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Chair: Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury





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• (1625)

[*Translation*]

**The Chair (Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.)):** I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 63 of the House of Commons Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Today is the 76th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, capable of the best and the worst, but we must not give in to the temptation to be cynical when faced with the disgusting spectacle of the affairs of nations in recent times. Human history requires that we forget that the inconceivable is conceivable, for both individuals and masses. Advancing human rights will continue to depend on gradually building mutual trust between nations and the work of non-state actors. It will be achieved over time through regular co-operation among them.

On a small scale, little victories occur in the macabre dance of human incomprehension and ignorance. Let's celebrate the work of our subcommittee, which has, over the years, been able to offer these small victories to various causes that exist in the shadows. We are bringing some humanity to places that really need it.

I want to thank my colleagues for their work and for their efforts to stand together to improve the human condition and support the universality of human rights.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on September 24, 2024, the subcommittee is resuming its study of patterns of forced migration in different regions of the world.

I'd like to welcome the witnesses. We have with us, as an individual, Napas Thein, research fellow. From the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, we have Alice Baillat, policy adviser, by video conference.

Each witness will have up to five minutes for their opening remarks, after which we will proceed with a round of questions.

We'll start with you, Mr. Thein.

[*English*]

I invite you to take the floor for five minutes.

**Mr. Napas Thein (Research Fellow, Myanmar Policy and Community Knowledge Hub, Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy, University of Toronto, As an Individual):**

Thank you for this invitation to speak on the situation in Myanmar concerning forced displacement.

I'm here as part of the Myanmar policy and community knowledge hub based at the University of Toronto and supported by the International Development Research Centre. As part of our ongoing research, I would like to share some information about the situation in Myanmar.

On February 1, 2021, the Myanmar military launched a coup against the democratically elected government, jailing elected political leaders and MPs. This set into place a nationwide revolt between the military junta and various emergent groups. Initially, thousands took to the street in protest, witnessing mass killings and the arrest of thousands. Many fled and joined resistance groups. Among these groups was a diverse civil disobedience movement; the National Unity Government, or NUG, with its People's Defence Force; and various ethnic revolutionary organizations, EROs, that had been engaging in resistance for decades prior.

The situation has renewed violence and precarity for the Rohingya, who faced one of the biggest displacement crises the world has ever seen in 2016 and who endured a genocidal campaign by the Myanmar military. There are over a million Rohingya refugees currently in Bangladesh, and hundreds of thousands in Malaysia and Indonesia. The number of Rohingya refugees fleeing Rakhine state in Myanmar has recently surged due to increasing violence, conscription by the Myanmar military, indiscriminate bombing and reports of increasing intercommunal violence, which has boiled tensions between the Rohingya and Rakhine communities.

This coup has not only affected the Rohingya. IDPs face significant insecurity, with conflict, air strikes and land mine use impacting civilians throughout the country. By the UNHCR's most recent count, there are over three million IDPs within Myanmar today. Over 2.8 million of them have been displaced since the coup in 2021.

In Thailand, the number of Burmese people fleeing conflict in Myanmar is likely in the hundreds of thousands if not millions. A report by the UNDP in 2023 found that there were 1.9 million Myanmar migrants in Thailand. As Thailand is not a party to the 1951 refugee convention, most of these migrants, many of whom we met in Thailand in our research, were unable to acquire refugee status or protections. They currently sit in limbo, particularly as the Myanmar military has been restricting passport renewals, which may lead to deportations to Myanmar.

Another cause of displacement was the junta's activation of conscription laws on young men and women in the wake of mass military defections. Many young people who have been out of school or unemployed since the coup are left with the precarious decision of risking conscription, joining resistance forces or fleeing Myanmar. I have family members who have been forced to make that decision.

There is an urgent need for action, as the plight of these displaced peoples is directly linked to regional and global security interests. International criminal gangs, particularly cyber-scam networks, are exploiting the crisis in Myanmar and displaced people.

In closing, I would like to share three broad considerations for the committee about actionable goals towards alleviating the situation in Myanmar.

First, there is a pressing need for cross-border assistance. The vast majority of IDPs in Myanmar, particularly those outside of the control of the Myanmar military, face significant precarity and lack support. Local humanitarian assistance providers depend on systems and networks of cross-border aid from Thailand and India. These are largely funded by the international Myanmar diaspora and various organizations and have even been able to support internal areas in Myanmar, including Bago and Sagaing.

Second, there is a need to work with neighbouring countries to support refugees and migrants. Individuals working on the situation in Myanmar in Thailand noted the precarious conditions of migrants. While there are a variety of local organizations that support migrants, they lack funding and support. Additionally, migrants lack rights and protections, putting them at risk of deportation to Myanmar. Canada should work with Thailand, India and Bangladesh on pathways for refugees and undocumented migrants.

Finally, there's a need to support non-traditional pro-democracy actors who provide assistance and support within Myanmar. Pro-democracy resistance organizations, including the NUG and various EROs, hold jurisdiction in many parts of the country and are subsequently responsible for humanitarian aid, local service delivery and IDP camps.

A study from the Special Advisory Council for Myanmar suggests that the Myanmar military has lost control of 86% of the country's territory. Moreover, 67% of the national population is reported not to be under stable military control and lacks access to traditional humanitarian support mechanisms. Supporting—

• (1630)

**The Chair:** Would you please wrap up? You have five more seconds.

**Mr. Napas Thein:** Absolutely.

Supporting actors that have de facto control in several areas will be paramount to alleviating the crisis of forced displacement within Myanmar.

Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

[*Translation*]

I now invite Dr. Alice Baillat to take the floor for five minutes.

**Dr. Alice Baillat (Policy Adviser, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre):** Thank you.

[*English*]

Dear Chairperson and members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to brief you today on the critical issue of internal displacement. I will do my intervention in English, but I will be glad, during the Q and A session, to answer in French or English.

I represent the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, or IDMC, a Geneva-based organization established in 1998 as part of the Norwegian Refugee Council, or NRC. The NRC is one of the world's largest humanitarian organizations, dedicated to assisting people forced to flee their homes.

For 25 years, IDMC has provided the international community with data and analysis on internal displacement caused by conflict, violence and disasters. We monitor internal displacement in over 200 countries and territories. Our mission is to highlight the plight of internally displaced persons, or IDPs, who are often overlooked, and to inform policy-making and action with reliable data.

What does our data tell us about the scale of internal displacement? As of the end of 2023, there were 75.9 million IDPs globally, a record high. This figure includes 68.3 million people displaced by conflict and violence and 7.7 million displaced by disasters.

In addition to tracking IDP numbers, we monitor displacements or movements, which count instances of displacement within a given year and not individuals, as one person can be displaced multiple times within one year. In 2023, disasters caused 26.4 million displacements in almost 150 countries and territories, while conflict and violence triggered 20.5 million displacements in 45 countries and territories.

New escalations of conflict, such as in Sudan and Palestine, forced millions to flee in 2023, adding to the populations already displaced for a long time in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo, Colombia and Syria. Earthquakes, storms, floods, wildfires and drought displaced millions more last year.

Although IDMC figures treat conflict and disasters as distinct triggers, the reality is that in many countries these factors overlap, contributing to prolonged and repeated displacement. Our final figures for 2024 are not available yet, but the trends that led to record levels of IDPs in 2023 continued in 2024.

The hardships faced by IDPs are severe. These include loss of shelter, safety and livelihood, as well as increased exposure to disease. Mental health is also an important concern. Women and girls are often disproportionately affected. The gaps in disaggregated data per sex contribute to blanket approaches to programming that tend to treat IDPs as a single homogeneous group that experiences displacement in the same way, but a person's gender inevitably shapes their experience of internal displacement, the risks they face and their ability to access appropriate support.

There are signs of progress in addressing internal displacement. In Bangladesh and India, for instance, where cyclone Remal displaced 1.6 million people in May of this year, early warning systems and community-based disaster management helped mitigate the impacts. In Bangladesh, nearly 75% of displacements were actually pre-emptive evacuations, demonstrating the life-saving potential of disaster risk management and anticipatory action. In Iraq, millions of IDPs have also found a durable solution in the past few years.

Despite such efforts, the overall trend remains alarming. With the growing impacts of climate change and the multiplication of humanitarian crises, and in the absence of durable solutions, the number of IDPs is likely to rise further.

The guiding principles on internal displacement affirm that national governments bear the primary responsibility for addressing internal displacement. With strong government leadership, international support and a commitment to listening to IDPs, we can help them achieve durable solutions and break the cycle of protracted displacement.

Internal displacement is a human rights and humanitarian issue, but it can't be only. In 2019, at the request of 57 member states, including Canada, the UN Secretary-General established a high-level panel on internal displacement, which issued a seminal report that led to the adoption of the action agenda on internal displacement.

• (1635)

**The Chair:** Will you please wrap up? You have 10 more seconds.

**Dr. Alice Baillat:** Yes.

This agenda advocates for a shift from short-term humanitarian aid to more development-oriented approaches and calls for a greater involvement of affected governments in finding durable solutions. We hope that Canada will also continue to demonstrate a steadfast commitment to supporting those countries in addressing the issue of internal displacement.

Thank you for your attention.

**The Chair:** I'd like to thank both witnesses for your good declarations.

Now I'll open the floor for questions and answers.

I would invite Mr. Mike Lake to take the floor for five minutes.

**Hon. Mike Lake (Edmonton—Wetaskiwin, CPC):** Thank you to both witnesses today.

Napas, I'll start with you.

You struck me with the conversation you were having about conscription laws. We can think of forced migration and about having no choice whatsoever in a matter, but you're talking about conscription laws. You're talking about people who have to make an almost impossible choice.

Could you elaborate a bit on what that's like for folks?

**Mr. Napas Thein:** Absolutely.

The country had conscription laws that were activated last year as a result of the military losing ground and facing mass defections. Many people on the ground—young men and young women throughout the country—have been forced to make the decision of risking conscription, joining resistance organizations or fleeing. Of the people we spoke to, the vast majority chose to either flee or join resistance organizations, as many young people who grew up under previously democratic conditions couldn't bear to see themselves supporting a military structure like that, which enacted the coup in 2021.

**Hon. Mike Lake:** I took a look at the three things you mentioned as your recommendations for the committee. I don't know if you want to elaborate on any of them, but feel free to do that with your time.

For the third one, the support for pro-democracy organizations, what does that look like?

What can we do here in Canada? What would be the ideal outcome of a committee hearing like this? On behalf of the Canadian government, what would you like to see?

**Mr. Napas Thein:** The MyPACK Hub—the Myanmar policy and community knowledge hub—recently released a report outlining various recommendations that particularly pertain to this question around working with pro-democracy groups on the ground.

There is the National Unity Government, which is the main pro-democracy or anti-junta force, and there are various ethnic revolutionary organizations throughout the country that have either recent or even decades-long capacity on the ground. They have, in and of themselves, functioning governments. They have democratic structures. They have ministries of education and ministries of health, and so does the National Unity Government.

What supporting pro-democracy actors looks like on the ground is actively engaging with these organizations, potentially opening up the question of recognition of government rather than recognizing the junta government, and actively working toward the provision of assistance for any activities that are pro-democracy in nature and are in support of local humanitarian assistance. It means supporting any of the ministries that are directly involved in humanitarian assistance, whether it's for education, health care or support for IDPs.

It also means supporting the democratic building of these organizations and not waiting for them to be fully functioning, perfect governing structures. Rather, it's about supporting them towards those goals, especially if organizations are working toward democratic structures.

• (1640)

**Hon. Mike Lake:** On the second point you made, which is support for migrants, how is Canada doing at this point in time, in December 2024? We've obviously had a lot of conversation on that at committee and in the House of Commons. How are we doing? What more could we do?

**Mr. Napas Thein:** Canada has had two strategies. The first strategy began in 2017 or 2018, in response to the Bob Rae report on the situation of the Rohingya. Canada has been sending a lot of money to support Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. There are organizations Canada funds that support migrants in Thailand as well.

What we want to see is more support for these migrants. We need more recognition that the situation of migrants and refugees is not one dimensional, that refugees and migrants fleeing conflict are themselves impacted in different ways and that local organizations that work along the border areas need significant supports in order to help these migrants.

Entire families of migrants are developing along the borders. There's a need for education. There's a need for health. There's a need for development assistance. It would be critical for supporters to provide people along the borders with assistance so they can develop, especially young people who are out of school, out of work or growing up in these conditions.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Lake.

I invite Madam Vandenbeld to take the floor for five minutes, please.

**Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.):** Thank you very much.

I'd like to thank both of our witnesses.

I'd like to start with you, Mr. Thein.

This morning, CNN was reporting that the Arakan Army has claimed the entire border between Myanmar and Bangladesh. First of all, what are the implications of that?

When we talk about migration, we don't often talk about who controls international borders, who controls the exit of migrants, who controls those entering and how international law applies in those situations. I wonder if you could let us know what you think

about the events that are happening as we speak. What are the larger implications for our migration study?

**Mr. Napas Thein:** Thank you for asking the question.

There are very serious implications. It comes down to the question of the organizations that control, with de facto powers, the territory that borders the country. This has implications for the situation of the Rohingya. It has implications for the wider country's situation of conflict, and it also has implications for Bangladesh.

It's not clear exactly what the Arakan Army will do with that border, but it is clear that any action done within Rakhine state needs to be done with the actors on the ground. That means international organizations may need to work with the Arakan Army and may need to work with Rohingya groups to provide humanitarian assistance effectively. There are various ways to do that, and there's the tool of using condemnation, especially if these groups are enacting atrocities towards the Rohingya.

For the second question on cross-border analysis, essentially, analyzing Myanmar in the context of who controls the borders is very important for understanding the situation. You can't really understand humanitarian assistance as a whole within Myanmar without considering that many of these ethnic revolutionary organizations, resistance organizations, control most of Myanmar's border. They are responsible for humanitarian assistance. They are responsible for the security situation on the ground. You can't expect the junta, which doesn't have control of these areas, to provide humanitarian assistance without control of those areas. Working with these border organizations, the ethnic revolutionary organizations, would allow more assistance to be provided.

• (1645)

**Ms. Anita Vandenbeld:** It's a lot more complex in situations like this. I don't have that much time, but I'd like to ask Alice a question as well.

You talked about internally displaced people. In that case, you're talking about millions of people globally and some being displaced more than once. What are the main causes of internal displacement as opposed to the kinds we're looking at where people are crossing international borders?

**Dr. Alice Baillat:** Thank you for your question.

I think the causes of internal displacement are, in many cases, similar to those of international displacement or migration. What we observe is that conflict and different sources of violence or persecution are a significant trigger of internal displacement. Disasters and the growing impacts of climate change are also becoming a significant trigger.

As I was saying in my intervention, I think it's really important to look at these triggers as interconnected and not necessarily as separate triggers, as they tend to overlap in more and more situations and increase the vulnerabilities of people who are displaced. That's also important because, while we tend to focus our intention on international migration, the numbers all show that internal displacement is way more significant in terms of numbers. That's an overlooked challenge, but it deserves way more attention.



There are quite a few studies looking at the nexus between internal and cross-border displacement. In some situations, especially when IDPs do not find solutions within their country after a certain period of time, it can lead to more international migration. People are going to try to find solutions elsewhere.

I hope that answers your question.

**Ms. Anita Vandenberg:** Yes. Thank you very much.

You mentioned a couple of conflicts—like in the DRC—where a lot of pressures are coming up internationally from across a border, putting pressure on internal—

**The Chair:** I'm sorry.

**Ms. Anita Vandenberg:** Is the time up?

**The Chair:** Yes.

**Ms. Anita Vandenberg:** Okay. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

**The Chair:** Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, go ahead, for three minutes.

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

In a 2024 opinion piece that you published in *The Globe and Mail*, Mr. Thein, you said that funding to support measures to address forced displacement must prioritize collaboration with grassroots and diaspora networks.

How can grassroots and diaspora networks contribute more effectively when it comes to providing assistance in cases of forced displacement?

[*English*]

**Mr. Napas Thein:** Is it okay if I answer in English?

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Yes, of course.

[*English*]

**Mr. Napas Thein:** Thank you.

The role of the international diaspora is extremely important within Myanmar. The international diaspora has been responsible for involvement within Myanmar in supporting various EROs, the NUG and local organizations throughout the country. They finance them in different ways. There are many articles about that sort of financing. It's done through various things, from financial apps to cryptocurrency.

This type of financing is very important for these organizations. This is what they use, in addition to a lot of volunteer work within Myanmar and along border areas by people who are either refugees or migrants. They all use this funding to try to develop a sense of government and provide services, and also to repel the Myanmar military within their capacity.

• (1650)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** What you're really saying is that money is put to much better use when it's sent directly to the people

on the ground, rather than to large international aid organizations, where there's more bureaucracy. Did I understand you correctly?

[*English*]

**Mr. Napas Thein:** I'm sorry. I think my headset is not working.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Can you stop the clock, Mr. Chair? I want to make sure that Mr. Thein understands my questions.

It seems that the interpretation problem has now been resolved. I'll start over, then.

What you're really saying is that when grassroots and diaspora networks are used, money is put to much better use when it's sent directly to the people on the ground, rather than to large international aid organizations, where there's so much bureaucracy. Did I understand you correctly?

[*English*]

**Mr. Napas Thein:** I understand what you're asking.

From the people we spoke to on the ground, they would agree with that statement, although it does vary depending on who you ask.

Not to discredit the work of multilateral organizations and larger organizations, but many of the organizations we met in Thailand did not really receive much support outside of diaspora networks and informal networks, meaning that many people who are actively working on the ground, facing conflict and risking their lives, who are working informally with EROs and working directly within non-junta-controlled areas, depend on diaspora funding.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** I think I have time for one last question, and it is for Ms. Baillat.

Which human rights are most at risk when it comes to forced displacement?

**Dr. Alice Baillat:** Thank you very much for your question.

Internal displacement affects the full range of human rights, but I would say that the first things that come to mind are the right to housing, the right to a livelihood, the right to health care and the right to education.

Numerous studies have shown that displaced children often end up out of the school system, for example. This means they are deprived of their right to education. Studies have also shown that displaced people often have trouble accessing health care.

So I would say that access to education, access to health care, access to water and food, of course, access to housing and access to livelihoods are the main rights affected by internal displacement. In any case, all human rights are affected, generally speaking.

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

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Baillat and Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.  
[English]

I would like to invite Mr. Johns to take the floor for three minutes, please.

**Mr. Gord Johns (Courtenay—Alberni, NDP):** Mr. Thein, last week the special rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Myanmar and other UN experts issued a press release calling for a “course correction” on Myanmar after the civilian death toll passed 6,000. I’ll read an excerpt from that release, which said, “There are now 6,000 reminders that the international community is failing the people of Myanmar. It is time for a change, starting with moving this disaster out of the shadows of international attention.”

You gave us stats on the millions of people who are internally and externally displaced. Why do you believe there’s been such a lack of international attention on the situation in Myanmar? What can the international community do to help bring an end to this ongoing crisis?

● (1655)

**Mr. Napas Thein:** There are a variety of reasons why there’s not a lot of attention on Myanmar. There are many crises going on in the world, many of them closer to Canada geographically. Also, there has always been limited attention towards Myanmar. It’s a very complicated crisis, and one where there are a variety of issues going on within the country—before the coup and after the coup—that make focusing on it difficult.

In response to the last part, I would say that countries need to start looking at Myanmar differently. You can’t necessarily look at it as a state-to-state relationship. You have to look at it as a myriad of organizations working on the ground. They work with the people who are actively involved in improving the country and actively involved in democratic work and humanitarian work.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Dr. Baillat, can you please expand on the unique impacts and risks faced by women and girls who are internally displaced? Can you also expand a bit more on some of the promising durable solutions to displacement that you mentioned in your opening remarks?

**Dr. Alice Baillat:** Yes, sure. Thank you for your question.

Regarding the first part on the particular vulnerability of women and girls, we have observed, first of all, that they constitute the majority of IDPs. They are also particularly affected most of the time because of pre-existing vulnerabilities for various reasons—economic, but also cultural and other reasons.

What we have observed is that in many cases in displacement situations, women and girls face, for instance, a lack of safety, including because of crowded IDP camps, which leave them with very little intimacy and a safe space. Gender-based violence against women and girls is a particular concern in displacement situations. We also observed that they struggle with access to livelihoods. We

know that in many situations, women and girls—women in particular—are the ones getting water and food for their family, and this access is restricted in displacement situations.

As a last example, there’s also access to education. We have observed that when there is an income deduction in households experiencing displacement, there is a tendency to give priority to boys in accessing to education, meaning that girls are even more at risk of being excluded from education systems.

These are the kinds of risks and vulnerabilities that women and girls are facing.

**The Chair:** Can you wrap up, please? We’ve exceeded the time limit.

**Dr. Alice Baillat:** Yes, sorry.

I will just say that there is a global process called the action agenda on internal displacement, and a special adviser on solutions to internal displacement was appointed. His mandate is terminating at the end of the year. Canada was actually a co-chair of the group of friends of this UN special adviser.

It will be particularly important after next year to look at how to keep the political momentum on internal displacement going and to look at ways within the UN system, but also among governments, to keep addressing the issue of internal displacement at both global and national levels.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

I would like to thank both witnesses for being with us. Thank you for your declarations. They were very useful to this subcommittee. If you feel that you have other information to provide to the subcommittee, please do not hesitate to write to the clerk or to me.

I would now like to suspend for a few seconds.

● (1655)

(Pause)

● (1700)

[Translation]

**The Chair:** We now resume the meeting.

I would like to welcome our next panel of witnesses.

We have two officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development. First, we have Bob Rae, ambassador and permanent representative of Canada to the United Nations in New York, who is appearing by video conference. We also have Matthieu Kimmell, director of the humanitarian policy division.

You each have a maximum of five minutes for your opening remarks. Afterwards, committee members will ask you a series of questions.

Welcome, Mr. Rae. Go ahead with your opening remarks.

**Hon. Bob Rae (Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations in New York, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Dear friends and former colleagues, thank you very much for your invitation.

As you well know, we are living in disastrous times. In 2024, there are 122 million forcibly displaced persons, including 47 million refugees. It's important to remember that these are not just numbers. These are human beings. We're talking about families that are being torn apart and communities that are shattered. It's happening all over the world, on every continent.

In Sudan, for example, there are 8.6 million forcibly displaced people within the country, while 3.2 million have fled to neighbouring countries.

Since 2011, the conflict in Syria has displaced over 7.2 million Syrians and created 6.2 million refugees. These are extraordinary situations.

In Gaza, nearly two million people have been displaced, and more than 100,000 people have been injured or killed in the war. Unfortunately, the war continues.

Mr. Thein, whom I know well, told you about the situation facing more than one million Rohingya. People living in camps in Bangladesh face the constant risk of poverty, disease, violence and flooding.

In the Americas, we have the situation in Venezuela.

It's important to remember that displaced persons and refugees are subjected to dangerous journeys, forced to live in overcrowded camps and have limited access to basic services. They feel a constant sense of insecurity. Women and children are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence, forced marriage, human trafficking and exploitation. It's also important to remember that more than 7.2 million young people are not going to school.

We have our work cut out for us. Frankly, this is an unprecedented situation. The situation is worse than it has ever been in recent years.

It's also important to understand that the response to the crisis is complex and requires a multi-faceted approach.

*[English]*

Through our partnership with UNHCR, IOM, Canadian NGOs, international NGOs and community organizations working on the ground, we've provided over a billion dollars in humanitarian assistance since 2023. That's an unprecedented number to support those affected by conflict and natural disasters. We've also started a three-year international Together for Learning campaign that focuses on the question of what happens to kids who don't get access to education.

We're working on looking at climate finance investments. We're working with the World Bank to see what more we can do with the IMF to see how to respond to fragile states. We're supporting the integration of refugees into national systems in Colombia and other places, and we're working through the World Bank's global concessional financing facility in Jordan, Lebanon and Ecuador to help middle-income countries access concessional financing to support refugees.

Our efforts in Gaza continue at the UN on a daily basis as we call for civilian protection, an immediate ceasefire and a resolution to the conflict that continues to displace millions, unfortunately. Finally, we welcome the most vulnerable here, including women and girls, ethnic and religious minorities, LGBTQI members and human rights defenders.

I can't stress strongly enough that more needs to be done. I had the pleasure of meeting with your colleagues in the other place. Their report has come out, and I'm looking forward very much to working with them given their report.

In assuming the presidency of ECOSOC this year, I've made the crisis of displacement a personal priority. We're going to work with states to ensure we promote better-managed migration systems and have strong adherence to the international protection regime. As part of its 2025 G7 presidency, Canada will continue to address the myriad geopolitical crises rocking our world. The protection of civilians, I can assure you, is going to be at the centre of this commitment.

We need to find new ways to support forcibly displaced people and their host communities, address root causes and propose durable solutions. We must ensure that our efforts are always informed by the voices of those who are displaced—by refugees and those who are displaced either within a country or beyond the borders of a country. We must listen to them, include them and make sure we amplify their voices.

Thank you so much for this chance. I look forward to answering questions.

• (1705)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Rae. That is excellent.

Thank you, Mr. Matthieu Kimmell. Due to the fact that you don't have a declaration, we can give our colleagues one minute extra, or a minute and a half extra in the case of Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe and Mr. Johns.

Now we'll go to questions and answers. We will start with Mr. Majumdar.

You have the floor for five minutes, please.

**Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar (Calgary Heritage, CPC):** Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, witnesses, for showing up here for our study.

Ambassador Rae, you mentioned Gaza as well as a series of other issues with respect to the forced migration refugee crisis. When we think about these types of issues, as you well know, disputed borders, international laws, compacts between countries and negotiations all compel a refugee and migration crisis, in large part. At the United Nations, you voted initially, on behalf of this government, against Israel, and in a hot mic moment, you got caught saying, "We'll see how that flies."

Let me ask you this: How has it been flying?

**Hon. Bob Rae:** Mr. Majumdar, as you well know, vote decisions are taken by the Government of Canada. These are not votes taken against any country and certainly not against Israel. The policies that Canada has adopted are based on reason, on international law and on the need for a two-state solution, for a political path away from where we are today and for an urgent response to the depth of the crisis in Gaza, which I think most people would recognize. Certainly, all the people working in the field, from UNICEF to the World Food Programme, and all the agencies working in the region are telling us this is one of the worst and most serious humanitarian situations that has been faced.

I appreciate your question.

**Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar:** Notwithstanding the UNRWA issues and that this institution of the United Nations has been supporting terrorism directly, you said you take direction from the Government of Canada, and I appreciate that. Usually you get a position from the Prime Minister, you get a position from the foreign minister and you get another position from the special adviser on Jewish community relations and anti-Semitism.

Which position is it that you reflect when you're voting against Israel at the United Nations?

**Hon. Bob Rae:** You should know me better, Mr. Majumdar; I'm not going to take any political bait that's thrown my way. My leadership and I take advice and I take my instructions from the Government of Canada. I can assure you that when those instructions are given to me, they're given to me on the basis of a joint position by the Government of Canada, and those are the positions I represent at the United Nations.

• (1710)

**Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar:** I do have respect—

**Ms. Anita Vandenberg:** Mr. Chair, I have a point of order. The purpose of the study today is migration. I'm noticing that my honourable colleague opposite is not asking questions about migration.

**The Chair:** Excuse me, Mr. Majumdar, but I believe strongly that this is off topic. Would you please come back to our topic regarding migration? Thank you.

**Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar:** International agreements and discussions of the United Nations and UN agencies that deal with matters of migration are at the source of the topic here. The ambassador raised the issue of Gaza, so I'm picking up that thread a bit.

Let me go a bit further, Ambassador Rae. You mentioned your chairmanship of ECOSOC and looking at how other jurisdictions manage migration pressures and refugee pressures. How do you think Canada is doing in dealing with its own migration pressures?

**Hon. Bob Rae:** I think Canada at the present time has, and has had historically, a remarkable record of welcoming people. We've become the country we are because of immigration and because of migration. I think everyone knows that. I think our reputation in that regard is very strong.

I've had recent meetings with Amy Pope from the International Organization for Migration and with the head of the UNHCR, Filippo Grandi, just a couple of weeks ago, in fact. In both of those meetings, they stressed how refreshing it was to continue to engage with us on issues where there is a strong sense of mutual understanding and a strong sense of mutual respect. They were very aware of the way in which we've charted a course that they felt very strongly was supportive of the work they were trying to do. It represents an immense importance to the world.

For example—

**Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar:** Respectfully, while I appreciate your view on that, I think a lot of people in Canada might disagree with how effective we've been at dealing with some of these pressures at home.

Let me ask you a final question, sir.

Our government has yet to pronounce on what's been happening in Venezuela, which has been the weaponization of refugees. Given your long history in dealing with these issues, what's your assessment of our government's view on how it's been handling the Maduro regime?

**The Chair:** Excuse me. The time is over. There will probably be another possibility to answer this question. You are very restricted. I have to be fair to the others in order to finish the panel.

**Hon. Bob Rae:** Will you let me answer the question or not? I'm happy to answer it.

**The Chair:** I'll give you a few seconds. Answer quickly, please.

**Hon. Bob Rae:** I think the conduct of Venezuela has been disgraceful. They represent a threat to the stability of the region. For them to have created a refugee crisis when none of it needed to happen has been a total disgrace and has been severely disruptive to the economies of many of their neighbours.

I've actually had the opportunity to visit Darién Gap, which is the part of the border between Panama and Colombia where thousands of people—when I was there—were crossing the border every day. Many of them are from Venezuela and many of them have been displaced from Colombia and other places as a result of the Venezuela crisis.

I think the Maduro regime didn't win a fair election and should not be allowed to get away with it. We continue to look at ways in which we can bring pressure to bear on that regime to conduct elections that are fair and allow the voices of the people of Venezuela to be heard. They haven't been allowed to be heard for a long time and that's disgraceful.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Rae. I'm sorry, but we have to go to another member.

I invite Mr. Ehsassi to have the floor for five minutes, please.

**Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Mr. Ambassador, for joining us today. I'll try to keep my questions restricted to the topic at hand. It's good to have the opportunity to have timely discussions with you.

Mr. Ambassador, you rightly pointed out that the scale of migration patterns we're seeing around the world is unprecedented. There's no doubt that much more needs to be done.

You were very gracious. You did outline a number of different things that Canada is doing, given that we recognize the extent of the challenge.

In your opinion, is this something that needs to be dealt with at the national level by numerous different countries or is there some room to deal with it at the supranational level, where countries come together not only to pledge money to a wide variety of excellent organizations, most of them multilateral, but to devise policy changes at the supranational level as well?

• (1715)

**Hon. Bob Rae:** Mr. Ehsassi, we'll have to recognize a couple of things.

The first thing is that every government in the world is facing financial pressures. Those are affecting levels of support, whether for people displaced internally or for people forcibly migrating. We'll have to figure out a better way to provide services and get help to the people who really need it. We'll have to become more efficient. We'll have to become more effective. We'll have to become more innovative. We'll have to draw, as I think your previous witness suggested, a lot more on the talents and skills of refugees and displaced people themselves. We need to find a way to get assistance directly into the hands of people as opposed to going through a lot of the very expensive delivery systems we have at the moment.

These are things we're actively discussing at the UN, principally because we now have a financial crisis. The UN itself is in a state of great challenge. Unlike other forms of governance, the UN can't borrow money. If people don't pay their assessments to the UN, the UN has no choice but to stop doing things.

In this situation, we have to do things much more efficiently and effectively. I think over the next period of time, particularly given some of the positions being taken by governments about international organizations, international organizations will have to do everything they can to innovate and change. I think we're in the middle of an extraordinary period of that kind of a transformation. It's also important for Canada to stay the course, stay committed and not only be a reliable, steady funder, but also be a funder that, when working with other countries, insists on more efficiencies and innovation to make sure we're getting good value for the money we're investing.

That's very much on my mind at this time in the UN, because having had a bit of experience in working with the organization, I think we have some ideas as to how we might work more effective-

ly. We'll try to start discussing those things in the new year as we approach the new financial year coming up.

**Mr. Ali Ehsassi:** I also want to touch on something else you mentioned in your opening remarks. First of all, congratulations on now chairing ECOSOC.

You touched on the fact that you were considering opportunities in the context of ECOSOC to have discussions with UN member states. Could you provide us with more of a glimpse as to what might be on the agenda of ECOSOC insofar as migration is concerned?

**Hon. Bob Rae:** We already had a special meeting on Haiti last week, which I called. It was a chance for member states to look in particular at the issue of internal displacement. There are 700,000 people now in the city of Port-au-Prince who have been internally displaced. They've been kicked out of their homes by gangs. I visited those people and the places where they're staying—the refugee camps, schools and other places where they're temporarily located. These are very tough conditions.

We need to focus on education and on making sure that people are being given every opportunity to make sure their kids are in school. We're looking at the health care needs and obviously the food needs that people have. People are going hungry. It's a very serious situation. That's just one example.

In the new year, we'll be looking at working with governments that are receiving a lot of refugees. We'll be looking at countries that are doing well at it, and we'll be trying to champion examples where there's been a lot of innovation and work done with people on the ground and where refugees are taking part in their own governance. They're pursuing—

• (1720)

**The Chair:** I'm sorry, Mr. Rae. Is it possible to wrap up, please, in, say, 25 seconds?

**Hon. Bob Rae:** I will quite gladly come to a close.

Those are some examples, Ali, of the things we're doing. We're really trying to make a difference in talking about both internally displaced people and people who are forced to leave their countries.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Rae.

Thank you, Mr. Ehsassi.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, go ahead. You have five minutes.

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

Mr. Rae, it's a pleasure to have you with us today.

In your opening remarks, you mentioned human beings. As you said, we're not just talking about numbers today. We are talking about real people. I also want to emphasize that.

If you don't mind, I'd like to look a little more closely at the migration route from South America, often starting in Brazil, then going through Colombia, Venezuela and the Central American Isthmus, to the United States, and sometimes as far as Canada.

Based on your experience and the information available to you, do the transitional countries through which migrants pass facilitate their migration to their new host country, or at least the one they hope to get to?

**Hon. Bob Rae:** No. I can describe what I saw in Panama, for example. People arrive from Colombia by canoe on the rivers. They disembark to get some food and see a doctor or a nurse. Then they're put on a bus and told to leave. These are transitional places. These countries are not prepared to accept these people, except for Colombia, which is a good example—

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Excuse me, Mr. Rae. Perhaps you misunderstood my question.

What you're actually saying is the same as me, in other words that countries are in fact facilitating the passage of migrants through their territory. Is that correct?

**Hon. Bob Rae:** Yes.

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Okay.

Please continue with what you were saying about Colombia, since it was interesting.

**Hon. Bob Rae:** In Colombia, it's different. Colombia has created a situation where it has accepted millions of people from Venezuela. It has given them the opportunity to work and be educated there. It has given them security cards, so they can stay and live there. Colombia has taken an important position in that sense.

We need to continue working with countries that accept refugees, that help them and give them the opportunity to stay, instead of telling them to go away. Given the policies that exist in other countries, it will become increasingly difficult for people to stay where they land. It's a tough situation. That's why we need to find solutions.

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** As Canadian Ambassador to the United Nations, you're in a good position to talk to us about this. You say that some countries are much easier to work with on migrant rights at the moment. I'm referring primarily to countries along the route from Brazil to Canada. Some of the countries that you said are easier to work with include Colombia and possibly Costa Rica.

That must mean that some countries are less easy to work with. Could you tell us about those countries today as well?

**Hon. Bob Rae:** We could talk about a lot of countries along that route. The Mexicans are doing a tremendous job in providing people with employment opportunities. The same goes for Guatemala, for example. I just had a great conversation with the Guatemalan ambassador two days ago and we specifically talked about this issue. We could also talk about Costa Rica, which has a different policy.

That said, another aspect of the problem needs to be considered. Some people want to keep travelling further. When that happens, it's hard to stop them.

The next year is going to be hard, and I think we're going to see different policies put in place. It's important to recognize these people as human beings and respect their rights and dignity. They are not people who should be put in jail. They should be accepted.

• (1725)

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Yes, absolutely.

**Hon. Bob Rae:** That's why I think it's important for us to reaffirm our obligation.

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** We're on the same page on that point. These are people, human beings.

Now, I'm sure you are aware that criminal organizations are abusing these people all the way to the Canadian border. The Globe and Mail reported that some people are demanding up to \$45,000 to help migrants cross the Canadian border illegally.

Where do things stand regarding the criminal organizations abusing these people?

**Hon. Bob Rae:** Organized crime exists everywhere in the world. Its activities have very costly repercussions, it tramples on human rights and it abuses victims of crime.

In general, organized crime, like corruption, is a huge problem around the world. That's why we have to keep dealing with it in a realistic way. These people didn't randomly decide one day to pick up and go somewhere else. That's not what's happening. These are people affected by drugs, corruption and companies that lure them with promises, saying they can help them and that nothing will go wrong. An international effort is needed to deal with the level of criminality that we're seeing. It's a huge problem.

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Thank you, Mr. Rae.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Rae and Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

I invite Mr. Johns to speak.

[English]

You have five minutes.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

First, I want to thank you, Ambassador Rae, for joining us today and for your service to Canada.

You're aware of the forced displacement and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians from northern Gaza over past months during Israel's genocide. You'll also be aware that Israeli extremist leader Daniella Weiss, who was sanctioned by Canada, visited northern Gaza to scout settlement locations, and members of Netanyahu's own government—

**The Chair:** Excuse me, Mr. Johns. I believe we are off topic. Please come back to our topic.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** I'll be coming right back to it. This is part of it.

We know that members of Netanyahu's own government are advocating for resettling Gaza for Jewish Israelis. I note that Canada has not yet sanctioned members of Netanyahu's government, despite the NDP asking for months for Canada to do so.

I want to ask you to explain Canada's position, on the record, to specific questions. What is Canada doing to prevent the resettlement of Gaza by Israel?

**The Chair:** Excuse me, Mr. Johns, but you're off topic.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** This is absolutely on topic.

**The Chair:** If you want to challenge my decision, you can.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** Mr. Chair, I'll ask the ambassador if he can talk about what Canada is doing to prevent the resettlement of Gaza.

**The Chair:** This is not regarding immigration. We are not discussing that at all.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** It is. It's about internally displaced people. That's what the study is on.

**The Chair:** I'm sorry, but I can't allow it.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** I'll pivot to Syria, then. That's an issue that I'm sure, Mr. Chair, you'll be fine with me talking about, because Syria has one of the world's worst displacement crises.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** I just want to point out to everyone that a lot of people are talking with their microphones turned off.

We have to be mindful of our interpreters' health and safety. They do an outstanding job. They're probably among the best in the world. Mr. Rae would be able to attest to that. Canada's parliamentary interpreters are the best in the world when it comes to enabling us to work in both official languages. I'd like their work to be respected. This requires that my colleagues, if they wish to talk, must wait until their microphone is turned on.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*English*]

Mr. Johns, please stay on topic. We cannot go off topic.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** This is about internally displaced people, Mr. Chair.

I'll say this about my colleagues. I may not have agreed with their questioning, but I didn't interrupt. I let them speak, because it was their time and I respect that, as long as they're on topic.

I'm going to ask a question. Hopefully this one will be fine.

Syria, obviously, has had one of the world's worst displacement crises, affecting an estimated 60% of its pre-war population. With the events of the past weekend—the welcomed fall of Assad's murderous regime—we're seeing that many Syrians want to return home to help rebuild their country.

Ambassador, what can you tell us about Canada's support for those displaced Syrians and what the next months may hold?

● (1730)

**Hon. Bob Rae:** Mr. Johns, first of all, on Gaza, insofar as you're asking me a question about forcible displacement, I don't believe anybody should be forcibly displaced from Gaza. I think Gaza's territorial integrity should be respected, and that's the position of the Government of Canada, which has been very clearly expressed by our Prime Minister and by our minister. As to the rest of your comments at the beginning, that's your opinion. I'm giving you the position of the Government of Canada.

On Syria, to be serious for a moment, I think there's a very difficult decision people have to make, because we don't quite know what the situation is—how stable it is and how much security there's going to be. Everyone, whether living in Canada or living in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan or Syria, who is internally displaced is wondering if it's safe for them to go back home to Aleppo or another city that's been liberated. I think these are questions the Syrians themselves will have to decide.

We're doing everything we can to reinforce the security of Syria. We're doing everything we can to support the humanitarian agencies. I was talking yesterday to Mr. Fletcher, the new executive director of OCHA, which is the UN humanitarian agency. We had a very good conversation about this very question. I know our own government is looking all the time at assessing this as best we can, because we don't have our embassy in Damascus. We quite rightly pulled out of our embassy because of Assad, but we have terrific teams that are working in all of the neighbouring countries. They're working hard to give us the best possible information about the safety and security of the people in Syria.

I know that every family will be thinking about what they will do and how they are going to do it. I know that the Government of Canada will be reflecting on the ways we can provide the most accurate information and the ways we can provide all the assistance, humanitarian and otherwise, that, frankly, we've been providing.

We have done a fantastic job on behalf of civilians in Syria over the last 10 years. I've been very proud to see the efforts we've made. They've been extraordinary. I think they're widely appreciated by civil society groups in Syria, which are celebrating the end of the Assad government, a brutal dictatorship, but we have to figure out what is coming and what the political path is going forward. That will be a decision the Syrian people themselves will have to make.

**The Chair:** You have one minute.

**Mr. Gord Johns:** I appreciate that extra bit of time.

Mr. Rae or Mr. Kimmell, is there anything you want to add based on the questions you've heard today around the table?

**Hon. Bob Rae:** Go ahead, Matt.

**Mr. Matthieu Kimmell (Director, Humanitarian Policy Division, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development):** Thank you very much, Ambassador, and thank you very much, honourable member.

I appreciate the conversation we've had so far and the conversation that I heard from the previous panel.

There's no question that the crisis of displacement is extremely complicated. It's extremely complex. I think the ambassador did a very good job of speaking to the different ways in which Canada responds.

From my vantage point of the humanitarian response, I can tell you that the billion dollars the ambassador spoke of earlier is reaching people in 67 countries. Most of those people have been affected by conflict or by natural disasters. We're working with a really strong group of partners—the UN, the Red Cross, civil society, Canadian civil society actors and national civil society actors—to

provide the type of assistance that people on the move need in order to feel protected, to feel safe and to feel that they are not at risk of being sent home into difficult and dangerous conditions. We're working to support them in the spaces and places where they are, and also to support the communities that host them.

I think that's a very important point. Governments—like Colombia, but everywhere—that are hosting refugees are doing so often at times when they have great crises of their own. I think 87% of refugees are in lower- and middle-income countries. They are already facing significant challenges, and they need to be supported in the work they're doing to welcome refugees and other displaced persons.

I'll leave it there.

• (1735)

**The Chair:** Thank you very much.

Thank you, Mr. Rae and Mr. Kimmell. Your presence was extremely important for this subcommittee. Your good answers, your comments and your declarations really enlightened this subcommittee. I thank you from the bottom of my heart on behalf of all members and the staff here. We wish you the best.

If you feel that other information may be of interest to the committee, please feel to write to the clerk or to me.

I wish you well.

**Mr. Shuvaloy Majumdar:** Mr. Chair, before they hang up, can we still chat with them, just a friendly chat?

**The Chair:** We will suspend for a couple of minutes.

*[Proceedings continue in camera]*









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