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Chair

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj

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•(1210)

[English]

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Tilson (Dufferin—Caledon, CPC)): We'll call the meeting to order. The chairman has another engagement, so, Mr. Orr, you're stuck with me again.

We're continuing on with the main estimates for the next hour. Some members of the committee have some questions.

Ms. Zahid.

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

I would like to thank our officials for joining us today.

In the meeting on the supplementary estimates that we had in March, the minister discussed an additional \$2.5 million that was designated to reduce a processing backlog for the live-in caregiver program. Could you please give the committee an update on the effect of that funding on the backlog?

Ms. Anita Biguz (Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Mr. Chair, I have a number of comments in response to the question.

The caregiver inventory actually has been reduced by about 34% as of December 31, 2015. We have been making headway in terms of the processing times. In particular, I would just note the fact that in terms of the 2016 levels plan, the range of the number of planned admissions is about 20,000 to 22,000. Looking at the last five years, we are certainly planning a higher number of admissions which will help to facilitate our ability to work through the inventory.

In that sense, we are optimistic with the additional room in the levels plan, and the work we've been putting into processing, that we should be making good headway in terms of moving through the inventory over the course of this year and next year.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: On average, by what percentage do you think it will decrease this year and next year?

Mr. Robert Orr (Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): Mr. Chair, the inventory this year, as the deputy mentioned, the levels spaces, the estimate is 20,000 to 22,000 individuals. At the end of last year, we had about 38,000 in the inventory, but we also anticipate an intake this year of about 10,500. All those things have to be taken into consideration as to where we will be at the end of the year.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: The current wait times for the live-in caregiver program are considered excessive by both the employers and the employees. The minister had spoken about raising the fee for

the LMIA's and the other MIA's. Could you please give the committee an update on this and other such initiatives to reduce the wait times and strengthen the caregiver program to better meet the needs of both the employers and the employees?

Ms. Anita Biguz: Mr. Chair, if I may, that is a commitment, certainly, of the government. Labour market impact assessment fees are under the responsibility of the Minister of Employment and Social Development. That department is working in terms of the follow-up required to be able to deliver on that commitment.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Some live-in caregivers feel insecure in their employment situation, and their employers sometimes take advantage of these caregivers, who are afraid to file a complaint as they fear potential retaliation from their employers. Does the department have a plan to address these concerns for the employees?

Mr. David Manicom (Associate Assistant Deputy Minister, Strategic and Program Policy, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): I think the main step the government has taken in recent periods is to eliminate the live-in requirement. The live-in requirement was seen for many caregivers as creating a power imbalance situation which led to a higher incidence of either abusive situations or non-payment of overtime. There's no longer a requirement to live in the home to qualify for permanent resident programs. That is the primary step taken.

We've also put in place a large number of compliance resources and penalties to make sure that employers are subject to occasional audit and subject to penalties if they do not fulfill the requirements under which they receive the labour market opinion. Actual labour standards compliance is a provincial responsibility.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: In my riding of Scarborough Centre, I've heard a lot from the caregivers that the dependent children of live-in caregiver class applicants who turn 18 and over while the applications are being processed face further delays as additional documentation is required from them when they turn 18.

Do you have any plan to address these issues? I've heard a lot about these issues in my riding.

Mr. Robert Orr: The requirements are consistent, and we will be trying to facilitate these cases considerably. The fact that we have increased levels space is significant in allowing us to bring down the inventory, and thus in the longer term we will see much faster processing times, which would assist with these various issues that occur.

Right now we're in a situation where because we had restricted levels space, we weren't able to bring in large numbers, and the inventory grew.

With the 20,000 to 22,000 this year, that will help significantly to bring down the inventory. Therefore, it's easier for families to get the information together once, and they are not subject to such long processing times.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Further to this, in some cases, it currently has more than 48 months. That's the situation. That is after the minimum work standards have been met.

Families are separated for over six years by the time the caregiver has received their PR. During the processing of the PR applications, the family overseas is required to have multiple medical examinations, each of which costs about \$200 on average, to keep the file current. If they have to repeat that medical examination more than once, that's an additional burden.

Are there any plans with regard to that?

• (1215)

Mr. Robert Orr: Mr. Chair, we're very conscious of the concerns about that. Certainly we try to time the medical examinations in most cases so that the validity will not expire. The medical examination is normally valid for a one-year period, and we do our best to coordinate the timing.

As I mentioned, with reduced processing times, which we are getting into as we have more levels space, we are hopeful that the number of times people would have to repeat information, or submit documents a second time, or update things will be reduced significantly.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Tilson): Mr. Saroya.

Mr. Bob Saroya (Markham—Unionville, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I did ask three questions last time. They were supposed to get back to me. Are they going to get back to me today, or are they going to get back to me in the future?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Mr. Chair, we're certainly prepared to follow up on a number of the questions that were presented at the meeting last week.

We have a series of questions. Perhaps you could identify which of the three you want us to respond to first.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Absolutely. Thank you.

These main estimates indicate that IRCC will transfer \$1.3 million to the computers for schools program of Innovation, Science, and Economic Development Canada to facilitate the integration of Syrian refugees by providing them with computers.

First, from which department programs will these funds be transferred? Second, has IRCC funded this program in the past? If not, what is the rationale for doing so now?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Mr. Chair, in response to the member's question, in fact, the main estimates include an amount of \$1.3 million for the computers for schools program. This is a program of the Department of Innovation, Science, and Economic Development Canada. Our department actually included the funding or sought the funding of \$1.3 million on behalf of the Department of Innovation, Science, and Economic Development as part of the overall Syria initiative. These funds, \$1.3 million, are being transferred to that

department through the main estimates. In fact, the intention is to be able to provide refurbished computers for Syrian refugees to help facilitate their settlement and integration into Canada.

That department is working using its existing program authority in partnership under the computers for schools program to make these computers available to Syrian refugees either at settlement locations or in host communities. That's what these costs are for. Apparently an amount of \$250,000 is for working with partners and includes hardware to support refurbishment, transportation, and software licences for additional computers, and overtime to assist staff in being able to meet the demand in a timely manner.

This is not a program that my department has. We don't have the mandate for the program, nor have we funded the program previously. It is an initiative that was identified under the Syrian national initiative, but it will be delivered by the Department of Innovation, Science, and Economic Development Canada.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Thank you.

Funding requested for the resettlement assistance program has substantially increased in fiscal year 2016-17 because of the government's Syrian refugee resettlement commitment, but is expected to return to a normal level in the following years.

Resettlement refugees have the right to apply for family reunification for immediate family members within their first year in Canada, which means a second wave of Syrian refugees could be expected.

How has the department prepared for this possibility in resource allocation for the resettlement assistance program for future years?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Mr. Chair, in response to that question, the settlement program has an annual budget of about \$589 million. Incremental funding was received for settlement services as a result of the increase in the number of Syrian refugees coming to Canada, and in fact, these estimates include additional funding for settlement services. That funding will continue over the course of the next couple of years in terms of being able to meet the settlement needs of those refugees.

In terms of our admissions for future years, that is part of our annual immigration levels process, so that in 2017 and future years levels, we actually work on identifying what the intake will be across different business lines. That includes the number of refugees. This year, of course, we've seen a tripling in terms of the number of resettled refugees in the 2016 immigration levels plan.

All of this will be factored into the 2017 and future years levels plan, in terms of the number of admissions that the government will want to achieve through the normal levels planning process.

Those costs would be factored in as part of the levels plan for the future.

• (1220)

Mr. Bob Saroya: Thank you.

My next question is on the media reports that IRCC is shutting down expedited processing of private sponsorship applications.

The government has indicated that all applications for Syrian refugees received prior to March 31, 2016, will be processed in 2016 and early 2017. Applications received after that time will be processed according to the usual procedures.

How many private sponsorship applications for Syrian refugees are in the processing inventory? Has the department allocated additional resources to finish processing the applications received prior to March 31, 2016? What options are being considered to respond to the ongoing interest in private sponsorship that the Syrian initiative has generated?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Mr. Chair, in terms of the numbers of applications received to March 31, 2016, the number is around 12,000 for privately sponsored refugees.

We are assessing those applications currently. We have more than 65 full-time staff located in the region who do processing, but we also have dozens of staff in Canada as well, both in terms of our office in Winnipeg and also in Ottawa. We actually work across the network. We have a centralized processing network, so that we are able to work across the network.

We have dedicated staff who will be working on these applications. In addition, we are working on operational plans now. We do normally have temporary duty officers who we assign to the field. We are working on our operational plans now, in terms of being able to assess how many officers we would deploy to the field to process these additional applications that we receive to the end of March. That is with the intention, of course, as was announced, that we would finalize processing by the end of December 2016 or early into 2017. That is the planning that we're doing right now.

Otherwise, we know that there has been a great deal of response in terms of organizations and private sponsors coming forward and their interest in sponsoring refugees. Again, this will be taken into account in our 2017 and future years immigration levels planning.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Tilson): Thank you.

Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the officials.

To follow up on that question, how many staff were flown back from processing the Syrian refugees overseas?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: We'll have to get back to you with that answer, Mr. Chair.

As I said, we certainly did deploy staff overseas as part of the big initiative. Of course, because we have resumed normal operations, those staff members have in fact been returned to Canada. We'll have to confirm the exact number.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Tilson): Could you give that to the clerk soon?

Thank you.

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Yes, Mr. Chair.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: If we could get the number as well as the cost of the staff who have come back, that would be great.

On March 10, I asked a question on how much was spent on the renovations for the military base. I received some answers to my set of questions from March 10, but I did not get a response to that question. I wonder if I could get that as well.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Tilson): Is the answer to that, yes, Ms. Biguzs?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Yes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Then moving on to new questions, I wonder if the officials could give me the breakdown of the resources allocated to local embassies to process sponsorship applications, and to have that breakdown by categories that are currently on the website so we actually have a basis to look at.

Could I have information on what the targets are for each embassy as well? That would be for the different categories, parents and grandparents as well as spousal, family reunification applications.

• (1225)

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Mr. Chair, we'll be happy to look into that. It may be that we don't normally break down our costing by mission according to business line to that degree. I can certainly make the commitment that we will go back and assess the question from the member, and respond to the clerk of the committee appropriately in terms of how we do actually account for our costing, but some of it may not be costing we would normally have.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Tilson): I've stopped the clock, Ms. Kwan.

As you may or may not know, the committee is embarking on a study of the Syrian settlement issue. That information would be useful before we start that, if that's possible.

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Mr. Chair, if the member could clarify the question, my understanding is that this is not just looking at refugees. Perhaps the member could clarify precisely what kind of costing. It sounded as if it was more than for Syrian refugees. It would be helpful if you could clarify that, and I take your point, Mr. Chair, in terms of your interest in having information on the Syrian refugee initiative.

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

Yes, it's not only for Syrian refugees; it's for all the different categories. I think it's important to know, so perhaps I could get the breakdown by cost as well as by staff, so on both counts.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Tilson): I've started the clock again, thank you.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thanks, Mr. Chair.

With respect to the wait times for the different categories, for parents and grandparents reunification and other family sponsorships, spousal sponsorships are done differently. On the website it actually shows the processing time in Mississauga as well as the local embassies for the spousal and dependent children sponsorship category, but for the parents and grandparents it doesn't. It only gives the one timeline.

I'm wondering why it does not show the different timelines as it used to. Would the department commit to actually providing that additional information?

Mr. Robert Orr: Mr. Chair, we're trying to give as much information as we can on the spousal information and we have broken that down. Recently we changed how we presented it so there is more fulsome information on the spousal processing times.

For the parents and grandparents, it's rather complicated at the moment because we are going through a phase where we are making significant inroads into the backlog, but there was a pause period. What we are doing is trying to indicate the timing of which applications we're dealing with, so people can see that, because once the application is in the process, it's fairly rapid to get a response. What we're trying to do is give an indication of what sort of applications we're dealing with.

We have sufficient levels space this year, but because there was a pause for a couple of years on parents' and grandparents' applications, we're now into the new applications that were received after that pause. We should see a rapid decline in processing times for parents and grandparents as a result of that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: It would be very useful to find out exactly the processing time. I understand that there was a pause, but even with that, right now it's really hard to find out exactly what the wait is, so that the families can plan accordingly. The website only says—and I checked just this morning—40 months or 41 months and it doesn't give you any other information.

If you go back, it used to list the embassy wait times as well, so you could differentiate the wait times in the processing here in Canada as well as the wait times in the local embassies.

Mr. Robert Orr: If I may, on that particular point, the reason we're not doing it by embassies is that many of the parents' and grandparents' applications are processed entirely in Canada and never go to one of our missions overseas. Therefore, if you have an applicant from a given country, the application may be processed entirely in an office in Mississauga and never go to the mission abroad.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Are you suggesting that the 40- or 41-month wait time is the entire time in terms of the wait time?

Mr. Robert Orr: That is correct.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thanks for that clarification.

With respect to contacting local embassies, this is again an issue that's come up for MPs. They're not able to contact local embassies, in some instances, to get information for their constituents. This was again a change from previous practice. I believe it's been raised and has been brought to the minister's attention. At our last session with officials, it was brought to the officials' attention. There was supposed to be work under way to fix the issues there.

Has that been addressed, and what can we expect?

• (1230)

Mr. Robert Orr: We've recently instituted, Mr. Chair, a single point of contact for MPs. This is to simplify matters for members of Parliament. Because of our integrated network, to which the deputy made reference, it's often difficult to know where an application is

actually being processed. It may start off in a particular country. It may be processed in Canada. It may be at one of our centralized processing centres abroad.

What we have tried to do, therefore, is to say that you can come with a particular inquiry, and we will determine where the application is being processed and ensure you get a response within the specified service standards.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm sorry, but with all due respect, the specified —

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Tilson): Ms. Kwan, I'm sorry, but the time has expired.

Mr. Chen.

Mr. Shaun Chen (Scarborough North, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I have a question with respect to the main estimates and the \$6.3 million in transfer funds to Global Affairs. This represents a net decrease of \$3.7 million from the previous financial year. What is the rationale for the decrease, and how will this impact service delivery at our Canadian missions abroad?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Mr. Chair, our department has many staff who are located in and of course work out of our missions abroad. I think we have the second-largest footprint, after Global Affairs, in terms of the number of Canadian-based staff working on immigration processing abroad, including locally engaged staff as well. We have a memorandum of understanding with Global Affairs in terms of funding that we actually provide on a regular basis to cover those costs, whether it's property growth, opening of new visa offices, or as well, the electronic travel authorization. These are increased costs to support the work we do.

At the same time as well, Global Affairs actually then transfers back to us changes in terms of funding levels where we've had visa office closures, for example, or where there's been a workload redistribution, so it's kind of a net effect. There have been funds that we have provided to Global Affairs, and Global Affairs has transferred money back to us. What you see is basically the net amount that's reflected in terms of this particular transfer. Essentially, it's just reflecting the amount of support services required to support Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship staff in our missions abroad.

Mr. Shaun Chen: In terms of the net change, one of the issues that I've heard about from constituents in my riding is their concern around the process for visitor visa applications. Some constituents have expressed to me that they have relatives and other people abroad who have received visitor visas in the past, yet they apply for a third or fourth time and get denied.

In terms of the budget, is there sufficient staff at the missions? What type of work are they doing in terms of coordinating between different missions to understand the history, for example, of a visitor visa applicant?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: If I can clarify, I think this item is basically related to the support required for staff. In overall staffing for visas in terms of our department, we actually make sure that we look at missions across the network internationally. We locate our resources where we know the volumes are.

We also send out temporary duty officers, certainly in terms of key missions, to where we know the volumes may be increasing, to help us in terms of managing the workflow, as we've already mentioned. As Mr. Orr has mentioned, with the centralized network, we actually also move work across the network electronically. We are able to do processing in Canada in addition to the work that may take place at our missions abroad.

It's the role of visa officers to ensure that we are fulfilling the requirements of legislation under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act. That means our visa officers assess applications based on the admissibility criteria that have been identified in that legislation in terms of whether they actually deem a visa should be approved or not. That's the role of the visa officer in terms of fulfilling their functions. I think it may be less an issue in terms of staffing, but that's the role of the visa officer in terms of making determinations whether to approve or not to approve a visitor visa to Canada.

•(1235)

Mr. Shaun Chen: Thank you.

Mr. Chair, I'll be sharing the rest of my time with Mr. Ehsassi.

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

I want to focus my questions on changes to the estimates relating to the refugee determination system. I notice there was a decrease of \$6.7 million, and I was wondering if you could explain what accounts for that decrease in funding. As a follow-up, the reason I'm concerned is that the IRCC had a report on plans and priorities that suggested there was a need to spend more money in introducing reforms. How would one reconcile what one finds in the report on plans and priorities with the decrease in funding?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Mr. Chair, I think there have been some variations in our main estimates, in terms of the funding that had been received as part of the changes to the refugee asylum system back in 2012-13. Among the items that had been included as part of the asylum system was funding for what we call the reviews and interventions pilot project, which would allow immigration officers to intervene at hearings before the refugee protection division.

That funding, I think, has sunset, which is why you see a decrease in the estimates. The issue of whether that pilot project would be continued was to be taken into account as part of an overall assessment of how effective the changes to the asylum system have been. That work is now taking place in the department. We are assessing those changes and deciding whether we need to make further changes or continue the program.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Tilson): That concludes the first round of questioning.

Ms. Biguzs, before we start the second round, there were a number of undertakings you were going to give. Were you planning on giving us those in writing or orally? Do the members want them orally, or do you want them in writing?

An hon. member: In writing.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Tilson): It sounds like we'd prefer to have them in writing, sometime before the meeting concludes. I don't expect the members want to interrupt their questions.

Are you okay with that?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Mr. Chair, yes, we were prepared to provide this information. One question we've already responded to was about computers for schools. I know there were other questions. There was one on the staffing issue in the Middle East, which we've responded to. We had a question on biometrics, which we are prepared to respond to.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Tilson): Are you able to give us those in writing today?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Yes, we can.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Tilson): Thank you.

Ms. Rempel, you have five minutes.

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

My questions will reference resources available to offices of members of Parliament for dealing with immigration casework. It's my opinion that members' offices, whenever possible, should be referring constituents to the public service and making sure we're sticking to the rules. Every once in a while, however, our offices get something that requires our attention.

We've heard conflicting reports about what has happened to access to the ministerial enquiries division versus a general hotline in the central operating unit. When we call this general hotline, do we still have direct access to the ministerial enquiries division?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Mr. Chair, I'll start and then turn the floor over to Mr. Orr.

We made a number of changes to try to provide better services to members of Parliament. The intention was to have one line to go through to simplify the kinds of inquiries we are receiving.

We also had a process for more complex cases—cases that the call centre might not be able to respond to—to have them addressed through the ministerial enquiries division. Our overall objective was to try to improve service and make it more facilitative for the offices of members of Parliament. Your input is invaluable in that.

I'll now turn to Mr. Orr to explain how we're trying to deal with some of the issues that members of Parliament have been experiencing with our MP call centre.

•(1240)

Mr. Robert Orr: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Yes, we've set this up recently with the new information line for members of Parliament. We are currently receiving about 3,500 inquiries per week, about 1,800 of those by phone and the rest by email. We are responding to the phone calls immediately, and the emails are being responded to within about 48 hours.

Specifically in response to the ministerial enquiries division, the unit is making a determination. If it is something that they can deal with rapidly, they are doing so. If it is a more complex issue, then it is automatically referred to the ministerial enquiries division, who will respond to that inquiry and get back to the constituency office or the MP directly.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Mr. Orr, do you have a sense of what the turnaround time is now for inquiries to the ministerial enquiries division through this new process?

Mr. Robert Orr: I believe they are respecting the 48-hour turnaround, at least for initial contact.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: What's happened in my office is that, where we used to get a decision within a day when we were able to contact the ministerial enquiries division immediately, it's now taking 10 days. This has significantly increased the workload on my very few constituent staff. I'm wondering why you've removed the access directly to the ministerial enquiries division and put a middleman in as opposed to simply training members of Parliament who might not be aware of the capacity or the purpose of the ministerial enquiries division.

Mr. Robert Orr: Mr. Chair, I think the issue here is that the agents in the information centre for members of Parliament are able to answer the vast majority of cases immediately. The vast majority of cases are being responded to there. We made changes yet again yesterday to increase the types of cases that the call centre can respond to immediately.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: But to be clear, Mr. Orr, it's my understanding that members of Parliament do not have direct access to the ministerial enquiries division any longer. Is that correct?

Mr. Robert Orr: We have not closed down the phone line to ministerial enquiries.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Will that change? Can my office still now pick up the phone and bypass the central call unit for complex cases and directly call the ministerial enquiries division?

Mr. Robert Orr: Our experience thus far is that offices are getting excellent client service through the centre, and the vast majority of those cases are being responded to immediately. Where there are systemic or more complex issues, then, yes, it goes back to the ministerial enquiries unit.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: But to be clear, it's my understanding that my office can no longer directly contact the ministerial enquiries division with a complex case. Is that correct?

Mr. Robert Orr: The phone line is still there, Mr. Chair, and access is possible.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Which phone line is available: the phone line to the central processing unit or to the ministerial enquiries division?

Mr. Robert Orr: Both lines are open.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Will both lines remain open and accessible to members of Parliament without change?

Mr. Robert Orr: Mr. Chair, we have made a change, and we're very much encouraging people to go through the other route because we think it is more efficient and, in the long run, better service.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Tilson): Thank you.

Mr. Sarai.

Mr. Randeep Sarai (Surrey Centre, Lib.): Thank you.

This is a question either one of you can answer.

The area that feeds the Chandigarh visa office or consulate in India has one of the highest GDPs in the country, has one of the highest concentrations of wealth, and some of the highest per capita incomes, but compared to other offices in the country, it has a substantially lower acceptance rate. My understanding is that currently it's below 50%, and in the last seven years the highest it's ever achieved was 57%. In my riding and in many other ridings, it's perceived as a visa rejection office rather than a visa acceptance office.

I want to find out if there are any plans to change that process so that we have a higher acceptance rate and our constituency offices aren't inundated with feedback about why the rejection rate is so high.

Mr. Robert Orr: Mr. Chair, the issue of temporary residence acceptance rates and so on is always of interest. The overall acceptance rate for our temporary resident program is approximately 82%. The member is absolutely correct. In certain offices, there are lower acceptance rates than elsewhere. I think it's important to understand that each case, each application, is looked at on an individual basis, and then the refusal rate results from that. It's not that we are working to a particular rate. Each case is looked at individually on its own merits.

We would be looking at a whole variety of different elements in terms of documentation, in terms of the purpose of going to Canada, and ties both to their home country and to Canada, and we make an overall assessment on those bases. Indeed, there are certain countries where the acceptance rate is low, and Chandigarh is certainly one of those places. The statistics you have are absolutely correct. I think that there are a number of issues that occur there. In Chandigarh we have seen a number of elements that have led to a lower acceptance rate.

● (1245)

Mr. Randeep Sarai: Following on that, it's my understanding that when one applies for a TRV, temporary resident visa, the two things they predominantly look for are purpose and travel history. The reason I call that a rejection office is that if the travel history is strong, they are rejected because the purpose isn't strong enough. If the purpose is very strong, they say the travel history isn't there. It seems that the officers in that particular area are looking for a reason to not give a visa, as opposed to getting enough grounds to give a visa.

While sitting here, I just received an application of a person who's been to 41 countries as an athlete of the Olympic team in India. He's a decorated officer in the police force. He applied here. His email is astounding. He's embarrassed. He's never been rejected by anyone. They cite "lack of purpose", because he's coming to a hockey tournament here.

These are appalling, and we constituent MPs are inundated. In our offices, at least 50% of our time is taken up dealing with these files, sending them back to your offices, and getting inquiries done.

However, we have no internal review process. Are there any plans to do an internal review? Currently, if someone's visa is rejected, such as the one I just mentioned, the only recourse the person has is to go to the Federal Court or reapply.

Mr. Robert Orr: Mr. Chair, I think it's important to understand that the visa officers are very much interested in facilitating travel to Canada for bona fide visitors. We do approach our caseload with that in mind.

We do need to look at a number of different factors and balance those to reach a conclusion. If you like a composite picture of risk, there are a number of different elements we're going to be considering before we reach our decision.

Mr. Manicom, I don't know if you want to comment, specifically having served in India.

Mr. David Manicom: Yes, I would just add that the refusal rate is historically significantly higher in Chandigarh over a large number of years with a large number of different officers. There's relative consistency in the refusal rate, regardless of which particular staff member is there. It's the nature of the caseload. The caseload is very different. There are a very high number of low-quality applications and of fraudulent applications.

We can't speak to any particular case, but approval rates vary widely both across countries and within countries. There are other parts of India that have refusal rates similar to that from the Punjab. I don't think we can associate it with particular officers, because that higher refusal rate persists over many years, even when officers, managers, and so forth turn over.

Having managed the office both in New Delhi and with responsibility for Chandigarh, I can tell you that the caseloads of the two offices are very different. The officers are applying a very similar standard, and normally people with repeat travel histories are approved. There are many hundreds of visas being approved in Chandigarh every week.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Tilson): Thank you.

Mr. Saroya.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Significant reforms to the system for determining refugee claims in Canada were made in 2012. There was approximately \$6.7 million available, yet these estimates indicate a decrease by that amount related to this reform. What accounts for the decrease in funding?

•(1250)

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Mr. Chair, as I may have indicated in a previous response, included in the asylum system changes back to

2012 was funding for a pilot called reviews and interventions. It was a pilot that would provide for the ability of officers of the department to intervene in proceedings before the refugee protection division and the refugee appeal division at the Immigration and Refugee Board. Essentially, that was intended to be a pilot, and we would assess how effective that pilot had been, based on information and evidence looking at the results of the pilot.

We have been in the process of assessing that now to determine whether, in fact, there would be merit and warrant, based on the results and outcomes, to suggest that this pilot be continued on a regular basis. We are reviewing overall the changes to the refugee asylum system of 2012, and this is included as part of our review, just to ensure that we have a good understanding of what has been achieved as a result of the changes to the system and whether any changes are required. It was basically sunset funding for a pilot initiative.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Thank you.

The three-year evaluation of reform to the Canadian refugee determination system was to be completed in December 2015. Are there any budgetary implications following from this evaluation?

Ms. Anita Biguzs: At this point, work is continuing by officials in assessing the overall outcomes and results of the changes to the asylum system. It was a very large, comprehensive transformational change that took place. It had implications certainly not just for our department, but of course also for the Immigration and Refugee Board and CBSA. That work is taking place now.

At this point in time, it would be too early to say whether in fact there are any changes as a result of that, since the policy work and the assessment are still taking place.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Thank you.

If I can go back to the Chandigarh situation, most of the people there are farmers, right? I've seen a number of reactions. Every three months or six months, there is grain, rice, or potatoes, or whatever they grow, and the amount that would come from the market would be 400,000 rupees, or 10,000—big amounts. A number of applications were rejected.

I've seen that they've assumed this was—what do you call it?—this is number two money; this money is perceived to be illegal proceeds.

Is there any way that we can train the visa officers in Chandigarh so that they understand the system? The farmers' money comes twice a year. It's not weekly money or monthly money, but for the year. A huge cheque comes in. I know personally that a number of people were rejected because they asked for the transaction in their account—one of them was for 400,000 rupees—stuff like this. It's not even big money in India anymore.

Is there any way we can train the people in Chandigarh?

Mr. Robert Orr: Mr. Chair, the visa officers in all of our visa offices abroad are well trained.

One of the issues they are trained in is to ensure that they are aware of their local circumstances. The local knowledge in assessing an application is critical. That is why we have officers who are based in Chandigarh, so they really do get a good understanding of how the system works, how the society works. They would be very much taking that into consideration in reaching a decision.

I believe that the elements you've outlined would be taken into consideration when a decision is made.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Tilson): Thank you, Mr. Orr.

Mr. Ehsassi.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Mr. Chair, I am wondering if I could follow up on the questioning that Mr. Saroya first raised regarding acceptance rates at various visa application centres.

The one that I hear about most in my riding of Willowdale is the visa application centre in Ankara. I've had ample opportunity to review many, many requests that have gone in there. Much like my colleagues here, it appears to me that the staff there inclines more toward not granting visas than actually looking into it and doing a thorough job.

I wonder if you could provide me with the acceptance or rejection rate from the visa application centre in Ankara, Turkey.

• (1255)

Mr. Robert Orr: The visa caseload in Ankara is mixed, because not only are they dealing with applications from Turkey, but they are also dealing with applications from Iran. The overall acceptance rate of temporary residents is 76%. In other words, they are accepting far more than they are refusing.

I don't know if that response is sufficient or if you have further questions.

Ms. Anita Biguzs: Mr. Chair, if I could just make one point in terms of the role of the visa officer, it is a balance, and the visa officer does have to fulfill the responsibilities and obligations of the legislation.

The legislation is very specific in terms of the admissibility criteria. It is a balance between facilitation.... I think we would all like to be able to facilitate very quickly the ability to provide positive responses and process visas. However, it is a balance in terms of ensuring that we also have integrity in the system.

The criteria in the legislation is quite specific in terms of the different aspects and factors that a visa officer has to take into account. Sometimes the information that a visa officer has available to them is very black and white, and it makes it very straightforward in making the decision. However, these are challenging positions, challenging jobs. They have to take into account the circumstances of the country that they're residing in, the kind of integrity issues that may be at play. It all contributes to basically ensuring that we have confidence in the system, that we actually have integrity in the system, but of course recognizing at the same time that we do want to facilitate the movement of people.

It's a delicate balance. Judgment as well is required. It's not an easy job. I have sat in on visa interviews, Mr. Chair, and I know how challenging it can certainly be.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you.

No, I didn't mean to suggest for a second that it's not a challenge. Having looked over a lot of the applications and the reasons cited for refusals, it did seem somewhat higher than would otherwise be the case.

I had a second question. In going over the estimates, I noticed that there has been a \$46-million decrease with respect to terminated applications, which occurred obviously after legislation was introduced. That leads me to the question of—because that was quite a troubling process that was in place—how many applications still remain in that inventory and need to be returned to applicants.

Mr. Tony Matson (Assistant Deputy Minister and Chief Financial Officer, Department of Citizenship and Immigration): With respect to the two programs you're speaking of, I believe for the federal skilled workers we've cleared approximately 60% of the applications, which would be approximately 60,000 applications. There would be about 30,000 remaining, but I can verify those figures.

For the other program, I believe it's about half of 30,000, so we've cleared about 15,000, and there are 15,000 remaining.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you.

That having been said, when do you expect the entire process to be completed?

Mr. Tony Matson: That's a good question.

Over the last few years we've noticed a considerable reduction in the number of people applying for a refund. It's at the point now where we don't anticipate that all of the applicants will apply to have their refund. This entry in the main estimates reflects that fact. This is a statutory appropriation, and so anybody who does come in over the next few years will be eligible to receive their refund, and we will give it to them. This is just more of a forecast reflecting the fact that we don't anticipate in the near term requiring this amount of funding.

Ms. Anita Biguzs: If I may just add, Mr. Chair, we have actually done a lot of outreach in terms of trying to locate the various individuals who had made applications, both by email and general call-outs. What the CFO is stating is that in the early days we had many who came forward. Now, despite all of the efforts that we're making to reach those clients, it's very difficult, but they will have recourse and rights if they do come forward seeking refunds.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Tilson): Thank you very much, Mr. Ehsassi.

Ms. Biguzs, on behalf of the committee I'd like to thank you and your colleagues for once again coming to us and answering what are probably very difficult questions for you. You've done a good job, and thank you.

Perhaps before we adjourn you could give to the clerk your answers to the questions.

• (1300)

Ms. Anita Biguzs: If I may, Mr. Chair, I've just been told that we had been prepared to respond verbally. We do have written answers. We're having them translated right now, so we would like to give them to you in a bilingual version, if we can, by the end of the day

today, as soon as we have them translated. It will be either today or tomorrow, I can assure you. This meeting is adjourned.

The Vice-Chair (Mr. David Tilson): Thank you, Ms. Biguzs.

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