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Chair: Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal



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• (1705)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Surrey—Newton, Lib.)): We have quorum.

I call this meeting to order. We are meeting in public.

Before I introduce the honourable minister and the special guests with us today, I'll mention that we have two honourable members who are new on this committee: Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus and Mr. Chandra Arya. Welcome to the committee.

Besides this, we have technical support.

Jean-François, welcome and thank you for being our technical support here.

Welcome to meeting number 90 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

Today, for a briefing on migrant trafficking and smuggling, we have with us the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, the Honourable Marc Miller, along with the officials. From the Canada Border Services Agency, we have Mr. Daniel Anson. From the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, we have Mr. Scott Harris, associate deputy minister; and Madame Michèle Kingsley, assistant deputy minister, economic, family and social immigration. From the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, we have Chief Superintendent Richard Burchill, who is the acting assistant commissioner, federal policing criminal operations.

Welcome, Minister and officials.

Minister Miller will present for the first full hour, with the officials going for the second hour.

With that, Minister Miller, go ahead with your opening statement. Thank you.

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

I will begin by acknowledging our presence on the traditional and unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

[Translation]

We are here to discuss a matter we take very seriously—the protection of vulnerable migrants from human trafficking, smuggling and organized crime.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): On a point of order, Mr. Chair, I'm on the French channel, but I'm getting the English translation.

[English]

The Chair: I'll suspend the meeting for a few seconds to make sure that the interpretation works.

We will start from the beginning.

Go ahead, please.

Hon. Marc Miller: Thank you, Chair.

I'm acknowledging our presence on the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

[Translation]

We are here to discuss a matter we take very seriously—the protection of vulnerable migrants against human trafficking, smuggling and organized crime.

[English]

IRCC plays an important role, both in combatting human trafficking and migrant smuggling, as well as protecting the rights and dignity of migrants who are either entering or are already in Canada. Our top priority is to maintain the integrity of our programs and promote safe and regular migration while also ensuring that we are humane and compassionate in our approach towards migrants.

[Translation]

Victims may enter Canada through a number of routes, whether as international students, workers, caregivers and visitors, or with a non-valid immigration status.

It should of course be noted that, with nearly 110 million people displaced globally, the world is facing a global migration crisis, and Canada is not alone in feeling its impacts.

[English]

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): My device is also not working. There's no interpretation.

The Chair: Hold on, please.

We have to suspend for a few more seconds to make sure that everything works.

• (1705) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1705)

The Chair: The new interpreter has to get familiar with the system. Otherwise, the system is working fine. If there are any issues, please do raise your hand, and we'll accommodate.

With this, Minister, please continue.

• (1710)

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marc Miller: I assume that only my last two paragraphs were not interpreted.

[*English*]

Ms. Jenny Kwan: There's still no sound.

The Chair: Do you want the minister to start from the beginning?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: No. I'm sorry, even after the minister started the second round, there's still no sound coming through. Maybe my device is broken. I don't know.

I'll try this one.

The Chair: I'm going to suspend the meeting to make sure that Ms. Kwan's device is working.

• (1710)

_____ (Pause) _____

• (1710)

The Chair: With this, Minister, I am so sorry, but we will have to give you an opportunity to repeat. I would really appreciate it if you could start from the beginning. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Hon. Marc Miller: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

I want to begin by acknowledging our presence on the traditional and unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinabe people.

[*Translation*]

I'm here today to discuss a matter we take very seriously—the protection of vulnerable migrants against human trafficking, smuggling and organized crime.

[*English*]

IRCC plays a key role both in combatting human trafficking and migrant smuggling, as well as protecting the rights and dignity of migrants who are either entering or are already in Canada. Our top priority is to maintain the integrity of our programs and promote safe and regular migration, while also ensuring that we are humane and compassionate in our approach towards migrants.

[*Translation*]

Victims may enter Canada through a number of routes, whether as international students, workers, caregivers and visitors, or with a non-valid immigration status.

It should be noted that, with nearly 110 million people displaced globally, the world is facing a global migration crisis, and Canada is of course not alone in feeling its impacts. In particular, we are seeing unprecedented levels of migration and forced displacement from the Americas.

[*English*]

Our priority has always been and will always remain preserving the integrity of our immigration system, while also ensuring that we are fair and compassionate towards those fleeing persecution.

[*Translation*]

We continue to work with our global partners to promote safe and regular pathways of migration, which includes our commitment to welcome 15,000 people from the Americas.

[*English*]

Through the national strategy to combat human trafficking, my department also works with national and international partners to detect traffickers and offer programs and support for victims, importantly. Our continued efforts are vital to ensure that Canada eliminates criminal organizations that are taking advantage of vulnerable migrants.

Statistics Canada reports that 96% of human trafficking victims are women and girls. Of those, nearly 70% are under the age of 25, with sexual exploitation cited as a common motivator for traffickers. We can't look the other way on such atrocious acts.

[*Translation*]

Based on police reporting, we know that approximately 30% of human trafficking incidents are related to immigration. One incident is too many. Our immigration officers work in partnership with the Canada Border Services Agency and the RCMP to combat this.

[*English*]

As well, since police investigations and prosecutions can take a considerable amount of time, our immigration officers can provide immediate support if they believe an individual is a victim of smuggling or human trafficking.

[*Translation*]

In addition—

[*English*]

The Chair: Again there is a problem. We are hearing the French interpreters on the English channel.

Is it fixed?

Minister, please go ahead.

• (1715)

[Translation]

Hon. Marc Miller: In addition, we use our whole-of-government strategy to disrupt migrant smuggling attempts destined for Canada by land, air or sea, and to assist migrants stranded as a result of these activities.

We will continue to work with domestic law enforcement agencies and international partners to combat international criminal organizations that seek to profit from the desperation and vulnerability of others.

[English]

We also have measures in place to help connect victims to the services they need. IRCC may issue temporary resident permits to out-of-status human trafficking victims so that they can access physical and mental health services and prescription drug coverage through the interim federal health program. These temporary resident permits also allow them to apply for work and study permits at the same time, and we waive some processing fees.

Workers on employer-specific work permits who experience abuse from their employer are also eligible to apply for an open work permit for vulnerable workers. This is to help them leave abusive situations without jeopardizing their ability to continue working in Canada, if applicable.

Between 2015 and 2023, IRCC issued 906 temporary resident permits to foreign national victims of human trafficking and their dependents. In addition, between July 2019 and December 2023, we issued 4,857 open work permits for vulnerable workers.

[Translation]

Another measure we've collectively taken is the Canadian Human Trafficking Hotline. This toll-free hotline is available 24/7 and in 200 languages—including 27 indigenous languages—to receive reports of suspected cases of human trafficking and connect victims to community supports.

[English]

We will continue to use all of the tools at our disposal to curb these heinous crimes and ensure the safety of vulnerable migrants.

Thank you, and I will now take your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Honourable members, if you think the minister is going too long on the answer, instead of interrupting him, could you raise your hand? Then I will make sure that your time is respected, and I will acknowledge you or the minister. Instead of cross-talk, that will work well.

With that, we will go to the first round. For the first round, we will go to honourable member Paul-Hus for six minutes.

Please, go ahead.

[Translation]

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus (Charlesbourg—Haute-Saint-Charles, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good morning, Minister, gentlemen and madam.

My question is about the visas that the Conservative government imposed on Mexico in 2009. The government required Mexicans to obtain a visa to come to Canada from then on, so as to avoid the criminal problems associated with certain individuals. Of course, it wasn't everybody, but some people were taking advantage of the system to come to Canada. That is why the government imposed visas.

In 2016, the Liberal government made the decision to lift that visa requirement. At the time, I was my party's critic on this file and I gave several interviews to state our party's position and to say that lifting this requirement made no sense, that it would not work and that we would have problems. Clearly, that is what we are experiencing today.

Minister, can you confirm for me that it was a bad decision at the time?

Hon. Marc Miller: I don't know if it was a bad decision at the time. Requiring a full visa from one of our most important trading partners was clearly a problem in terms of trade flows, which have increased significantly since that decision was made, both directly and indirectly, as has tourism.

However, when we lifted that requirement, we did so with certain conditions. One of the things Mexico had to do was make sure that the people who would come here would not necessarily be people who would claim asylum. It can certainly happen in the flow, but asylum claims are now at a level that is higher than we had expected, and we feel that this is unacceptable.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: I understand what you're saying about the pressure you had in terms of trade negotiations. The fact remains that the decision made in 2009 took all of that into account. There was a crime problem among asylum seekers who stayed in Canada and infiltrated street gangs or cartels such as Sinaloa and MS-13.

Today, we have a situation where people are arriving in Canada with a fake Mexican passport and are not necessarily Mexicans, but rather from other countries.

Have you started reimposing stricter measures, such as the return of visas?

Hon. Marc Miller: First of all, I would hesitate to associate all flows of people coming here with crime. I'm sure you are not—

• (1720)

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: That's what I said when I asked my first question, Minister. I said that it was not everyone, of course.

Hon. Marc Miller: A diplomatic process is under way. I met with the Mexican ambassador two days ago. We spoke very frankly about the challenges we face and about our good relationship.

Not every decision will necessarily be announced publicly in advance, which could cause problems for people who want to contact the authorities in case something happens.

I don't want to—

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Marc Miller: —hasten an announcement because it may well be that agents who don't have Canada's best interests at heart will make decisions accordingly, and I—

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: I understand, Minister.

Earlier, in your presentation, you mentioned the positive things your government has done over the past eight years. The fact remains that I have never seen so many immigrants or people waiting for permits come to members' offices as I am seeing right now. The immigration system is really broken.

Concerning the crime currently taking place in Montreal, I would like to hear your opinion on the letter that the Premier of Quebec sent to the Prime Minister. In his letter, Mr. Legault raises specific points. In particular, he talks about the impact of asylum seekers on Quebec, but also about the criminal element. In 2019, I actually did an interview on street gangs, a terrible scourge.

In the short term, what concrete steps are you taking to find a solution to these problems?

Hon. Marc Miller: The representatives of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police or the Canada Border Services Agency could answer your question on how to stop the crime.

Clearly, we share many of the concerns raised in Mr. Legault's letter. However, as the government responsible for diplomatic relations with Mexico, we have to respect certain steps and give this process a chance. If we do things hastily, Mexico could act against the interests of Canada and Quebec. All of that has to be taken into account when we make such a decision.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: In 2009, the Conservative government made a calculated decision. I understand that you are talking about economic interests, but the assessments were done and this decision was made carefully. Mr. Harper, at the time, did not do that for fun.

Today, after the fact, can you admit that you ultimately made a mistake in 2016?

Hon. Marc Miller: That is not the case. It is clear that we are dealing with very significant migration flows, whether from Mexico or from other countries. I've said in other committees that the number of people interested in coming to Canada is at an all-time high.

Please don't think that the flow of asylum seekers is solely dependent on Mexico, but it is clear that a large proportion of that flow is currently coming from that country. All in all, this is a relatively recent development. On balance, I think the decision made in 2016 was the right one.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: In closing, do you consider the points raised in the letter from the Premier of Quebec to be reasonable?

Hon. Marc Miller: Those points are reasonable in several respects, and we are working to address the issues raised.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Are you finding solutions to these problems?

Hon. Marc Miller: Absolutely.

Mr. Pierre Paul-Hus: Thank you.

[*English*]

The Chair: Minister, you have 15 seconds to respond.

Hon. Marc Miller: I said that I agree with him.

I'm done.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we will move to Mr. Ali for six minutes.

Please, go ahead.

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

Thank you, Minister and officials, for appearing before the committee.

In November 2023, I was with the Minister of Diversity, Inclusion and Persons with Disabilities, Kamal Khara, as she announced funding of \$7 million for Peel Region towards opening a new reception centre for asylum seekers. This funding is absolutely crucial for Peel Region and the City of Brampton and to ensure that asylum seekers have a safe and warm place to sleep at night. It has saved and will save lives.

The mayor of Brampton, Patrick Brown, even went as far as to say, "credit where credit is due. [The Government of Canada] stepped up."

Minister, could you please tell the committee how the federal government has been providing funding to Peel Region and other provinces and municipalities across the country to support the housing needs of asylum seekers?

● (1725)

Hon. Marc Miller: Thanks, MP Ali.

The announcement we made, which you were at—and thank you, obviously, for your advocacy and for that of your colleagues on this, because it was directly responsible for swift action by the federal government—was very important, because this is a humanitarian operation. Whether or not you agree that people who arrive here irregularly should be here, clearly they need shelter over their heads for the winter and also as they get the due process to which they are entitled under the laws of this country and under our international obligations.

The relationships we have are different from province to province. We have a different relationship with Quebec, and frankly, despite the political narrative at times, it is more organized than the one we have with the Government of Ontario. We deal sort of city by city, municipality by municipality at times in our organization, and there is probably a good argument to be made about being better organized, particularly as we see large flows coming into the city of Toronto, a lot of them coming from other places in the country, including Quebec.

These announcements will save lives. The interim housing assistance program—and its name betrays it—is something that is interim, but it is intended to keep shelter over people's heads. Federally speaking, we are also operating in numbers of hotels across the country to make sure that people are safe and that they can have work permits and get jobs.

However, it isn't ideal and I don't think anyone could credibly tell you that this is a long-term solution to the challenges we face. I think it is a challenge that Canadians want to see us rise to, particularly as it involves not only the federal government but also municipal governments, including the mayoralities of Brampton and Mississauga, and importantly, given the volume, Toronto.

We're not out of the woods by any stretch of the imagination, but the sums that we've deployed federally and those that we will leverage provincially and municipally are key to making sure that these people, who are among the most vulnerable people in Canada, are properly taken care of and housed as they get the due process to which they are entitled.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: Thank you, Minister.

As you know, the minister's mandate letter asks the minister to, "Build on existing pilot programs to further explore ways of regularizing status for undocumented workers who are contributing to Canadian communities."

Can you expand on the pilot programs and other initiatives that IRCC has developed to regularize individuals without status?

Hon. Marc Miller: It is important to underscore how vulnerable people without status are. We're looking at a number of options, including one broader one, which I'm scheduled to take to cabinet this spring sitting, that deals with the regularization of people who are here without status. It will not be as comprehensive and as far-reaching as many people would like, but I think it will be something that will be fair for people who have been treated very unfairly who are here, who are working and who perhaps have kids who are Canadians, and who should be Canadian by any other name but are not. Whether it succeeds or fails, I've been given the mandate by the Prime Minister, and I've undertaken to take it before cabinet for discussion and eventually debate by the House if we choose to move towards a legislative path.

I would add that we are also looking in other areas such as the construction industry and looking at pathways towards permanent residency and extending some of the pilots we have for out-of-status construction workers who are here. They are not a pressure on housing, and they could really contribute to an industry that has historically been under-represented by immigrants.

Those are a couple of the lines we are working on, but we are always open to more innovative ones if Canadians want them.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: As you know, whenever you and your officials come, I like to ask for an update on the visa processing centre in Islamabad. I asked the deputy minister last time she was here, and the committee was told that the visas for officials were in process. Could you please update the committee on where we're at?

Hon. Marc Miller: I'm pleased to confirm that, Shafqat. We do have about seven positions that should be in place by summer of this year. This is a process of accreditation with the Government of Pakistan that is under way. It is good news, and it will allow us to have a more streamlined processing capacity on the ground in Islamabad.

• (1730)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ali.

We'll go to my dear friend, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

I know you get excited when French-speaking ministers come in. I'm going to give the floor to you. Go ahead.

[*Translation*]

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

Minister, it's always a pleasure to have you appear before this committee.

I'm going to pick up on something you said. I think it is important for Canadians to know what the situation is in terms of immigration.

According to what you said in the House, the leader of the Bloc Québécois compared migrants to heat pumps and treated migrants like cattle by asking for a fair distribution among the provinces. That is what Mr. Legault and Ms. Fréchette are asking for. You also said that Bloc Québécois members were just armchair quarterbacks.

Do you think the tone you used toward the opposition is appropriate when discussing a subject as important as immigration?

Hon. Marc Miller: Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

I generally think that immigration is a topic worthy of a thoughtful and rational discussion. I have a great deal of respect for you. That said, I think that your leader crossed a line when he spoke out against our announcement of \$100 million for Quebec. That awkward comparison with heat pumps was bizarre. In my opinion, comparing the announcement to social housing was disrespectful. I thought that it was a bit all over the place.

Clearly, the atmosphere in the House is heating up. You also rise to the challenge of these discussions. It's a bit like a hockey game sometimes. I don't mean to be disrespectful, but you must remember that the Government of Canada works with the Government of Quebec. Between these two levels of government, the Bloc Québécois is nowhere to be seen. Obviously, as members of this political party, you're entitled to responses from us. We're accountable. However, clearly, you aren't the Government of Quebec. You don't speak on behalf of Quebeckers either.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Minister Miller.

Are you suggesting that Liberal members of Parliament were armchair quarterbacks during the 10 years of the Harper government when they were part of the opposition? Is that how you would describe them?

Hon. Marc Miller: I think that the government—

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: It's a yes or no question.

Hon. Marc Miller: The Liberal government can still form the government, but—

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: When you were in the opposition, were you armchair quarterbacks?

Hon. Marc Miller: —the Bloc Québécois doesn't have that opportunity, unless you have members across Canada. The last time we checked, you didn't.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Minister Miller, in your opinion, what purpose does the opposition serve?

Some regimes around the world don't have any opposition parties. Would you prefer to live in a regime without opposition parties?

Hon. Marc Miller: No.

I love your comments, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe. I learn things from them.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Do you think that the opposition serves a purpose?

Hon. Marc Miller: I didn't hear the question.

[*English*]

The Chair: Honourable member Brunelle-Duceppe, if you can go through the chair, I would really appreciate it because—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Chair—

[*English*]

The Chair: —it's very hard on the interpreters. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

Sorry, everyone.

Mr. Chair, I want to know whether the minister thinks that the opposition parties play a role in Canada, or whether they're just armchair quarterbacks.

Hon. Marc Miller: The opposition parties play a key role, but they must take it on. That said, I think that we're getting away from the topic of the committee meeting.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: At some point, you have to set the record straight—

[*English*]

The Chair: Wait one second, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, because the interpretation is not working.

Could we just test the English channel again?

Go ahead, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I hope that you'll add two minutes to my time, Mr. Chair.

Minister Miller, I was saying that you need to set the record straight. Treating an opposition member like an armchair quarterback shows spite and a lack of respect for the democratic system of the great and beautiful country that you call Canada.

Would you say that you have a good relationship with Minister Fréchette? You keep saying that you have a good relationship and good communication with the Quebec government. However, yesterday, Minister Fréchette was so exasperated that she spoke about considering a referendum to repatriate all powers to Quebec. Is this your idea of a good relationship with the Quebec government?

Hon. Marc Miller: She can say what she wants, of course. Personally, I think that we have a good relationship. We talk to each other and text. We don't necessarily agree on everything, but I don't think Quebeckers expect us to. I wasn't elected to the National Assembly and she wasn't elected to the House of Commons. We have different responsibilities. In my opinion, we take them on.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Minister Miller.

In January 2024, the media reported that the Mexican ministry of foreign affairs claimed to have reached an agreement with Canada to implement joint measures to deal with the current flow of migrants. To date, Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, or IRCC, has denied that any such measures have been implemented.

Should we believe Mexico's foreign affairs minister or IRCC? I'm not sure whom to listen to.

● (1735)

Hon. Marc Miller: It may be a matter of interpretation.

The Prime Minister told the Mexican president in person that he wanted to see a change. As far as I know, the president said that he would implement measures. Personally, I think that we should give him the benefit of the doubt, considering the significance of this diplomatic relationship. So far, we haven't seen any impact other than a seasonal variation. However, some evidence is needed in the short term.

[English]

The Chair: Honourable member, go ahead, please. Your time is almost up, but I'll give you one question.

[Translation]

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

Minister Miller, will you grant the Quebec government's request to reinstate visa requirements for Mexicans?

Hon. Marc Miller: That remains to be seen.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Minister Miller.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you. Now we will go to Ms. Kwan.

Madam Kwan, you have six minutes. Go ahead, please.

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

Thank you to the minister and officials for coming before the committee.

The government, of course, with the safe third country agreement, secretly signed an agreement with the United States and then later on announced it. Part of that announcement came with a commitment to accept 15,000 migrants from Central America and South America, who would come in through regular channels in 2023 and 2024.

Can the minister advise us how many have actually come through to date as part of that commitment?

Hon. Marc Miller: Thank you, MP Kwan.

There are a couple of clarifications on that. A portion of that undertaking involved the excess number year over year that we have with respect to temporary foreign workers. That has been achieved. It's in the ballpark of 4,000 people.

We also have a number.... I would say that the envelope is now fully subscribed, and the next step in the process is to land those people. That's something we're confident will happen over the coming months.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm sorry, but when the minister says that it is fully subscribed, I'm talking specifically about the commitment to take 15,000 people. Is that commitment to take 15,000 fully subscribed and 4,000 have arrived?

Hon. Marc Miller: That's correct. At least that many have.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Could the minister also provide a breakdown of the demographics of those migrants in terms of where they are from?

Hon. Marc Miller: From which countries...?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Yes.

Hon. Marc Miller: To the best of my knowledge—and we can confirm with officials—they are, I would say, predominantly from Colombia. There is, after that, a second significant portion from Haiti and a less significant one from Venezuela.

Jenny, we can get you the percentages if you want.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Yes, maybe along with the actual numbers. That would be useful as well. Thank you for that, Minister.

Then those numbers are fully subscribed. When do you expect the arrivals of these individuals?

Hon. Marc Miller: It can vary, but we expect significant steady flows over the coming months.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay. That's about as vague as you can get.

All right. I will move on in terms of the issue around human trafficking and the concern with respect to that. From the department's information, both through IRCC and, presumably, working in collaboration with your colleagues from Public Safety, how many people from Mexico have you identified to have been victims of human trafficking?

Hon. Marc Miller: Perhaps Mr. Anson....

Mr. Daniel Anson (Director General, Intelligence and Investigations, Canada Border Services Agency): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The way our reporting works, we don't necessarily have, or I don't have, the statistics on the number of victims. I can tell you right now that we have, specific to human trafficking, 27 active criminal investigations. Obviously, it continues to compile over the number of years, because with the complexity of human trafficking cases, it tends to take multiple years, so we don't have easily defined statistics.

We also refer, as a matter of standard procedure, all trafficking investigations to the RCMP, with some exceptional circumstances. Specific to human smuggling we also have 171 active cases, but our systems don't necessarily identify the statistics on the number of victims. I couldn't be able to answer that today.

You have my apologies, Mr. Chair.

● (1740)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you for that.

It's challenging, then, if you say "active cases", but then you can't really say how many victims are engaged in that process. I think it would be useful to know, of those cases, how many victims there are. Perhaps that's a process that could be looked into by the department, to supply that information to the committee subsequently.

With respect to migrants who are subject to exploitation, some would say that is a form of human trafficking, because they come here with a promise of employment and pay and so on, yet they don't receive that treatment. They are mistreated, and they are subject to abuse. From the immigration department's information, how many victims—of the vulnerable workers, the migrant workers—who have been found are from Mexico?

Hon. Marc Miller: I wouldn't have the geographical breakdown of that, MP Kwan. We could probably provide it at a subsequent date.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I think it would be useful to have that. Seeing as the specific study of the motion is to talk about Mexico, I think it would be useful to have that information. We know that migrant workers, temporary foreign workers with a closed work permit, are subject to abuse, and this is an ongoing issue that I know the minister is aware of and the committee is as well.

From that perspective, there have been ongoing reports. In a recent report in Ontario, I think some 67 migrant workers were subject to abuse in that regard, but it's not the only example. There are many. I won't bother citing all of them. Many people have said over and over again that the reality is that, when people are subject to a closed work permit environment, they are actually at a severe disadvantage and are subject to exploitation.

I know that there's a system whereby the people themselves can report and go through the ministry to apply for an open work permit as vulnerable workers. Will the minister consider providing open work permits to people from the beginning—so that they're not having to face exploitation and then seek recourse—to be more proactive and pre-emptive in the face of this ongoing situation?

The Chair: Thank you.

Minister, we are already 15 seconds over. Can you be brief, please?

Hon. Marc Miller: It's something that we're definitely looking into. Obviously, we want to deal with the exploitation as it occurs, regardless of the conditions that people are in. It is clear that, when you have a closed work permit, it does make you more vulnerable. It makes you more hesitant to report abuse and take action, and it gives you less of an ability to move from one place to another.

Looking at the next policy options we have in our tool kit is something that both I and Minister Boissonnault are looking at intently. I think it's something that we will be working to fix in the coming months.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

We will go to the honourable member Mr. Kmiec for five minutes.

Please, go ahead.

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

Minister, when you assumed your role as Minister of Immigration in August 2023, were you briefed on the surging number of asylum claims being made at airports in Canada?

Hon. Marc Miller: Yes.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: When did you receive those briefings? Was it in August?

Hon. Marc Miller: I couldn't tell you precisely what date it was. I became minister in July. I would venture that the briefings occurred within the next week, and then we followed up with more detailed subjects.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: You've seen that there were 250 asylum claims made by Mexican nationals in 2016. The visa requirement was lifted, and the numbers I have show that, just for Mexican nationals at the air border, the number was 14,490 as of September. Why haven't you acted on that?

Hon. Marc Miller: Again, as I was telling your colleagues, MP Kmiec, this takes both an internal process and one with the Government of Mexico, which is one of our most important trading partners. This isn't a decision that is taken lightly. The commercial flows that go between our countries are much more significant than they were in 2015. I think that's important. Tourism is a multi-billion dollar industry. There are valid public policy reasons for it, as I think you'll admit.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Minister, I understand. These are all fair points.

For 2022 and 2023, CBC calculated the numbers. There was a 46% increase in asylum claims being made at an airport, which meant someone applied for an eTA and landed here. According to the IRB, 11% followed through and were accepted, which meant that 89% of the claims made so far were rejected as false asylum claims.

I'm asking you what you have done since then. You see these numbers. You've been briefed on them. Why haven't you acted?

• (1745)

Hon. Marc Miller: Again, this is not an issue that is limited to Mexico. That 11% you are citing is erroneous; the number is closer to 30%. It is very important to correct that record. We can give you all the information in order to correct that. It is much lower than it is—

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Will you provide it to this committee?

Hon. Marc Miller: Absolutely.

It is much lower than the acceptance rates we see at the Immigration and Refugee Board with respect to other asylum seekers. Undoubtedly, the volumes are disconcerting when it comes to people coming in from Mexico.

I would add one qualification, which is that claims made at the airport are probably understating the number of people coming to the airport, because there are people who come here and then spend 14 days or more and then make the claim afterwards. They are not necessarily, to the best of my understanding, tabulating that. However, I don't want to downplay the severity of the issue.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: But this is a separate number from the 14,000.

I want to remind you that in 2016, the government put out a news release. It's right on the Prime Minister's website. It refers to the visa requirement being lifted. It goes on to say in one of the paragraphs, "Closer collaboration between Canada and Mexico on mobility issues will also help encourage travel between the two countries while preventing any increase in asylum claims or other irregular migration." That obviously hasn't happened if the numbers have gone from 250 to well over 14,000 claims being made in just one year, and at the IRB there are tens of thousands of claims from just one country of origin. It begs the question of why you haven't acted since August to reimpose the visa requirement on Mexican nationals.

Also, what prevention measures were used between 2016 and 2024, and why haven't they worked?

Hon. Marc Miller: First and foremost, I think you'll agree with me that the fact that you haven't seen visa requirements imposed doesn't mean there hasn't been action taken or that we are not seized with the severity of the issue. My colleagues here live that on a daily basis. That's a different consideration.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: The numbers aren't coming down.

Hon. Marc Miller: Clearly there is a challenge. When it comes to asylum seekers generally, we're facing historic flows. We're not immune. Every country in the world that people want to go to is seeing massive numbers of people coming to it in an irregular fashion.

You asked what action was taken. In December I cancelled a public policy with respect to certain visas we had put in place after COVID to deal with a lot of the backlog. That policy was cancelled, and there are now stricter terms in place for visas generally. That should impact the aggregate number of asylum claims, although I do recognize that it is not directly related to our relationship with Mexico, which, again, is very important and every decision has to be made in the correct fashion.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Minister, the cancellation of policies that have to do with the COVID pandemic doesn't go back to 2016. There was no pandemic in 2016.

I asked you a two-part question: Why haven't you acted since August, and what were these measures that are still on the Prime Minister's website? It says, "Canada to lift visa requirements for Mexico", and it goes on to say, "while preventing any increase in asylum claims". The government said that. It was 250. It's in the tens of thousands, and you admitted that now 70% of them are being rejected.

Why haven't you reimposed a visa requirement on Mexican nationals?

The Chair: Minister, we are already 30 seconds over. Please give a brief answer.

Hon. Marc Miller: Again, it doesn't mean that we are not taking the steps necessary to change that reality, but I'm not going to tell you in advance when it will occur. I think as a responsible member of Parliament you can appreciate precisely why.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kmiec.

Thank you, honourable Minister.

We will go to Mr. El-Khoury for five minutes.

Please, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

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

Welcome to our committee, Minister Miller. I would also like to welcome the public servants.

Minister Miller, I was delighted to hear you announce last week that the federal government will provide \$100 million to Quebec under the interim housing assistance program. This funding will help the province prepare affordable housing and take in asylum seekers. Minister Fréchette called the funding a step in the right direction.

Could you explain to this committee in detail the funding that our government provided to Quebec?

• (1750)

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

As I've said publicly, the Quebec government does more than its fair share to take in asylum seekers. In addition, compared to other provinces, Quebec has a more structured and organized approach to taking in asylum seekers. Clearly, the flow of migrants varies from province to province. Ontario and Quebec face the highest demand. For both provinces, the proportions are higher than their percentage of Canada's population.

Last week, we announced \$100 million to help Quebec house asylum seekers. This comes on top of another \$50 million announced from a different budget and \$60 million to \$70 million from that program. The interim housing assistance program dates back to 2017. In response to the flow of migrants, the federal government decided that it needed to get more involved in housing asylum seekers. Is this the perfect solution? No. Perhaps other solutions would be more suitable, including tightening up the border a bit.

Regardless, Quebec has received a great deal of money so that it can keep taking in asylum seekers. In addition, over 10,000 asylum seekers have also agreed to move to other provinces, obviously with the consent of those provinces.

The issue is significant. Work remains to be done. We aren't out of the woods yet. However, despite the heavy political rhetoric, from a humanitarian perspective, these people need proper housing.

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: In recent weeks, we've heard many Quebecers say that we should be doing more for asylum seekers. They have asked the federal government to increase funding for the interim housing assistance program. As you said, this has just been done.

Our government has done more than provide funding through this program. Can you talk about other ways that we've helped Quebec while abiding by the terms of the Canada–Quebec Accord relating to Immigration and Temporary Admission of Aliens?

Hon. Marc Miller: This funding is vital for the entire country, especially for Toronto and the surrounding cities. They're facing a huge influx of migrants from Quebec. These migrants arrive in Montreal but don't stay and move on to Toronto. The area is a magnet for these people, who come to see their loved ones and who are in survival mode.

The Canada–Quebec accord is a key tool in our relationship with Quebec. When it was signed, the goal was to maintain Quebec's demographic weight within Canada. The accord gives Quebec a great deal of power, choice and responsibility. I'm sure many provinces are jealous. In 2015, when our party came to power, the amounts allocated were roughly \$365 million and a few crumbs. Today, the figures have more than doubled. It's significant, because immigration is on the rise.

The funding under Quebec's control hasn't increased. The province has this money regardless of its immigration thresholds.

[English]

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

We will go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for two and a half minutes, please.

[Translation]

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

Minister Miller, Romain Schué conducted an excellent investigation that aired on Radio-Canada this fall. It showed that Mexican cartels control various forms of trafficking at borders, including human trafficking. Do you agree that Mexican cartels control borders in part because Mexican visitors don't need visas to enter Canada?

• (1755)

Hon. Marc Miller: I can't enter the mind of a criminal. Clearly, criminals take advantage of the vulnerability and volume of people who come to Canada. It's a known fact that people are abused and exploited. However, regardless of a person's reason for coming to Canada, a passport or visa requirement won't stop an individual determined to do this sort of thing, obviously.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Burchill, in your opinion, is the lack of a visa requirement for Mexican visitors to Canada related to the control exerted by the increasingly present Mexican cartels at the Canadian and American borders?

Hon. Marc Miller: I would say that, in general, people—

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: My question is for Mr. Burchill.

[English]

Chief Superintendent Richard Burchill (Acting Assistant Commissioner, Federal Policing Criminal Operations, Royal Canadian Mounted Police): Thank you for the question.

I wouldn't necessarily draw the correlation that any immigration patterns are responsible for organized crime per se in this particular regard. What I would say is that, as mentioned, these folks who are

coming over are vulnerable. Organized criminals of all stripes, Mexican cartel included, will exploit that.

The numbers are not something that we track, whether it's the number of migrants or the number of investigations that we have, but what we can say is that organized crime writ large of all different stripes is involved in human trafficking and human smuggling, and we can say that in Canada, from our investigations across the country, there is Mexican organized crime involved in this.

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

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Is my time up already?

[English]

The Chair: Yes. That was two and half minutes. Thank you.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I thought that I had some time left, Mr. Chair.

Minister Miller, Ms. Fréchette has just stated publicly: “To date, I haven't personally received any overtures from Mr. Miller.” What's your response?

[English]

The Chair: Minister, I can give you a brief 20 seconds. Otherwise, the time is up.

[Translation]

Hon. Marc Miller: I'll need to speak to her directly. I can do that. I won't make any public comments before talking to her.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: She just did that.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're going to move on to Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan, go ahead, please. You have two and half minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Minister, earlier in your response, you talked about the regularization program that is about to go before cabinet. In it, you spoke a little bit about one of the categories being construction workers. Could you advise whether or not in this regularization scheme is it limited only to certain categories of workers, such as construction workers, or would it be open to all workers?

Hon. Marc Miller: No, and it's not based on working necessarily. We should really—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm sorry—my apologies.

When I said “workers”, I meant undocumented migrants.

Hon. Marc Miller: What I hope to bring to cabinet is something that is broad and comprehensive. What I was talking about separately was that, when we look at new public policies on the temporary foreign workers that we bring in to fill labour shortages in Canada, there are options for us to carve into those people who are here anyway who have fallen out of status and to regularize them. In my mind, that's something that would be separate and discrete from a broader regularization process.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: All right. Just so I'm clear, it would be that the regularization program would actually be open to all workers and not just to specific professions or occupations.

Hon. Marc Miller: My thinking behind that, without betraying any cabinet confidence, is that it would not be based on that theme. If there are certain categories of people who have fallen out of status, it would sort of be an ancillary approach to it. However, I'm looking at something a little broader and more comprehensive.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Just very quickly, as I know I'm running out of time, with respect to individuals who are vulnerable workers and for the people coming through the border applying for asylum, etc., what is the average processing time for those who are from Mexico? How long are they waiting for their applications to be processed to determine whether or not they have a valid asylum claim?

• (1800)

Hon. Marc Miller: There are two things. I think we do our best to get work permits into people's hands, but the processing can take two years.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

What's the turnaround time for the process of providing open work permits to claimants?

Hon. Marc Miller: What's the fact pattern? This is for someone who has been exploited because of a closed work permit, and they're to be issued an open work permit?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: No, I'm talking about people who have come into Canada and made asylum claims and are then waiting for their claims to be processed by the IRB. In the meantime, they're provided with a work permit. What's the turnaround time for them to get the work permit?

The Chair: Thank you.

The time is up, Minister.

Hon. Marc Miller: We strive for 30 to 60 days. It can be longer at times.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll move to Mr. Kmiec now.

Mr. Kmiec, we'll go to you for four minutes. Please, go ahead.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Thank you, Chair.

Minister, I'm reflecting on the answers you gave me 10 minutes ago.

In 2016 there were just over 200 asylum claims made by Mexican nationals who arrived in Canada with a visa. Last year that number had surged into the tens of thousands. The numbers at the

air borders especially are increasing exponentially. There's been about a 2000% increase.

When I asked you a direct question on that specifically, you couldn't provide me with a single thing the government has done since 2016.

Last month or the month before, you said the immigration system was out of control. Is this an example of its being out of control?

Hon. Marc Miller: I said quite clearly that the flows that are coming into the country, regardless of the country of origin and particularly in terms of asylum seekers and regular migration, are very high. I think it's important to take a look at our public policies to see where we can tighten those up. That includes for Mexico.

Your specific reference was with respect—as you well know—to international students, who are in a completely different category. Under that category, however, because of lax policies—particularly of provinces and designated learning institutes—you will find inland asylum claims from a number of those institutions.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Minister, a few months ago the previous immigration minister—who's now the housing minister and is still kind of moonlighting as a senior immigration minister sometimes—on the housing issue specifically said the situation was a mess. He was specifically talking about immigration to Canada. He said on CTV *Power Play* that it was a mess. He mentioned the same in the *National Post*, and it was printed in *The Canadian Press*.

Did you agree with him on that? Is the asylum situation in Canada—with the surging number of claims that are specific to one country—a mess?

Hon. Marc Miller: I would caution people against judging those who seek to come here. Clearly the flows—

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Are you saying that Minister Fraser judged them?

The Chair: Honourable member, let the minister finish, and I'll make sure that I respect your time.

Honourable Minister, go ahead.

Hon. Marc Miller: What I'm saying is that those flows are significant. We as a government have the job of looking at the public measures we have to tighten the screws. Those come in many forms, including the announcement I made with respect to international students—which will have a significant impact on volumes—or any decision-making process that is currently under way with respect to Mexico. That is something that we are looking at. Clearly, however, we're not immune to the flows that we're seeing across the world.

You know this well. This is an area of interest to you. It's not something that Canada can escape completely. I think that, first and foremost, we have to have a humane and humanitarian approach to it, but as the government we do also have a job to do.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Minister, you're deflecting.

There are two of you now who are still commenting on immigration issues. You're the minister and then the senior minister for immigration is commenting, calling it a mess and tying it to housing. He's blaming international students in some situations.

There are provinces looking to the federal government and directing the fault at your ministry and, I would say, at your government. Since 2016 you have not taken any actions even though there's still a press release on the Prime Minister's website saying that you will prevent an increase in asylum claims or other irregular migration specifically in relation to the lifting of the visa on Mexican nationals. You haven't done anything.

Is Minister Fraser correct? Is it a mess? Are you responsible for that mess by not having done anything in the last six or so months to reimpose the visa requirement?

Hon. Marc Miller: You've gone from a very general observation to a particular question.

What I would say is that I could point you to two measures that I have taken in the last few months alone that have moved to restore the integrity of the system.

The Chair: Honourable member, I'll give you 30 seconds to respect your time.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: It's not working, Minister. The numbers are still increasing. What else are you going to do?

On what date are you going to reimpose the visa if things don't change?

• (1805)

Hon. Marc Miller: Again, you are a responsible member of Parliament. I will not be telling that to you or anyone else publicly.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Mr. Chair, the minister is obstructing. I'm asking a direct question on surging number, and he won't answer the question before a parliamentary committee.

The Chair: Minister, you have five seconds.

Hon. Marc Miller: MP Tom Kmiec asked me when and if I would reimpose a Mexican visa. I told him that I wasn't going to tell him publicly, and I won't. That's not obstructing. That's answering the question.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: The public has a right to know by which date he would reimpose—

The Chair: Thank you. I'm sorry, Mr. Kmiec. We're going to Mrs. Zahid for five minutes.

Please, go ahead.

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

Thank you, Minister, for appearing before the committee.

Minister, this last Friday, on February 2, I had the honour of standing with our Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, as well as Mayor Olivia Chow, when the federal government announced \$143 million through the interim housing assistance program to help Toronto provide housing for asylum seekers.

This is great news for the City of Toronto, and Mayor Olivia Chow said herself at the announcement that the federal government has “fully delivered” for Toronto.

Could you please explain to the committee how this \$143 million that was announced for Toronto will deal with the surge in demand for shelter spaces and prevent asylum claimants from experiencing homelessness?

Hon. Marc Miller: The interim housing program is a very important tool in making sure, as the name portrays, that people have a roof over their heads.

Toronto, like most but not all cities, does have a balanced budget, and Mayor Chow has been quite responsible in saying that she has an obligation, just like her provincial counterparts, to help asylum seekers in a very humane and humanitarian way in the jurisdiction and has taken that on her shoulders and the shoulders of the City of Toronto.

The number we announced—that you attended—builds on the \$100 million we announced earlier last year for the same thing. The City of Toronto has received hundreds of millions of dollars over the last little while to face an increasing flow of migrants who are coming to them—whether it's through Pearson, or through Trudeau airport, for that matter, or across the land borders—and gravitating to where their community members are or where they see the prospect of being able to get a job once a visa is issued. That's the federal government's responsibility. We also give interim health benefits while there is due process undertaken with respect to the asylum claims.

These housing initiatives are very important as well in terms of our ability to coordinate so that we can actually issue visas, track people and be able to reduce processing times. If people are all over the place, it's very hard to find them if they change addresses. There is an incidental effect over and above the obviously very humanitarian need to make sure people have a shelter.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Minister, in previous studies in our committee at CIMM, we heard a lot of testimony about the open work permit for vulnerable workers. Could you please go into more detail about the purpose of that program and what the features are of the open work permit for vulnerable workers?

Hon. Marc Miller: For vulnerable workers—and this can be done on an ad hoc basis—there is a program to make sure they can get an open work permit so that they can leave the place where they are being exploited. It is a program that requires a number of parameters to be met, but it is one that is extremely important in making sure that we are stemming and preventing abuse and at least allowing people to be able to, at times, testify against their employers. In the context of being in a closed work permit, they would be disincentivized from that and in fact, at times, when they are truly being exploited, threatened with being sent home or fired. It is therefore extremely important.

It's a program that makes sense, and it's a program that I believe needs to continue. It has had, I will admit, some challenges at times, but it's one that we will continue to refine to make sure that people in a vulnerable situation aren't exploited.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

On behalf of the committee members, honourable Minister, thank you for being with us and for being accessible to our committee. I'm looking forward to seeing you here soon.

We will suspend the meeting for a few minutes before we get the officials going.

• (1810) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1815)

The Chair: Welcome back. We will begin another round of questions and answers with the officials. The hard stop is at 7:05.

An hon. member: I thought the stop was at 6:30—

The Chair: No, it's not, because we have a full two hours. I'm going to 7:05. That is the decision that was made to make sure that, for the minister and officials, we had two full hours.

We will continue with the meeting. I will go to Mr. Redekopp for six minutes.

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

Thank you to our witnesses for being here.

The International Coalition Against Illicit Economies released a report a few months ago regarding the extent to which organized crimes, terrorist regimes and foreign national agents have infiltrated our country from places like Mexico, Iran and China.

One of the authors was Calvin Christie, a former senior officer of the RCMP. His conclusion is that since 2015, when the Liberal government took charge, these criminal networks have taken over the country. Officers are powerless to stop them due to the weak-kneed, catch-and-release policies of the NDP-Liberal criminal justice system.

Mr. Burchill, would you agree that Mexican cartels, Chinese triads and Iranian-backed organized crime networks are flourishing in Canada right now?

• (1820)

C/Supt Richard Burchill: Thank you very much for the question.

In response to the question, what I would say is, as the national police force, the federal policing border integrity program relies heavily on domestic and international partnerships to detect, deter and investigate organized crime.

I certainly am not in a position to speak to the author's conclusions that he has documented. What I can say is that we use all of our resources within the RCMP and our integrated efforts with partners to try to attack organized crime, and we investigate it where it shows up.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Would you not say that organized crime is increasing in Canada compared to, say, 2015?

C/Supt Richard Burchill: I certainly can't speak to whether it has increased or decreased since 2015. All I can say is that we currently have a position where we are fighting it with everything that we can, and I can say that, for our international and domestic partnerships and the kind of multi-layered approach that we have to the border, the federal policing border integrity program is very good at identifying organized crime and investigating it where it's detected.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: The commissioner of the RCMP, Michael Duheme, appeared at this committee when we were talking about Roxham Road. He painted a picture of a police department that was stretched quite thin.

I asked him at that time, "If Roxham Road weren't a priority, would that be better for the overall [crime rate] in Quebec and in Canada?" His response was, "You'd redistribute the resources within the other units that we have in the province: serious and organized crime, financial crime and national security."

National security and organized crime mean fighting international cartels, drug traffickers and human trafficking. From your perspective, do you agree with your commissioner that the Prime Minister has hamstrung your ability to fight organized crime and these cartels of human traffickers in Quebec?

C/Supt Richard Burchill: Thank you for the question.

I would agree with the commissioner about the reallocation of resources—for certain.

Roxham Road was one particular point where we amalgamated a lot of resources. Some of those resources were already dedicated to the federal policing border program. Some of those resources were pulled from other federal policing units to assist because of the volume and the work that was required to do that.

When the volume of migrants started to slow down at Roxham Road and we redistributed our resources, some of those were just redistributed back to their border integrity positions, but some of them went back to their substantive units, which would have been national security, financial crime and serious and organized crime. I would agree with him that that is what happened when Roxham Road closed.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: According to Stats Canada, in 2015 there were just over 300 cases of human trafficking investigated under the authorities of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act and the Criminal Code, but it increased to 550 in 2019, and it has continued to be high. It's almost a doubling of cases. As the Liberal government has lessened prison time, international organization criminals are becoming more emboldened.

Can you not see that as the Liberals have implemented these soft-on-crime house arrests—these kinds of things—there is a correlation between those policies and the rise of human trafficking in Canada? Or are you just saying that's not the case at all?

C/Supt Richard Burchill: I guess I wouldn't be able to comment on the number of cases because I wouldn't be tracking, or we as an organization wouldn't be necessarily tracking, the stats on the cases. We'd be dealing with the investigations that we're presented with.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: You're telling me that, within the RCMP, there is no tracking of statistics, that you don't know if crime is going up or down or sideways. Are you telling me that you're flying blind on these things?

C/Supt Richard Burchill: No, I wouldn't say that. To clarify, I guess what I would say is that federal policing and border integrity because of our mandate at the border—

Mr. Brad Redekopp: We've gone down this road before. You just told me that you didn't know if things have increased, but now you've just said that there are stats. Which is it? Do you know, or do you not know? I'm confused.

C/Supt Richard Burchill: Yes, if I could have an opportunity to answer the question....

With regard to the federal policing mandate, when we get referrals, as my colleague from the CBSA said, on human trafficking cases in the federal program, we do those investigations. However, because human trafficking cases are primarily “police of jurisdiction” files, investigations get done in other parts of Canada where we're the police of jurisdiction as well, but where there are other police of jurisdiction.

The carriage of our human trafficking program falls under the contract and indigenous policing programs. I can certainly commit to come back to the committee with the statistics that we have on human trafficking cases from both programs. I guess what I am trying to say today is not that we don't have stats, but just that I wouldn't be tracking stats for the purpose of responding to this committee.

• (1825)

The Chair: Thank you very much, honourable member.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: If he could provide those stats to the committee, that would be good.

The Chair: Sure. Thank you.

Now we'll go to the parliamentary secretary, Mr. Chiang.

Go ahead, please, for six minutes.

Mr. Paul Chiang (Markham—Unionville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

One of IRCC's responsibilities when it comes to human smuggling is to detect and correct misinformation regarding Canada's asylum and immigration programs. What kind of misinformation are we seeing, and can you expand on the work that is being done to correct it?

The Chair: Who is the question for?

Mr. Paul Chiang: It's for IRCC.

The Chair: Mr. Harris, go ahead, please.

Mr. Scott Harris (Associate Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): IRCC is working closely with our partners in the international protection space to ensure that we are working through their networks not only to contact individuals who are at risk and potentially requiring protection and/or asylum but also to ensure that they have access to information about that. We push that information out on our website. We also have campaigns in regions where we see that people may be vulnerable to those activities.

A good example, actually, is a measure that our mission in Mexico has recently put in place called *checa tu visa*, which allows people with documents that may have been provided by individuals who are malicious actors offering bad information or false permits to check with our officials to make sure that the documents or the promises made to them are legitimate and accurate.

Mr. Paul Chiang: Thank you for that answer.

When the minister was here, we heard him talk about the global migration crisis that we are seeing across the world. As you said, Canada is not the only country facing this crisis, but we must continue supporting asylum seekers.

Can you expand on the programs that IRCC has put in place to help asylum seekers?

Mr. Scott Harris: There are a couple of the things that I would just highlight there quickly.

First, we are making significant engagements internationally to address the conditions that lead people to seek asylum. In December, Minister Miller announced a \$75-million investment in programming elsewhere in the world, such as Latin America, to deal with some of the conditions and factors that are in place in those countries and to support people.

Obviously, here in Canada when people do claim asylum, we have measures in place, and we work closely with our provinces and territories to ensure, as has already been mentioned at the committee, that housing supports are in place and that other supports are in place. We've expedited the processing of work permits—with respect to another question—to ensure that people can be settled as quickly as possible and as safely as possible while their claims are being considered.

Mr. Paul Chiang: Does IRCC have a role in going to other countries to speak about the migration or asylum-seekers issue, or do we just do it locally in Canada?

Mr. Scott Harris: We have a mission footprint around the world, so our staff are present in many missions across the world and actively engage with local officials, with local NGOs and partners, and directly with the community to ensure that good information is made available to them.

Mr. Paul Chiang: We also heard the minister discuss the open work permit for vulnerable workers. It helps workers on employer-specific work permits who are experiencing abuse from their employers.

Could you expand on the program, how it has helped temporary foreign workers and in what ways the program can be improved further?

Mr. Scott Harris: Thank you. The open work permit for vulnerable workers or exploited workers is open to people who currently have a valid work permit and who have experienced abuse. They are able to come forward either directly or through migrant support agencies, which are also supported through our colleagues at ESDC to ensure that people have access to supports outside of their employer. They come forward and their claims are assessed. Once their claim is approved, they will be offered an open work permit. That can be extended for up to three years.

• (1830)

Mr. Paul Chiang: In his opening remarks, the minister also stated that police investigations and prosecution can take time. Immigration officers are able to provide immediate support if they believe someone is a victim of smuggling or human trafficking. Can you expand on these supports that you provide the victims?

Mr. Scott Harris: Yes. Similar to what I've just responded, the IRCC role within both the strategy on human trafficking and the strategy on human smuggling is around providing immigration protection, so ensuring that people have an opportunity to regularize their status so they're not out of status in Canada and are able to work and to access supports in place. Some programs also offer access to the interim federal health programs so that people have access to health care resources, and in the case of the open work permit, we also waive fees associated with applying.

Mr. Paul Chiang: Could the officials from IRCC, CBSA and RCMP please explain the difference between human trafficking and human smuggling and the role that your department plays in combatting human trafficking and human smuggling?

The Chair: Director General Anson, we'll start with you.

Mr. Daniel Anson: Sure. Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

To begin with, the simplest way to distinguish between the two is that, in one case, someone is willing, and in the other case, someone is unwilling. In the case of the less severe, which is human smuggling, that pertains to the organized movement or irregular illicit migration of individuals across international boundaries or borders. In many cases, if somebody is being smuggled, they are doing so willingly and have secured the support of somebody to allow for their facilitation across the border.

In the instance of human trafficking, there is an exploitative nature to it and in those circumstances, people are being coerced and quite often are being robbed of their dignity, their freedom and in many cases, their humanity. Trafficking is a much more severe and serious crime. That is something we work significantly with partners on for both leads and recommendations and for information, guidance and patterns. We work with IRCC but also in concert with the RCMP to ensure that we have a joint investigative mandate at the border. That's human trafficking in general.

Specific to what we are doing in the employment of our mandate, just being cognizant of the time, I'll maybe focus on a couple of layers. There is what we do extraterritorially in identifying threats abroad and what we do in terms of applying border security measures to ensure that threats are identified, leads are provided and referrals are made where there are instances of potential or suspected human trafficking or smuggling. Then domestically we have a variety of different inland enforcement officers and criminal investigations partners who do their work by surfacing evidence of human smuggling, where we go after the traffickers—the people who are smuggling, the organized criminality—and then also the traffickers' where—

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We'll go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for six minutes.

Please, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Anson, listening to you makes me realize that human misery is exploited when it comes to human trafficking. I used to work in the film industry. I worked on the documentary series *Human Trafficking*. I don't know whether you saw it, but it was quite moving.

You spoke about investigations. Can you say how many investigations into smugglers are under way on this side of the border? If not, perhaps Mr. Burchill could?

Mr. Daniel Anson: Thank you for the question.

[English]

For human trafficking, we have 27 current active cases. What's important to mention as well is that cases can last for multiple years due to witness availability and the ability to compel testimony. Again, for the complexity and sophistication that augment that figure, I would refer to the RCMP in supporting what is likely the larger number of investigations.

Specifically on human smuggling, we currently have 171 active cases. Again, that's going back approximately three years. In those circumstances, what we also try to do is ensure that not only are we going after the organizers and the organized criminality, or the more facilitative role behind that—the people who are organizing large numbers of people who are being exploited, typically after the border—but we're also working in concert with our partners. In some circumstances, we might be the lead, or there might be a joint investigative lead. We might also defer to the RCMP, based on what we would perceive to be their ability to focus with greater sophistication on more complex cases.

• (1835)

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Is it easier for American police authorities, with the laws at their disposal, to investigate human trafficking and lay charges against smugglers?

We consulted many people. A number of experts said that American authorities could lay charges more easily than the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, for example, or the Canada Border Services Agency.

Mr. Daniel Anson: Thank you for the question.

[English]

I'm not qualified to make a comparison between the two criminal justice systems, but I would say that our own legislation and Criminal Code do afford the right types of tools, which we employ to the greatest extent possible. Again, I wouldn't be qualified to make a direct comparison. I apologize.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Burchill, I'm sure that you're familiar with the investigation that I referred to. It aired on Radio-Canada on November 16, 2023. The investigation showed that border officers often witness human trafficking, but that Canadian legislation doesn't let them search a vehicle.

We heard from RCMP officer François Paquet. He found himself in front of a rental car from the Toronto area filled with people who spoke neither English nor French. They had arrived in Canada through the Vancouver airport a few hours earlier, and they ended up at the border between Quebec and the United States. The driver and front passenger were Canadians, with no apparent connection to the other passengers. All signs pointed to smugglers heading for the United States. However, the police had to let the vehicle go without searching it, since no illegal act had been committed at that time.

Sadly, these migrants were arrested the next day while trying to cross the border on foot. The smugglers had vanished with—I'm guessing—a fairly substantial amount of money.

Are many officers witnessing human trafficking these days, and yet, despite their good intentions, as Mr. Paquet said in this investigation, they can't do anything about it because of Canadian legislation?

[English]

C/Supt Richard Burchill: Thank you very much for the question.

What I would say is that it's very difficult for me to comment on exactly what the circumstances were of the investigation at that time in that particular instance. However, I know our officers....

When we get integrated intelligence from our U.S. partners, particularly at the border in these sorts of cases, we obviously don't catch all the trafficking and smuggling that comes across, but from time to time, we get intelligence that we can act on. These investigations are complex because of the nature of them, and sometimes there isn't evidence available that affords us.... At the end of the day, within Canada, we have to work within the statutory and legislative frameworks that we have. Sometimes there's not the ability for them to pursue an investigation, but we have instances when we do and we are able to arrest that driver.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Let's face it. We're talking about an officer who wanted to do his job and who knew what was happening. Unfortunately, he couldn't intervene when two individuals were financially exploiting poor people who just arrived in the country. To take the time to speak to a journalist, a rare occurrence, this officer had to be fed up and sick of the whole thing.

There are rumours that C Division, which patrols the border between Quebec and the United States, has recently seen staff cuts, or will see them in the near future. Can you confirm or deny this information?

[English]

The Chair: Give a brief answer, please.

C/Supt Richard Burchill: Yes, I'll give a brief answer. Thank you for the question.

I have no information that suggests to me that we're cutting any positions at the border.

On the border program, as I said before, because we had a more critical mass of officers, whom we had reallocated from other units, at Roxham Road, that does not mean that we're taking any resources away from the federal policing border program. I'm not aware of any cuts to our program or that we would be removing resources, looking at border security.

• (1840)

The Chair: Thank you.

We will go to Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan, you have six minutes. Go ahead, please.

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

Thank you again to the officials for being here today.

I think this is where we're talking about data. It would be really good to have data that compares apples to apples in this sense, and over a longer period. We've just heard allegations, for example, about certain periods of time and that certain things have escalated and so on.

For my first question, what I would be interested in getting for the committee is a breakdown of the staffing level, both for the RCMP and for CBSA officers, over different periods. That would be for the period of the previous administration, that 10-year period under the Harper administration. Separated out from that period, how many staff—RCMP officers—were there, as well as CBSA officers, during that period, breaking it down year by year, along with the budget?

I think budgetary constraints have implications as well. I fully understand that sometimes within the departments certain urgent things come up and you redeploy, but if you've lost budgets as well as staffing, you're just sort of plugging a hole over here with something else.

Getting that data would be really useful, that data for that period, as well as the period from 2015 to now. Is it possible that this is something you can table with the committee, breaking it down year by year, both on the staffing level and on the budget level, for both the RCMP and the CBSA?

The Chair: I will go first to you, Assistant Commissioner, and then to the director general.

C/Supt Richard Burchill: Thank you for that, Mr. Chair.

I will endeavour to go back to the RCMP and ask about that data. I know we have data. I know there's data that we can track. I'll see what we can do about how we break that budget down in federal policing as it pertains to positions looking at border integrity.

The Chair: Thank you.

C/Supt Richard Burchill: I'll commit to go back with that.

The Chair: Mr. Director General, go ahead, please.

Mr. Daniel Anson: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

I'm confident that we'll either have the information, or we'll do our best to surface as much information fidelity as possible on the number of employees and certainly the budget year over year for that 10-year period.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: It's for that 10-year period as well as the current period from 2015 on.

Thank you so much. I really appreciate that. I appreciate that it's a lot of work, but I think it's important to get the data on the table.

Related to the data, we talked about cases and how many active cases you have and so on. It would be really important as well, over those two segments of time, to see how many cases were under investigation over those different periods, and then when the investigation actually started. As you've indicated, some of those investigations started three or four years ago or whatever, and then it's not

an accurate presentation, because if you started three or four years ago versus what it is today, there's a differential in terms of those numbers.

Would we be able to get that breakdown as well?

C/Supt Richard Burchill: Again, I'll certainly commit to go back and endeavour to get that breakdown for you.

Are you talking specifically human trafficking cases, or human trafficking and human smuggling?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: It's both.

C/Supt Richard Burchill: It's both.

The Chair: Mr. Anson, go ahead, please.

Mr. Daniel Anson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Of course, the CBSA will do its best to get any and all information related to the number of investigations, prosecutions, etc., over that time period. What I would just suggest to the committee, for awareness, is that it's very complex and particularly manually intensive. Due to changing circumstances with a case or criminal investigation or an immigration or IRPA-related investigation, not all of the cases will go through to the end. The statistics aren't going to be as finite as I'm sure the committee would want, Mr. Chair. In many cases, perhaps the person that is the victim or the smuggler might leave or there might be extraterritorial charges that were not brought before the Crown because there was no probability of successful prosecution.

What I would say is that, given the multi-year and the manual and complex nature of aggregating data of that nature, there will be a certain amount of, I would say, reduced fidelity to the information. Again, we'll do our best, but again, similar to victims as opposed to offenders in crimes, a lot of these are information and data that we may not be able to actually pull from the systems that are used to accurately track all these important features and events.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I appreciate that answer, because you're exactly correct to say it is very complex. There are a number of different factors that play into it. Simplistic conclusions are exactly that: just simplistic conclusions that may well be meaningless.

I'm trying to get at the truth, as opposed to disinformation. It could be very good and useful, as you gather this data, to also footnote the complexity of the issues and why there might be variances. We at this committee are trying—at least, I am trying—to get at the truth and to figure out what the best option is and what government needs to do to best support you in your efforts to address these issues—not just use sound bites and disinformation and think those somehow address the issues. That is a disservice both to you as people who serve our country, and to the public, who rely on elected officials to do a better job in getting at the issues at hand.

I really appreciate your answer. Thank you so much for that.

● (1845)

The Chair: You have 12 seconds left.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Is there anything else you might like to add or bring to our attention, in terms of where we should focus our minds?

The Chair: Thank you. The time is up.

Mr. Burchill, do you want to say something? No...? Okay. Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Kmiec.

Mr. Kmiec, go ahead for five minutes, please.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'll go back to the "Canada to lift visa requirements for Mexico" press release of June 28, 2016. It's on the Prime Minister's website. It's still there. It says, "while preventing any increase in asylum claims or other irregular migration. Officials plan to meet regularly to promote these mutual interests."

My question is for IRCC. The other two gentlemen can relax. I'll have questions for them in a moment.

The minister was incapable of answering a question about what programs, public policies or internal departmental things were going on to try to keep the numbers down. It's a 2,000% increase.

What are the programs? What was done in 2016 when the visa requirement was lifted? The minister couldn't answer.

Mr. Scott Harris: Thank you for the question.

For a number of years now, we have had high-level dialogue occurring between the two countries. That specifically speaks to both the number and the trends we are seeing in this space in terms of asylum claims, human trafficking and others. It's to look at measures that can be taken. Some of those measures have included having discussions about strengthening awareness of rights and looking at educational campaigns. There are a number of things in the law enforcement space that I wouldn't want to publicly disclose, obviously, because it might eliminate the tools available to people.

That said, you've pointed out that the number of asylum claims has continued to increase, and we're seized with that. We're continuing that dialogue. I can tell you that, as recently as two weeks ago, I met with officials in Mexico City to discuss this.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Okay. You're saying "high-level dialogue". You've met with your Mexican counterparts.

Mr. Scott Harris: I have, as recently as two weeks ago.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Okay.

How often would you say that senior officials at IRCC are meeting with the Mexican government?

Mr. Scott Harris: The meetings vary over time in terms of frequency. More recently, we've been meeting frequently. My follow-up meeting in January was preceded by one in December. In addition, we obviously don't always meet in person. We have virtual contacts with governments on a number of levels.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Is it fair to say that you're the lead on the file, then?

Mr. Scott Harris: We have a number of people working on the lead. We have an idea. We've recently gone through reorganization at IRCC, and we created an ADM of migration integrity. Aiesha Zafar's role is to augment and elevate our ability to deal with integrity issues in the broader system, not just on this issue.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Is that ADM, then, the person who is the lead on whether or not to reimpose the visa requirement on Mexican nationals?

Mr. Scott Harris: I would say that it's a shared lead within the department. Obviously, we have policy considerations as well as integrity issues. She is currently leading the discussions.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Could I ask you whether you're getting pressure from the Mexican government not to reimpose the visa?

Mr. Scott Harris: I would say we've maintained a good dialogue with Mexican officials. We rely on them for a number of our programs.

They have obviously expressed concerns—if that's your question—about modifying the current structure around travel between our two countries. We are very reliant on mutual travel between the two countries, and that has been flagged.

That said, we raised our integrity concerns, and we will continue to do so.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: By the minister's own accounting of the numbers.... I only have the numbers going up to September. None of the rest of them are posted on the IRB's website. By his own account, 70% were refused after they made their asylum claim. They were rejected by the tribunal.

Are you tracking these people? What is happening with them?

I'm going to the CBSA in a moment to ask for the tracking.

● (1850)

The Chair: We'll hear from the associate deputy minister, and then I'll go to the director general.

Mr. Scott Harris: That is the right order of things. I would say to go to the CBSA next.

As you know, once a claim is not approved, it moves into the removal process, and that triggers CBSA processes to start the process for removals.

Mr. Daniel Anson: That effectively answers it. Once the IRB process is done and any potential appeals have been exhausted, it is placed into the CBSA's hands for enforcement and, potentially, a removal order for the individual.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: How many are in that queue who are Mexican nationals or have Mexican national documents?

Mr. Daniel Anson: I apologize, Mr. Chair. I don't have the statistics on the number of Mexican nationals on the removal order list.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: Could you provide them to the committee?

Mr. Daniel Anson: Yes.

Mr. Tom Kmiec: I'd like to ask a final question, sir.

When did the CBSA realize there was a huge problem with the number of asylum claimants from a specific country—Mexico—making claims and being rejected? When was it flagged up to the DM level or the ministerial level?

The Chair: Give a brief answer, please.

Mr. Daniel Anson: The CBSA manages a variety of different threats that continue to evolve and shift based on global migration patterns. We always do our best to inform senior officials of intelligence or migration patterns as they evolve, based on countries of origin, which are usually due to geopolitical events out of our control.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mrs. Zahid for five minutes, please.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you, Chair.

My first question is for the IRCC officials. As we all know, the path of migration is not an easy one. It's long, difficult, dangerous and expensive.

Could you talk about what is actually driving these people to make the decision to undergo these journeys, and all the risks that are entailed in that process of migration?

Mr. Scott Harris: I think you're talking specifically about migration for protection purposes or humanitarian purposes, as opposed to people who may be moving—

Mrs. Salma Zahid: The factors that are driving them to take all those journeys.

Mr. Scott Harris: As the minister mentioned, estimates from the UN are that there are about 110 million people in the world who are currently displaced or on the move as a result of changing circumstances.

The reasons for that would vary incredibly, from exposure to violent circumstances, wars or criminal elements in their country that threaten people's circumstances. Declining economic situations in various countries drive people into poverty and a lack of security. We are aware of increasing challenges in parts of the world that are

becoming unlivable and driving people from where they have lived historically.

The variables are quite considerable that would lead to people who require protection.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you.

Although Canada's aid and development programs all fall under another department and minister, would you be able to touch on how working to improve the conditions in people's home countries can lessen the demand for outward-bound migration and make sure they don't have to migrate?

Mr. Scott Harris: We work with our international partners and make investments in that international space to address country stability, and we work with the appropriate partners to help ensure that this occurs, as well as to promote human rights around the world. The individual measures would vary by region and by country.

As I mentioned earlier, the minister made an announcement of \$75 million for this work to occur. In addition to that, our partners in Global Affairs Canada make numerous investments in international spheres to try to support countries in becoming more stable.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Given our geography, Canada hasn't had to deal with the same levels of migration as many countries in Europe, for example.

Are there any lessons we can take from the European experience of high levels of migration? Are there lessons we should adopt as we go through this process, or some examples we can avoid?

• (1855)

Mr. Scott Harris: We're robustly engaging with our counterparts, whether they are in Europe, the U.S., the U.K., Australia or New Zealand, to look at the different models that people have in place to address the flows of migrants around the world. We will continue to maintain an open dialogue to learn from one another.

Canada is often looked to as a leader in this space and people seek our advice, but we need to be open to considering the views of others.

Obviously, there are some measures we would not be interested in taking and that would not be consistent with our framework, but it's important for us to remain in dialogue with the global movement here.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Can you give some examples from any country you have been in touch with, some examples of what we should avoid or some examples from which we can take lessons and make our programs better?

Mr. Scott Harris: I'm reluctant to comment negatively on another country's measures given that their circumstances are different from our own, but I will say we are looking to our partners.

An interesting example of a place we're learning from is Mexico. As much as we're talking about the flows from Mexico to Canada, Mexico in the last number of years has grown to be one of the larger asylum-receiving countries in the world. They have numbers of asylum claimants that mirror Canada's. They have developed some interesting measures around economic mobility within the country to support people who are seeking asylum there so that they can find meaningful employment quickly.

Those kinds of measures we do pay attention to and we want to learn from.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you. I think my time is up.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

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

Go ahead, please.

[*Translation*]

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

Since I have only two and a half minutes of speaking time, I'll ask each witness the same yes or no question, which they should be able to answer fairly easily.

In your respective organizations, are there any internal memos, notes or analyses stating that the Mexican cartels at the borders take advantage of the fact that Mexican nationals don't need a visa to enter Canada? The answer is simple. If it's no, it's no. If it's yes, it's yes.

[*English*]

Mr. Daniel Anson: I don't, unfortunately, have a yes-or-no answer. I would say, in terms of organized criminality exploiting visa-free travel, that is something that seldom surfaces in evidence related to prosecutions or in the line of investigations related to IRPA. I would say it is something that, in theory, we know exists. Visa-free travel is exploited in all circumstances, and there are always criminals and organized criminals and organized crime groups that are typically involved or associated with those types of illicit movements.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Burchill, have any internal notes informed you that the Mexican cartels are exploiting the loophole created by the lack of a visa requirement for Mexican nationals?

[*English*]

C/Supt Richard Burchill: Thank you for the question.

There was no internal information that would indicate that they were exploiting any situation in particular. I would echo the comments of my colleague from CBSA that organized crime—

The Chair: I think we have an issue with interpretation. Is it okay now?

Go ahead, Mr. Burchill.

C/Supt Richard Burchill: I would just underline the fact that organized crime will find vulnerable folks and exploit them regardless of the circumstances around that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: If we ask your organization for information, we won't find any notes, internal analyses or memos stating that Mexican cartels are taking advantage of the loophole created by the lack of a visa requirement for Mexican nationals. Is that right?

[*English*]

The Chair: The time is up, Associate Deputy Minister. Could you give us a brief answer, please?

Mr. Scott Harris: I'm not aware of anything specific on Mexican cartels, but we have, obviously, materials on organized crime and activities.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We will go to Ms. Kwan for two and a half minutes.

Go ahead, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

I don't think requiring a visa or not requiring one facilitates human trafficking or organized crime. This is what I'm hearing from you.

On the issue of investigations, how many active cases are being jointly investigated by, for example, the United States and Canada?

• (1900)

C/Supt Richard Burchill: Unfortunately, I'm not able to give you the number of investigations that are jointly investigated, but I can say that a large number of our human smuggling investigations that have to do with border security are jointly investigated.

We have integrated teams with the Americans on the intelligence side, as well as the operational side, at marine and land...and air-ports.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: In order to help you better do your work to address this situation, what sort of action do you need the government to take? I'd like to hear both the CBSA's and the RCMP's perspectives.

The Chair: Mr. Anson, we'll go to you and then to Mr. Burchill.

Mr. Daniel Anson: I'm not qualified, necessarily, to speak about what the next iteration of investments might be.

Again, we can describe the policies and the programs that we implement. I can, in certain circumstances internally, recommend different types of advancements, but I'm certainly not qualified or prepared to recommend what some of the future government investments might be.

C/Supt Richard Burchill: I would say that the RCMP is always going to be accepting of any resources, financial or human, that come our way to better attack this particular problem in all the integrated ways that we're doing that with partners.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Can I just say quickly...? It doesn't have to be in resources. It could even be any policy change or any enhancement that will better enable you to do your work more effectively. At the end of the day, what we want to do is tackle human trafficking and smuggling. What do we need to do as parliamentarians to say that this should be something that the government should look at?

I'm not trying to get you into trouble. I'm just trying to figure out what it is that we can do to help you do your jobs more effectively.

Could you table that information for the committee, please?

The Chair: The time is up.

Just give a quick answer, please, if you'd like. Otherwise, I'll move to Mr. Redekopp.

Mr. Burchill.

C/Supt Richard Burchill: Yes—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm sorry. I just asked them to table the information for the committee.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll go to Mr. Redekopp.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Can I get a response?

C/Supt Richard Burchill: I'll be quick, in the interest of time.

As I said to the other member who asked a question, we work within the legislative framework that we have, so it's not that we've turned our minds to what needs to be done differently necessarily. However, I can certainly take the question back and do some analysis at the RCMP to see if there's a different response.

The Chair: Thank you. We're over time.

Mr. Redekopp, we'll go to you for two minutes, and then we'll go to Mr. Ali to finish off.

Mr. Redekopp, go ahead, please.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Thank you.

Let's go back to this letter from 2016. You answered the question about meetings with Mexico, but you didn't really answer the question about the way to prevent the increase in asylum claims—what procedures, processes, strategies, documents, etc.

If I understand what you said to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you said that there was nothing there. Is it a fair assessment that there were no concrete plans to maintain asylum claims at that level back in 2016?

Mr. Scott Harris: I think the question from Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe was around whether we had specific briefing notes about the cartel and its role in terms of.... That is a very different question from the question of whether we are doing anything or what the measures in place are to begin to address some of these issues—just to be clear.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: This is for the CBSA.

When you detain violent criminals, the provincial jails generally aren't allowing you to put them in there anymore. You have your own jails for human traffickers, violent offenders, etc. Essentially

though, if there's no room for them—if there's nowhere for them to go—they are released into the Canadian population. Is that a fair statement?

Do you believe that releasing these criminals into Canadian society is a good thing?

Mr. Daniel Anson: Unfortunately, that's not the area within which I work. I do understand that it's an area that is also in transition, but unfortunately, I'm not able to accurately answer the question. We can certainly commit to a response as required, but unfortunately, I'm not prepared to answer that one.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Can you provide that information to the committee?

Mr. Daniel Anson: I can certainly endeavour to do my best, for sure. I'll take that question back.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: The Auditor General confirmed that the CBSA had almost 35,000 people listed as wanted—people whom you wanted to remove but could not find. Of those, 2,800 were wanted criminals. That's the information that I have. As of today, how many people who have received removal notices have you lost track of?

• (1905)

Mr. Daniel Anson: Again, unfortunately, that's not the area within which I currently work. It's something that I can certainly take back as a question to the CBSA, but unfortunately, I don't have those figures with me today.

The Chair: Thank you. We'll go to Mr. Ali for two minutes.

Please, go ahead.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: Thank you, Chair.

Through you, Chair, I would like to first of all thank IRCC for dealing with the heavy load, and CBSA and RCMP for keeping our borders safe and Canadians safe. Thank you so much for your hard work.

My question is for IRCC.

There are ways that we can improve our immigration system. We should look to other countries for positive policies and measures that we can implement here in Canada.

Has IRCC studied the measures put in place in other countries with regard to undocumented individuals? Can you compare our system to those of other countries?

Mr. Scott Harris: Thank you very much.

I may turn to my colleague who is responsible for many of these areas.

We generally say that we learn from all countries. The minister has already indicated his commitment to bringing something to cabinet later this year in the undocumented space. That would take into account those experiences.

I don't know if you have anything to add.

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

We are looking at regularization initiatives that have been undertaken in other countries. Recently, there were some in Italy, Ireland and other countries, so we're looking at all of those, I would say.

Right now, the main difference is that those regularization initiatives tend to be at the temporary resident stage rather than at the permanent resident stage. Something that we've heard very clearly from stakeholders is that they want to see a permanent residency regularization initiative.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: Thank you.

I just wanted to ask if CBSA and RCMP are looking into similar things.

Mr. Daniel Anson: We work closely with IRCC, just to ensure that our border security, both facilitation and security measure postures, correspond to any changes in policy as required.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Ali. Your time is up.

On behalf of the committee members, I would like to thank Associate Deputy Minister Harris, Assistant Deputy Minister Kingsley, Director General Anson and Acting Assistant Commissioner Burchill.

Thank you for being with us. We appreciate your time. I'll let you go.

Before I adjourn the meeting, I want to remind all members that the clerk has distributed a calendar with activities for February and March. He has advised me that he did not receive any comments from members, so we will follow the calendar.

On Monday, we will begin in camera for drafting instructions for a letter to the minister regarding the government's response to the final report of the Special Committee on Afghanistan. If we have time, we will also discuss committee business. The notice will be published later today.

On Wednesday, February 14, I have asked the clerk to reinvoke officials from IRCC and CBSA for the first hour to begin the study of persons with temporary status and undocumented individuals. The clerk will also invite witnesses for the second hour.

Is the committee in agreement to adjourn?

Mr. Redekopp.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: At the Monday meeting, when we have the second hour of committee business, we would want that to be in public.

The Chair: Okay.

Mrs. Zahid.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Chair, committee business cannot be in public, or can it?

The Chair: The drafting is not going to be, but the other committee business can be in public.

Thank you. The meeting is adjourned.

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