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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Julie Dzerowicz (Davenport, Lib.)): Good morning. I want to welcome everyone to our meeting number 21 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

[Translation]

I want to start by giving a warm welcome to Alexis Deschênes, who is now part of our team.

[English]

We have an extra special guest, the very Honourable Greg Ferguson. I want to say welcome to you as well. Thank you for joining us today.

Thanks to everyone. I usually start promptly right at 11 o'clock, but it's been a manic Monday —everything has gone wrong. I appreciate everyone for their patience.

We also have Mr. Vincent Neil Ho. I saw you at our last meeting, and I thought you were already part of our team. Let me also warmly welcome you here with us today.

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. I want to make a couple of comments for the benefit of our witnesses as well as give reminders as always to our members.

I see we have one witness with us in the first panel on Zoom. As a reminder, please click on the microphone icon to activate your mic and kindly mute yourself when you are not speaking.

As well, at the bottom of your screen, you can select the appropriate channel for interpretation, whether it's floor, English or French. If you have any questions, just let us know.

For those of you in the room, please use your earpiece and select the desired channel. Sometimes it's easier to listen to all the testimony in English. Sometimes the questioners are soft speakers.

For your five-minute introduction, I'll give you a bit of a warning when you have one minute left. I'll also let my colleagues around the table know when they have a minute of questioning left.

Of course, always wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. Please do not speak over each other, as it makes it very difficult for our interpreters. All your comments are of course addressed to the chair.

Members, please raise your hand if you wish to speak, and the clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best as we can.

Thanks to everyone in advance for your co-operation.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on September 16, 2025, the committee is resuming its study of Canada's immigration system.

I would now like to formally welcome our witnesses for the first hour of our meeting today.

On behalf of the Caregivers' Action Samaritan Movement, we have online Laila Elcano, who's the founder—a warm welcome to you. In the room, we have two witnesses. From Immitracker, we have Nino Melikidze. Welcome. From the Sudanese Canadian Community Association, we have Ranya Elfil. Welcome to you as well.

You each have five minutes to give opening remarks, after which we will proceed with rounds of questions.

I'm going to begin online with Ms. Elcano.

Laila Elcano (Founder, Caregivers' Action Samaritan Movement):

Thank you, Madam Chair.

Good morning, everyone.

My name is Laila Elcano. I am a former caregiver. I now work in health care as a personal support worker. I am a community leader and volunteer. I am the founder of Caregivers' Action Samaritan Movement, or CaSamaMo, an organization of caregivers helping caregivers.

It is an honour to be invited as a witness to the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration for its study on Canada's immigration system. It is my hope that what I will share will assist you in this study.

As a caregiver myself, I know first-hand the emotional and psychological strains associated with being a caregiver. Though I am fortunate enough to have a loving and supportive family to work for, the fact that I was not with my own family back then was hard enough, but there was also the feeling of uncertainty. The feeling of not having control over your own life was, at times, too much to bear.

Caregivers or care workers are the backbone of Canada's economy. They perform critical work essential to the Canadian economy. Without them, parents of young children would not be able to work. The children of aging, sick or elderly parents would not be able to be in the workforce if not for caregivers. Families with special needs children and people with disabilities rely on the support provided by caregivers. Caregivers provide a sense of normalcy as they absorb the tasks and responsibilities the family can't provide to their loved ones. It is just fair that these caregivers be provided a simple, smooth and easy transition from workers to permanent residents, but the government is failing them.

Canada's immigration system has the family reunification program. It is ironic that the system that allows the family reunification program is the same system that is tearing families apart. How many caregivers are there who are not with their children?

One officer of CaSamaMo has five children—four boys and a daughter, who is the oldest child. Two years ago, her husband and the four boys came to Canada. Unfortunately, the only daughter was left in the Philippines. Why? She is over 22 years old. I believe, and I am sure you will all agree, that our children are our children at any age. They are our children for life. Why is it the daughter's fault to not be part of her family living in Canada? The sad part is, the boys here can't even post pictures of themselves enjoying dinner or lunch in a restaurant, or any picture, because it makes their sister back home feel sad, alone and abandoned.

Another one of our officers was able to bring her husband here, but not her two children. Why? They had turned 22. The mother, after sacrificing so many years of separation, will grow old here with her husband while both of their children are back home.

In both cases, they had to endure a lifetime of emotional and psychological pain. Is this what family reunification is? Lucky are those who have never experienced this.

With the current situation of the PR application, with all the delays, backlogs and lack of concrete or solid pathways, a lot more caregivers will suffer separation from their children, because their children will inevitably become 22 years old.

There is also a great concern with the educational credential assessment, ECA. I remember in 2021, there was a lot of confusion, anxiety, stress and depression in the caregivers community, particularly for those who were already here when this new requirement was announced. We even sent a petition to the then minister of immigration, Marco Mendicino with almost 300 signatures to reconsider this requirement. The TR to PR pathway opened and most of those who signed the petition were able to apply. Today, most of these caregivers are citizens now, and they are thriving, successful and contributing to Canadian society.

The biggest concern is the language proficiency test through IELTS and CELPIP. During the live-in caregiver program, LCP, ECA and language proficiency were never part of the requirements, but nonetheless, all the caregivers under the LCP are thriving and successful. Some are entrepreneurs or business owners. They are contributing to the Canadian economy and society.

• (1110)

At the last round table I attended with then minister of immigration, the honourable Marc Miller, alongside Minister Rechie Valdez and then minister Ya'ara Saks—

The Chair: Ms. Elcano, I'm so sorry. You have 30 seconds left. I need you to wrap up, please.

Laila Elcano: I have provided a written question, which I will be asking here again, as this is an area I think you should look into. What steps have you taken to stop these unscrupulous immigration lawyers and consultants, who are charging exorbitant rates to vulnerable and desperate applicants?

I have included a written brief with recommendations that will hopefully assist you in the study of Canada's immigration system.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much, Ms. Elcano.

Now we're going to turn to Ms. Melikidze for her five minutes.

Nino Melikidze (Chief Executive Officer, Immitracker Inc.): Thank you, Chair and members of the committee.

I am one of the few tech entrepreneurs in the immigration space, and I run the largest Canadian immigration data aggregation consumer platform. Furthermore, I'm a product of the express entry system, having gone through it myself in 2018. From my unique perspective, Canada's immigration system is under strain, not because immigration has lost its value, but because the system has increasingly lost its focus.

When express entry launched in 2015, its role was clear: It was an economic selection system built on ranking skilled candidates based on merit. For several years, it worked. It predictably selected the candidates most likely to integrate successfully. However, since then, it has begun to collapse. I want to focus on two interlinked issues driving this breakdown: the implementation of francophone immigration targets and the mismanagement of skilled immigration categories.

Let's begin with francophone immigration. The federal government set an 8.5% target for French-speaking permanent residents outside Quebec in 2025, which will rise to 10.5% by 2028. Supporting francophone minority communities is a valid objective. The problem is where this target is being applied. Because family, refugee and humanitarian streams do not assess language, they cannot be used to meet francophone targets. As a result, express entry carries the burden by default. This isn't made explicit, but it is the operational reality, and the impact is clear.

In 2025, a significant share of express entry invitations—42% of the total—was issued to the francophone draws. Most were candidates outside Canada, without Canadian work experience or education. At the same time, the Canadian experience class, the pathway designed for people already working in Canada, saw fewer and smaller draws. The disparity between the quality of the applicants was stark, with a 529 average CRS score for Canadian experience class versus 422 for francophone candidates. That is more than a 100-point difference. This outcome is driven by politically motivated targets, not applicant quality.

According to the IRCC's 2024 stakeholder consultation report, only 14.6% of respondents identified francophone immigration as a top priority, while a strong majority emphasized economic and labour market needs. Despite this, francophone targets dominated express entry in 2025.

What was the result? First, express entry is being distorted and often fails to prioritize candidates with the highest potential to successfully settle in Canada. Second, francophone newcomers are dispersed broadly across the country, often into regions without strong French-language employment opportunities or settlement infrastructure. A more appropriate mechanism already exists. It's called the francophone community immigration pilot, and it aligns language objectives with specific regions that have the capacity and demand to support francophone settlement. This is exactly where francophone immigration outside Quebec can be pursued effectively.

On the skilled category side, STEM has effectively collapsed. There have been no STEM-specific draws since April 2024, and 19 core STEM occupations, including software developers, engineers and data scientists, were removed from eligibility. Meanwhile, occupations such as insurance agents were added to it, despite being sales-oriented roles. The health care category saw fewer than a third of the francophone invitations in 2025, while suffering from incorrect skill prioritization within. The result is predictable. Canadian-educated graduates and skilled professionals, many already working here, are losing clear pathways to permanent residence. Canada is training talent and failing to retain it. These outcomes directly stem from policy choices that layer non-economic objectives onto economic selection tools.

The brief we submitted to this committee outlines a clear course correction. The first step is to separate linguistic and cultural objectives from express entry. The second is to rely on targeted programs to fulfill francophone immigration objectives. The third is to restore the Canadian experience class as a reliable immigration pathway. The fourth is to correctly structure and increase the priority of STEM and health care categories.

Canada needs an immigration system whereby each stream does what it was designed to do. If it is to remain functional, we must return to first principles—

● (1115)

The Chair: You have one minute left.

Nino Melikidze: These are long-term economic impact and high human capital prioritization.

Thank you, and I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thanks so much, Ms. Melikidze.

Next, we have five minutes for Ms. Elfil's opening remarks.

Please go ahead.

Ranya Elfil (Member of the Board of Directors, Sudanese Canadian Community Association): Hello, and thank you for having me.

My name is Ranya Elfil, and I'm a board member of the Sudanese Canadian Communities Association. Since the war in Sudan began in April 2023, I have worked extensively with IRCC to advocate for humanitarian pathways for Sudanese impacted by the war—a tradition Canada has upheld for many communities in times of crisis.

Sudan is facing genocide and the largest humanitarian and displacement crisis in the world. Today I'm here to share our community's experience with prolonged delays, inequitable processing and systemic disparities, and to outline how we can ensure no future community endures what we have.

When the war began, we submitted a policy brief calling for multiple immigration pathways. Initially, IRCC focused on a family reunification pathway, recognizing the direct impact on Canadians and permanent residents with loved ones trapped in Sudan. The program launched—after many delays—10 months later, in February 2024. It was capped at 3,250 applicants and later increased to 5,000.

Sponsors were required to assume full financial responsibility and demonstrate substantial income, or tens of thousands of dollars in available funds. Applicants, many of whom had lost everything, were required to pay high processing fees. As a result, our community transferred millions of dollars to IRCC, funds that could otherwise have supported displaced family members with urgent needs like food and medicine. This put an immense financial burden on the community. Just a couple of days ago, a young community member, Muna Jad Alrab—who, like many others, had to work multiple jobs to help support her family in displacement while waiting to be reunited with them—passed away suddenly in Montreal, leaving behind a grieving family and an enraged community.

We met those financial obligations. What we did not anticipate were extraordinary delays. In the first 13 months of the program, only 9% of applicants arrived in Canada. In October 2025, it was stated before this committee that Sudanese applications could face delays of up to 99 months. For people trapped in an active war zone, displaced without work, stability or safety, 99 months is not simply a delay. It's life-threatening. Approximately 7,000 to 8,000 individuals remain waiting.

We repeatedly warned IRCC and honourable ministers that prolonged processing in a conflict zone would have deadly consequences. Our committee has tracked cases of applicants who died from violence, heatstroke or lack of medical care while waiting. One Calgary sponsor applied in February 2024 to bring his sister and her four children. After months of delay, she was killed when her city was stormed by RSF forces. Her children remain unprocessed. These are not abstract cases; these were preventable losses.

We are also deeply concerned about a reduction in government-assisted refugee, GAR, commitments. In September 2024, IRCC committed to resettle 4,000 Sudanese GARs per year from 2025 to 2027, with a focus on women impacted by gender-based violence. By March 2025, the commitment was reduced to 4,000 total arrivals by the end of 2026, effectively cutting the pledge to a third. An earlier request to waive refugee status determination requirements—allowing more Sudanese to access private and community sponsorship programs—was capped at only 700 individuals. At a time when Sudan faces the world's largest displacement crisis, scaling back commitments sends a troubling signal about prioritization and responsiveness.

We have also repeatedly raised cases of children with Canadian citizenship stranded in Sudan.

• (1120)

The Chair: Ms. Elfil, you have one minute left.

Ranya Elfil: Often, these children were the sons and daughters of deceased Canadian fathers and lived with their widowed Sudanese mothers. While the children are Canadian, their mothers required visas to accompany them, creating a barrier to leaving a war zone. We raised this issue in April 2024, in July 2024 and many times after.

One Canadian child drowned in an IDP camp after displacement. Other children were hungry, out of school and without access to medicine. While there recently has been some movement on the file, it remains alarmingly slow.

The Canadian Council for Refugees has documented that African applicants face the longest processing times and that African visa offices carry the highest caseload with the least staffing. Our experience aligns with those findings. The issue before us is not simply operational delays. It is an absence of equity, transparency and consistency in Canada's humanitarian response.

If I may say, just to conclude, as a way forward IRCC should implement a standardized crisis response framework with clear service standards for active conflict zones, including urgent processing timelines and transparent benchmarks. Equity safeguards must be embedded into humanitarian programming from the outset, including public reporting on regional processing times and adequate resourcing for African visa offices. IRCC should establish a standing protocol for Canadian children stranded abroad, with accelerated processing and facilitated pathways for accompanying caregivers. Finally, a structured and transparent engagement with affected communities must be formalized to reduce uncertainty and prevent harm.

Canada's humanitarian system should be measured—

• (1125)

The Chair: Ms. Elfil, I'm sorry. You're a minute over your time—

Ranya Elfil: Thank you.

The Chair: I want to thank you for your excellent opening remarks.

Thanks to our other two witnesses as well.

Now we will do rounds of questions. I'm going to start with six minutes for the Conservatives, followed by six minutes for the Liberals and then six minutes for the Bloc Québécois.

Mr. Davies, you'll start please.

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

Thank you to all of the witnesses on three very distinct and very important topics today, all of them important to the work of this committee.

I would like to spend my time with Ms. Melikidze.

You wrote a piece entitled "Rethinking Express Entry for economic growth". I'd like to quote from the article:

One of the most significant shifts in Canada's Express Entry system is the quiet abandonment of the STEM category despite its central role in Canada's innovation economy and long-term productivity. No STEM draws have been held since April 2024, and IRCC has given no indication [when] they will resume.

I wonder if you could give us some insight as to why you think the STEM category for the express entry system was removed. Do you have some insight into why that was removed at a time when there are well-documented shortages in many of the disciplines in that STEM category?

Nino Melikidze: We did some digging when we were writing that article. We requested a couple of ATIPs. From what I saw in an ATIP from 2024, there was an IRCC ministerial instruction to halt all STEM draws sometime in 2024. I believe it said that there were no STEM draws that should have been conducted past the summer, but there was no justification provided in that ATIP. I can go back and look to see if I can find more data, but there was no information provided there.

This doesn't even begin to cover the entire issue, because the bigger part is that 19 core STEM occupations were also removed from the category, which is.... When we talk about Canada becoming a competitive nation compared to the United States in topics such as artificial development and building data centres or becoming a leading nation in terms of technology, how are we doing that if we have removed every single occupation that is related to that direction from the STEM category? IRCC has not provided a single documented fact regarding why they are choosing to pause STEM. I genuinely have no clue. I'd be lying to you if I told you that I knew.

Fred Davies: Since that decision has happened, have there been any measurable or noticeable declines in the number of people who are coming to Canada? Has there been any impact on the number of people actually leaving Canada as a result of lack of support in that STEM sector?

Nino Melikidze: I will give you an incredible example.

A couple of months ago, I spoke to a U of T grad who was stuck at 499 points for CEC because he has two years of work experience. He is a civil engineer and working, with a good job. He cannot get selected for express entry because the Canadian experience class scores were so high and there have been no STEM draws. He told me that he's trying to utilize a special pathway to get another visa to get in another year of work experience sufficiently so that he can qualify for the next CEC draw when it happens. This is an example of a person who is a U of T engineer.

We're talking about Waterloo AI grads who are choosing to go to San Francisco to get a job at a start-up there rather than wait for a STEM draw here, and they're not qualifying for the CEC draws.

That's the impact, and yes, it's actually quite measurable.

Fred Davies: Would you recognize in the market that these people who can't qualify under the current rules are actually leaving Canada for the United States?

Nino Melikidze: Some of them are leaving for the United States. Others are going back home. Another one I know, who is from Singapore, said that she's just going to go home. Why would she keep trying to struggle here when she's never getting selected for any of the draws?

Fred Davies: You also made reference to the fact that we seem to have flipped the script on some of the categories that are acceptable under the new rules. For example, we don't allow trained chefs to fill the gaps in the Canadian market, but we would allow cooks. Can you explain the rationale behind that?

Nino Melikidze: The rationale is that the system was designed in 2015 and hasn't actually been redesigned since. The points ranking system measures for very basic qualities. It measures for age and for Canadian work experience. When you put a NOC code as well, that is not really being divided up by the level of TEER, so a TEER 1 and a TEER 3 NOC code under Canadian experience class would be ranked the same level. You don't get extra points for having a higher skilled occupation under the Canadian experience class or even in the trades draws. The cooks and the chefs would actually be ranked equally under the trades draw because they both have work experience.

• (1130)

Fred Davies: That's interesting, considering that a chef has to go through many more years of education, experience, qualification and passing actual tests.

Nino Melikidze: The health care is the same, actually.

Fred Davies: I'm interested in your perspective on areas of the STEM sector that we need to attract people to in order to be competitive in the years ahead. It seems to me that we are effectively shooting ourselves in the foot by not having a system that attracts the most talented people who can actually contribute to our economic growth.

Give me some of the areas that you think are lacking or have been excluded.

Nino Melikidze: Canada has one of the best education systems in the world. We have the University of Waterloo here. The joke in the U.S. is that San Francisco is a University of Waterloo wrapper, because that's how many Waterloo grads go and start start-ups there.

The types of people we need to be attracting are the types of people who are actually leaving because they don't want to rely on this immigration system and they cannot rely on this funding landscape in order to build something successfully. We're talking about engineers. We're talking about AI scientists. We're talking about researchers in the tech space. They are people who actually want to build tech in Canada to make us competitive and make us a new technology hub.

We were that before. Toronto used to be one of the best cities in the world for start-ups and for technology development, but we've started going a little bit downhill recently.

Fred Davies: I don't have much time, but I have one follow-up question.

How does investment capital relate to this problem? You said that there's an outflux of people going to California. In addition to not being able to get this qualification, is it a capital-based issue as well?

Nino Melikidze: It absolutely is. I'd probably need another half-hour to dive into that, but I'm happy to talk to you after.

Capital is a very big problem. We can get into access to capital and removing bureaucratic barriers in more detail, but one thing that Canada did well before was it at least promised these people an immigration pathway. That's also no longer available.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Davies.

Thank you, Ms. Melikidze. It's a great last name. It's almost as great as my last name.

We are having some technical issues with Ms. Elcano.

Ms. Elcano, I want to make sure that we try our best to include you as part of this conversation. Can I get you to say hello for just a couple of words? Tell me what the weather's like where you're at and we'll see if we can bring you on board. If not, unfortunately, you'll have to add whatever additional testimony you have in written format.

Laila Elcano: Thank you, Madam Chair. I hope you can hear me now and it comes in clearly.

The Chair: Ms. Elcano, even though you have the proper headset and you've done everything right, I'm hearing that for some reason we're not able to get responses from you. That's an issue we have to deal with. I'm not quite sure how we will be able to deal with this without our full testimony from all of our witnesses.

Laila Elcano: I understand, Madam Chair.

The Chair: If you hear anything that you want to contribute, please send your comments in written format after this meeting.

I apologize that we're not able to bring you on, Ms. Elcano, but I appreciate your understanding, and I thank everybody for their understanding as well.

Ms. Zahid, you are up for six minutes, please.

• (1135)

Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre—Don Valley East, Lib.): Thank you, Chair. Thanks to all the witnesses.

I had some questions for Ms. Elcano, but we'll start with Ms. Elfil. If there's a problem with the sound or interpretation, please let me know.

Thank you for coming today and thank you for all the work you are doing for the Sudanese community.

Recognizing that Canada is working within a reality of lower immigration levels, within Canada's current family reunification framework, what specific changes, definitions, eligibility criteria or processing flexibilities would have the greatest immediate impact for the Sudanese families?

Ranya Elfil: At the beginning there was a commitment to bring in those families by the end of 2024, beginning of 2025. I don't think we expected that the wait would extend to 2026, when the new levels plan has been introduced.

The issue with the new levels plan is this program has been placed in an "others" category, and that others category is very restrictive with only 5,800 spots in 2026 and then 4,000 spots in 2027 and 2028. We are placed with other impacted communities that are already in Canada while our families are outside Canada in an active war zone or displacement.

Having a special initiative that really upholds the commitment of the fast response—humanitarian equals fast and prompt response—that brings all those family members as soon as possible to Canada, would be the best way forward, as was committed to in the past.

The new levels plan came in 2026. It was not there in 2025. Still, those numbers were not processed fairly in 2025.

Salma Zahid: Thank you.

In addition to the special measures program, are there any other applications such as spousal applications or dependent applications in the pipeline that are not happening, or is it just the special measures program you are more concerned about?

Ranya Elfil: One of the temporary measures that IRCC implemented at the beginning of the war was the acceleration of the processing of Sudanese applicants across multiple pathways.

We have not seen that materialize in terms of how people are coming across different pathways. We still see delays across the different pathways, so family reunification, the normal path, this path, group of five, not the one that was done specifically for the Sudanese community after the war with the 350 applicants, which is also delayed. We see delays across multiple pathways.

Salma Zahid: Where are you seeing bottlenecks in the system? Is it the processing or the biometrics communications or coordination? What steps should we recommend to the government to address these issues?

Ranya Elfil: There are no barriers to bringing in people at this point. There was in the past an issue with no biometrics centre in Sudan. That was resolved in May last year.

Since then, we've seen IRCC able, in some cases, especially in Sudan, to bring people in very quickly, to process them quickly. It's really a matter of will at this point. If IRCC chooses to process quickly and the program gets removed from this very restrictive, prohibitive category in the levels plan, those families will be able to unite very quickly. There are no processing barriers or system barriers. It's just because of numbers and the levels plan that those families are impacted at this point.

Salma Zahid: The other issue I've been hearing about from my constituents is that a lot of the residents here from the Sudanese community have already put in the money—which was the requirement—and they can't even use that money.

Is that a concern that you have?

Ranya Elfil: Yes, that's a huge concern for the community at this point, because the program had substantial financial requirements, unlike any other humanitarian program implemented by IRCC, where Sudanese families had to either show substantial income or put money in funds in banks.

This money has been held for almost two years now. As families, they cannot access that fund because their families are trapped in Sudan or in displacement where they can't work. Most of the families here are actively supporting their families in displacement and that puts a huge financial and mental burden on the families here, and those are working Canadians, committed Canadian citizens who really feel this is unjust and unfair processing to bring their families.

• (1140)

Salma Zahid: I have a last question for this round.

You are monitoring the status online. Is it that the eligibility criteria for most of them have not been finalized, or is it that the majority of the files are within the security process?

Ranya Elfil: A lot of them passed security and are pending medical, but medical was not sent.

There are multiple stages. I would say that the majority of those files have passed eligibility, because when you pass eligibility, your file gets passed from Ottawa to Rome, and most of those files are currently being processed in Rome. A lot of those files have passed security, but others are stuck in security for reasons that are not very clear. However, even if you pass security, medical is not shipped.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Elfil. I appreciate it.

Thank you, Ms. Zahid.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Deschênes, you have the floor for six minutes.

Alexis Deschênes (Gaspésie—Les Îles-de-la-Madeleine—Lis-tuguj, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Good morning, everyone.

Thank you for welcoming me here to the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

Thank you to the witnesses who are also here.

Ms. Melikidze, as I understand it, you work from Toronto.

Do you assist temporary foreign workers who need to renew work permits, for example?

[*English*]

Nino Melikidze: That's less so. Our company deals more frequently with express entry applicants as well as spousal sponsorship and citizenship. We have some work permits and study permits as well, but it's usually first-time applicants.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: Okay.

Do you operate only in the Toronto area? Do you also operate in more rural areas in Ontario?

[*English*]

Nino Melikidze: Our company is actually province-agnostic. We are covering programs across all of Canada. The only ones we probably don't have a lot of trackers for are the Quebec skilled immigration programs. We do have coverage for the rest of the Canadian programs.

[*Translation*]

Alexis Deschênes: I'm going to present you with a problem. While you were speaking, I received an email from my riding in Gaspésie. People are criticizing the fact that work permits for temporary workers are not being renewed.

As far as we understand, the rules for thresholds were tightened, but I was trying to make sense of that. I also wanted to get your take on things. When it comes to tightening the rules for temporary foreign workers in budget 2025, the Liberal government says that it will take into account the specific needs of rural and remote communities.

Where we are, in Quebec and in the regions of Quebec, that's not what we're seeing.

Do you see anything else?

[English]

Nino Melikidze: I will not lie: I have not seen a lot of applicants for the rural community programs, because we deal with more general programs like express entry, and if we're talking about provincial nominee programs, we're talking about the biggest streams.

That being said, I don't know about renewals exactly, but when it comes to work permits in general, we have seen the processing times go up significantly since 2024. If processing took a couple of months before, we're looking at six-plus months of processing time with certain work permits right now. There have definitely been longer processing times and ongoing delays in that category.

Study permits also have been delayed. I know, for example, that you can't even apply for the start-up visa open work permit. People who did apply before have had their applications cancelled, or it is taking so long to process that it's close to impossible to get it.

From that point of view, I can speak to it. However, in terms of the exact question that you asked, unfortunately, I do not have the data, but I can look it up for you afterward if you like.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: Now let's talk about francophone immigration.

You're not the only one to have mentioned it. In fact, again this morning, we saw an article where Evan Green, an immigration lawyer, somewhat reiterates your idea that benchmarks for francophone immigration would ultimately be bad public policy.

You claim that the government decided to increase francophone immigration thresholds for political reasons. In fact, it's quite simply to prevent the French language from disappearing outside Quebec. I spent a year in Saskatchewan, and I can tell you that assimilation is rampant there.

That said, there's this increasing narrative that says that imposing a language criterion would rig the immigration system.

Can you explain that? I need to understand how having a francophone immigration requirement is bad public policy.

• (1145)

[English]

Nino Melikidze: I do not think it's a bad public policy to have levels for francophone immigration. I just think it's being implemented incredibly incorrectly, in a way that's actually hurting Quebec, first and foremost. If you look up the government's initial data regarding francophone immigration—I can find the ATIP for this—over 80% of immigrants who come in under the federal francophone programs end up coming to Quebec, at the end of the day, because there is a lack of employment opportunities outside Quebec for purely French speakers.

That being said, it's not a problem if they go to francophone communities, which is what I recommended in my brief. They should go to specific francophone communities outside Quebec. However, because they're coming in through express entry, they go anywhere in the country—it does not matter. Look at the level of qualification these applicants have. They're generally quite low-skilled, which is why I argued that, regarding the point difference.

They don't have the bilingual component, so they're not fluent enough in English to pick up an English-speaking job. You then have a flood of lower-skilled immigrants whose primary skill—what they got selected for—is French. They come to Canada, look for employment opportunities outside francophone communities, primarily, and are unable to settle successfully.

We're recommending tying francophone immigration numbers to francophone communities in order to help facilitate their settlement and help them get employment opportunities, so they don't end up going to Quebec at the end of the day. That's where they're more likely to find employment when they've tried all those resources in other places.

[Translation]

The Chair: You have one minute left, Mr. Deschênes.

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Ms. Melikidze, how do we realize your proposal to tie immigrants to francophone communities?

How can we achieve that result?

[English]

Nino Melikidze: The francophone community immigration pilot can be done in two ways.

One, we simply need to be more realistic about our francophone targets. Right now, it's more like a blind idea: “We want this best-case scenario, so we're just going to force it on everyone without thinking through the consequences.”

Two, once we have more realistic numbers, we put them all into the francophone community immigration pilot and direct all these francophone immigrants at a higher number. I think the cap for that program is 5,000 people now. Make it 15,000 or 20,000, and direct those francophone migrants to communities where they can be absorbed and settled successfully.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Deschênes and Ms. Melikidze.

[English]

Now we move to our second round. We have about 15 minutes left. We're going to start with Mr. Ho for five minutes, then Mr. Zuberi for five minutes.

[Translation]

Next, Mr. Deschênes will have the floor for two and a half minutes. Then, there will be only three minutes left.

[English]

I'm going to give one and a half minutes to Mr. Redekopp and one and a half minutes to Ms. Zahid.

Mr. Ho, you have five minutes.

Vincent Ho (Richmond Hill South, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair.

My questions are for Ms. Melikidze.

What year was Immitracker founded?

Nino Melikidze: It was in 2022.

Vincent Ho: Since that time, or even before then, what kinds of trends have you noticed in the immigration system?

Nino Melikidze: I was part of express entry back in 2018-19. When I first came to Canada and went through this program, it was one of the most incredible things I've ever seen in my life. I genuinely could not believe there was a country doing immigration correctly. I remember telling all of my friends, "This is incredible. They actually understand how to prioritize and rank skilled candidates, and give them potential opportunities to integrate into the economy."

After 2020, the immigration system became haphazard. This happened for three reasons.

First, there were a lot of one-time measures introduced as a result of COVID to make up for the labour shortages that were going on.

Second, the immigration numbers were increased very blindly. If you look at the immigration levels plans, they kept going higher and higher every year.

Third, there was a lot of ignorance of the fraud going on. We all knew it was happening. I'm very sure people on this committee heard quite a bit about it when it started. They didn't really stop it until it started to become such a big problem that they had to radically overcorrect and stop a lot of programs in their tracks.

The biggest trend I noticed is the ballooning of numbers without thinking about the consequences, and turning a blind eye to a lot of fraud.

• (11:50)

Vincent Ho: In recent years, what trends have you observed regarding STEM applicants in the express entry system?

Nino Melikidze: As I mentioned to Mr. Davies earlier, the first thing is the pausing of STEM draws. It is a huge blow for a country that has universities like McGill, Mila, U of T and Waterloo. Why are we not giving people who have studied engineering, science and AI a dedicated pathway to stay and integrate into our economy further?

Second, they're going through the general Canadian experience class program, where the bar to meet those scores is incredibly high. The average score for last year, 529, is a very high score. You can have a master's degree and three years of work experience, and

you'd still not be reaching that score. That's probably one of the biggest things, frankly.

Vincent Ho: Yes. That's unfortunate. We're seeing that basically the Liberals have effectively abandoned the STEM category and have instead added categories like insurance agents and brokers at a time when we have a productivity crisis and investment is fleeing.

Actually, these are not talking points of mine. These are talking points taken from the costly Liberal budget, that we are in a productivity crisis, and they seem to be moving in the opposite direction.

We saw the Liberals mismanage Canada's immigration system by pretty much flooding Canada with low-skilled temporary workers. Let's talk about high-paid, high-skilled workers. Are you seeing people in high-skilled fields paying taxes, contributing to our system, already living in Canada, wanting to become Canadian and wanting to earn their citizenship? Are you seeing them being blocked from permanent residency because of the mismanagement? Name some examples, if you could.

Nino Melikidze: Absolutely. I personally know so many people like that in Toronto. I've known them over the years. They're graduates of good universities who have finally seen the Canadian experience class points drop a little bit now. That was within a month of the expiration of their post-graduation work permits. These were people who were counting the days until their work permits were going to expire. Then they would probably have to pack up and go home, because they were not getting selected in Canadian experience class.

Again, I'm not even talking college grads. I'm talking university grads with two to three years of work experience in high-demand jobs. They already have jobs. They've been paying taxes every single year. They basically had no opportunity to stay, up until these last couple of draws.

Vincent Ho: What kinds of jobs? Could you give me an example, please?

Nino Melikidze: They were jobs related to UI/UX—

Vincent Ho: Engineers.

Nino Melikidze: —and marketing, along with engineering and software engineering. I mentioned a civil engineer earlier. There was a variety, yes, but all had jobs here.

Vincent Ho: We're seeing that the Liberals broke the immigration system, and we're also seeing massive, unprecedented stress on the health care system. We have a shortage of nurses and doctors. Six million Canadians are without a family doctor. Can you tell me a little bit about how the Liberals mismanaged the immigration system in the health care field specifically?

The Chair: You have 20 seconds, please.

Nino Melikidze: In short, I believe the health care category was brought in too late. I believe it is not being prioritized correctly within. I'm happy to talk to you about those factors after this as well.

More importantly, the numbers for the health care category were too low. As I mentioned in my speech, they got fewer than a third of the francophone spots last year. There were only 14,500 invitations sent out to health care candidates in 2025.

Vincent Ho: For my last question, how would you—

The Chair: The time is up. Thank you, Mr. Ho, and thank you, Ms. Melikidze.

If there's anything you feel you haven't finished, or you remember it afterwards, feel free to write to the committee. It's formally accepted and it is part of our study. Thank you so much.

Now we have five minutes for Mr. Zuberi.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

I'll start with you, Ms. Elfil. Thank you for your testimony and for speaking about the very difficult situation that's going on in Sudan. As you mentioned, it is the largest humanitarian crisis in the world right now, and one that we are seized with.

You spoke a lot about what's happening specifically within the program that you and others from the community in Canada are concerned about. I want to ask more broadly, when it comes to Canada's immigration process, how do you think it can be improved for the most vulnerable populations that are impacted by armed conflict around the world? It would apply to Sudan but also other regions. Do you have suggestions on that? How can we improve our immigration process?

Ranya Elfil: I'm not going to claim to be an immigration consultant or someone who's very deep into that. I will speak from the advocacy space, where I've been for the past two to three years. I would say just having an adequate....

I mean, Canada from the beginning had pillars for immigration. Economic immigration was part of those pillars, but the humanitarian part was always core to our values. We always stood up for communities impacted by war and created programs.

We see a lack of equity in the response to those communities. Have something with a standard process and transparency that brings equity to how we respond to communities in crisis, with targeted programs that help those communities. I think the example of the Sudan family reunification program is a great one, because it directly helped the Canadian community here that was mentally and emotionally impacted by the war and the direct impact on their families. That is one to replicate, I think, in similar cases.

• (1155)

Sameer Zuberi: Thank you.

You mentioned in your testimony that biometrics were made available and that wasn't initially the case. Can you talk briefly

about how that made an important impact and change in terms of applications, processing, etc.?

Ranya Elfil: A lot of the applicants for the program are in Sudan. It was very difficult, due to the safety situation, for them to leave. There was no biometric centre in Sudan after the war. That impacted their processing, as IRCC was not waiving the biometric requirement. They either had to go to another country, which was not feasible for everyone, or just remain stranded in Sudan.

We worked closely with IRCC, with their international crisis response team, to establish a biometric centre in Sudan through IOM. IOM is present in Sudan. We actually came in with a proposal that through working with IOM, IRCC can solve that problem. It took a very long time, but at the end, they managed to establish a biometric centre in May last year. Since then, we've been able to successfully process applicants from within Sudan.

Sameer Zuberi: Aside from the one proposal you made, which you also succeeded in achieving, do you have any other proposals you haven't spoken about that you want to bring forward right now?

Ranya Elfil: I want to draw attention to and build on a point that was said by the witness next to me.

When you think about this community that is coming, you don't think about how they're actually skilled. Fifty per cent of the Sudanese population is under the age of 18, so the people coming to Canada are the youth. The majority of those coming to Canada are very skilled because unfortunately, due to the prohibitive financial requirements of this program, those who are able to apply to bring their family members are skilled professionals in Canada, who are actually bringing skilled professionals.

The Chair: You have 30 seconds.

Ranya Elfil: My family sponsored three engineers who are currently in Canada—a civil engineer, an electrical engineer, both in Ph.D. programs now, and one in a financial institution with a full-time job, and an architect who's doing a bridging program and has a part-time job.

Those we're bringing are skilled. This is something that I think is overlooked. It should not be taken into account when we're talking about a crisis situation, but this is something to also be taken into account.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Elfil.

Thank you, Mr. Zuberi.

[Translation]

Mr. Deschênes, you have the floor for two and a half minutes.

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you, Madam Chair.

My next question is for Ms. Elfil.

According to an article published in the National Post this morning, thousands of claims made by asylum seekers are now being processed without any filters. The countries they come from are not taken into consideration.

Have you seen the IRCC's approach change in recent years?

[English]

Ranya Elfil: I'm trying to clarify the question. When you say, "with no filters being applied"....

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: According to an article published in the National Post, from 2019 to 2023, nearly 25,000 asylum seekers from previously listed countries who made refugee claims were admitted without meeting with a government official. They were admitted only on the basis of the written request they submitted.

Have you seen this approach?

• (1200)

[English]

Ranya Elfil: I won't say that I'm very familiar with the asylum system and how it's working. I can speak to our community.

[Translation]

The Chair: You have one minute left, Mr. Deschênes.

[English]

Ranya Elfil: After the war, what we've seen in some cases is that they were processed without a hearing. Based on the cases presented, some, but very few, were processed without a hearing. Still, their ability to get a PR and to bring their families is very much restricted.

There's a huge struggle within that group who came here as asylum seekers seeking safety. Some of them even came before the war, with their families stranded in Sudan—a similar situation to family reunification. They're struggling to reunite with their families because processing, in terms of being given a PR so they're able to sponsor their family members, is taking very long.

[Translation]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Deschênes.

[English]

Thank you, Ms. Elfil.

That ends our first hour of testimony today. I want to thank all the witnesses for their time to be here.

I apologize to you, Ms. Elcano. I think we need to do a little bit better on our side. You have done everything right in terms of the headset and coming in and trying to do a bit of a test. We have to find a better way to guarantee that we can ensure all testimony while also respecting our interpreters.

Thanks to all.

We're now going to suspend for five minutes to do a bit of a changeover.

The meeting is suspended.

• (1200)

(Pause)

• (1205)

The Chair: Welcome, everyone.

I would like to welcome everyone to our—

[Translation]

Mr. Deschênes, you may take your seat.

[English]

second panel. Thank you for being here.

I want to, as always, make a few comments for the benefit of our new witnesses.

We don't have anyone online. I'm glad that everybody's here in person.

Please put on your headsets and try to do it in advance. It makes it easier to hear.

Address all your questions through the chair, please.

Of course, you can click on the microphone icon to activate your mic. Please make sure that you select whether you want to listen in French or in English. You can also adjust how loud you would like it to be.

As you saw earlier, I'll let everybody know when there's about a minute left.

With that, I'm going to now formally welcome our witnesses for the second panel.

We have, as an individual, Mr. James Yousif, who is a lawyer.

From the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, we have Mr. David Pierce, vice-president, government relations.

From the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada, we have Ms. Liane Roy, president, and Mr. Alain Dupuis, executive director.

Each group will have five minutes to speak.

We're going to begin with Mr. Yousif for five minutes, please.

• (1210)

James Yousif (Lawyer, As an Individual): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you for the invitation.

My thanks also to the C.D. Howe Institute for its support with the publication last month of my paper on the subject of the Immigration and Refugee Board's file review policy.

The file review policy involves the rapid acceptance of asylum claims without conducting a hearing or asking any questions of the claimant. For example, between January 2019 and February 2023, the IRB accepted 24,599 asylum claimants into Canada without asking them a single question. This policy remains in effect, and I think it's problematic for a number of reasons.

Firstly, it has not worked. During the relevant time, the backlog of claims increased from 17,000 in 2016 to 300,000 in 2025, an increase of more than 1,400%.

Secondly, the policy may also increase risk to Canada. The refugee hearing functions as a screen for national security risk and fraud. During the hearing, if questioning raises a red flag, the IRB member must stop the hearing and notify the minister to give the minister the chance to intervene. If the IRB accepts claims without conducting hearings or asking questions, those risks will never be detected, the minister's ability to intervene will be nullified and the risk to Canada will increase.

The policy may be interfering with the ability of board members to freely assess the evidence in their files in ways that are inconsistent with the law of administrative tribunals by imposing a mandatory file triage structure in which persons other than the person with authority delegated by Parliament are assessing the evidence in each file and making implied recommendations to adjudicators. This interferes with the independent assessment of the evidence in their files and pressures board members into making fast, positive decisions without asking questions.

Also of concern, the IRB appears to have implemented this policy on its own unilaterally without consulting ministers or cabinet, despite the fact that the policy has direct implications for the statutory mandates of the ministers of IRCC and Public Safety, and that shouldn't be possible. The IRB is an administrative tribunal. It does not have the authority on its own to make policies that directly implicate the mandate of the Minister of Public Safety or the Minister of Immigration.

For example, in the U.K., France, New Zealand and Australia, a policy change like this would have required the approval of ministers, cabinet and, possibly, Parliament.

I think this may point to a structural problem with Canada's model. Canada's IRB may be too independent; it reports to no minister. For that reason, it can't be seen clearly and its actions cannot be predicted. More broadly, the IRB's acceptance rate, or recognition rate, has now increased to 80% of claims decided on the merits, excluding claims that are withdrawn or abandoned.

By comparison, in 2024, Ireland accepted 30% of claims on the merits, Sweden accepted 40% and Germany accepted 59%. Re-

search suggests that acceptance rates are a significant factor in asylum seekers' choice of a destination country. The IRB's extraordinarily high rate of acceptance may be attracting more asylum claims to Canada.

In conclusion, I would make two recommendations.

The first is that the file review policy be brought to an end and the regular in-person hearing restored.

The second is that ministers and cabinet should assume responsibility for asylum policy in Canada. It may be worth considering the transfer of the functions now performed by the IRB to a setting that places them within the oversight of government in a way that provides a sufficient degree of independence for each tribunal, but which also results in a direct reporting relationship to ministers and cabinet. That was one of the recommendations for the refugee protection division in the independent review commissioned by the Trudeau government in 2017. I think that's a good option worth considering for the four tribunals that comprise the IRB.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Next we have five minutes for opening remarks from Mr. Pierce from the Canadian Chamber of Commerce.

Please go ahead, Mr. Pierce.

David Pierce (Vice President, Government Relations, Canadian Chamber of Commerce): Thank you very much.

Good afternoon, Madam Chair and members.

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today on behalf of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce and our new immigration council to provide testimony to your study on the immigration system.

The Canadian Chamber of Commerce is the country's largest business association, with an active network of 400 chambers across the country representing nearly 200,000 businesses. We exist in almost all sectors, across almost all regions and certainly in most ridings in Canada.

Immigration is a key driver of economic growth in Canada. For thousands of businesses, temporary and permanent immigration is not optional. It's an economic imperative.

That economic imperative became even more relevant last January with the inauguration of the current U.S. administration. Since then, Canadian businesses have been under strain due to the real or potential risk of tariffs that might shut down their sector. They're under strain because of aggressive changes to U.S. tax policy, and they're being asked to diversify to new markets.

At a time when Canadian businesses are having to compete in ways they haven't before, adding one more challenge—a shrinking workforce—may be a bridge too far for Canadian business. This in turn would force businesses to make difficult decisions to reduce services, stop producing goods or, worse, shift their business to jurisdictions where they can access labour.

I joined the Canadian Chamber of Commerce last January. I've had the chance over the past year to meet with most of our members. I can tell you from meetings with them that their top three issues always include access to skilled labour or access to immigration to grow our economy, which is also in their top three risks.

The simple fact is that we have an all-time low fertility rate, coupled with a rapidly shrinking labour pool due to an upcoming wave of retirements across critical sectors of our economy. The simple fact is that we have a demographic problem.

The Canadian Chamber of Commerce and our members recognize that, over the past few years, rapid and disproportionate population growth in certain communities across Canada has placed pressure on housing, infrastructure and social services, but we must draw to your attention the fact that those pressures are not experienced equally across our country. In many rural and remote communities, as well as specific sectors of our economy, employers continue to face persistent and structural labour challenges. Examples include Thunder Bay, much of northern Ontario, regions of Quebec and Atlantic Canada and across the west.

Our immigration system must reflect the full range of labour market needs for high-skilled, mid-skilled and low-skilled labour across rural and urban centres. Based on the research of our business data lab, approximately 1% of Canada's labour force is made up of temporary foreign workers, yet they play a critical role by addressing shortages in agriculture, food processing, construction, hospitality, manufacturing and health care.

Now, let me be clear. The Canadian Chamber of Commerce firmly believes that a qualified Canadian should have, and be able to compete for, a job in Canada. Those jobs should go to Canadians and permanent residents who want them and who are qualified to do that work, but I hope we can all agree that if those conditions do not exist, and where a qualified Canadian does not want that job, then a qualified Canadian business owner should be able to find the skilled workers they need through a program like the temporary foreign worker program to avoid being forced to reduce production, relocate or close.

Over the past couple of years, we've seen a lot of criticism of the temporary foreign worker program, and much of it, rightly so. The program's delivery, certainly over the past few years, has been a challenge for employers, no doubt for Canadians and especially for those coming in through the program, but that should not undermine the need—the imperative—that Canada has for an immigra-

tion program that enables employers to access labour that is not available domestically.

The multiple and reactive immigration policy changes over the past few years, such as the postgraduate work permit changes, changes to the temporary foreign worker program and reductions in immigration levels more generally, have created significant uncertainty and negatively impacted businesses and communities across the country. Together, the effect has been to erode Canadians' trust in the system, while also damaging Canada's reputation abroad as a destination for the best and brightest.

• (1215)

Businesses and Canadians need certainty and predictability back at the centre of our immigration system. On behalf of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce and our immigration council, I will say that we are eager to support you in doing just that.

Thank you.

• (1220)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Pierce.

Next we have, for five minutes, the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada.

[*Translation*]

Who would like to start?

Ms. Roy, you have the floor.

Liane Roy (President, Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada): Good afternoon, Madam Chair and members of the committee.

Thank you for inviting the Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada, or FCFA, to testify today.

My name is Liane Roy, and I have with me our executive director, Alain Dupuis.

For 50 years, the FCFA has been the national and international voice of minority francophones and Acadians in nine provinces and three territories. It runs a network of several hundred francophone organizations and institutions across the country. It is the federal government's voice when it comes to the vitality of our communities.

In 2001, the FCFA and its network made francophone immigration a priority in the national development of our communities. The FCFA quickly took a national leadership role on the issue. In 25 years, our communities have come a long way. For example, every province and territory now has at least one reception and settlement service in French.

Recruitment is improving, but it's still more mixed. In 2003, the government and the communities jointly adopted a target of 4.4% for francophone immigration to minority communities. It took us 19 years to reach that target. In the meantime, there have been several years of stagnation. Barely 2% of immigrants admitted outside Quebec were francophone. The federal government relied on general immigration instruments to achieve the target, with no specific mechanism to do so.

However, the FCFA and its network have argued for years that they needed programs specifically designed for francophone immigration. The government gradually changed the score given to candidates eligible for the express entry program who knew French. That's part of what got us to the 4.4% target in 2022.

However, at that time, we had fallen behind. For a generation, the Canadian francophonie was deprived of the immigration needed for its vitality and renewal. This has led to a faster decline in the demographic weight of our communities. A statistical study commissioned by the FCFA showed that, in order to halt and reverse the demographic decline of our communities, we now need targets of 12% as early as 2024, which would gradually increase to 20% by 2036.

The Official Languages Act, which was modernized in 2023, commits the government to taking action to restore the demographic weight of our communities to its 1971 level. As a result, the government adopted its first francophone immigration policy in early 2024. It also increased the francophone immigration targets. In 2025, the proportion of francophone immigrants admitted outside Quebec was 8.9%. The tools currently in place, such as group-based selection under the express entry program, seem insufficient to meet higher francophone immigration targets.

Moreover, these tools lead to a concentration of francophone immigration in two provinces, Ontario and New Brunswick. However, all our communities want to benefit from francophone immigration.

The policy launched in 2024 commits to the creation of an economic immigration program specific to our francophonie. Under the program, immigrants can be matched with labour needs, particularly in the regions and rural areas where the needs are urgent. That way, immigrants can be retained in places where there are jobs.

The Chair: You have one minute.

Liane Roy: Okay.

It will also help reduce labour shortages.

It will ensure that the criteria are better adapted to the socio-economic realities of francophone source countries, particularly in Africa. Lastly, it will increase the bilingual capacity of Canada's workforce, an important competitive advantage at a time when our

country is seeking to diversify its markets, particularly with the 90 member states and governments of the francophonie.

We therefore recommend that the committee call on the government to work closely with our communities to accelerate the implementation of a separate francophone economic immigration program, so that it can see the light of day in 2026. That way, IRCC will have all the resources it needs to increase francophone immigration to the country, in accordance with its obligations under the modernized Official Languages Act.

Thank you. We look forward to your questions.

● (1225)

The Chair: Thank you for your opening statement.

[English]

I forgot to mention at the outset that the last few minutes of our meeting is going to be taken up with a supplementary estimates motion. I just want to let everybody know that I'll be ending a few minutes early.

We go now to the first round of questions for six minutes, and we are going to begin with Mr. Redekopp, please.

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

Thank you to the witnesses for being here today.

Mr. Yousif, I'm going to start with you. I really hope I heard you wrong. I want you to clarify. You were talking about the file review program. That's the program in the Immigration and Refugee Board where asylum claimants come to Canada. Just repeat that for me. Are you saying that with file reviews those claimants do not talk to an interviewer?

James Yousif: The claimants are accepted without a hearing taking place or any questions being asked.

Brad Redekopp: Canada is accepting asylum claims on paper without actually talking to the claimants. Is that what you're saying?

James Yousif: Yes.

Brad Redekopp: Then that must be from countries where we trust people inherently or something. What's the logic in terms of the countries that we accept people from?

James Yousif: When the policy was publicized in January 2019, it was accompanied by a list of countries. Then about a year and a half later, that list came down, but the policy remains operable. For the initial list, it was comprised of countries that had an acceptance rate of 80% or higher as a threshold and presumably additional criteria.

Brad Redekopp: What kinds of countries were on that list?

James Yousif: It would be dangerous countries, because if a country has an acceptance rate for asylum claims of greater than 80%, that would tend to indicate there are significant sources of potential risk for asylum seekers from those countries.

Brad Redekopp: Are we talking about countries like Russia and Afghanistan?

James Yousif: The list has evolved over time. I attached a sample of one of the lists to my paper. I don't have it in front of me right now.

Brad Redekopp: Canada could theoretically, under this file review process, admit an asylum claimant from, let's say, Afghanistan, without actually ever talking to that person, or that person not being interviewed. Is that what you're saying?

James Yousif: Yes.

Brad Redekopp: Does that make you uncomfortable? It sure makes me uncomfortable.

James Yousif: Yes, I think it's problematic.

Brad Redekopp: You also talked about acceptance rates. You're saying our acceptance rates in Canada are quite high right now, relative to where they have been traditionally and also relative to peer countries. Can you talk about that?

James Yousif: The acceptance rate or recognition rate refers to the percentage of claims that are accepted, measured against the total of accepted and rejected claims. In 2024, that number was almost 80%, so 79.8%, for Canada. It's now among the highest, perhaps the highest, in the world.

Brad Redekopp: What are some other countries for comparison?

James Yousif: In 2024, Ireland accepted 30%, Sweden accepted 40% and Germany accepted 59%.

Brad Redekopp: Our peer countries are accepting 30% to 40% of asylum claims and we're accepting 80%. Is that what you're saying?

James Yousif: We're accepting a lot more.

Brad Redekopp: Does that concern you? It concerns me.

James Yousif: There's research that suggests that a disproportionately high acceptance rate may have the effect of attracting additional asylum claims to Canada. To put it in another way, perceptions of the likelihood of success and acceptance rates have been shown to have an effect on the selection by asylum seekers of the forum or the jurisdiction in which they choose to make their claim.

Brad Redekopp: When the Liberals tweeted out, "Come to Canada, we'll welcome you in", and then basically we have very low rejection rates, I can see why that would attract a lot of people. That makes sense.

It seems like there are a lot of problems potentially within the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada. Do you think it would be helpful for us as a committee to invite them to this committee to talk to them and ask them some of these questions?

• (1230)

James Yousif: I think perhaps that would be helpful.

Brad Redekopp: What kinds of questions would you suggest we ask them?

James Yousif: I don't think I should presume to suggest what questions you might ask.

Brad Redekopp: What would you ask them if you could ask them a question?

James Yousif: I would ask them to end the policy of accepting asylum claims without asking any questions.

Brad Redekopp: That makes sense.

We proposed some amendments to Bill C-12—for example, not allowing asylum claims from people who have transited through a G7 country or an EU country. Another was that, basically, if you lie to an officer, you would immediately not be able to claim asylum.

Do you think reforms like that would be helpful to our system?

James Yousif: I'll comment briefly on the idea of having designated countries.

A designated country-of-origin policy was contained in the Balanced Refugee Reform Act of 2010. To me, that's significant because that was during a minority Parliament, and it was legislation that was passed with the support of all parties in the House of Commons. It contained a variation on a way of partially restricting access to Canada's asylum system on the basis that the claimant may be coming from a safe, or relatively safe, country. It's an idea that has had some success in Canada's Parliament previously.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

Next we have five minutes for Ms. Sodhi.

Amandeep Sodhi (Brampton Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses for being here today.

My first question is for Madam Roy.

You recently emphasized the benefit that Canada has in having a bilingual workforce and how the francophone immigration targets contribute to this. Can you explain further your thoughts on the economic benefits that Canada sees by having a bilingual workforce?

[*Translation*]

Alain Dupuis (Executive Director, Fédération des communautés francophones et acadienne du Canada): Thank you for your question.

In our opinion, francophone immigration outside Quebec must first and foremost meet the economic needs of the francophone minority. As we know, we are dealing with labour shortages in key areas such as education. In fact, there is a shortage of at least 15,000 French and second-language teachers outside Quebec. Consequently, if we want to maintain a bilingual Canada, we certainly need qualified teachers.

We are also short 75,000 francophone day care spots. It's very difficult to place your children in a French-language day care outside Quebec. As we know, if children aren't educated in French during their early childhood, they won't go to a French-language school.

Those are the two sectors fundamental to the future of bilingualism in Canada, but there is also potential to develop bilingualism in other sectors. We know that the transportation and tourism sectors, for example, require bilingualism to properly welcome Canadians and enable them to travel.

We can also count on the bilingualization of more sectors of the Canadian economy in all provinces and territories. The Canadian economy is in a period of diversification. The more we use Canada's bilingual advantage, the more we will be able to diversify markets.

As mentioned, the francophonie is made up of 90 states from around the world where French is spoken. In our opinion, it is important to support the maintenance and growth of bilingualism in Canada.

[English]

Amandeep Sodhi: Madam Roy, you've been clear that francophone minority communities outside Quebec are facing a huge demographic decline and that immigration plays a central role in reversing that trend.

In January, the Minister of Immigration announced that Canada will exceed its 2025 target, reaching 8.9% on the 8.5% target, and that this target will continue to increase to 10.5% in 2026. From your perspective, what message does exceeding the 2025 target send to the francophone minority community across the country? Looking ahead, if Canada continues to meet or exceed these targets, what impact could that have on the vitality and long-term sustainability of francophone communities over the next decade?

• (1235)

[Translation]

Liane Roy: Thank you for the question.

The fact that we exceeded the target in 2025 is significant. It is a sign that we are moving in the right direction, but unfortunately, we are several years behind.

From 2003 to 2019, we were unable to meet the 4.4% targets. The delay has really caused a demographic loss in our regions and in our communities. It is therefore very important to ensure that we can meet the targets. That said, we also need to set even more ambitious targets so that we can ensure the vitality of our communities.

The Prime Minister announced a 12% target for 2029. However, we think we should go even further to be able to make up for all the years when we didn't meet the target.

A few years ago, the Commissioner of Official Languages conducted a study that showed that the shortfall in our communities was about 73,000 people, since we didn't meet the targets for two decades. We're still playing catch-up. We have to meet the targets, but we have to have even more ambitious targets.

[English]

Amandeep Sodhi: The FCFA has emphasized that ambition in setting francophone targets must also be matched with implementation. In practical terms, what are the most important tools or mechanisms that you feel will help translate a national target into tangible results on the ground?

[Translation]

Liane Roy: That's a great question, and we talk about it often.

It is important to introduce francophone lenses into IRCC's existing programs.

In addition, the policy launched by the government in 2024, the francophone immigration policy, talks about a separate economic immigration program for francophones.

We think it's very important that the program see the light of day. We recommend that it be put in place as quickly as possible, because a separate immigration program for francophone communities would send a strong message to increase francophone immigration. It would be a lasting commitment to the evolution and vitality of our communities. It would ensure consistency with the francophone immigration target. It would ensure detailed accountability. It would align with the standard of substantive equality set out in the Official Languages Act.

As I mentioned in my opening remarks, according to the new version of the Official Languages Act, which was passed in 2023, we have to go back to the demographic weight of francophones that existed in 1971.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Roy. That's the end of the six minutes.

Mr. Deschênes, you have the floor for six minutes.

Alexis Deschênes: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Mr. Yousif, my next questions are for you.

Do you speak French?

James Yousif: Just a little bit.

Alexis Deschênes: Okay.

I want to begin by thanking you, because you are making quite a significant contribution today. You're telling us about a practice that was previously unknown.

If I understand correctly, claims from asylum seekers increased starting in 2017. At the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, it was decided that tasks had to be lightened and security checks had to be set aside, given the extra workload.

What you're telling us is that, for four years, 25,000 asylum seekers who claimed refugee status were admitted without meeting any officers or being asked any questions. The board relied solely on their written declaration.

That process was not in place prior to 2019.

Is that correct?

[English]

James Yousif: That's correct. There were substantial investments and reforms to the system in 2010. The new system was implemented in 2012. The key to those reforms was that the IRB would maintain a certain level of claim finalizations each year. Between 2012 and 2017 the IRB was unable to meet those targets, and a second backlog had emerged.

Then—and I think this is an important detail to understand—in 2017 the Trudeau government commissioned an independent review because of this continued inability of the IRB to stay on top of its backlog and meet its promised level of claim finalizations. The Trudeau government appointed former deputy minister Neil Yeates to lead an independent review of the asylum system.

Mr. Yeates was considering all options. His report was published. The two main options were to leave it as is or to do what he referred to as “major structural reform”, i.e. take the refugee protection division from the IRB and move it to IRCC so that it would be fixed in a reporting relationship to a minister, so that ministers and cabinet would have oversight and so that IRCC would just have better control over this problematic aspect of the system.

In 2017 the IRB was under immense pressure to quickly produce an increase in its rate of finalizations. It was by using this policy tool I've been describing that they were able to do that.

• (1240)

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: We've adopted a practice that involves eliminating security checks. Through an access to information request, you're able to tell us that, until 2023, 25,000 asylum seekers were able to enter the country without meeting with an officer.

To your knowledge, is this situation still ongoing?

[English]

James Yousif: The extent of the disclosure that you referenced was from January 2019 to February 2023, and—that's right—as you've said, the number during that period of time was just under 25,000.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: Okay.

[English]

James Yousif: The policy is ongoing—

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: Then it's ongoing.

[English]

James Yousif: —and, just to your question about security, there is front-end security screening. However, the IRB itself is required to act as a kind of security screen to notify the Minister of Public Safety or the Minister of Immigration. If an issue comes up during questioning that raises a security flag or a program integrity flag, they must notify the minister. However, if they don't conduct a hearing and they don't ask any questions, that can't happen.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: The decision was made to remove the obligation to conduct reviews for people from countries on the list of countries with the highest crime rates.

Why is it important to have individual reviews before someone is allowed to be a refugee in Canada?

[English]

James Yousif: Are you asking about contact with claimants before they come to Canada, or are you asking about why it is important to conduct hearings?

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: Why is it important to hold hearings?

[English]

James Yousif: Every asylum application, as it's written, will always contain a narrative, a story, which, if it's accepted by the IRB, will meet the test for refugee status.

James Yousif: In other words, you can't tell whether a claim is true or false just by looking at the written paper application. The only way to do that is by asking questions.

[Translation]

Alexis Deschênes: Mr. Yousif, you basically seem to be saying that this was known around the world. People learned that they could now apply for refugee status if they came from certain countries and that there was no security screening.

What effect did that have?

[English]

James Yousif: I think it's possible that this policy may have had the effect of attracting more asylum claims to Canada. I also think that having an acceptance rate of 80% may also be acting as a pull factor, attracting more asylum claims to Canada.

The Chair: Thank you.

We have 10 minutes left for this round. I'm going to give four minutes to Ms. Rempel Garner and four minutes to Mr. Zuberi, and

[Translation]

two minutes to Mr. Deschênes.

[English]

Michelle Rempel Garner, please go ahead.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Just to summarize, Mr. Yousif, when I saw the list come out in 2019, I assumed that this was a way for the Liberals to quickly clear the backlog—or attempt to. Would you characterize the list system that you talked about as a way to clear the backlog, essentially? That was likely the motivation.

• (1245)

James Yousif: The country list was published by the IRB; it was not published by the Liberals or the Government of Canada. I think, to me, that actually points to one of the more concerning aspects about this, which is that the IRB unilaterally implemented this policy.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Okay. I've heard enough on this.

I move:

That, having regard for the February 23, 2026, National Post article titled “Overwhelmed by asylum claims, Ottawa coped by ignoring security protocol”, and further to its study on Canada's immigration system, the committee invite the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada to appear before the committee for two hours, at the earliest opportunity and no later than Wednesday, March 11, 2026.

My rationale for moving this motion is as follows, colleagues. The study that we're undertaking right now is to examine ways to improve the order, fairness and effectiveness of Canada's immigration system, and a point under that was the asylum system.

We've heard here today that the IRB made a unilateral decision, potentially, to expedite asylum claims from a list of countries that may have put Canadian security at risk. I think they need to come to the committee to answer what exactly happened here. Otherwise, I think that we're going to continue to just have numerous news stories on this, and I'd like to get them on the record.

This is very concerning, and this would also be in alignment with our study. It could just be another witness list as well.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you for that motion, Ms. Rempel Garner.

Mr. Zuberi.

Sameer Zuberi: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I suggest that we suspend in order to have a conversation on this motion. Given that it's a surprise, we have to reflect on this.

The Chair: Okay. I will suspend for two minutes.

• (1245)

(Pause)

• (1250)

The Chair: Please take your seats. We'll come back to this.

Is there anyone who would like to speak to this?

Monsieur Deschênes.

[Translation]

Mr. Deschênes, you have the floor.

Alexis Deschênes: My comment will be brief.

I think it's relevant. This is new information, but it is part of the study undertaken by the committee. Given what the witness indicated, it is entirely relevant and appropriate in the circumstances to call officials from the Immigration and Refugee Board. That is why I will support my colleague's request.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Zuberi.

Sameer Zuberi: Thank you, Madam Chair.

[Translation]

Thank you for giving me the time to consult with my caucus members and reflect on the proposal. We support the motion, and we're ready to go to a vote.

[English]

The Chair: Since it seems that everybody unanimously approves, I don't think we need a formal vote.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: I see we've come up against our time, unfortunately.

Mr. Pierce, it doesn't seem that you have been able to answer any questions, but we need a few minutes to go through the supplementary estimates.

Mr. Redekopp.

Brad Redekopp: I'd like to move the following motion:

That the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, along with the appropriate officials from the department and the Immigration and Refugee Board, be invited to appear on the Supplementary Estimates (C), 2025-26, for two hours; and that this meeting take place at least five calendar days before the supplementary estimates are to be reported to the House.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: We have done a lot of business today.

I want to thank the witnesses for their testimony today. Thank you for your contribution to our study.

Mr. Pierce, please rest assured that your testimony was very important to us today. You didn't get any questions, but if you heard anything that you would like to contribute to, please feel free to follow up on it in writing. We take additional testimony afterwards. That goes to everyone. Sometimes you think about things you would have wanted to say, but didn't say. That would be important for us.

The meeting is adjourned.

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