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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Surrey—Newton, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 88 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

For the first hour, we are continuing our study of closed work permits and temporary foreign workers.

I am pleased to welcome Mr. Tomoya Obokata, all the way from the U.K. He is the United Nations special rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery. He is joining us online.

Welcome, Mr. Obokata. You have five minutes for your opening remarks. Then we will have questions.

Please go ahead. The floor is yours.

Mr. Tomoya Obokata (Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, United Nations, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much for inviting me to provide information this afternoon.

I am Tomoya Obokata, the UN special rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery.

As you are well aware, I visited Canada officially between August 23 and September 6 to investigate issues relating to my mandate.

I began my mission in Ottawa and visited other locations, including Moncton, Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal. During my visit, I met over 200 stakeholders, including federal, provincial and territorial government officials; lawmakers; trade unions; civil society organizations; the business community; national, provincial and territorial human rights institutions; and workers as well as victims of contemporary forms of slavery.

In relation to the treatment of migrant workers, I expressed concern over the low wage and the agricultural streams of the temporary foreign worker program, as workers are at a higher risk of labour exploitation, which may amount to forced labour or servitude.

In this regard, I received first-hand information from a wide variety of stakeholders, including close to 100 workers I met across Canada, with regard to appalling working conditions, which include excessive working hours, physically dangerous tasks, low wages,

no overtime pay, and being denied access to health care facilities, as well as sexual harassment, intimidation and violence at the hands of their employers and their families.

For sectors where employers provide housing, like agriculture, I also received reports of unsanitary and unsafe living conditions, lack of privacy and of gender-sensitive housing arrangements, and arbitrary restrictions on energy use or freedom of movement.

One of the factors facilitating labour exploitation seems to be the closed nature of the temporary foreign worker program. Many workers told me that they did not report instances of abuse and exploitation due to a fear of unemployment and deportation if they left their employers.

Now, I appreciate that workers can quit their jobs and stay in Canada until their individual visa has expired, but the problem is that they are not allowed to work until they find new employers who are willing to conduct labour market impact assessments, and I understand that this can take a long time. Unemployment among them, in the meantime, inevitably increases the risk of labour and sexual exploitation.

I am aware of open permits for vulnerable workers, but again, this is a temporary solution, and the process is so bureaucratic, with a high evidentiary requirement, that many workers do not take advantage of this opportunity—

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): On a point of order, Mr. Chair.

I don't know if we've done the sound tests, but, unfortunately, the interpreters have told me twice that they can't provide interpretation services.

It's not our honourable colleague's fault, but I'd like to make sure we have access to French interpretation services.

We must respect the Official Languages Act.

Thank you.

• (1540)

[English]

The Chair: Certainly, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, I totally respect that, and I'm sure every member on both sides respects both official languages.

I have had a discussion with the clerk. There were some difficulties in the beginning, and we tried to do everything possible to carry on, but this is the best we can get. I can suspend the meeting for a few seconds and come back to you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: If I may, Mr. Chair, I believe this testimony is absolutely essential to the study. In fact, our motion on the study mentioned our willingness to welcome today's honourable witness.

I absolutely want us to have a good session with this witness. If that's not possible, then we'll have to cancel today's session right away and make sure our witness can return with a good connection.

I'm no technology professional, but I get the impression that the problem is obviously one of connection on the witness's side.

This affects the work of our interpreters, who do an exceptional job. This is an occupational health and safety issue for them, and I certainly don't want anything to happen to them.

[*English*]

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

I also apologize to the interpreters. I stand with them all the time.

With that in mind, I will suspend the meeting for a few minutes. When I come back, I will make my decision.

• (1540)

(Pause)

• (1545)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

I would like to thank Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for his intervention.

As the chair, I fully respect that both official languages should be working simultaneously. As it is not working—and I don't want to put any extra pressure on the interpreters—we are making the decision to tell Mr. Obokata that we are extremely sorry, but it isn't working. We will try to arrange another time that will be mutually workable, when the system is working better, so that we can hear him and the interpreters can hear him and then interpret to the best of their ability.

Thank you for being with us.

With this, I will discharge the witness. We will suspend for a few minutes and then come back to the meeting again.

Thank you, Mr. Obokata.

I want to thank the interpreters, as well, for their understanding, given the pressure that they have.

Thank you.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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