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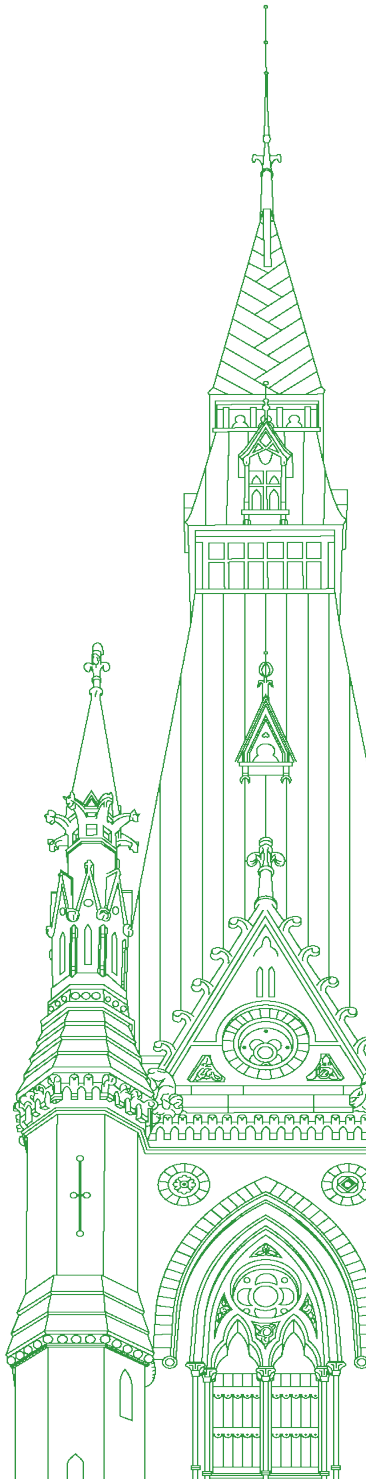

Chair: Fayçal El-Khoury

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

Monday, May 25, 2026

● (1550)

[*Translation*]

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

Welcome to meeting number 19 of the House of Commons Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the 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 on its study on internally and externally displaced people across the world.

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 witnesses and 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 now like to welcome the first panel of witnesses.

[*English*]

We have, as an individual, Ann Fitz-Gerald, director, Balsillie School of International Affairs, who is with us by video conference. We have Dr. Ardi Imseis, professor, Faculty of Law, Queen's University. From Doctors Without Borders, we have Michael Lawson, humanitarian representative to Canada. From the Global Centre for Pluralism, we have Meredith Preston McGhie, secretary-general, and Dr. Michael Youash, senior manager, global analysis. From the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, we have Youssef Jai, senior policy adviser appearing by video conference.

Welcome to you all.

Now I would like to give every one of you five minutes for your introduction. Please do your best to respect the time.

I would like to welcome Ann Fitz-Gerald to take the floor for five minutes.

Madame, the floor is yours.

Ann Fitz-Gerald (Director, Balsillie School of International Affairs, As an Individual): Honourable Chair and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for this opportunity to address the issue of internally and externally displaced persons globally.

Today, the world is experiencing levels of displacement unprecedented in modern history. More than 120 million people are currently forcibly displaced worldwide. The majority remain internally displaced within their own countries, while tens of millions have crossed borders as refugees or asylum seekers.

Across many regions, conflict is no longer driven by a single cause, but by an interaction among governance fragility, climate stress, economic exclusion, demographic pressures, food insecurity, transnational criminal economies and geopolitical competition.

My first key message is this. Conflict today is persistent, ongoing and driven by the collective impact of multiple reinforcing pressures. This is where work on the humanitarian-development-peace nexus is helpful. It moves away from siloed policy approaches and toward instruments that seek to address the collective systems-based effect of the pressures and the shift—the objective—to broader resilience capacity and resilience governance, as well as new funding models that can support this.

My second message is that the character of conflict is changing in ways that intensify displacement and complicate humanitarian protection. Modern conflicts increasingly target critical civilian infrastructure, telecommunications, dams, water facilities, energy grids, hospitals and more. Armed groups and state actors recognize that infrastructure disruption weakens governments, fragments societies and undermines economic life. Autonomous systems, new weapons capability and even cyber-hacking are enabling these disruptions from afar.

This has direct implications for displacement. Populations are forced to flee not only the violence but also the collapse of water systems, electricity, health care and food networks. Increasingly, displaced populations disperse into rural and peri-urban areas that are difficult for humanitarian organizations to access based on the growing incidence of urban-based warfare, which is subject to precision strikes on critical infrastructure. This is challenging both humanitarian access and the protection-of-civilians agenda more broadly.

Technology-based humanitarian support has become important beyond mapping and tracking applications, which have been developed in recent years. There is a growing need for autonomous support systems, trusted communications networks, fact-checking tools and information authentication mechanisms to protect vulnerable populations from misinformation, exploitation and manipulation.

My third message concerns human rights implications for people on the move.

Displacement drivers are increasingly blurred, with individuals fleeing conflict. As international legal and institutional frameworks tend to treat these drivers separately, many displaced individuals fall into protection gaps. Along migration routes, rights protections remain uneven. There is often a patchwork of legal mechanisms, inconsistent asylum systems and differing standards of protection among countries of origin, transit and destination.

One particularly important principle is that of non-detention and how individuals on the move should not be criminalized through detention-based approaches. Registration systems, temporary documentation and rights-based administration are far more effective and humane responses than detention practices, which often deepen vulnerability and trauma.

Recent policy shifts in North America and Europe also raise important concerns. Increasing restrictions under safe third country frameworks and externalized migration arrangements sometimes risk pushing vulnerable populations towards more dangerous migration routes while weakening procedural protections.

My final message is that Canada has an opportunity to exercise principled leadership in this space. This includes investments in digital systems, support for humanitarian innovation and responsible technology deployment into fragile environments.

Canada can continue advocating for a rights-centred approach to displacement—one that recognizes the dignity and rights of people on the move, regardless of whether they are internally displaced, refugees, asylum seekers or migrants affected by overlapping crises. It can do this through the global compact for migration, the global compact on internally displaced people and the UN's "Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement".

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

● (1555)

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Fitz-Gerald. I appreciate that you kept to your allotted speaking time.

I now invite Ardi Imseis, a professor at Queen's University, to take the floor for five minutes.

[*English*]

Dr. Ardi Imseis (Professor, Faculty of Law, Queen's University, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I shall address the most prolonged refugee problem in the post-World War II era, namely the case of the Palestine refugees, and what Canada can do about it. I do so as one of the very few Canadians who have ever served in senior roles with both UNRWA and the UNHCR, which I did between 2002 and 2014.

I have three points.

First, UNRWA's mandate is part of what the United Nations has determined is its "permanent responsibility" for the question of Palestine. This responsibility originates in the unsuccessful attempt by the United Nations General Assembly to partition Palestine without the consent of the Palestinian people in 1947 and, of course, the ensuing "Nakba" of 1948, during which at least 750,000 Palestinians were forcibly exiled from their country.

UNRWA was created in 1949 to provide direct relief and works programs to the Palestine refugees until their plight was resolved in accordance with international law, including their right to return, to restitution and to compensation; however, these rights have consistently been violated by Israel, which has forbidden the return of the Palestine refugees simply because they are not Jewish. As a result, the UN General Assembly has repeatedly renewed the mandate of UNRWA, most recently for a further three years, in December 2025. Today, some 5.9 million Palestine refugees are registered with UNRWA, making them eligible for education, health, relief and social services in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and occupied Palestine.

This committee has heard assertions that UNRWA's practice of extending refugee status to descendants of Palestine refugees is an anomaly. That is incorrect. Under international law, when durable solutions remain elusive over successive generations, international refugee protection—whether done through UNHCR or UNRWA—extends to the descendants of refugees on the basis of family unity. To blame UNRWA for the continuation of the Palestine refugee problem is, quite frankly, a baseless canard.

Second, the Palestine refugees are today facing their most difficult moment in history. Since October 7, 2023, Israel has killed or injured approximately a quarter of a million Palestinians through starvation and indiscriminate bombardment. The vast majority of them were Palestine refugees. A further two million Palestinians have been forcibly displaced by Israel.

In January 2024, the International Court of Justice determined that Israel is plausibly engaged in genocide in Gaza. Hundreds of UNRWA staff, together with their families, have been killed and injured while hundreds of UNRWA installations, including its headquarters in occupied East Jerusalem, have been unlawfully destroyed, damaged or commandeered by Israel.

The Secretary-General of the United Nations has described UNRWA as “the backbone of the United Nations humanitarian relief operations” in Gaza. Citing spurious allegations that upwards of 10% of UNRWA staff are terrorists, in October 2024, Israel passed legislation banning UNRWA operations in occupied Palestine. In October 2025, the International Court of Justice determined that Israel's allegations are wholly unsubstantiated, that its legislation is unlawful and that Israel is obliged to facilitate UNRWA operations in occupied Palestine. Israel, of course, refuses to do this.

It is therefore vital that Canada puts pressure on Israel to reverse course.

Finally, while UNRWA is vital to helping Palestine refugees, it must be said that no measure of support for agency operations can replace the need for a durable solution. It is often overlooked that Israel's decades-long ethnic cleansing of the Palestine refugees, its wholesale dispossession and usurpation of their property, its mass denationalization of that population and its denial of those refugees' right to return and to restitution constitute gross and systematic violations of international law, all of which have been documented by the United Nations for decades and continue to this very day.

Therefore, in addition to Canada's principled support for UNRWA's humanitarian operations, Ottawa must redouble its efforts to help find a durable solution to the Palestine refugee problem, including the implementation of their right to return, to restitution and to compensation in accordance with international law. Until such time as Canada does so, it must also immediately open its doors to Palestinian refugees fleeing the ravages in Gaza and elsewhere in the occupied Palestinian territory.

Thank you so very much, Mr. Chair. I look forward to questions.

● (1600)

The Chair: Thank you, Dr. Imseis.

Now I would like to invite Mr. Michael Lawson to take the floor for five minutes, please.

The floor is yours.

Michael Lawson (Humanitarian Representative to Canada, Doctors Without Borders): Thank you, Mr. Chair and members of this subcommittee, for inviting me to speak to you today on the subject of internally and externally displaced populations.

I'm here representing Doctors Without Borders, or Médecins sans Frontières, better known as MSF, which delivers emergency humanitarian medical care to people affected by conflict and crisis around the world.

[*Translation*]

MSF is not an organization that specializes in migration issues, but we are direct witnesses to the humanitarian and health consequences faced by displaced populations. The United Nations estimates that 136 million people worldwide have been forcibly displaced, and many of them are among our patients in the more than 70 countries where we operate.

[*English*]

Our job, as MSF, is to provide medical care to people who have nowhere else to turn, and it is hard to imagine anyone who fits that description more than people who have been forced to flee their homes to escape violence, persecution or disasters. Many have been exposed to significant levels of trauma or require advanced levels of psychological care in addition to what are sometimes complex medical needs. Shelters are often overcrowded and under-resourced, and the risk of disease transmission is high. Forcibly displaced people must also frequently depend on organizations such as ours for medical care, and on other agencies for shelter, food, drinking water and protection.

Unfortunately, this global support system is facing collapse. Widespread cuts to international humanitarian assistance budgets by traditional donor countries have left response agencies, in many crisis zones, unable to provide the services needed to help displaced people to survive. Our organization sees first-hand the devastating gaps in the global response to forced displacement that countries such as Canada can and must take steps to fill.

The ongoing conflict in Sudan is one example. It has been called the world's largest humanitarian crisis. It is also the largest displacement crisis, with 4.5 million people driven by violence into neighbouring countries and a staggering 9.1 million people displaced inside Sudan itself. People who have been forced by this conflict to leave their homes, in search of health and safety, have struggled to find either. Within Sudan, the places where people seek refuge have been deliberately targeted by the warring parties, and dire living conditions are increasing the risk of outbreaks of diseases, including measles and cholera.

The situation is little better for those who have managed to flee across Sudan's borders. In the informal settlements in Chad and South Sudan, living conditions are frequently abysmal. Displaced arrivals face overcrowding, disease outbreaks and limited access to food or clean water.

Sudan is one example. Around the world, from the Bay of Bengal to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, from Gaza to Haiti, violence, conflict and disasters are driving displacement and creating a multitude of large-scale humanitarian crises, each of which requires a scaled-up response.

Unfortunately, we are meeting at a time when the humanitarian response activities around the world are scaling down because of funding cuts, even as needs are going up. As an independently funded organization, MSF continues to respond to many of the world's worst emergencies, but we are finding ourselves increasingly alone, and we cannot hope to meet such immense needs by ourselves.

Canadians have rightly prided themselves on this country's principled and committed approach to humanitarian assistance, which has prioritized meeting the needs of the world's most vulnerable people, even when others have conspicuously failed to do so. It is now more urgent than ever for Canada to remain committed to these principles and to expand its response to humanitarian needs at the very moment when others are turning away.

In its next federal budget, therefore, it is crucial that Canada's government announce an increase in international humanitarian assistance funding and demonstrate to the rest of the world that providing assistance to people with nowhere left to turn isn't just a feel-good spending option that can be cut when times are hard. Rather, it is an obligation based on principles and values that must be upheld.

I'd like to end these remarks by emphasizing that funding alone is not enough. MSF also works in the displacement camps in Bangladesh, where more than one million Rohingya refugees have remained confined for nearly nine years, since violence drove them from their homes in Myanmar. Recent funding cuts have decimated the services, including food rations, on which they depend. It is crucial for these cuts to be reversed in order to ensure their survival. That is the essence of humanitarian assistance.

The Rohingya and others like them cannot be left in perpetual limbo, with no chance of return and no future ahead. Canada and others must also put in the work to find a political solution that can make a future possible and give people who have been left with nothing a reason to hope. Global indifference and, indeed, hopelessness cannot be an option.

I'd be happy to discuss all these examples and what else Canada can do in response, in more detail, in the question session that follows.

● (1605)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lawson.

I would now like to invite Ms. Meredith Preston McGhie to take the floor, please.

Meredith Preston McGhie (Secretary General, Global Centre for Pluralism): Thank you, Chair and subcommittee members, for inviting us to appear.

One in every 70 people on earth is impacted by displacement. The Global Centre for Pluralism is not an operational, humanitarian or settlement agency. Our testimony therefore focuses on addressing causes of displacement, the challenges in societies in which refugees are settling and tools to help prevent and resolve conflicts. These things can enable return, stem the displacement and better equip societies to welcome displaced persons for all to thrive.

Our research shows that conflict, persecution and instability, key drivers of displacement, arise when societies see diversity as a threat and pluralism has broken down. These harms fall most on marginalized communities, but over time they weaken entire societies, fuelling further cycles of displacement.

Our global pluralism monitor research identifies trends that have translated into conflict and mass displacement. Core findings include the magnitude of the impact of a prolonged weaponization of identity on conflict and displacement, the necessity of having both legal frameworks to support resettlement and social-cultural programs to guard against scapegoating and promote social cohesion, the importance of front-ending pluralist approaches for post-conflict returns to be durable and avoid leading to renewed conflict, and the importance of engaging marginal and conflict-affected communities directly in programs, policies and peace processes.

Our pluralism monitor for Sudan shows the consequences of state-led policies and practices that centre diversity as a threat. The official state ideology of unity in conformity, and the exclusion of groups not conforming to majority Arab identity, are at the heart of causes of the conflict that now represents the gravest humanitarian and displacement crisis in the world. The return of displaced populations requires durable peace to prevent repeated displacement. This requires a focus on fostering social cohesion among both returnees and receiving communities.

In Syria, we see the challenges posed by massive levels of displacement to the country's recovery. With 13.5 million people, nearly half the pre-war population, displaced since the beginning of the conflict, the impact of the war—coupled with economic stresses and the influx of returnees—has deepened tensions between Syria's diverse communities. Without proactive strategies to promote social cohesion, the combined impact of displacement and economic decline may lead to further fragmentation and instability.

The physical and psychological toll of displacement must also be considered. Findings at a recent convening of displaced Sudanese youth highlight psychological distress, as well as hopelessness and exhaustion, as major impacts of the war, along with depression and social fragmentation. These things limit the ability of a society to recover and avoid future cycles of conflict and displacement.

Severe restrictions on civic space for youth inside Sudan create conditions in which there is almost no safe space for independent civil action outside humanitarian work. Displacement has affected education, livelihoods, mobility and social stability. This highlights the importance of support to receiving countries, as two-thirds of refugees are in protracted displacement situations globally.

Strategies to integrate displaced populations into the societies require a pluralist focus. This includes combining practical policy supports, such as citizenship pathways and access to services, with efforts to build belonging, social cohesion and connection to receiving communities.

Millions of displaced Sudanese youth face significant challenges as they aim to engage economically and seek connection, community and dignified livelihoods. Legal status is the root barrier. Work permits and fees, residency documentation and bank account access are structural impediments, not simply bureaucratic inconveniences. Even when strong legal frameworks are present, without an intentional pluralism focus, social hostility and policy restrictions undermine the inclusion of displaced populations. We see this across countries that we have assessed.

These findings across all of our global pluralism monitor reports highlight the need for holistic approaches to support constructive inclusion of displaced persons, engagement with receiving populations and connection to reconciliation processes for returns in post-conflict cases.

We have extensive further findings that we would be pleased to share with the committee through our written submission and through the question period.

● (1610)

Canada has been a global leader in upholding refugee commitments. The policies and practices of pluralism provide the foundation for Canada's success in receiving and integrating refugees here over time. Canada can draw on these traditions and its expertise to support the holistic actions necessary to address the challenges of displacement globally.

We look forward to your questions. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Preston McGhie.

I would now like to invite Mr. Youssef Jai to take the floor for five minutes.

Youssef Jai (Senior Policy Adviser, Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre): Honourable Chair and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to brief you today on the issue of internal displacement.

I represent the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, a Geneva-based non-governmental organization established in 1998 as part of the Norwegian Refugee Council. For over 25 years, IDMC has provided the international community with data and analyses on internal displacement caused by conflict, violence and disasters. We monitor internal displacement in over 200 countries and territories. Our mission is to highlight the plight of internally displaced persons—IDPs—who are often overlooked, and to inform decision-making with reliable data. We do not collect primary data; rather, we gather, curate and validate information from a variety of sources, including governments.

What do our data tell us about the scale of internal displacement? We released our annual "Global Report on Internal Displacement" just two weeks ago. As of the end of 2025, there were 82.2 million IDPs globally. Roughly two-thirds of forcibly displaced people are IDPs. This figure includes 68.6 million people displaced by conflict and violence across 54 countries and territories, as well as 13.6 million people displaced by disasters across 82 countries and territories. While the total number of IDPs fell slightly compared with 2024, it remained close to its historical peak. The decline was partly linked to reported returns, including in Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Syria, many of which took place under fragile conditions. It was also linked to decreased data availability, partly because of aid cuts.

In addition to tracking the number of IDPs, we also monitor displacements or movements, which count instances of displacement within a given year, not individuals—since one person can be displaced multiple times—to get a sense of the dynamic nature of the phenomenon. Conflict and violence drove a record 32.3 million internal displacements in 2025, a 60% increase compared with 2024, surpassing disaster displacements for the first time on record. Iran and the Democratic Republic of Congo together represented two-thirds of the total.

Disasters also continued to drive large-scale movements. Storms, floods, wildfires and other sudden and slow-onset hazards triggered close to 30 million internal displacements in 140 countries and territories, a 35% decrease compared with the exceptionally high level in 2024 but still 13% above the annual average of the past decade. Many of these displacements were pre-emptive evacuations, showing that displacement can be a positive coping mechanism in disaster-prone countries. Many of these displacements were not short-term, although data on the duration of disaster displacement remain a major gap. Although IDMC figures treat conflict and disaster as distinct triggers, the reality is that these factors overlap in many countries, contributing to prolonged and repeated displacement.

Behind the data are millions of lives disrupted, communities torn apart and children deprived of their futures. The hardships faced by IDPs are severe. These include loss of shelter, safety, livelihoods and education. With the growing impacts of climate change and the multiplication of humanitarian crises, and in the absence of durable solutions, the number of IDPs is likely to remain high.

The 1998 guiding principles on internal displacement affirm that national governments bear the primary responsibility of addressing internal displacement. Internal displacement is surely a human rights and humanitarian issue, but it can't be only that. In 2019, at the request of 57 member states, including Canada, the UN Secretary-General established a high-level panel on internal displacement, which issued a seminal report that led to the adoption of his action agenda on internal displacement.

A key takeaway from these initiatives has been the call to shift from short-term humanitarian aid to more developmental approaches. With strong government leadership—where feasible—and appropriate international support, the cycle of protracted displacement can be broken. Today's IDPs can be prevented from becoming tomorrow's refugees, and durable solutions can be achieved. Positive developments have started in several countries, but the challenge of collectively sustaining momentum and accelerating progress to address internal displacement, in a time of declining international solidarity and respect for international law, remains.

We hope Canada, which co-chaired the Group of Friends on Solutions to Internal Displacement in Geneva until recently, will continue to demonstrate steadfast commitment to this important issue.

Thank you for your attention.

● (1615)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Jai.

I would like to thank all of our witnesses for their good introductions.

Now we'll go to the first round of questions and answers.

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

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

Thank you to the witnesses for appearing today on this important study.

I'd like to begin my questions with Ann Fitz-Gerald.

Ann, it's good to see you after so long. It's nice to see that you've maintained a strong command of all these files.

I want to dig a little deeper into your testimony with my first questions. How do new transformative technologies play a role in driving both external and internal displacement? How can these technologies help?

Ann Fitz-Gerald: Thank you very much for your question. It's an important one.

I come to this debate from a conflict and security lens. That really leads me to analyze how conflict and wider security dynamics lead to that displacement and force people to move and become internally displaced. I look at the way wars are being fought now. Solutions are data-driven, and many are based on digital platforms and new weapons systems, systems that are overcoming large-weapon systems of global leaders with military capability.

I say that because we live in an intangibles world in an intangibles economy, which is data driven. It's the most valuable asset for any organization. With the deployment of resources into military and defence budgets at the moment, there is a huge injection of dual-usage technology support. “Dual-usage” means, of course, use for civilian purposes and use for defence purposes.

Canada can play an additional role in that investment by bringing in rules, protocols and norms, which are very underdeveloped in other parts of the world, for those dual-usage technologies, especially in the form of humanitarian technologies and peace tech—the responsible and safe use. Thus, the data of internally displaced people would not be manipulated or used for exploitative purposes. That's one of many examples.

Canada, as a principal leader in this space, can stand for the rights and the dignity of these groups. In trying to build internal capacity to improve resilience and governance, as well as continuing funding and supporting frontline humanitarian emergencies, it can bring a sense of rules-based norms and principles to how that technology is being used. We've seen how data has been used against people in such countries as Lebanon and Afghanistan: biometric data, border-crossing data. It's because governance lags behind the use of the technology. Canada has a real role to play in that space.

● (1620)

Shuvaloy Majumdar: Thank you for that.

We know that many of the regimes behind the displacement of people are habitual abusers of that data and in fact weaponize it with the support of authoritarians in Beijing and elsewhere. They share best practices in this marketplace. I'm very grateful for your assessment of how technology in this disruptive time can inform a positive outcome for displaced people.

Let me ask you for another perspective on this. We have a lot of downsizing of international aid budgets. We've seen it here in Canada, tragically, and we see it around the world. In this downsizing, what role can Canada play in supporting the rights of internally and externally driven persons or groups, particularly given the nature of conflict dynamics that drive this displacement?

Ann Fitz-Gerald: Canada can help in a number of ways.

The first is in capacity building. This is largely inexpensive and can be, if done properly, very effective in its delivery. Canadians, especially Canadians working abroad in humanitarian and development capacities, are trusted. We had a very good experience with our MDP program, the military development program, when we had advisers in countries. We've seen this in development and humanitarian capacities.

This can link into the work going on with the UN right now—something I'm involved with—in trying to push forward this synergized and collective approach to humanitarianism, development and peace. This is breaking the silos, taking a systems-based analysis and making recommendations that address the system-based pressures, not just the siloed pressures. Canada has an important role to play. We have excellent higher education programs in this space as well.

The second is deploying advisers to help make systems more resilient in-country. As I said, Canadians are trusted and knowledgeable in this area. We have a number of advisers in the room today who work in-country on these issues. It's much better to develop internally safe, responsible and effective systems than to allow migration to go outside the borders, if it can stay well managed inside of the borders and these groups are protected with all the status and benefits that they should have. Sometimes these governments need to develop more resilient systems—to absorb shock when it happens—that are made up and informed based on that collective analysis.

I would put in a strong vote not just for sustained funding at the emergency coal face but also for capacity building.

Shuvaloy Majumdar: I think we only have a few seconds left.

You made reference to economic exclusion and how states need to build resilience and systems around ensuring that they prevent the spillover of migration across borders and build the systems inside these domestic environments to prevent that displacement.

Could you clarify how these dynamics risk entrenching or widening inequality among displaced populations across different phases of displacement?

Ann Fitz-Gerald: I'm going to draw a connection between displacement—

The Chair: Can you give a quick answer, please? The time is up.

Ann Fitz-Gerald: We're seeing countries that are conflict-affected being slowly robbed of their data and their ability to capture wealth in the future. We're seeing a new program in the U.S. that is dubbed “health aid” but is a program meant to gain unfettered access in perpetuity to the data of the citizens outside those borders for economic innovation purposes. That is going to lead to more marginalization and more groups on the move because of huge economic inequalities in the future.

● (1625)

The Chair: Thank you.

Now I would like to invite Ms. Dhillon to take the floor for seven minutes, please.

Anju Dhillon (Dorval—Lachine—LaSalle, Lib.): Thank you to all of our witnesses for being here today.

I'll start with Mr. Lawson.

With the service provided by Doctors Without Borders to those who are displaced, often the personnel who work for Doctors Without Borders are constantly under threat. I'll ask a bit about that.

Those who work in this context of violence put their lives at risk. Can you talk to us a bit about that?

Michael Lawson: Are you referring to the staff of Doctors Without Borders themselves? It's probably worth emphasizing that the makeup of our staff around the world is almost entirely people who live in and are from the countries in which we operate. They do almost the entirety of the work that we do. They are also frequently affected by the same crises and the same conflicts to which we are responding. Many of our colleagues do find themselves displaced, depending on the situation, and are forced to make those accommodations. However, they continue providing emergency medical and humanitarian care where it's needed.

To emphasize only those staff members and people who are providing that care...it is a much larger context than that. It is the entirety of the people who are affected that we need to keep in mind here.

In all of these situations, we are finding the same thing. We are finding that the capacity to respond to the needs that exist of people specifically who have been displaced.... As I said in my introductory remarks, people find themselves in exceedingly difficult situations with few options for getting out of them. They become almost entirely dependent on humanitarian assistance and aid. In view of the fact that so much of that assistance is now under threat—it has been reduced by funding cuts—the challenge, which was already exceedingly high, is now even more difficult.

Anju Dhillon: In June 2025, MSF put out an article about fear becoming a defining feature of migration journeys, as many refugees and migrants experience prolonged, anticipatory fear linked to violence, insecurity and shifting border policies. There's vicarious trauma. There's also long-term and generational trauma. Sometimes this continues over many generations.

Can you speak to us about this? Also, what types of mental health supports are provided?

Michael Lawson: Absolutely. An often-overlooked aspect of the challenges that are facing people who have been forcibly displaced is the mental health aspect and the psychological trauma that many people have to endure.

Being forced from your home in the first place is in itself often a traumatic experience. As we have seen throughout many of the places around the world where we work, people who are on the move, who have been forcibly displaced, are frequently exposed to significant levels of violence, even as their journeys progress. They find very few options for safety, so it's absolutely fundamental to provide psychological care and mental health services to people who have been displaced in every dimension of their journeys. For those who remain confined in displacement camps or who are moving onwards, it is a fundamental need that is frequently unmet.

For MSF—Doctors Without Borders—it is always a component of the work that we do in virtually every displacement context in which we work. We're aware of the higher levels of trauma that people experience, so we continue to prioritize that. As mentioned in my comments at the beginning, we do frequently see ourselves alone in the provision of this care across a number of different contexts.

Anju Dhillon: Women and girls are at very high risk of being trafficked, because they are displaced, they're in refugee camps and transit areas.

What measures can be taken to better address this issue and to protect them?

● (1630)

Michael Lawson: Thank you very much for that question, because this is also a frequently overlooked dimension of displacement as a context.

This has always been something that should be a very high priority in any humanitarian response and any response to the needs of displaced peoples. As you have said, people who have been forced from their homes are placed in contexts in which they do not have the usual safeties and protections. People are at risk. Women and girls are at particular risk of exposure to gender-based violence.

Even outside large-scale displacement camps, when the humanitarian response is insufficient.... We often find that, for example, something as simple as lighting is not available in a camp, and you suddenly have people travelling at night to go to a latrine that is far away. This is because there are not sufficient resources in place. All these tiny pieces create more and more risk, particularly for women and girls in a displacement environment.

Regarding internally displaced people, we look at Haiti as a displacement example that often gets overlooked in that context. MSF operates a clinic that is dedicated to sexual and gender-based violence in Port-au-Prince. We have seen a significant increase in the number of survivors who are seeking care at our clinic, who have been displaced within Port-au-Prince. We've seen an immense scale-up of displacement within that context.

An absolute priority concern when it comes to any displacement context is this increased exposure to sexual and gender-based violence that puts people at risk.

Anju Dhillon: I have half a minute. Would you like to add anything else?

Michael Lawson: All of these things speak to the fact that we are talking about people who are in a particularly vulnerable space and are exposed to a number of immense risks. The more we see the humanitarian response diminishing in all of these contexts, the more we see all these needs increasing, and we see the risk exposure increasing as well. This is an imbalance that needs to be addressed.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dhillon.

[*Translation*]

I now invite Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe to take the floor for seven minutes.

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

I'd like to thank all the witnesses appearing before the committee today.

Mr. Imseis, as a professor at Queen's University's faculty of law, could you tell us to what extent the international legal framework adequately protects people who are internally displaced?

[*English*]

Dr. Ardi Imseis: In international law, there are two subsets of persons, broadly speaking, who concern the international community. We refer to these people as “people of concern”. There are refugees, and there are internally displaced persons.

The main difference between them has to do with one simple factor: In one group, internally displaced persons, people do not cross an internationally recognized border during the course of their movement. The reasons for movement are similar. As we've heard from testimonies today, there are far more IDPs—internally displaced persons—than there are refugees in the world.

There is an attempt by the international community of states to bridge the gap between these two regimes. That's why we have reference to the New York declaration that was done some years ago. We try to bring to bear the same regulatory framework that exists for refugees under the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees in principle, at least, to IDPs. We're not there yet. Under international law, the rules governing how IDPs are treated, what their rights are and what states are obliged to do vis-à-vis IDPs are not one-for-one matches with what refugee law requires.

There is what we call a body of soft law. Here I refer to a series of principles done by Francis Deng. We call them the Deng principles concerning IDPs. There is also the New York declaration, which was done some years ago after the Deng principles. When we read this soft body of law together—and when I say soft, I'm referring to non-binding principles that states would adhere to as a matter of comity, interest, morality and so on—we see the progressive development of a body of rules and norms applying to refugees under the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees that is similar for IDPs. They are almost a one-to-one match, though not completely.

My point is that Canada and all states have every interest in ensuring that the body of law that exists as soft law governing IDP treatment under international practice be codified in a treaty of its own, or at least that there be some attempt to make binding these norms as they relate to IDPs.

As a final point, that is not to say that states that are engaged with or faced with an IDP problem do not have binding legal obligations vis-à-vis these people. They do. They're very robust. We see this not only in refugee law principles but in human rights law, such as the 1966 covenants on economic, social and cultural rights; on civil and political rights; and so on. Then we see customary principles of international law that apply to refugees but also to IDPs, most particularly the duty of non-refoulement, that is, not sending somebody back to a place where they have a well-founded fear of persecution.

That's the long and the short of it. I could give a whole lecture on it, but I will spare you.

● (1635)

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much for your answer.

In my view, this is the basis of the solution in the short, medium and long term. The challenge we're currently facing, based on what several witnesses and representatives from the groups we've met with have told us, is that major international organizations are unable to function effectively when it comes to defending internally displaced people. The same is true for refugees in general. There are also international refugee rights that are being completely disregarded.

The question we're asking ourselves right now is whether we should create new international organizations. Should we make changes from within? Is that even possible, given the current geopolitical situation? We need only look at the United Nations and the Security Council.

What would allow major international organizations to ultimately reach this solution?

[*English*]

Dr. Ardi Imseis: My approach would be to use what we have and not shoot too far. That is to say, if we attempt to create a whole new treaty, that will be very difficult, because you'll need political will on the part of 193 member states of the United Nations and possibly more if you count non-member observer states of the UN and so on. That requires a great deal of heavy lifting.

The New York declaration, which was passed some years ago, was the product of some two or three years of heavy negotiating on these general principles. We need to back the United Nations on that.

Canada can play a very important role in ensuring that the United Nations bodies that are mandated with discharging their obligation under the New York declaration, such as UNHCR and the IOM, have the human and material resources they need to provide sufficient protection for persons of concern, whether they're refugees on the one hand or IDPs on the other.

At this time, I think all of us would admit that resources are very hard to come by, and there seems to be an increase in global conflict and geopolitical conflict. This is where Canada can step in to fill a gap and play a serious leadership role.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You may agree with me that the problem we're currently facing is that Canada seems to be following a trend that we are seeing not only domestically but also globally: increasing defence spending while cutting spending on international development. It is as though these two envelopes must be linked in some way, whereas, in my view, they should be treated as completely separate.

Indeed, we are currently seeing a rise in conflicts, an increase in defence spending and sharp cuts to international aid, whether in Europe, Japan, Canada or the United States, in the case of USAID, the U.S. Agency for International Development. This places us in a situation that could potentially cause these problems to grow exponentially if all the factors I've just mentioned continue to compound.

How can we get out of this at this point? Is Canada heading in the right direction?

[*English*]

Dr. Ardi Imseis: Based on what you describe, I would say they aren't headed in the wrong direction, but Canada is not alone.

I agree with you wholeheartedly that each of these factors—the rise in geopolitical conflict, isolationism on the part of some of the great powers in the world, the complete undermining of the international rules-based legal order and so on—can be looked at in isolation of one another, and they must not be. Our foreign policy needs to be well-rounded in order to understand that, if we're going to pour money into defence, at the end of that is war, and at the end of war are the internally displaced and refugees. Inevitably, the “problem” or “burden” that needs to be shared, as UNHCR calls it.... The refugees will come back to us. All of these things are connected.

● (1640)

The Chair: Thank you.

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

Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.): I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here and for the very interesting testimony that's coming forth.

I would like to continue with Professor Imseis along the lines of what you were speaking about, just now, with respect to international law and the regression of its implementation. Where do you see things going into the future with respect to this? How do you see our restoring the respect of it to ensure that it again becomes the guide by which we address conflict and migration, displacement, etc.?

Dr. Ardi Imseis: Thank you very much for the question. It's an excellent one.

I must say that I was rather pleased when Mr. Carney delivered his speech at Davos. In fact, I taught it to my students the next day, with much glee.

I was crestfallen, however, some weeks later. It was four weeks later or so when Mr. Carney prevaricated and was not very clear on what Canada's position should be in places like Iran, with respect to the United States and Israel's unlawful use of force there and the aggression against Iran, or indeed in Venezuela, and so on.

The point I'm raising here is that we are only as good as our ability to apply international law universally and treat like cases alike. That is how I would answer the question. I think that Carney showed leadership. The Prime Minister was very good at Davos. The general sense I get is that he understands what's at stake with respect to our relationship with the United States, which is extremely important. However, Canada can show leadership, and if it does, others will follow. Other middle powers will follow and, indeed, the global majority will follow—that is to say the global south. They will see, at long last, a state that takes seriously the international rule of law by applying it universally across the board, regardless.

With respect to internally displaced or refugee populations, a perfect example that's relevant to Canada is the manner in which we correctly and generously responded to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, dealing with the Ukraine refugees who came to Canada. Our neighbourhoods were welcoming; our government was welcoming, and we had all of these temporary visa programs in place—and rightly so. This showed leadership on Canada's part. Juxtapose that, only two years later, against the treatment by Canada—or not, if you like—of the Palestine refugee populations who were affected by what's going on there. Clearly, these are like cases. Both have foreign military occupations, both are the result of aggression and, at least in one case, a plausible genocide, if you take the words of the International Court of Justice seriously. However, Canada was not applying these principles equally and fairly, and that is the problem.

Canada can show leadership, but it comes down to political will. To each and every one of us, are we serious about international law? If we are, we'll do the right thing and apply it universally.

Sameer Zuberi: You spoke about Palestine just now, Professor Imseis, and I would like to pull Mr. Lawson into this also.

A lot of people ask why people focus on Palestine. In your introductory remarks, you mentioned that this is the longest ongoing displacement concern in the world, on the face of the earth today.

Mr. Lawson, would you like to share some insights as to why that is?

Mr. Imseis, you can do so after.

Why do people raise this issue time and again?

Michael Lawson: Do you mean to ask why people raise the issue of displacement in Palestine time and again?

● (1645)

Sameer Zuberi: Yes.

Michael Lawson: I can only answer that question from the perspective of an organization that provides humanitarian assistance to people who have been displaced, in among other causes, for their need to access humanitarian assistance. I can't speak to why this topic is raised more than any other. I can speak to the fact that it is certainly not the only displacement crisis happening around the world to which we are responding, creating the immense needs that need to be addressed. However, it's important to emphasize that we are talking about a population that does not have anywhere to go. There has not been a response specifically to the displacement needs to ensure that people have access to the care they need and to what they need to survive. In fact, there has been a specific reduction in humanitarian access inside Gaza in particular.

The fact that this is happening in full view of the world, in full view in one of the most covered crises.... As MSF, we have visibility on a number of similar displacement crises and political crises that do not get the attention. The fact that we are seeing in full view the reduction and impediments to humanitarian assistance when the needs are so very clear is perhaps one of the most disappointing aspects of this, and it's why it continues to need the attention that's focused on it.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Zuberi.

Now I would like to invite Ms. Cody to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Connie Cody (Cambridge, CPC): Thank you.

I'd like to direct my question to Meredith Preston McGhie, if I could, please.

Based on your extensive work in mediation between both state and non-state actors amidst conflicts that result in the mass displacement of ethnic communities—particularly in supporting UN efforts in parts of Africa, Asia and Kosovo—what do you think is the biggest threat facing displaced people right now, and what regions are most affected?

Meredith Preston McGhie: First of all, it's a huge question.

One of the challenges of ranking the various threats to displaced populations is that we can miss the interconnected nature of these threats. When we look at the levels of displacement—in Sudan, for example, they were noted as four and a half million outside of the country and about nine and a half million internally displaced—we see that the threats are myriad: constant bombardment by drone attacks inside; repeated levels of displacement; sexual violence, both inside the country and within camps; a lot of the exclusions I spoke about in the wider region that young people are facing; the social polarization; the division; the economic hardship; and the trauma that's been discussed by others in the committee. Sudan is just one example. We speak, and testified, specifically about Sudan because of some of the work and research we've been doing there, but you could transplant that experience to the Rohingya in Cox's Bazar. You could talk about this in terms of prolonged displacement in Syria and in Colombia, where we do a huge amount of work—again, it's undercovered as a displacement crisis, but it has one of the largest internally displaced populations in the world.

I think we have to look at the complexity of the layers of what's happening to these populations, the connections between these populations and either receiving communities or host communities where they're staying, as well as how we build them together.

The legal challenges that have been raised continue to be a challenge, but one of the central things that concern me—and you noted my work on mediation and peacemaking—is our failure to make peace. The vast majority of these situations come from conflict and our inability to take a leadership role globally in seeking durable solutions for peace. I would suggest that this is something in which Canada could play a stronger leadership role, not only in terms of supporting civilian-led efforts for peace in Sudan but also within conflict contexts around the world. I think it's a particularly important priority area for Canada at this time.

Connie Cody: Thank you for that.

In addition to what you just mentioned regarding peace, is there more we could be doing to prevent armed groups or state actors from targeting critical humanitarian infrastructure?

Meredith Preston McGhie: I expect that there is. I would turn to my humanitarian colleagues, specifically, regarding attacks related to humanitarian infrastructure.

What I will say, based on our experiences in Sudan, is that the prevalence of technology, which Ann spoke about earlier.... It's about the use of technology—the use of drones—to attack civilian and humanitarian infrastructure in many of the conflicts we're seeing. Sudan is certainly an example. Ukraine is another. It's something that I think we need to be really seized with.

● (1650)

Connie Cody: In your opinion, how can the government step up its humanitarian efforts?

Meredith Preston McGhie: From our perspective at the Global Centre for Pluralism, the question is not just about resourcing and political will on the humanitarian front. Canada has an opportunity to play a role not just in bandaging solutions but also in really looking at how to connect this to durable solutions—the upstream effects of these situations—by focusing on peace and governance efforts. We spoke briefly about Syria. There are huge opportunities right now in the reconstruction process in societies like Syria's. Canada could be playing a leading role to support social cohesion and positive engagement in a post-conflict reconstruction process, one that augments humanitarian responses where we're also providing support.

At a time when there aren't enough resources, we have to make sure the resources in all these different baskets are reinforcing one another so that we don't just have a humanitarian strategy on one side and a peace or development strategy in other spaces. We can make sure we're bringing all of these together as a more cohesive strategy for Canada's foreign policy.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Cody.

[*Translation*]

I now invite Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe to take the floor for five minutes.

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

Ms. McGhie, you just said again that Canada must become an example. However, I've had the opportunity to serve as vice-chair of this committee for six and a half years, and for six and a half years, I've been hearing that Canada must take the lead on humanitarian issues, among other things.

Canada is not a military or an economic power, but it does have a track record when it comes to defending rights. This is coming from a Quebec sovereignist. We need only to think of Mr. Mulroney and apartheid, or Lester B. Pearson and the peacekeepers. Even Mr. Chrétien had a policy on Africa that was quite remarkable. Mr. Trudeau came to power in 2015 saying that Canada was back. Today, Mr. Carney tells us that we should not see the world as we would like it to be, but as it is. So there has clearly been quite a paradigm shift.

What I'm seeing right now is not a Canada that is taking the lead, since it is cutting international aid. It is currently putting all its eggs in one basket when it comes to the oil and gas industry, even as climate change is worsening and more and more people will be displaced.

How can we try to make people in the government understand that there is an urgent problem, but that Canada has an opportunity to act meaningfully, within its means, as a moral leader in international human rights? How do we do that? I haven't been able to find the answer in six and a half years.

[*English*]

Meredith Preston McGhie: I'll try to answer that.

When we want to diversify on trade issues.... You mentioned oil and gas. We talk about the need to diversify our economy. We talked earlier about defence spending. That's fine. None of those things can exist in isolation from one another.

Take the example of the gulf states and Sudan. We want to increase relationships with certain gulf actors. We need to have an opinion on and engagement on Sudan if we're going to be engaging in the gulf. The gulf has engagement on Sudan. They're engaged in the conflict quite actively. Canada can play a role in the economic drivers of the conflict in Sudan—addressing those, trying to stem some of them and addressing the peace process in Sudan—as a way of demonstrating that we are a serious political actor when we're talking trade as well.

We need to connect these pieces to one another, not just do trade with one hand and political peace processes or diplomacy with the other. These things need to come together for us to have a mature foreign policy.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I understand, but let's talk about the most recent agreement between Canada and the United Arab Emirates, for example, which, according to what we've been told, is heavily involved in Sudan. This is an $80 billion agreement that was signed in November or December, when Mr. Carney made a brief visit there. I haven't heard about Sudan. Once again, there was an opportunity, but unfortunately, we are left somewhat empty-handed today. There's an $80 billion investment agreement, but there's no guarantee that anything will happen in Sudan. From what we are told, Sudan is part of the problem, as it is facing a very serious humanitarian crisis.

I didn't have time to address you earlier, Mr. Lawson. I would like you to tell us about what you are experiencing right now. As you said, you and the people on the ground are direct witnesses to the situation. I would like to know what MSF staff are telling you about the most urgent needs of displaced people in the most serious conflicts right now.

● (1655)

Michael Lawson: What I'm hearing from my colleagues and from all the MSF staff is that it's not easy to pinpoint a single need, because everything is interconnected.

[*English*]

The simple answer is that we see all needs specifically increasing, because we see the response decreasing. Just as my colleague here has said, these things don't exist in isolation when we're talking about a large-scale policy response. You can't confine the impacts of displacement and the significant humanitarian needs to one isolated piece.

Displacement, as you said before, drives exposure to violence and exposure to sexual and gender-based violence. Also, when shelters and displacement sites become overcrowded and under-resourced, this becomes a driver of disease transmission and exposure to outbreaks.

What are the needs in these places? All of these needs are in place: food rations, as we have seen in some contexts, which have been cut due to global funding cuts, and protection programs for—

The Chair: Can you wrap it up, please? The time is up.

Michael Lawson: Each piece, from medical care to food distribution and protection and safety...all of these pieces are in urgent need of escalation.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lawson.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[*English*]

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

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

I'd like to start with Dr. Lawson. I'd like to talk a bit about the way in which we do our humanitarian and development assistance.

We've talked about this before, and there has been previous testimony about the inability to pivot. If you have a five-year program with activities and outputs, and then all of a sudden a catastrophe happens, it's very difficult for a lot of agencies to respond to that, because it's outside of what their project was funded to do.

I've never forgotten the story about Goma, where Médecins sans Frontières was active. You described going past a number of gated offices with the white vehicles and then literally two minutes down the road was a spontaneous refugee camp that had zero services—that irony.

Can you talk about how we could change the way in which we do our ODA and our development assistance that would allow for the flexibility, the pivoting and responding better to the needs on the ground? The world is changing. Things are happening much more quickly. Can you talk about a way in which we can maybe change how we do it?

Michael Lawson: Absolutely, and thank you for the question.

From the start, I will say that I can't lay claim to being a doctor, but thank you all the same.

MSF is an organization that by and large does not rely on institutional funding from governments around the world, although we do have a relationship with the Government of Canada. Almost the entirety of our funding is privately delivered, and this has allowed us to have flexibility in our ability to respond. However, we are just one small part of the response, no matter how that gets determined, so the question here is how that flexibility is built. That is an essential.... I'm very glad you've raised this point, because that absolutely needs to be built into how humanitarian assistance funding is determined.

Without that flexibility, we run into the exact same situation that you've described. Needs change, because these are all very dynamic contexts that are affected by any number of different factors, and if we maintain the traditional approach of long-term static funding allocations that's been in place, it does not set up agencies to be nimble and respond. Now more than ever, when we are looking at reduced resources and a reduced ability to respond, it is absolutely essential that the agencies that depend on governments for their funding have flexibility built in so that they can pivot to these needs.

It's a fundamental need. It is something that we have seen for a very long time from our perspective, because we try to emphasize this flexibility. However, when it comes to long-term institutional funding, this is a change that needs to happen.

● (1700)

Anita Vandenbeld: Thank you. I agree.

I'd like to ask a question of Meredith Preston McGhie.

You had a statistic in your opening remarks. You said two-thirds of displaced people are in protracted situations. I think much of the popular imagination thinks of a displaced person or a refugee as somebody walking down a path or a road going from A to B in a temporary and mobile way, but that's not the experience for most displaced people in the world. It is very much not a temporary thing that lasts while you get to place B, where you will be safe. The way we think about displacement is perhaps something that we need to rethink.

When you talk about these protracted periods, how long are they? What does the actual experience of a displaced person typically look like today?

Meredith Preston McGhie: First of all, there isn't a single typical experience, but I will give a couple of examples.

We have friends and colleagues who've been born as refugees. Their parents fled, and then they were born in camps. If I may, I will read a quote from one of our Global Pluralism Award laureates—Trésor Mpauni, who is in the Dzaleka refugee camp in Malawi. He is a refugee from Congo. He's now been in Malawi.... I met him six years ago. He'd been displaced for 14 years. He's now been displaced for 20. He reminds us that:

> Refugees are more than just “refugees.” They are doctors, engineers, architects, teachers, artists, dreamers, entrepreneurs, and ambitious people with much to contribute when given the chance. What distinguishes them is their heroic courage and unshakable resilience....

I use Trésor as an example because—

The Chair: Can you wrap it up, please? Time is up.

Meredith Preston McGhie: I would say that he's lived 20 years not in the society of Malawi writ large but in a refugee camp. We also have to remember that these durable solutions need to exist in the wider society. A lot of people are essentially confined in camps for decades, and we need to look at how we are building connection between those inside the camps and the wider society, those who are living in the wider population.

The Chair: Thank you.

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

Shuvaloy Majumdar: Thank you, Chair.

Dr. Imseis, I'm just a member of Parliament from Calgary. I'm not a legal expert, and I don't teach at one of the finest universities in the country.

In your April 2025 statement to the ICJ, you said, “UNRWA is the last hope that the Palestinian people, particularly in the Gaza Strip, have of surviving Israel's genocide against them.” You have repeatedly described Israel's response to the October 7 massacre as genocide, as you did here today.

It's such a passionate debate, filled with very emotional content, and I'm trying to have an empirical conversation about it. It's a fair question: Do you apply the same legal and moral standard to Hamas's deliberate killing of 1,200 civilians, systemic sexual violence and hostage taking on October 7, or does international law bind only the Jewish state?

Dr. Ardi Imseis: Thank you very much for the question. I think the question answers itself, in a sense.

I have given evidence to you today affirming my commitment to international law and its universal application to all, without fear or favour. I have to correct you, dear sir: It was not said today that what Israel is doing is genocide. I have quoted the ICJ as saying it is a plausible genocide.

Shuvaloy Majumdar: Which is not calling it a genocide, sir....

● (1705)

Dr. Ardi Imseis: Bear with me.

What you quoted just now, in terms of the submissions that I made before the principal judicial organ of the United Nations, the ICJ, was on behalf of my client—a state that asserts that it is a genocide. I think you are well enough prepared to understand that when legal counsel goes before any court, they represent their clients and not themselves.

Shuvaloy Majumdar: Your inference that the ICJ's.... We can split hairs over this, but your testimony today, your inference, the reason you highlighted it, was to establish a fact pattern, unless it was just a footnote in a longer conversation you're having. It was in support of an argument that you presented as full, and when we go back to the record we can see that.

You cited Israeli statements as evidence of having genocidal intent generally. You cited that evidence today.

Have you similarly examined Hamas's founding charter, its leaders' calls for Israel's destruction and the explicit strategy of embedding military assets among civilian populations? Why does your analysis treat Hamas's actions as resistance while framing Israel's elimination of that threat as genocidal?

Dr. Ardi Imseis: I'm happy to talk to you and give you an answer to your question. I'm just dumbfounded in that I've not given any evidence, nor have I been asked to give evidence today about my position regarding a non-state armed group, Hamas. I've not said anything about Hamas.

I will try my best in good faith to answer your question about Hamas's actions on October 7. My view is that on that day, as a matter of international law, the attacks against Israel and Israeli civilians were unlawful, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, quite frankly. There are now arrest warrants out for the leaders of Hamas. Some of the arrest warrants are out for individuals, three leaders of Hamas, who have been killed by the Israelis since.

I would think that the Office of the Prosecutor of the ICC is going to continue to examine this matter and perhaps deliver more arrest warrants in respect to the events that took place on that day, as directed by Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups.

At the same time, on that fateful day of October 7, to the extent that Palestinian armed groups attacked legitimate military targets, which they did empirically—IDF targets, pillboxes, the wall and military bases—

Shuvaloy Majumdar: Dance parties and villages....

Dr. Ardi Imseis: Bear with me. I've already dealt with the attacks against civilians. I acknowledged them. I said that they are war crimes and possibly crimes against humanity. That's a matter of record.

Let me address the attacks against legitimate military targets, because I apply international law universally across the board. In this regard, those attacks are perfectly lawful.

An occupying power in the occupied Palestinian territory, there for some 60 years—

Shuvaloy Majumdar: Forgive me, I'm going to interrupt you. It's my time, sir.

Dr. Ardi Imseis: —they are using their militarized forces, and they are therefore legitimate targets.

Shuvaloy Majumdar: I'm not sure how a listed terrorist organization.... I'm not sure how you can justify that.

Dr. Ardi Imseis: I'm just telling you what international law says, dear sir.

The Chair: Excuse me. There can be no crosstalk, please.

Shuvaloy Majumdar: It's my time, sir.

I don't understand how—

Dr. Ardi Imseis: You asked for an answer to the question. I'm trying to give it to you, sir.

Shuvaloy Majumdar: Hamas is a listed terror organization—

Dr. Ardi Imseis: Listed by whom...?

Shuvaloy Majumdar: —which you are now trying to say was justified in attacking legitimate military targets. You are describing Hamas and its activities on October 7, atrocious as they were. You are justifying their attacks on Israeli military installations as somehow legitimate.

Hamas is not a legitimate force. Hamas had infiltrated UNRWA. You reject the evidence, but I think the evidence—

Dr. Ardi Imseis: The International Court of Justice does too.

Shuvaloy Majumdar: The German government, European governments and governments around the world, including many in the international bodies, have very rightly questioned—

Dr. Ardi Imseis: The State of Israel put evidence to the ICJ, which includes a German and an American judge—

Shuvaloy Majumdar: —the capability of UNWRA to administer—

The Chair: Excuse me. The time is up.

Dr. Ardi Imseis: —and a Chinese judge. They put all that evidence to the ICJ, and the ICJ has been very clear: It's unsubstantiated.

Rachael Thomas (Lethbridge, CPC): I have a point of order.

The Chair: Their mics are off.

Yes, Mrs. Thomas.

Rachael Thomas: Thank you.

Chair, my colleague had the floor, and the witness, Mr. Imseis, kept speaking over him and taking the floor. Chair, that is inappropriate, and it is your job as the chair to make sure that this doesn't happen.

I'm curious as to—

The Chair: I'm sorry. That's why I said no crosstalk.

Rachael Thomas: My point of order is not done, Chair.

I'm curious as to why you allowed that interruption to continue rather than bringing order to this committee when that is your job as chair.

The Chair: Actually, I did bring order, and I said no crosstalk. Then 15 seconds passed and I had to stop.

Rachael Thomas: On that point of order, Chair, I would ask you to remind the witnesses that they are here at the invitation of the members at this table. It is their job to respect the questions that are being asked of them and not to speak over the honourable members here.

The Chair: I totally agree. Thank you.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have the floor for five minutes.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Now that everyone has had their turn, I can jump in.

Mr. Jai, let me turn to you, since I haven't had a chance to ask you any questions.

In your opening remarks, you spoke about climate change and the displacement of people caused by it. Do you have any concerns at present about efforts to combat climate change, when you look at everything that's happening around the world? There are significant geopolitical shifts, partly because of our neighbour to the south, but also because of an increasingly assertive foreign policy from China. In addition, we need only think of what's happening in Russia and Ukraine. This kind of context relegates what was the most urgent crisis facing all humanity to a secondary priority. As a result, what may happen is that efforts to combat climate change will diminish, climate change will worsen, and population displacement will also increase.

Am I wrong, or do you agree with this assessment? If you agree, what should we do?

● (1710)

Youssef Jai: In short, I agree with this assessment.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has clearly stated that climate change is increasing both the frequency and intensity of natural disasters. We know that the vast majority of disaster-related displacement is due to weather and climate hazards, including floods, storms and wildfires.

Although no direct link has yet been established, and I can't quantify internal displacement related to climate change, I can say that there is clearly an indirect link. That said, there's a point I often make: We should not attribute everything to climate change. Many things can be done to prevent and minimize disaster-related displacement, whether through urban planning or disaster risk reduction. There are many measures that can be taken.

Clearly, the weakening of climate action does not bode well for efforts to contain disaster-related displacement. That said, there is considerable variability. It is also true that it takes a very long time to establish trends.

What can we do? Obviously, some actors have disengaged from climate action. Canada and other countries, in Europe and elsewhere, clearly have a critical role to play in maintaining, in the hope that this is only temporary, this leadership in climate action and in ensuring that other elements, such as adaptation and the issue of loss and damage, continue to get the attention they deserve.

Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I don't think Steven Guilbeault would agree with us today if we told him that we are a leader in the fight against climate change.

Mr. Imseis, my next question may come out of left field, so you may not be able to answer it. I'm seeking your expertise as a professor at the faculty of law at Queen's University to better understand the situation internationally from a legal perspective. Do wealthier countries that emit greenhouse gases and are the largest contributors to climate change recognize that the countries with the lowest emissions are the first to be affected? I'm thinking of places like Tuvalu in the South Pacific, where rising sea levels threaten to completely submerge its territory.

Do countries that are largely responsible for climate change not have an obligation towards countries that are not responsible but are nevertheless its victims?

[*English*]

Dr. Ardi Imseis: That's a very good question, for which I thank you. The good news is that the International Court of Justice has also recently issued an advisory opinion on states' obligations for climate change. The long and the short, without spitting the whole opinion out to you, is that, yes, states do have an obligation commensurate with how much greenhouse gas they produce and their abilities to deal with the situation. This case was initiated by, I believe, some South Pacific states—perhaps Tuvalu, Micronesia and so on—because these states are at particular risk of the impact of climate change. This means not only the impact on the production of internally displaced and refugee populations, but also on the destruction of their own states.

The Chair: Excuse me, could you wrap it up, please? Your time is up.

Dr. Ardi Imseis: The short answer is yes. The western countries with big economies have an obligation commensurate with how much their outputs are. We'll see how the international community responds to that.

● (1715)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

On behalf of this subcommittee—the chair, members, staff and interpreters—we would like to thank you all for being with us and for participating in this meeting regarding displaced persons inside and outside of their countries, internationally.

Thank you very much.

Now we will suspend for five minutes, please.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]