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Chair: Fayçal El-Khoury

Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

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• (1530)

[Translation]

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

Welcome to meeting number 13 of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the subcommittee on Tuesday, October 28, 2025, the subcommittee is meeting to study the situation of members of the 2SLGBTQ+ community from Uganda.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the Standing Orders. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

[English]

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the witnesses and the members. Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to activate your mic, and please mute yourself when you are not speaking. For those on Zoom, at the bottom of your screen you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation: floor, English or French. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel. I remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair.

[Translation]

I would like to welcome our first witnesses.

[English]

We have, as individuals, Mr. Steven Kabuye and Meddie Ssentongo; from Amnesty International, Dr. Tigere Chagutah, regional director, east and southern Africa, by video conference; from Human Rights Watch, Oryem Nyeko, senior researcher, by video conference; from Reaching Out Assisting Refugees, Horst Backé, president; and from the African Centre for Refugees in Ontario-Canada, Madame Christopher Nkambwe, executive director.

I would like to welcome all of you and to give every one of you five minutes for introductions.

We start with Mr. Steven Kabuye.

Sir, the floor is yours for five minutes. Please go ahead.

• (1535)

Steven Kabuye (As an Individual): Honourable chair and committee members, thank you for inviting me to speak.

My name is Steven Kabuye. I'm a 2SLGBTQI+ human rights activist from Uganda and a board member of Coloured Voices Media Foundation, an NGO dedicated to shifting public attitudes about same-sex love in Africa. I'm here as a survivor of the anti-LGBTQI+ violence in Uganda to share our reality and urge Canada's urgent action.

The situation for LGBTQI+ people in Uganda has become a state-sanctioned nightmare. In 2023, Uganda passed the Anti-Homosexuality Act, one of the world's harshest anti-LGBTQI+ laws. The act criminalizes consensual same-sex relations with penalties up to life imprisonment and imposes the death penalty for "aggravated homosexuality", a term so broadly defined that it can be applied to almost any same-sex relationship.

Amnesty International warned that signing this bill was "a grave assault on human rights", enshrining "discrimination, hatred and prejudice" into law. When Uganda's Constitutional Court upheld the act in April 2024, Human Rights Watch noted that the court had "come down on the side of hate, violence and discrimination", rather than protecting fundamental rights. In effect, this law gives a public licence to violence. It invites neighbours, landlords, police and even strangers to harass, beat and extort, or worse, anyone suspected of being gay or transgender.

Life under this law is terror. Landlords can be prosecuted for housing anyone accused of being LGBTQI+, fuelling mass evictions and homelessness. In fact, a previous anti-LGBTQ law in Uganda made it illegal to keep "a house...for purposes of homosexuality", a provision that Human Rights Watch observed was "used to justify evicting LGBTI tenants." Medical providers have openly scaled back services for queer people, who are afraid to even ask for care lest they be arrested.

Every day, activists and ordinary people live in fear of arbitrary arrest or violent attack. Human Rights Watch reports that “authorities arbitrarily arrested and detained LGBT people” and “extorted money” from them, and that LGBTQ individuals “faced a range of physical attacks and online harassment”. Simply existing can be deadly. On the street or in your home, vigilantes feel emboldened. The state has effectively weaponized both the police and the public against its own citizens. Survival is now an act of defiance.

I know this first-hand. On the morning of January 3, 2024, I was walking to work when two men on a motorcycle ambushed me. They slashed my arm and then stabbed my stomach, shouting “Die, you homosexual!” as they left me bleeding on the ground. By some miracle, I was alive. I recorded a video of my wounds as proof of my reality in case I did not survive.

Instead of being protected by the police, I was treated like a criminal. While I lay in the hospital, the authorities sought to charge me with treason. My home was raided, and the colleague who rushed me to hospital, Eugene Ntambi, was himself arrested and tortured.

I survived, thanks to God and the swift action of fellow activists. I am deeply grateful to be here safely in Canada today. I owe my life to the unwavering solidarity of fellow human rights defenders, organizations like Rainbow Railroad and the people of Canada, who stood by me at the most dangerous moment.

However, I speak today not only for myself but for the millions of Ugandans who have no microphone, for those who are trapped and still fighting simply to exist.

For those who manage to escape Uganda's borders, the nightmare often continues. Many flee to refugee camps in neighbouring countries—for example, Kakuma in Kenya—only to find that camps are not sanctuaries but alternative prisons. A 2023 Amnesty International report on Kakuma found that LGBTI refugees there “routinely suffer hate crimes, violence, including rape, and other serious human rights abuses” because of who they are. In Kenya, local police and other residents prey on LGBTQI+ asylum seekers with impunity. Even the UNHCR reports that LGBTQI+ claims are stalled. Kenya has effectively become a “choke point,” blocking western resettlement efforts and leaving hundreds “languishing in dangerous refugee camps and safe houses”. Some of my friends fled Kenya to South Sudan in desperation, only to find more chaos and violence there.

• (1540)

Because refugee camps and transit sites are so unsafe, many LGBTQI+ Ugandans end up in hidden safe houses in cities, far from aid. They live in overcrowded basements or rented rooms, completely cut off from UN food or health care. They're in permanent legal limbo. Asylum systems are overwhelmed or blocked. It can take years—or never—to process their papers. Meanwhile, they have no legal status and no livelihood, and they live every day uncertain.

The Chair: Is it possible to wrap up? Our time is up.

Go ahead.

Steven Kabuye: The situation demands immediate action from Canada. We cannot wait while Uganda's queer people are hunted and abandoned. I urge this committee and the Government of Canada to champion three urgent measures: expedite humanitarian visas and resettlement for at-risk LGBTQI+ Ugandans; fund and partner with grassroots LGBTQI+ organizations; leverage Canada's diplomatic weight and global voice. Canada must publicly and repeatedly condemn Uganda's anti-LGBTQI+ crimes and demand accountability.

I demand this committee—

The Chair: Thank you. You are almost two minutes over.

Wrap it up in two seconds.

Steven Kabuye: All right.

I urge this committee to push for sanctions against politicians in Uganda who scapegoat LGBTQI+ Ugandans and put up statements or pass laws that put 2SLGBTQ+ Ugandans at risk.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

I would like Dr. Tigere Chagutah to take the floor for five minutes.

Dr. Chagutah, the floor is yours, please.

Tigere Chagutah (Regional Director, East and Southern Africa, Amnesty International): Thank you, honourable Chair.

Good evening to all members of the subcommittee and fellow witnesses.

My name is Tigere Chagutah, Amnesty International's regional director in east and southern Africa. I'm joining you today from Johannesburg. I thank you for this opportunity to contribute to this critical study.

Honourable members, Uganda's legal framework criminalizes various aspects of the lives of LGBTQI+ people, perpetuating the institutionalization of stigma, discrimination and violence and emboldening state and non-state actors' attacks on queer people, both online and off-line, with impunity. The 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act expanded the range of offences and introduced harsher criminal penalties against LGBTQI+ people, including the death penalty.

A 2024 report by Amnesty International, titled “Everybody here is having two lives or phones”, documents “[t]he devastating impact of criminalization on digital spaces for [queer] people in Uganda”. The report highlights how the threats and presence of various forms of technology-facilitated gender-based violence against queer people in a context of criminalization, and the passage of the Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2023 in particular, have forced LGBTQI+ individuals and organizations to alter their digital presence and behaviour.

The withdrawal of USAID funding in 2025 was a huge blow to Uganda, which, until then, was receiving around \$448 million U.S. in development assistance annually. USAID was the main funder of health and human rights programs, including critical support for key populations and marginalized groups, such as LGBTQI+ people. The funding cuts have weakened NGOs supporting queer people and impacted the supply of condoms and lubricants, which are essential for prevention and care.

I now turn to the human rights violations against Ugandan LGBTQI+ people and refugees living in Kenya and South Sudan.

A report by Amnesty International and Kenya's National Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission documented hate crimes, discrimination and systemic protection failures affecting queer Ugandan refugees in Kenya, making them flee to South Sudan, where they faced similar treatment. The inaction by both governments led to impunity for perpetrators and human rights violations for LGBTQI+ refugees, including their rights to physical integrity and freedom from torture and ill-treatment, as well as their right to live without discrimination. In South Sudan, LGBTQI+ refugees are continually denied basic services and forced to live on \$10 per month. They've been ordered to leave the country by the authorities as recently as last December.

We at Amnesty International have documented several barriers to resettlement, among them delayed registration, delayed refugee status determination and inadequacies of refugee registration systems. Our research shows that both countries have failed to create a safe environment for self-disclosure for LGBTQI+ people and refugees, which has had a negative knock-on effect throughout the asylum process. Delays in the refugee status determination hold up prospects of resettlement, a durable solution traditionally only available to recognized refugees. Additionally, refugee databases used at registration points in both Kenya and South Sudan recognize only male or female as genders, thus failing to record the gender profile of non-binary LGBTQI+ refugees.

As I conclude, honourable members, Amnesty International believes that Canada can play a significant role in protecting LGBTQI+ refugees and all those who have fled their countries. We are concerned about the growing anti-rights movement across the world, and we urge the Canadian government not to step back on its human rights commitments but to continue voicing support for the protection of human rights, especially for marginalized groups like LGBTQI+ individuals in and from Uganda.

Additionally, we urge you to increase funding and slots under the government-assisted refugees program for resettlement pathways for high-risk LGBTQI+ refugees in Kenya and South Sudan, with particular attention given to refugees from Uganda.

• (1545)

We urge you to increase funding to the LGBTQI+ international assistance program. This program is critical for strengthening LGBTQI+ networks that are fighting to protect the human rights of queer individuals around the world, including those from Uganda.

The Chair: Could you wrap it up, please? We have exceeded the time.

Tigere Chagutah: We urge you to establish, across all Canadian high commissions, a permanent rapid response mechanism for queer people facing emergencies.

Lastly, we urge the Canadian government to use all the leverage it has on the Ugandan, Kenyan and South Sudan governments to protect the rights of LGBTQI+ refugees.

I thank you.

The Chair: Thank you.

I now invite Mr. Oryem Nyeko to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Oryem Nyeko (Senior Researcher, Human Rights Watch): Thank you.

My name is Oryem Nyeko. I am a senior researcher within the Africa division of Human Rights Watch. I want to thank you for this opportunity to provide input to this study on the situation of 2SLGBTQ+ people from Uganda.

In May 2025, Human Rights Watch published findings documenting the impact of the 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act, which, as we know, remains in force today. We interviewed LGBT people, their family members, representatives of rights organizations, activists, journalists and lawmakers in Uganda. We reviewed the parliamentary records and speeches by government officials and religious leaders, as well as the media reporting in the lead-up to the passage of that law. Our research found that in the two years that preceded the passing of that law, LGBT Ugandans were increasingly vilified by political and government figures, who spread misinformation and incited hatred against them in the media, both traditional and social media, to drum up support for the then proposed law.

It was in this hostile environment that LGBT people experienced, and continue to experience, physical and sexual violence, as well as online harassment. These threats extend to their parents, who, because they've openly supported their children's sexual orientation, have also been subjected to verbal and physical attacks and threats and rejected by their families and communities. They face domestic violence and in some cases even financial challenges.

The Government of Uganda has raided and suspended non-governmental organizations working on LGBT rights and conducted arbitrary arrests and detentions. Police officers have engaged in entrapment and have extorted money from LGBT people in exchange for releasing them from custody. The Ugandan authorities have not held to account anybody responsible for these attacks.

All of this has unfolded under the backdrop of Uganda's deeply repressive human rights situation, where the government regularly and violently cracks down on its critics, political opposition, journalists and protesters. It has imposed sweeping restrictions on freedom of expression. As a result of all this, LGBT people in Uganda, along with their families, their allies and their supporters, continue to face significant risks.

As development partners to Uganda, we are calling on Canada to play a role in protecting these targeted populations, who are at heightened risk, by consistently raising concerns, both publicly and privately, with senior Ugandan officials about the human rights impacts of the Anti-Homosexuality Act and other laws and policies that impact LGBT people, and by continuing to support local organizations through, for example, the Canada fund for local initiatives.

In providing support for local groups, Canada should prioritize intersectional approaches that recognize sexual and gender diversity, support local organizations that address these overlapping forms of discrimination, and provide sustained assistance to LGBT rights groups to enable them to continue to work, given the challenging environment in which they operate.

Thank you.

• (1550)

The Chair: Thank you. The time was very well respected. I appreciate that.

I would like to invite Mr. Horst Backé to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Horst Backé (President, Reaching Out Assisting Refugees): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of the subcommittee, for the invitation to testify.

The organization I represent, Reaching Out Assisting Refugees, has resettled three Ugandan LGBTQ people. We currently have three people who are also waiting in the process. We're supporting an additional six people and have had to turn down many requests for help.

We are witnessing a state-led campaign of erasure. The Anti-Homosexuality Act, or the AHA, doesn't merely criminalize acts; it criminalizes identities. The AHA has created a permissive environment for the murder and assault of LGBTQ+ children or adult LGBTQ+ children by their parents and families. In fact, most of the

people we have helped to support have had that situation, including attempted murder and plans to murder by parents and families. In some cases, family members have killed their child's partner.

The AHA has turned neighbours into informants, landlords into evictors and doctors into potential criminals. Since its passage, we've seen a surge in mob violence, state-sanctioned torture and a mass exodus of LGBTQ Ugandans, who are now trapped in regional limbo in countries like Kenya and South Sudan, from which we get frequent reports of secondary persecution. Other countries in Africa have adopted or are considering adopting legislation like the AHA.

Canada's response has to move beyond concerned observation and denunciation, which happened in 2023. To stop the flow of refugees, we must make the cost of this law unbearable for its architects, while opening immediate, non-traditional paths to safety.

As we know now, Kenya is a choke point for the movement of LGBTQ refugees to safety. Because Kenya is not providing refugee recognition, they're also not providing exit visas, so people are stuck. It's a choke point. Because of that, LGBTQ refugees have moved to South Sudan, an even more dangerous country, due to the experiences of violence in Kakuma, Kenya, and a lack of hope that they will ever experience safety if they stay.

I have four recommendations.

The first is to implement surgical financial sanctions. Generic aid cuts often hurt the very people we're trying to protect. Canada should instead apply targeted sanctions under the Magnitsky act, specifically against the individual MPs who sponsored and supported the bill and the private financiers who funded the hate campaign that preceded it. The goal is to freeze Canadian-held assets and deny visas to these individuals and their immediate families. This should send a clear message that those who promote state-sponsored persecution of queer people will no longer have access to the benefits of western democracy.

The second recommendation relates to the current UNHCR refugee process, which is too slow for a life-and-death crisis. Canada should expand the direct referral partnership with organizations like Rainbow Railroad. This allows us to move individuals without waiting years for a UN referral. We should also leverage the economic mobility pathways pilot to bring skilled LGBTQI Ugandans to Canada as skilled workers, rather than solely as refugees. By treating them as assets to our economy rather than vulnerable victims, we expedite their exit and preserve their dignity.

Third, the Anti-Homosexuality Act is a direct threat to global health. It has made HIV/AIDS treatment nearly impossible for queer people in Uganda to access. We need to ensure that international health funding is contingent upon safe, non-discriminatory access to health care for all citizens. Canada should lead a G7 and Commonwealth coalition to frame the repeal of the AHA as a global health security requirement. We must work with the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria and with the World Bank. We cannot fund a health system that uses its data to hunt its patients.

I don't have time, at this point, to talk about recommendations to address the Kenya choke point issue, but I do have some ideas.

- (1555)

In conclusion, Canada denounced the Anti-Homosexuality Act in 2023, but Canada's legacy as a human rights leader is defined not by the statements we issue but by the measures we take to protect the persecuted. This requires courage. We have the legislative and advocacy tools; we now need the political will to use them.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now I invite Mr. Meddie Ssentongo to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Meddie Ssentongo (As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chairman and committee members, for giving attention to the LGBTQ+ Ugandan refugees who are facing persecution, discrimination and death simply because of who they are.

In Uganda today, being openly queer is not just socially dangerous but legally punishable. The climate of fear is constant. Individuals are reported to authorities by neighbours. Families reject their own children. Employers terminate jobs. I was 17 years of age when my dad discovered that I was gay. It was a curse in the family, and he threatened to kill me. I had to flee to Kenya to save my life.

Most of us who flee end up in different refugee camps in neighbouring countries like Kenya, the one I went to, and South Sudan, where homosexuality is criminalized. The camps do not protect LGBTQ+ people fleeing homophobic or transphobic violence. Like other LGBTI refugees, I was threatened too many times to count. I was often assaulted, but no complaint was followed up on, even after reporting it to the police. There was never any hope that the police would follow up on any complaints. No one was arrested, even after LGBTQ+ refugees were killed or our shelters were burned.

We experienced food discrimination. We would often be served less food and served last during monthly UN food distribution. We would also be shuffled between food distribution stations, which would result in missing a month of food rations. Despite the lack of food, some queer refugees chose not to line up again, which they had to do. We were frequently attacked and beaten just for lining up for water, which we had to do daily. Queer refugees sought safety by moving into one block, but the result was the opposite of what we hoped for. The UNHCR told us to keep a low profile just to avoid being recognized as queer. My partner and I chose to move to a different block, but the result still wasn't positive. It was still un-

safe. Others faced sexual violence. Several women I know had children after being raped.

Most queer refugees are stranded. There are long processing delays. I waited for four years after being registered as an asylum seeker before I was allowed to leave the camp. I was an exception. Almost no one else was able to move to safety. If the UNHCR in Kenya knows you are LGBTQ+, they will not officially recognize you as a refugee. Without a refugee recognition, you will not receive permission to leave the camp. The UNHCR will not allow or follow up on any complaints made by those who are not recognized as refugees.

I had been in Kakuma for three years and had completely lost hope that I would ever get help, especially after seeing other refugees who are not queer being processed by the UNHCR. Nothing changed for me until we met our private sponsors through Mr. Horst Backé, the president of Reaching Out Assisting Refugees. That's when we started feeling hope again, although getting an exit permit was still a problem.

I have friends in Kakuma in Kenya, and in Gorom, which is in South Sudan, who are facing the same challenges I went through, although in South Sudan, exit permits are available. Some people I know have waited for resettlement for over nine years, and they are still waiting. There's no hope.

In South Sudan, refugees are facing delayed documentation, as it is much more risky due to the civil strife going on in South Sudan. Resettlement opportunities are decreasing. Many friends I know who were on the U.S. list were disappointed when their resettlement was cancelled. Canada has also reduced the number of resettlement opportunities for refugees.

I have three recommendations that I would like to point out.

One is to expedite LGBTQ+ Ugandan refugees. Canada should create a temporary settlement program for queer Ugandan refugees, similar to what they did years back for Chechens and Afghans. Canada should also use the economic mobility pathways pilot to help LGBTQ+ Ugandan refugees with professions and also to contribute to Canada.

• (1600)

The second recommendation would be to increase collaboration with Rainbow Railroad to safely identify and refer the most vulnerable individuals. Rainbow Railroad referrals are capped at only 250 people per year throughout the world. This number should be significantly increased.

My third recommendation would be to increase the Rainbow Refugee assistance program and make it permanent. Increase the number of those supported beyond 50.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Now I would like to invite Madame Christopher Nkambwe to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Christopher Nkambwe (Executive Director, The African Centre for Refugees in Ontario-Canada): Thank you, Chair and members of the committee, for having me today and for giving me an opportunity to provide testimony as a witness in the study of the situation of 2SLGBTQ+ people from Uganda.

I am Christopher Nkambwe, a Ugandan by nationality. I fled the country in May 2019 and arrived in Canada in June 2019, where I began my journey as a refugee claimant. I am now a permanent resident in Toronto, Canada.

Four months after my arrival in Canada, I established The African Centre for Refugees in Ontario-Canada, where I serve as the executive director. The African Centre for Refugees in Ontario-Canada is a fully registered charity organization that supports vulnerable LGBTIQ+ refugees from the African continent and the Caribbean, providing wraparound support services from the time they enter the country until they are integrated into the Canadian setting. This year marks seven years of doing this work.

Chair, today I sit here before you as someone who was forcibly displaced because of my sexual orientation. Before and after the enactment of the Anti-Homosexuality Act, Uganda was and is known to have the cruelest laws in the world against LGBTIQ+ people. The situation is dire for those in Uganda and those outside Uganda in the refugee camps of Kakuma in Nairobi, Kenya, and Gorom in South Sudan. These people really need support.

This situation has further exposed members of the LGBTIQ+ community in Uganda to a vulnerable social and economic life. Many are unemployed because of the discrimination and persecution at workplaces. Many have been forced into exile to seek asylum in other countries, including Canada. Homophobia and transphobia are the order of the day. There have been widespread violations against LGBTIQ+ people in Uganda, mostly emanating from non-state actors, particularly in the communities they live in, and many of these violations remain unreported. The risks faced by LGBTIQ+ people in Uganda include evictions, forced marriages, physical assault, blackmail, legal persecution, discrimination and life imprisonment for the rest of one's life. As I speak now, health service delivery and access for LGBTIQ+ people in Uganda is very difficult after the funding cuts.

Chair, at the African Centre for Refugees in Ontario-Canada, we are concerned about the growing anti-rights movement across the world. We urge the Canadian government not to step back from its

human rights commitments, but to continue voicing support for the protection of human rights, especially for the vulnerable groups of people in Uganda.

Enhance funding to the LGBTQ2I international assistance program, which is critical for strengthening LGBTI networks that are fighting to protect the human rights of LGBTI individuals from Uganda and those still living in the country.

In the Canadian high commissions in the East African region, consider establishing a permanent emergency rapid response mechanism for LGBTI people facing sudden anti-LGBTI crackdowns.

Engage with authorities in Kenya and South Sudan to urge them to ensure that LGBTI asylum seekers and refugees fully enjoy their rights to a fair and effective asylum procedure and to be protected from refoulement.

Provide rapid funding for response protection services—case management, emergency medical support, psychosocial first aid, legal aid triage and survivor-centred referral pathways—all with strict confidentiality.

Use diplomatic channels to press for effective investigation and prosecution of violence and hate crimes against LGBTI refugees, including misconduct by police and service providers.

Support Kenyan and South Sudan institutions and CSOs to develop hate crime documentation protocols for survivor-safe reporting channels, paired with legal aid.

Canada should urge countries in the region to remove discriminatory barriers to asylum.

Support emergency departures for extreme risk cases identified by UNHCR-trusted referral partners, especially those from Uganda.

Increase funding and slots under the government-assisted refugees program for resettlement pathways for high-risk Ugandan LGBTI refugees in Kenya and South Sudan to create an expedited channel for at-risk cases.

Increase funding to the national LGBTI organizations and their programs, which are critical in creating a welcoming environment for LGBTI individuals from around the world and from Uganda.

• (1605)

Exert diplomatic pressure on the Government of Uganda to repeal the repressive Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2023 and to protect its citizens from hate-motivated violence, no matter their sexual orientation or gender identity.

I am in Canada because of the compassion of the Canadian government. The individuals currently stranded in the camps and cities across East Africa need that compassion today. Canada's leadership, applied through existing mechanisms and informed by on-the-ground expertise, can create the pathways to protection that LGBTQ+ Ugandans need.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Thanks to all of you.

I would now like to go to the first round of questions and answers.

I would like to invite Madame Kronis to take the floor for seven minutes, please.

The floor is yours.

Tamara Kronis (Nanaimo—Ladysmith, CPC): Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

I want to start by thanking all of our witnesses, particularly those who have had personal experiences of discrimination and violence in their lives and in Uganda. Hopefully, they have made their way to a place of safety, because what you've been through is terrible. I hope that today has not been too painful for you in bringing back those bad memories.

Before I ask you some questions, I'd like to get an update from Dr. Chagutah on the situation in Uganda right now. This is our second session on this topic here at the committee. We had actually put it off deliberately so that we would have our second session after the election in January.

Could you update us on what happened in those elections? I think a number of Ugandan legislators who were behind the AHA were not re-elected, but there were also some advocates who weren't re-elected. There is an ongoing appeal to the Supreme Court of Uganda on this.

Could you provide us with an update on where things are at, to the best of your knowledge?

• (1610)

Tigere Chagutah: Thank you for that question.

It is fair to say that the situation in Uganda post-elections has increasingly become more difficult for LGBTQI+ people in the country. Indeed, our own analysis shows that the elections have disrupted representation, particularly among legislators who were challenging this repressive act.

What we have seen is that those in government have become more emboldened. As recently as February 18, 2026, we saw a very brazen and open attack on the rights of queer people in Uganda when two Ugandan women in their early twenties were arrested in Arua on allegations of kissing in public.

What this means for the future is that without concerted action from partners such as Canada, we see the situation deteriorating for queer people in Uganda.

Thank you very much.

Tamara Kronis: Thank you very much for that update.

I'm wondering if any of our witnesses who are from Uganda have heard anything from their comrades about how things are on the ground in Uganda. I also wonder if any of you want to elaborate on the situation in the refugee camps after the election, specifically around the choke point in Kenya and South Sudan.

This is for whoever has information about that.

Go ahead, please.

Steven Kabuye: Thank you. I'd like to elaborate more.

The most recently concluded election was full of human rights violations. The President of Uganda and his government openly showed the world that Uganda has no place for human rights, because they are full of gross human rights violations. We saw a change in everything. Today, 90% of the members of Parliament in Uganda are from the ruling party, not because they were voted in but because the President decided that they were supposed to come in, by hook or by crook. These are people who have openly been against equal rights, especially for minorities, especially for LGBTQ+ people.

Of course, this is an automatic danger to people who are fighting for survival. When it comes to refugee camps, it's even worse after the election, of course, with everything that is going on.

My colleague highlighted the situation of Wendy and her friend, who were arrested recently for allegedly kissing in public and were imprisoned. Of course, we know the law. The law has nothing in it that says kissing is an act of homosexuality, but because these politicians have power and they want to be heard and seen, they advocated that they be rearrested, even after the court gave them bail. They were rearrested and taken back to prison.

This is automatically a sign that shows that many people are going to flee the country into these refugee camps, which we know are not safe places for people who are part of the LGBTQ+ community, as I highlighted. These people are raped. The police use it as an excuse to extort money from them to give them protection, but they are not protected. We have people who have been burned to death in these camps. Those who have fled to Sudan have also faced the same.

• (1615)

Tamara Kronis: I'm almost at the end of my allotted time.

Mr. Backé, could you just round that out? As someone who works in Nanaimo to support 2SLGBTQ+ refugees in general and specifically refugees from Uganda, you've had a bit of a longitudinal view of this before and after the election. How does this feel and how do the changes feel as time goes on? How does it feel to watch and to advocate?

Horst Backé: It's disappointing that things have not improved for LGBTQ people in refugee camps. We've witnessed, from a distance, people being assaulted. We've seen people's homes being burned to the ground. We've seen others—people whom we weren't supporting—dying as a result of arson and people being murdered.

Have things changed? It can't get much worse than it has been, so no, it hasn't changed. It's still awful. We need to do something to stop the flow of refugees, but we also need to realize that the Kenyan choke point, which has been there for a number of years, has created a backlog of people who are unable to leave, despite others wanting them to leave.

For organizations like ours, we could have done so much more and helped so many more people through private sponsorship if Kenya were giving exit visas, but they are not doing that for anyone without a passport.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now I would like to invite Mr. Zuberi to take the floor for seven minutes, please.

Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank the witnesses for being here today, for your courage and for sharing the trauma and the violence that's happened to you. Strength to you. We appreciate you.

I want to first ask one of the witnesses who are joining us online. Mr. Nyeko, you were talking about social media and mainstream media and how there is othering that is happening. Can you describe that a bit more? Also, what can we do over here, and what can the international community do, in order to get that under control?

Oryem Nyeko: What I was referring to was the climate around the time the Anti-Homosexuality Act was being debated in the Ugandan Parliament, and also shortly after it was passed, which was when there was heightened anti-LGBT rhetoric and sentiment that was actively being promoted and shared by several high-profile figures, including parliamentarians, including the President himself, and religious and cultural leaders.

In addition to the rhetoric, there was and has been impunity for the kinds of things that people were saying, which eventually led to attacks against LGBT people, both online and off-line. For example, Steven, who is a witness here today, experienced some of the violence that took place there, which I would attribute to the things that were being promoted and discussed online.

I think that—

Sameer Zuberi: I wanted to know if there were any particularly egregious platforms that stood out. For example, in the case of the Rohingya genocide, Facebook was discussed a lot as a vector. Were there any particular vectors that stood out during this period?

Oryem Nyeko: Yes, there were. Specifically, TikTok was a major example from the people we interviewed and talked to. They faced a lot of hate speech on their accounts and also had their accounts removed. Activists who would be talking about and promoting LGBT rights had their accounts disabled without explanation. As well, X was a major platform for anti-LGBT rhetoric in Uganda. We've documented that and called on some of those companies to take concrete action.

• (1620)

Sameer Zuberi: Do you have any suggested reforms around that, around those two companies and others?

Oryem Nyeko: Yes, we do. They definitely need to take steps to ensure better moderating of the rhetoric that comes onto those platforms, especially in local languages. Something that kept happening in Uganda, specifically with the Luganda language, was that people would post hate speech, and it wouldn't be removed or moderated. We do feel that it's important that those types of companies take steps to understand and moderate hate speech in local languages.

Sameer Zuberi: Do you have concern that it's still happening or that it can happen again in the future, even if it's not the case right now?

Oryem Nyeko: Certainly, I think it's at risk of happening again. It was heightened during the time when the law was being debated and passed, but the point we want to stress is that because of the impunity around these issues, it's inevitably going to happen again when homosexuality is used in the Ugandan context as a political low-hanging fruit once again.

Yes, it's likely to be a cycle of violence and hate.

Sameer Zuberi: Certainly.

You did speak a bit about police entrapment and extortion of money, etc., and others have also. Do you want to elaborate before others contribute to this? Can you elaborate a bit on how queer people, LGBT people, were extorted and entrapped, etc.?

Oryem Nyeko: We documented a number of cases of people who were lured into meetings with police officers, who would meet them on dating apps and say that they were gay and wanted to meet with, in the cases that we documented, other gay men. They would meet, and then, in the cases that we documented, the police officers detained those people and told them that if they didn't pay a sum of money, they would take them to jail, essentially, and charge them under the Anti-Homosexuality Act.

We also saw the same case with staff of non-governmental organizations. They would be rounded up and then told that they needed to pay a fee because they would be charged with promoting homosexuality under the Anti-Homosexuality Act. This was heightened around that time. I think it really stemmed from a lot of the misinformation that was being spread by government figures, and it was extremely harmful to the people who went through those experiences.

Sameer Zuberi: Thank you.

We have about a minute left. Would anybody else like to contribute to the question that I asked?

Christopher Nkambwe: I'll speak to the extortion.

In 2021, when a gay bar, the Ram Bar, was raided in Kampala, Uganda, a group of young LGBTQ people were taken to prison, but before even taking them, police were asking for money: "How much do you have so that we cannot take you?" People had to pay money not to be imprisoned.

When you go to prison, it means that you are going to be there for the rest of your life, or until a human rights activist comes to defend you, so many people fear going to prison. If they had some money, they had to give it. Personally, I had to send some money to the Happy Family Uganda organization to support individuals to not be taken to prison.

Sameer Zuberi: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: We now go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for seven minutes.

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

My sincere thanks to the witnesses for being with us for this important study. I'm especially grateful to the witnesses who have experienced horrific violence and are here to share their stories with us. Above all, I hope that the Canadian government will not simply leave this matter with the Subcommittee on International Human Rights but will listen to what you are here today to tell us.

Mr. Kabuye, a moment ago, another witness referred to your experience. You came out at the age of 18. Things really took a turn in 2023, when the act was being discussed, an act that basically made homophobia legal.

For the committee's benefit, could you tell us how things changed for the LGBTQ community in Ugandan society as of 2023? What did you see? Was the difference significant? Was the change swift?

• (1625)

[*English*]

Steven Kabuye: As a grassroots activist and a person who was very vocal against the Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2023, and as a person who faced violence after my very strongly voiced opposition to the law, I would say that the law, first of all, highlighted state-sponsored homophobia, because major politicians—the President, the Speaker of Parliament, and many other big entities like the Ministry of Health—were out there championing support of the

Anti-Homosexuality Act. This gave people empowerment. It gave people empowerment to go after people who were very vocal against the law, to go after the community itself. It was like a state-sponsored genocide, but a silent one.

A lot of things changed. Access to health care for the LGBTQ+ community became a liability. Homelessness in the community happened, because none of the people would let you rent a house if you were openly gay or lesbian or trans, because they feared being imprisoned, and then most of the parents.... As a person who was on the ground and running an organization that was helping out youth who were facing this situation, I worked hand in hand with different organizations and people, and I noticed that children were being chased away from home because parents feared being imprisoned. Friends were giving up their own friends and relatives to the police, sending them out to the police because they were in fear because of the law.

A lot of things changed. Life became very difficult for the LGBTQ+ community in Uganda after the law. Of course, these things were happening before the law, but they became more public. The situation became very dire after the passing of the law. Hopefully the world recognizes this and puts pressure on the Ugandan government so that this law will be repealed very soon.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you.

Mr. Ssentongo, in your brief to the subcommittee, you said that LGBTQ people, especially those with HIV, have trouble accessing health care. For the subcommittee's benefit, could you talk more about that specific issue?

[*English*]

Meddie Ssentongo: Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

For health care, I would say that for all refugees in Gorom and Kakuma daily medical care is not available.

Access to medication is inadequate. I was in Kakuma a couple of years ago, and it was a struggle to get medication if you got sick. Also, for typhoid and malaria, it's pretty hard for you. You cannot access the UNHCR hospitals. If you get there, you're not treated very nicely. You're going to be served last. They're going to keep you in the line for a couple of hours. There are scorpions in Kakuma. It happens frequently in the rain season. Let's say you've been stung by a scorpion and they keep you in the line for a couple of hours. Just imagine what's going to happen. You're probably going to die. This doesn't happen to only one person. It happens often.

Access to medication is pretty difficult for them. They don't access public health care, and there are no private hospitals. If there is care, it's in the town, and they don't have enough supports to get to the private health care. It needs a lot. To get to the private health care, there are what we call "roadblocks" in the road. Refugees are kept in the camp. You're not allowed access to the town. The police will be there as a roadblock, and they'll block you from accessing medication.

They don't have enough medication in the camp.

• (1630)

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you so much.

Mr. Backé, you wanted to say more about the choke point in Kenya during your opening statement. You touched on it in response to a question, but is there anything you'd like to add?

[English]

Horst Backé: Yes. Thank you very much for that question.

There are three things that can be done that could help to push or encourage Kenya to give the opportunity for LGBTQ refugees to leave their country and get to safe countries.

The Canadian government should diplomatically urge Kenya to decouple the issuance of exit permits from their domestic refugee status determination process. That could be done and would be really helpful. Canada does its own refugee status determination for all refugees. If Kenya doesn't recognize queer identity for its own asylum process, they should allow those already accepted for resettlement by Canada to leave. This frames the exit permit as an administrative necessity for international co-operation, rather than a domestic policy shift.

In line with what Christopher mentioned, I'm also suggesting proposing an emergency transit mechanism. For those who aren't familiar with that, it basically means moving people to another country temporarily and then moving them away from places where they're going to receive secondary persecution, like Kenya or South Sudan. Then the Canadian paperwork can be finished in that country, outside of Kenya or outside of South Sudan.

The third recommendation is to push for status recognition related to the commitments that Kenya has made under the Global Compact on Refugees. Kenya's recent Shirika plan, which aims to integrate refugees, is built on the principles of human rights, non-discrimination and protection from persecution. There are intended—

The Chair: Can you wrap it up, please? We have exceeded the time by a minute and a half.

Horst Backé: Okay.

There are a number of things that Canada can do to hold Kenya accountable to its commitments under the Global Compact on Refugees.

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

We now go to Ms. Dhillon for five minutes.

Anju Dhillon (Dorval—Lachine—LaSalle, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

First of all, I would like to thank all of our witnesses who have appeared today for their immense courage in sharing what has happened to them in living through these situations and coming out stronger on the other side. Thank you very much. I'm very sorry for the horrific experiences and violence you have been subjected to. I hope today we can find some solutions. This is why we're here. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I thank everyone who has appeared at committee today.

There's always a lack of time. Mrs. Nkambwe, I think you wanted to say something, so I will let you go ahead.

Christopher Nkambwe: Thank you so much for focusing on the LGBTQ refugees in the camps, but we also have those LGBTQ refugees who do inland claims and don't go through Kakuma and Nairobi. There are also those who come in while living an HIV-positive life, and the situation is not good, the reason being that the process of getting the documentation required by Canada takes six to eight months, and you do not get services, especially health services, when you don't have a health card and when you don't have a refugee document, which we call a brown paper. This situation is really affecting people coming in with HIV.

We have partnered with Sherbourne Health in downtown Toronto. When these people come in and are living an HIV-positive life, we immediately refer them to family doctors where they can openly come out to speak to them about their life and can start medication as soon as possible. That is why I came through, and we should also recognize the national organizations providing a welcoming environment to these individuals.

• (1635)

Anju Dhillon: You mentioned that shortly after you came to Canada, you established your centre. You do not just let them go once the paperwork is done, but also follow up after to ensure safety, security and health services.

Christopher Nkambwe: Exactly. That's why I said that we offer wraparound support services, especially to trans people. When they come in, we do not refer them to male shelters, but we look for the organizations that are really friendly to LGBTQ organizations and have shelters. That is where we refer our people.

Anju Dhillon: You mentioned extortion and the betrayal of community. How has that impacted you? It is a betrayal when your family turns their back on you. Love should be unconditional. Could you talk to us a little about that?

Christopher Nkambwe: I arrived in Canada in 2019, when the raid of the gay bar happened. We heard lots of calls for support. People needed this and that. I saw it as very important to send \$15 dollars that I earned—a small token of money—so that we could save our members.

As an individual, I was about to be imprisoned for the rest of my life, just for offering health services to the community. I know what it takes for somebody to go to prison. First and foremost, there are no facilities that support these individuals when they are in prison. We cannot let our members go to prison, yet we can really support these individuals.

Thank you so much.

Anju Dhillon: Thank you.

Mr. Kabuye, you spoke about mob mentality when, at first, communities were against the LGBTQ community, the queer community, and then legislation was passed. Can you talk to us about why it seems to have gone even more backwards?

Steven Kabuye: First of all, after the repealing of the 2014 “kill the gays” law, the community—at least this sect—went back a bit. They had no legal support to commit their atrocities. Then came the right-wing religious groups in Uganda that sponsored the Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2023 with all of this money poured into different organizations and groups, including religious groups, political groups and other individual groups. They were ready to do anything they could, but they had no support. With the law coming into place, they had something to use as an excuse.

I was a victim of online harassment. For a full year, I was out there, telling the public I was getting death threats, and no one gave a damn. I reported to the police that I was receiving death threats. They never give a damn there.

Even after my stabbing—I was in the hospital immediately after surgery, having just gotten a knife out of my stomach—the hospital was raided and they wanted to take me in, first of all, for the promotion of homosexuality, and second, for treason. They were saying my work as an activist was a betrayal of the country. These groups were online. After the news broke out online about my stabbing, these groups of people, these politicians and individual people, were online praising the people who wanted to end my life.

The government and the spokesperson of the Kampala Metropolitan Police, Mr. Onyango, sat on TV without shame and said, while I was in the hospital fighting for my life, that I had stabbed myself. Without shame, he said I had stabbed myself. I was just lucky to get out of that country three days later, before they could finally end my life.

Just know that back in Uganda, the situation for 2SLGBTQIA people is worse than we talk about here.

• (1640)

Anju Dhillon: Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you.

I would like to invite Mr. Davies to take the floor for five minutes.

Fred Davies (Niagara South, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I don't really know where to begin. I want to thank you all so sincerely. I know all of us here are horrified by the experiences you've been through and are grateful that you've found a level of freedom in Canada to be yourself. I can't imagine the pain and hardship of being in a country that has such an institutionalized, integrated level of discrimination at all levels, from education to policing, security, law and basic health care.

Mr. Kabuye, you probably would have died in that hospital had you been there much longer. I want to express my appreciation for your courage, what you have done and what you've come through, and I'm glad you're here in Canada.

It seems to me that the three biggest issues are the AHA itself, the repression of activists across the board and the institutionalized and social violence. We've heard a lot of suggestions about what Canada and the international community can do in response to this, but I want to try to take a bit of a different tack.

Mr. Backé, you mentioned earlier non-traditional pathways. The biggest current human rights.... The AHA, the violence and the discrimination have actually had an economic impact on Uganda. Estimates suggest there's \$470 million to \$1.6 billion in lost economic activity due to sanctions, tourism decline and a reduction in investment. I'm wondering if we can think in a different dimension in terms of the economic scale, from a world perspective. What can we do? What can the world do on an economic basis? This may get to your comment, Mr. Backé, about non-traditional pathways. What can we do, what partnerships can we forge and what can the international community do on an economic basis to try to initiate some change and bring pressure on the Ugandan government to make changes? It doesn't seem to me that, at the electoral level, that's ever going to change. It has to change on an economic basis, in my opinion.

Can you elaborate on that for me, Mr. Backé?

Horst Backé: I agree with you that we do need to leverage some economic clout around this, working with other partners in the G7 and the Commonwealth to put pressure on Uganda. Specifically, the only thing I was focused on was trying to make health care more accessible for everyone. However, I think it could be broadened beyond that as well, working with the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. Again, that's a focus on health care, but there might be other ways.

I'm not sure what other options there are. I'm not an international relations expert.

• (1645)

Fred Davies: Well, I was thinking about...even through the UN and through other multinational organizations and NGOs. There are also sanctions that could be placed on people in power in Uganda.

Mr. Kabuye, do you have something to say on this?

Steven Kabuye: I want to say that sanctions on the state are kind of like.... I do not support them, because they affect the LGBTQI+ community too. More sanctions on health and on other institutions also affect us.

However, I support sanctions based on individuals. After the passing of the Anti-Homosexuality Act, the Biden administration in the U.S. made a move on sanctioning individuals. It was working, until the Trump administration came in and squashed the sanctions.

I call upon the Canadian government. This can work, because after the sanctions we saw them backing down a little bit on the rhetoric they were spreading against the community. With the United States adding in its immigration policy, I think these individuals have now turned to Canada. They come here for vacations. Their families are here. These are people who call for the death of LGBTQI+ individuals, which means their families are also very conversant on this. We cannot allow them to have freedom in the LGBTQI+ Eden. They cannot be here in a world where we freely live and also enjoy it.

I call for individual sanctions. We have members like the Speaker of Parliament, Anita Among. During previous electoral campaigns, every time she had an opportunity to speak, she used homophobia as a move to call for votes.

Fred Davies: I understand that. What I really want to focus on is that we have to initiate some actions against those who are imposing the discrimination on the LGBTQ community. If we can't find a pathway to undermining the Ugandan authorities.... Those are the people who are in charge right now. Nobody wants to do anything that would have a negative impact on the community across the board. The last thing you want is—

The Chair: Excuse me. Please wrap it up. You've exceeded the time by almost two minutes.

Fred Davies: You said that the United States had initiated some sanctions that have been removed. Has the Canadian government placed any sanctions on authorities in Uganda?

Steven Kabuye: No.

Fred Davies: It hasn't at all.

The Chair: I'm sorry. You may give your answer later, because we're two minutes over the time.

[*Translation*]

It's now over to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for five minutes.

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

I have a question for the Human Rights Watch representative, Mr. Nyeko.

A lot of countries have drastically cut their funding for international development assistance. Of course, USAID, the American aid agency, comes to mind, but many European countries have also made cuts. Canada, too, has significantly reduced its funding for international development assistance. Part of that money is often earmarked for human rights organizations.

This question may seem like it's coming from left field, as they say, but how significantly will international human rights organiza-

tions be impacted by the drastic cuts to international aid by wealthy countries?

Could you then tell us how that ties in with the issue we're discussing today?

[*English*]

Oryem Nyeko: I'm not sure I understand the question that's being posed to me.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Okay. Do you have the interpretation?

[*English*]

Oryem Nyeko: I do.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: As I understand it, you are part of Human Rights Watch. I am seeing wealthy countries slash their international development assistance budgets. In many cases, that money helps to fund human rights organizations.

What I'd like to know, then, is whether you're seeing the effects of that on the ground. Do you see a potential risk or serious consequences for human rights organizations because of those cuts to international aid?

Is that any clearer?

• (1650)

[*English*]

Oryem Nyeko: Yes, I think so. If I understand you correctly, you're asking me if groups on the ground are facing more challenges now with the reduction in funding to rights groups globally. Is that correct?

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Yes, but could you tell us how that ties in with the situation in Uganda? I don't want to spend much longer on this, because it's already taken up too much time. It's fine if you don't have an answer.

[*English*]

Oryem Nyeko: I'm sorry.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: No, that's fine.

[*English*]

Oryem Nyeko: I didn't understand the question.

I will say that a number of rights groups in Uganda that specifically focus on promoting LGBT rights had a lot of challenges and continue to have a lot of challenges with receiving funding. That has obviously escalated over the last year and a half with the changes in funding practices by major international actors. What we call for is that the nature of funding take recognition of the specific needs that LGBT rights groups face and the conditions that they face.

A very specific and concrete example is to be able to provide funding for local LGBT rights groups to do online work. In the context of Uganda, many of them are not able to operate out of offices because of the climate that exists there, so I think the nature of funding has to shift in order to enable LGBT rights groups to do the important work that they are able to do in-country.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: In the end, you understood the question perfectly, and I'm very satisfied with your answer. You are encouraging the Government of Canada to stop these cuts and to put more funding into international development and human rights groups.

Mr. Chagutah, we talked about the most effective or most urgently needed international supports that Canada, G7 countries or wealthy countries could provide. You're the regional director for east and southern Africa at Amnesty International. Could you also tell us where neighbouring countries and the other countries in Africa stand on what's happening in Uganda right now? Do their positions vary? Have any of them taken a position of non-interference or non-indifference? How have Uganda's neighbours and countries in Africa responded to the Anti-Homosexuality Act?

[*English*]

Tigere Chagutah: Thank you, honourable member.

With regard to other African countries, particularly in East Africa, we have recognized a failure to denounce the Ugandan government's attitude toward LGBTI rights. In fact, Amnesty International released a report about 18 months ago that showed that, across 12 countries in Africa, we have copycat legislation that is aimed at restricting the rights of LGBTI individuals, and in many instances we have the threat of similar legislation.

We are definitely noticing a trend where African countries are not calling out Uganda, but in fact there is a danger that there will be a spread of similar legislation across the continent.

• (1655)

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*English*]

The Chair: I would like to invite Mr. Chang to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Wade Chang (Burnaby Central, Lib.): First of all, thank you to all the witnesses who are appearing today. Thank you so much for your courage.

Mr. Kabuye, you have shown tremendous courage in speaking out. What risks do activists and community leaders currently face when they advocate for the safety and dignity of 2SLGBTQI+ people in Uganda?

Steven Kabuye: Thank you, Mr. Chang.

I'll start with this: First, it is in the hands of the government or in the hands of the mob, the general public, and second, it is imprisonment. The law clearly states that you face a certain number of years for standing up. They call it "promotion". Another issue is displacement. The law clearly states that no one is allowed to let you rent any premises. When you speak up publicly, I don't think anyone can give you a house to rent. A lot of factors face you as a 2SLGBTQI+ rights defender, but just know that those are the main ones.

Funding is another factor. This work is very, very dangerous. It leads to you losing your job, to homelessness and everything else. You need a lot of funding for the general upkeep of your life and for the work you do. It is not guaranteed that you will be funded. That is also a major factor.

Wade Chang: Thank you.

Are human rights defenders and organizations in Uganda still able to safely support 2SLGBTQI+ individuals, or has the law effectively shut down their network?

Steven Kabuye: I would say that the law has affected them, but with the correct funding and the correct strategy, they can still support 2SLGBTQI+ individuals. We've started using different tactics so that we can at least bypass the government laws and instructions to, first of all, register our organizations and many other things.

They can still support these individuals, but in a way that is very cautious and in a way that they can still keep these individuals safe and the organizations still in operation.

Wade Chang: What risks do families and allies face if they support someone who identifies themselves as a 2SLGBTQI+ member in Uganda today?

Steven Kabuye: First, as a family member, you are not allowed to keep quiet if you know that your son or daughter or relative is part of the community. The law forces you to give them up to the law, to report to the police, or to use any means to report them to the authorities. If you keep quiet, you are eligible for a certain number of years in prison if you're found guilty.

Families face this problem. Believe it or not, the moment they realize you are part of the community, they have to let you go or give you up to the authorities.

Wade Chang: The parents are required to report their sons or daughters to the police—

Steven Kabuye: Exactly.

Wade Chang: —for them to do what?

Steven Kabuye: You are supposed to report them to the police so that the police will charge them under the Anti-Homosexuality Act. Otherwise, they will charge you for keeping quiet.

Wade Chang: Oh. Wow. Thank you.

Has the law had unintended consequences for public health or mental health programs, particularly HIV prevention or treatment?

Steven Kabuye: In fact, it has affected the mission to end AIDS by 2030. You cannot go out and seek medical attention, especially in a public hospital, because you fear you'll be outed. The doctors are mandated to give you up to the authorities the moment they know you identify as LGBTQ. They are mandated through the law. Many people fear seeking medical advice except when they're visiting medical facilities being operated by LGBTQI+ organizations, which are also facing closure due to the law or due to the scrutiny from government security officials.

It is a very, very huge obstacle. We do not have the clear numbers today, but right now we fear that there has been a rise in positive cases of HIV/AIDS.

• (1700)

The Chair: Thank you.

I'm sorry, Mr. Chang. That's your time. Thank you.

Wade Chang: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Now I would like to invite Madame Kronis to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Tamara Kronis: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you very much, by the way, for all the briefs that were submitted by the witnesses who are appearing today. They are very helpful.

Mr. Backé, I want to come back to you. In your brief, you talked about the Kenyan choke point and the issues that are facing people after they have fled. Can you elaborate a bit more on that for us, please?

Horst Backé: Are you interested in knowing what the issues are after people flee?

Tamara Kronis: Yes.

Horst Backé: Okay. There are many. One is that... When people flee, they're going to a place where, hopefully, there is safety for them. Of course, when you're fleeing a country in East Africa, there's no nearby safe country to flee to. You're going into a homophobic country.

Kenya was at one point the only country accepting queer refugees, and they still do, strangely, but they're not processing them. That's a huge issue. They're creating a choke point. They've

been collecting people over many years—hundreds of people—and they're not being allowed to leave.

That's one of the issues, but it becomes more compounded because of the extreme violence that queer refugees are facing in Kenya, and in South Sudan now. I think people here have talked about that: everything from people being killed to daily assaults—physical assaults and verbal assaults—as well as lack of treatment and being pushed to the back of the line and excuses being found for not providing health services.

The reality is that UNHCR is not supposed to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. The reality is that people often can't help but express what they've grown up with—their bread and butter—and the people in those countries are often coming from homophobic backgrounds, unfortunately.

Tamara Kronis: Can you help to contextualize that in comparison to a Canadian context? We worry about discrimination in Canada. We talk about discrimination in Canada. We talk about hate in Canada. Can you talk about the difference in terms of orders of magnitude in what is being faced in South Sudan and in Kenya by the people and the kinds of discrimination and circumstances that people are facing in Uganda?

Horst Backé: Some of the people whom we have helped or are helping have experienced severe trauma. I don't know how to describe the trauma. I think someone like Meddie might be able to do a better job.

Tamara Kronis: If you wouldn't mind, the reason I'm asking—and I'm sorry to put you through the pain of describing it—is that sometimes we need to understand just how bad it is and how different it is from what we think of as discrimination here in Canada.

You know, I can't testify here, but for you, as someone who has provided services to members of your community, there are some things you've shared with me that I think people would benefit from understanding.

Mr. Ssentongo, if you would, if you can bear it...

• (1705)

Meddie Ssentongo: I remember, back in the days when I had just moved out here, Horst asked if I was facing trauma challenges. To be honest, it really happens. Getting through violence, physical assault and all of that...you can't just get rid of it in your head right away because you're in a safe country. You still face it. Not every Black person we have here in Canada is fleeing violence for being homosexual. We have other Africans who are here to study. You still associate with them, because you're all Africans, but you're not as welcome as you should be, so the trauma stays permanently. It's just something you learn to live with.

I remember I was at work and I called Horst and said, "I've been crying." He asked what was happening. People just see you smiling, but they don't know what you're going through. You go to work, do the work, and then you get back home, but the pain stays. We have friends there. They're still living the same situation we went through. They call you for emotional and financial support. You still want to make life better. When they tell you their stories of being assaulted, being beaten and having their knees dislocated, you imagine exactly what you went through.

You're fighting to get rid of the memories, but you still have to give support to those ones who are still there. Those who are still there are not being supported enough through mental health. They rely only on us, but we're also trying to get rid of that. It's really tragic. To say it's something you can just get rid of.... It stays. I still face it, to be honest. I still face it. You can imagine....

Tamara Kronis: Thank you. I'm sorry for putting you through that.

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

Thank you, Ms. Kronis.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, it is now your turn for five minutes.

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

I'd like to keep discussing what Mr. Ssentongo just said.

First, though, I'd like Mr. Nkambwe to explain something to us. Your centre plays a vital role in the resettlement of LGBTQ Ugandan refugees who have fled Uganda. What supports do those who have fled Uganda need? Actually, what I really want to know is this: Once they get to Canada, what supports do they need but do not have access to?

[English]

Christopher Nkambwe: I'll start with the trans people. Shelters for these individuals are so limited. When trans people come in, we have to refer them to organizations that are friendly to LGBTQ individuals, but if they are at their max, I have to host some of them, because I understand their ways and I know what they want.

We really need a safe space for LGBTQ individuals. We have tried, but the city has not responded. We, as The African Centre for Refugees, have applied for a Black- and LGBTQ-led shelter, but we have not heard from the city. This is to create a safe environment for these individuals.

When you look at the crisis that happened in 2023, more LGBTQ Black people were on the streets, and we had to refer them to churches because those were the spaces that were available at that particular time. They also faced a lot of challenges in the churches. The preachers were preaching against LGBTQ people. To that extent, at that particular time, I organized the annual national conference for newcomers in Canada. On the same day, there was a program going on, so the people who were coming in as newcomers were told not to come to these spaces and they were taken to other programs, yet these programs were benefiting these individuals.

We really need a space for LGBTQ individuals to support them with the cultural wraparound support services they really need on

arrival. Yes, there are so many organizations here supporting these individuals, but to some extent, they do not know the needs of Black people, especially those who are coming from the East Africa region.

Thank you so much.

• (1710)

[Translation]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: These people lived through horrors in Uganda and may have experienced similar things in Kenya or other neighbouring countries. What I'd like to know is this: After they have gone through all that, do they face challenges because of their LGBTQ identity or Black LGBTQ identity here, in Ontario, or in the rest of Canada? I'm talking about things like discrimination and violence. They are already scarred and traumatized from the horrors they have fled.

Do they unfortunately continue to experience certain challenges here, on Canadian soil?

[English]

Christopher Nkambwe: Discrimination still exists in Canada, especially against people from my country, Uganda. People come from these countries when it has already sunk in their heads that being LGBTQ is criminal. When they are here, they don't think about that. We are in a safe environment, but it doesn't stop them from discriminating against us.

We have many cases around that. When I organized the first annual Newcomers Pride in 2023, many people came. When the drag queens were entertaining us, people started throwing words at them. I had to come in and said, "What are you doing?" We had to call the police at that particular time. They came and supported us with that. We recorded that case.

On top of that, the case we recorded, again, during the homelessness crisis is what I just talked about. It was about the churches. There are so many LGBTQ individuals who are stranded on the streets of Toronto. The easiest place for them to stay at was the churches. They gave the churches.... Again, the people from Uganda coming here to preach the word of God are the same people who are hosting these individuals here. That makes no difference. Discrimination still exists in Canada.

[Translation]

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

We now go to Mr. Zuberi for five minutes.

[English]

Sameer Zuberi: Thank you, Mr. Chair and everyone for being here.

Mr. Backé, can you speak about how your organization operates and the services you give? I think you've helped some of the panelists here. Can you talk a bit about that?

Horst Backé: We're an organization that basically develops private sponsorship groups and raises funds to make them function. We work under the private sponsorship of refugees program.

We are different from many other organizations. We provide pre-arrival support, which is something we don't like to advertise, because it makes it look like we have unlimited funds. For people to come here with a minimum amount of trauma, we like to provide the support they need. Not everybody needs support, but most people realistically do need financial support and emotional support.

The lifeline of hope is really important. Having people experience the opportunity for hope is really important. Ongoing pre-arrival contact is also part of what we offer.

Sameer Zuberi: You talked about trauma. How do you deal with how people process trauma? Are there any particular methods or best practices that you have that are also unique?

Horst Backé: I wouldn't say we have best practices. We're a fairly small organization. One of our sponsorship groups has provided online counselling services and has provided funding for that. That's all privately raised money for that purpose.

When people come, we connect them with mental health services, if needed. The reality is that for most people, when they come, their lives are so much better right away. They feel really good in the first year, but it's in year two when reality sets in and they start getting stuck mentally.

• (1715)

Sameer Zuberi: Is it because...? When one has grown up in another country and then comes to Canada, there's this adjustment, but also this freedom where one can be oneself in terms of one's orientation identity. Being out of the environment where one grew up is also destabilizing. Is that part of it?

Horst Backé: Yes, it's the whole issue of settlement. Settlement doesn't happen right away. It takes many years, actually. Anybody who's moved from one place to another realizes that it takes a while.

Sameer Zuberi: Christopher, you spoke about how challenging things are here.

I'd like to open up the floor to Steven and Meddie.

I'd like to open it up to both of you about your experiences—and I know they might be different from Christopher's—of how you found Canada to be, as compared to your migration to here from your country of origin.

Christopher Nkambwe: I arrived in Canada on June 1, 2019. Before I left for Canada, I was a peer educator at the Most At Risk Populations Initiative, MARPI. That is the LGBTQ hospital that supports these individuals. As I was doing an outreach, I was raided in Kabalagala, in the suburbs of Kampala, and I managed to escape. By that time, I had already secured a visa to Canada.

When I arrived here, I went through a lot of challenges: finding housing, finding an organization to support me, finding legal aid to take me through my case, and finding employment. I even reached the extent of going to the central intake, and there was no bed available. The next small space was near the urinals, so I had to sleep

near the urinals so that I could be secure at night. I had to wonder how many newcomers have to go through the same challenges.

Like I said, four months after my arrival, I established The African Centre for Refugees in Ontario-Canada, and we support these individuals with wraparound support services. We have programs that support them in navigating the system. Due to the limited resources, we saw an influx in the number of refugees on the streets. If we had a space to welcome these individuals, at least there would be no such influx of refugees. We don't have any Black-led organizations that have an LGBTQ Black-led shelter to support these individuals. Like I said, these organizations are in existence. However, to some extent, they really don't know the needs of these individuals. If we had a space that was really welcoming to these individuals and centred to Blacks or people with lived experience, that would be good.

I'm glad to let you know that at The African Centre we are working with people with lived experience. However, due to the limited funding, when peers I work with find other opportunities, greener pastures, they have to go to organizations that pay them maybe \$28 per hour. We are a volunteer-led organization. For the years the organization has been in existence.... For the first three years, I was funding my own organization, until the city started to recognize the work of The African Centre for Refugees when the influx of refugees came. Now we have secured some funding from WAGE—that is, Women and Gender Equality Canada—to build the capacities of the organization, but we are still looking for more COA funding in order to have space.

Right now, I operate out of my apartment. As for the services, I take them on the road. If we have enough funding, we need enough space to call home. Also, if these people come from these countries.... I think I am very well known right from Uganda: "Oh, Christopher has an organization that supports these individuals." Before they come in, when they secure visas, they call and ask, "Oh, Chris, what are we going to do when we get there?" I just give them hope that when they get to Canada they will have a space to call home. That is my home. We are looking forward to funding to create a space for these individuals.

Thank you so much.

• (1720)

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Zuberi.

Now I would like to invite Madame Kronis to take the floor for five minutes.

Tamara Kronis: Thanks for that.

In the context of that knowledge that people in Uganda have of the work that you're doing, what impact does that have on people's lives and hope, both in Uganda and in the refugee camps?

Christopher Nkambwe: They hope they can get support from The African Centre for Refugees, but we don't have that mandate. We get so many requests for support. I refer them to Rainbow Railroad, which has the mandate to support these individuals. To some extent, if they are lacking basic needs—they need to buy food, they need to buy water, they need to buy a mattress, they need to buy blankets—I will send them \$50, if I have it, through Sendwave. As somebody said, \$10 can do at least something for these individuals. We don't have that budget, but I pick from my pocket to support these individuals.

Thank you.

Tamara Kronis: Mr. Ssentongo, is there anything you want to add around how the situation for 2SLGBTQ+ refugees in South Sudan and Kenya differs from that of other refugees who are there?

Meddie Ssentongo: Thank you, Madame Tamara.

What I would say about the people in Gorom in South Sudan, in Kakuma, and in Juba in South Sudan is that queer refugees face horizontal violence in verbal abuse and brutal physical violence at the hands of locals. We all know about the civil strife going on in South Sudan. In refugee camps, there is also violence at the hands of refugees. Queer refugees in both camps have been killed. I witnessed a shelter getting burned down and two LGBTI refugees being rushed to the hospital. One died right on the spot. They also face state-sanctioned violence and neglect. There is no police protection or follow-up, even when the crime is serious. Sometimes you may be arrested for reporting an assault, because you're queer.

Life is really, really challenging in both camps. I've been to Kakuma, but I'm getting information from sources on the ground in South Sudan. There's no difference from the situation they face in Kakuma. It's the same in South Sudan: documentation delayed, being outed. They're doing documentation, but because you are queer, you are left out. The only thing to do is sit and wait, but you're not waiting in peace. You're waiting in violence, assault and death.

Canada cannot fight or solve global injustice, but I think if the leadership works, we can get these people out.

Tamara Kronis: We talked a little bit about this in the first session. From the estimates we were given, I believe four million people in Uganda are situated in this place of non-safety. Getting them all out...especially in the context of the fact that there are always new people being born. They are living their lives. They come of age. They learn things about themselves that in the context of Uganda make it impossible for them to coexist in peace in the country in which they were born. In the long run, it will be impossible to get everyone out.

We have only a couple of minutes left. Do you have any recommendations or thoughts on what can be done to make Uganda a safer place—or a safe place? Safer isn't actually going to cut it in this particular circumstance. How do you make change on the ground? Where's the hope?

• (1725)

Meddie Ssentongo: To be honest, there can still be hope. In Kenya, the government is the one that recognizes refugees. If Canada works with UNHCR Kenya, at least UNHCR Kenya can start giving mandates to the refugees. It is well known that Kenya is

a homophobic country. If the Government of Kenya registers LGBTI people, we all know that it will not recognize them as refugees, because they are gay. I would suggest that at least UNHCR Kenya starts to do that—which they will do only if the subcommittee works hand in hand with them—and UNHCR Kenya takes over instead of the Government of Kenya.

Also, there were some programs you did back in the day. I mentioned what you did for Chechens and Afghans with those temporary programs. We can go through those ones. The Rainbow Railroad is only capable of helping 250 people. That's not enough.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Over to you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, for five minutes.

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

I don't have a lot of time, and I want to give the last word to one witness, in particular, but I'm going to start with Mr. Chagutah.

For the committee's benefit, I'd like to know what risks organizations that defend persecuted individuals face on the ground in Uganda.

[*English*]

Tigere Chagutah: Specific risks that we have documented include attacks on their person. Those are directed attacks on individual human rights defenders identified as fighting for the rights of LGBTIQI people. There are attacks in online spaces. Definitely, their rights in online spaces are also severely restricted.

We have also documented several types of attacks on their organizations and networks. If a human rights defender is known to associate with specific organizations, with specific networks, those are targeted by individuals and by the authorities. There are several other forms of targeting that we have documented.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chagutah. If there are other things you've documented, the committee would appreciate receiving that information, if you could send it to us.

Although it was tough for some to hear what this panel had to say, it was very important for us to hear from them. For the benefit of committee members, and hopefully the government and its ministers, I would like to give you the last word, Mr. Kabuye.

Is there anything that hasn't been said? Pretend you are speaking directly to the Prime Minister. What would you say to him if you could?

[*English*]

Steven Kabuye: Thank you.

First of all, I'll call on Canada to leverage its diplomatic weight and global voice. Canada must publicly and repeatedly condemn Uganda's anti-LGBTQI+ crimes and must demand accountability. Quiet diplomacy is no longer enough. We should raise this issue at the UN Human Rights Council, with the Commonwealth and in bilateral talks. Amnesty International and the international community must urgently put pressure on the Ugandan government to protect LGBTQI+ persons.

As Mrs. Kronis mentioned, there are four million of them. They cannot all be taken out of the country, so protecting them would be the next priority. Canada should make it clear that continued Ugandan persecution will have consequences for aid, trade and diplomatic relations.

Lastly, I would say to fund and partner with grassroots LGBTQI+ organizations. These organizations deal first-hand with these individuals who are at risk. The local civil society groups on the ground are doing life-saving, frontline work. They run hidden safe houses, provide medical and legal aid, and document abuses, even as their staff are arrested and their offices are raided.

Human Rights Watch documented that Ugandan authorities have shut down organizations that provide vital health, legal and mental health services, and have arrested and detained their staff. These brave local groups—including my own organization, Coloured Voices Media Foundation, and others—need flexible Canadian support now to continue providing emergency housing, counselling and legal aid for refugees and survivors.

• (1730)

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much.

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

[*English*]

I would like to thank all of our witnesses.

Thank you for being with us. Thanks for your good answers to the members' questions. Your answers enlightened this subcommittee. If any of you have another idea, suggestion or opinion, please feel free to write either to me or to the clerk.

It was a good meeting with the members regarding the 2SLGBTQ+ community.

Thank you for being here.

The meeting is suspended.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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