learning institutions, and I believe we already have the authorities to do that. I don't think we need information-sharing agreements, necessarily. We do share information with them on an ad hoc basis when there's a doubt around fraud, and we will be enhancing that shortly.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Maguire.

Mr. Larry Maguire: I'm just looking into whether the minister has given that kind of direction or not, as a new minister in this department.

Has the minister also directed the department to contact all of the designated learning institutions to have them immediately contact the department if a student shows up at their campus without a legitimate letter of acceptance?

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Kingsley.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: The minister has been very clear in directing us to look at the overall international study program, to increase integrity, to address student vulnerability and to develop a recognized institution model.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Maguire.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Has the minister directed the department to do that, though?

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Kingsley.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: The minister has clearly directed us to do work on the study program, and the way that we achieve those goals is being worked on right now.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Maguire.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Does the IRCC keep track of when international students change their designated learning institution once they've already arrived in Canada? There are a number of them who change the area that they want to go to. Does IRCC keep track of that?

● (1720)

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Kingsley.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: There is a requirement for students to let us know if they change institutions. When they do let us know, we capture that information within GCMS, but unfortunately, it's not extractable in a way that we can easily report on. It is an area we're looking at enhancing, and we do get reporting from DLIs twice annually on student attendance, so right now we're taking a layered approach in determining that.

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Maguire.

Mr. Larry Maguire: It's not really clear how you track whether they change from one designated college or learning institute to another.

You gave us some numbers in your opening comments. I'm wondering if IRCC has ever considered prohibiting immigration consultants who are not registered through the College of Immigration and Citizenship when applying for a letter of acceptance from a designated learning institution or a study permit. We talked about unscrupulous consultants. Do you—

The Chair: Ms. Kingsley, you have 30 seconds to respond.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: IRCC won't process applications that are submitted by consultants in Canada who are not licensed or that aren't submitted from counsel.

The Chair: Mr. Maguire.

Mr. Larry Maguire: On prohibiting immigration consultants who aren't registered, do they all have to be registered? How do you track the ones who aren't?

The Chair: Ms. Kingsley.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: The college, which was established in 2021, and the act that led to the establishment of that college are really clear on who can operate as a consultant in Canada and what criteria they need to meet. The college has a registry published on their website.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Can you table that list with us?

The Chair: Thank you, my friend.

If you have a question, we can come back to you in the next round.

Mr. Larry Maguire: I have just a couple of quick questions. Like Ms. Kwan, I'll just write them in.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. El-Khoury, for five minutes. Please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

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

I would also like to thank the witnesses for being here.

Ms. Kingsley and Mr. McCrorie, some students who obtained a temporary resident permit for three years are still awaiting the outcome of their case review. Can you tell us why the Canada Border Services Agency doesn't return these students' passports?

[*English*]

Mr. Aaron McCrorie: As previously alluded to, this is a new process with a task force reviewing these individuals.

As a matter of policy, under normal circumstances, with people who are in similar situations, we take their passports so that we're in a position to remove them if we have to do so down the road. That is kind of a normal operating policy and procedure for normal circumstances.

These are not normal circumstances. This issue has just come to my attention. We are going to be reviewing it.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. El-Khoury.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: Ms. Kingsley, the former minister of immigration, refugees and citizenship, the Honourable Sean Fraser, told the committee on June 14, 2023, that he had set up a task force with senior managers in the department with a view to making the process more intelligible. Can you tell us how this initiative was helpful?

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: Thank you. Yes, I certainly can.

The task force was established immediately after being announced by the minister. It includes an IRCC assistant deputy minister, a Canada Border Services Agency assistant deputy minister, four directors general and some 30 analysts, by which I mean the officers who review the cases.

One very concrete benefit was the issuing of 30 temporary resident permits. We were able to determine that 63 students were legitimate, but that 40 were not. Approximately half of the latter will have an opportunity to submit additional information, if they have any, to demonstrate that they are genuine students.

In most instances, the main benefit of the task force was that it allowed us to determine from a paper review that an enormous number of students were genuine, but that they had unfortunately dealt with unscrupulous agents.

• (1725)

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: Thank you.

A new internal policy paper forecast 1.4 million applications from foreign students by 2027. The Department of Citizenship and Immigration therefore planned for a rapid increase in foreign students in a document about creating a category of recognized universities and other higher learning institutions that would be eligible for fast-track processing of foreign student study permits. Can you please tell us more about these forecasts?

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: Thank you.

The plan to develop a list of recognized institutions is being worked on. We held preliminary consultations with a number of institutions earlier this summer to obtain information, such as the type of support they provide to the foreign students they accept, and to identify what percentage of the fees paid by these students is reinvested in that population, whether by funding mental health support services or employment support. The purpose is to identify the results for the students at each institution to establish what criteria should be used to determine the designation of institutions that would benefit from the fast-tracking of applications from their students. The initiative is moving forward.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. El-Khoury, you have only six seconds to thank the officials.

[Translation]

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: Mr. McCrorie and Ms. Kingsley, thank you very much for your time and your clarifications, which have at least given us an idea of what is happening at these two federal institutions. Let's hope that we can clarify and address all kinds of problems in these two meetings.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

To finish off this round, all parties now have a maximum of three minutes.

I know, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, that you don't need three minutes, but I will say that parties have up to three minutes each.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, please, go ahead.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I don't need as much time, because all the witnesses will eventually have answered my questions in writing.

As my friend Mr. El-Khoury pointed out, the former minister, Mr. Fraser, came here on June 14. He explained that legitimate students who intended to submit a permanent resident application could be exempted on humanitarian grounds with a view to overturning an inadmissibility determination for misrepresentation.

Obtaining such an exemption is certainly not easy. It may take quite a while and accordingly, cost people a lot of money. Do you expect exemptions of this kind to be awarded quickly when the time comes to do so?

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: Yes, absolutely. Case reviews proceed very quickly. In the event that a student has not yet received a decision from the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, we put a note on their file in the Global Case Management System, the GCMS. If a student applies for permanent residence status, the officer processing that student's application will see the note on file. The agent will see that it's a student who was reviewed by the task force and considered to be a genuine student, meaning that humanitarian grounds can be confirmed.

Notes are entered directly into the system. No matter where students may have ended up in their travels, the officer processing the case will see them. Some students may not want permanent resident

status initially, but if they wish to have it later, the note will already be on their file. As soon as we have issued a temporary resident permit, we leave the note in the GCMS.

[English]

The Chair: Mr. McCrorie, do you have something to add? No, you don't.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Ms. Kingsley, I don't think you had finished speaking.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: The note is left in the system. If the student applies for permanent residence, the note will be very obvious and the officer will see it right away.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I agree that it would be automatic, but—

[English]

The Chair: Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have a minute to go.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: —to have this note placed on file, the student must have submitted an application. That's what I want to say, in fact. To have this note, it takes time and money. Are you with me?

• (1730)

[English]

The Chair: Madam Kingsley, give a short answer, please.

[Translation]

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: Well, the task force reviews all cases. When a person is here on a temporary basis, we immediately award a temporary resident permit immediately after having determined that the person is a genuine student, and the note corroborating our decision is left on file. So if the person, afterwards, decides to apply for permanent residence, the note will already be there.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to Madam Kwan for up to three minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Some of those students whom the task force has found to be genuine have already applied to the federal court for judicial review of the exclusion order. They believed at the time that they should not withdraw from that process, so they're continuing that process. Now that the task force has found them to be genuine, they're asking if they should withdraw from the investigation and that process or still carry through with that process.

The Chair: Ms. Kingsley.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: Those are very individual questions that students should be discussing with their counsel. It's not up to IRCC or CBSA to be giving legal advice. The work of the task force is to determine whether there was genuineness in terms of the study-permit process. We are intervening and issuing the TRPs when we do believe they were genuine. However, the court proceedings are separate, and individuals have to make their own decisions on whether they want to pursue or not.

In terms of the temporary status or the permanent resident status, if someone was deemed to be genuine, the notes are in the system, and we will be able to consider them when necessary if those people apply for permanent residency.

The Chair: Madam Kwan, you have the floor.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Yes, I would say there's a disconnect. You have a duplicate process going on, and you have the task force assessing an individual's file to say that they're genuine students. They were having to go through the Federal Court for judicial review only because they were found to have allegedly defrauded the system. If the task force has already established that they're genuine, why, then, do they still have to go through a separate process?

What I'm hearing from the officials is, "Yes, it's up to you. You need to decide if you're going through the process. It's not up to us to decide."

No wonder there's confusion. How are people supposed to know? You've already gone through the process, found to be genuine, and then they have to have no communication from the officials about what that means. Then, in the meantime, they go through a court process. No wonder people are worried. Even the ones who are found to be genuine are worried.

Meanwhile, their passport has been taken from them, as though somehow they're still defrauding the system.

Good grief, what is going on? I'm sorry to say that this is as clear as mud, and we're not that much further ahead with so many of the students.

I get it that officials can't give legal advice, nor can their offices give legal advice, but how are people supposed to figure out what all this means? I don't get it.

The Chair: Madam Kwan, your time is up, but I'll give you 30 seconds, Madam Kingsley, to respond.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: I would say that the immigration process is very separate from individual decisions to pursue something in court or not. We can only speak to the immigration side.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we will be going to my dear friend Mr. McLean for up to three minutes.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Greg McLean (Calgary Centre, CPC): Welcome, officials, and thank you for being here today.

My first question is about the number of applicants under this program. It was 122,000 students applying in 2000, the turn of the century. We were up to 638,000 in 2019. Since then, it has skyrocketed

after COVID to over 900,000 applicants who come into this program per year.

Are you confident, first of all, that you are able to examine and commit the resources to ensuring that all these are legitimate foreign students coming here? By the way, it's clearly a growth business, so there will be all kinds of bad actors around something that's getting this much attention.

The Chair: Ms. Kingsley, you have the floor.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: On the exponential growth in this program, there's no question that it just keeps growing and growing. As the minister noted, there is no cap on the temporary resident pathways. It is something that we're very cognizant of and concerned about. It's creating, in some communities, some issues with regard to absorptive capacity. It is leading to student vulnerability. It is leading to integrity issues as well.

I don't think any individual institution, organization or level of government can really address all of the challenges that come with that.

• (1735)

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. McLean.

Mr. Greg McLean: Thank you.

You talked about the integrity of the system itself. Let me go over to Mr. McCrorie here.

Mr. McCrorie, you're the one who's in charge of seeing these people come across the border. Are you satisfied that there's enough integrity? What are the mechanisms to maintain integrity that these people meet the requirements to come in when they're crossing the border?

The Chair: Mr. McCrorie, you have the floor.

Mr. Aaron McCrorie: Thank you.

Michèle alluded to this earlier. We don't have a single layer of defence. I spent much of my career in aviation safety, where we have multiple layers of defence that stop accidents from happening. We have the same approach in the immigration system.

It starts with the applicant and the applicant's having to vouch for the fact that they're responsible for this application and that their documents are true and genuine.

The second layer of defence is our colleagues at IRCC reviewing those documents. They get training for that. They look for that, and they do follow-up.

The third layer of defence is at the port of entry or gateway, with the border services officers who are trained to spot fraudulent documents. They are supported by document experts—

Mr. Greg McLean: Okay, can we stop there? That's the answer I'm looking for. What is that process at the border, please?

Mr. Aaron McCrorie: I wouldn't want to limit it to the border, with all due respect, because we don't want a single point of failure.

What we have are border services officers who are trained to assess individuals and look for fraud in all sorts of domains as well as being given training to identify fraudulent documents. They are supported by document specialists who can review documents. That is one layer of defence.

The subsequent layer of defence is the other work that Michèle described domestically, and also our own border services officers who work inland. That's how this case started. It was our getting intel leads leading to the use of fraudulent documents, so we did an administrative review—

Mr. Greg McLean: Thank you. I have only a little bit of time here.

The Chair: Thank you.

You have time for a quick question.

Mr. Greg McLean: The issue is about how you're going to continue this, because we are looking at cuts in both your budgets going forward here. If this is going to continue to be an expanding program, how are you going to meet the requirements of enforcing anything here when there's less and less money in your budget?

The Chair: We have Mr. McCrorie or Ms. Kingsley.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: I think the minister spoke about this earlier. We're looking at the program broadly. We're looking at enhanced integrity measures. We're looking to a recognized institution model to make sure that institutions that are really stepping up and providing supports are benefiting from priority processing. We're also looking at that study, work, stay continuum and at how we can better target that so that we make sure that the people coming in are really supporting Canada's objectives.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we will go to my friend, Mr. Ali.

Go ahead for three minutes.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: Wonderful. Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the officials for being here today.

In your October 4 correspondence you informed this committee that charges had been laid against Brijesh Mishra for immigration-related offences, but that he is one of many hidden agents identified in cases the task force reviewed.

Can you provide this committee with any other information regarding these hidden agents, or other organizations of these agents on a larger scale?

The Chair: Mr. McCrorie.

Mr. Aaron McCrorie: Over the last five years we have done over 800 investigations into IRPA offences, and that has led to over 1,000 charges.

Mr. Mishra is just one example of that, but I'm not going to comment on specific cases, because we don't want to compromise those cases, and we have to let them play out.

I was in an awkward position here at the last committee hearing, as that case was maturing, but I could not speak to it. I can tell you now that charges have been laid.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Ali.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: Through the chair, so that means you are still reviewing other actors who are in this sort of business, to identify and lay charges.

Mr. Aaron McCrorie: I would suggest again that's another one of those letters of defence that I talked about. We are always actively conducting two types of investigations—criminal investigations against the act itself, as well as administrative investigations. That is fundamental to ensuring the integrity of the system.

• (1740)

The Chair: Mr. Ali.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: Thank you.

Do you think it would be beneficial for this IRCC-CBSA task force to establish itself permanently to handle any future situations of exploitation of international students or other newcomers to Canada? Why, or why not?

The Chair: Ms. Kingsley.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: In fact, we are doing that in the sense that on the website “How to report fraud” we did include new instructions. We have updated that website so that genuine students, who feel like they have been impacted by fraud, can signal that to the department. The task force will in fact review those cases.

While we may slow down some of the activities once we get through this particular cohort—we'll see what comes through that website—the process is now established and the criteria, the things we're looking for, are all established. We do plan on continuing to use them.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: Thank you, Chair.

How much time do I have?

The Chair: You have 12 seconds. You can ask a question.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: Ms. Kingsley, you were talking about current numbers in response to Ms. Jenny Kwan. Do you want to add something, because you didn't have an opportunity?

The Chair: Ms. Kingsley.

Ms. Michèle Kingsley: Actually, I would say there was a question about those who had departed prior to their findings of inadmissibility.

When we met with the committee in June, we thought that was 10 people. It was, in fact, 13. The task force has reviewed those cases, and six have been found to be genuine; seven have been found not to be genuine.

Those people do not have an inadmissibility finding, and so there is nothing that stops them from reapplying to come to Canada. Notes have been left in the system.

In the case of the genuine students, they would be considered a *de novo* case. In the cases of non-genuine students, they are still assessed as *de novo* cases, and they probably would be subject to greater scrutiny, because of the past action, but they would be considered new cases.

The Chair: Thank you.

On behalf of the committee members, and as their chair, I want to thank Assistant Deputy Minister Kingsley and Vice-President McCrorie for appearing. Thank you for the great work your team is doing—the very best to you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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