HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

CIMM • NUMBER 025 • 1st SESSION • 42nd PARLIAMENT

EVIDENCE

Tuesday, July 19, 2016

Chair

Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj

Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

Tuesday, July 19, 2016

● (1310)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Borys Wrzesnewskyj (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.)): Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2), and the motion adopted by the committee on June 16, 2016, the committee will resume its study on immigration measures for the protection of vulnerable groups.

Please note that due to the sensitive nature of the committee's study, and as we hear from witnesses during the course of our study, the content of some witnesses' testimony may be upsetting to participants and the viewing public.

Appearing before us today are Mr. Michael Bociurkiw, here in Ottawa, who is the former spokesperson for the special monitoring mission to Ukraine for the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and Mr. Aleksandr Galkin, director for the Right to Protection, R2P, who's appearing by video conference from Mariupol, Ukraine. Also joining us by video conference from Kiev, Ukraine, are Ms. Iryna Dovhan, Mr. Gennadii Afanasiev, and Mr. Oleksandr Gryshchenko.

We will be providing seven minutes for testimony from each of the witnesses. We'll begin with Mr. Bociurkiw here in Ottawa.

Mr. Bociurkiw, the floor is yours.

Mr. Michael Bociurkiw (Former Spokesperson, Special Monitoring Mission to Ukraine, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, As an Individual): Thank you very much.

Committee members and Mr. Chairman, thank you for inviting me to speak before you today. It is indeed a great pleasure and an honour to be back here in Ottawa.

I've been specifically tasked to address the situation of internally displaced people in Ukraine and to propose recommendations on what Canada can do to assist those affected.

Ladies and gentlemen, a little over two years ago Ukraine had no displaced population. Today it is in the top 10 list of countries around the world with the largest number of internally displaced people, or IDPs.

There are essentially two contributing streams to this phenomenon. One, of course, is the illegal occupation of Crimea in March 2014, which sent a stream of men and women out of the peninsula and into areas controlled by the Ukrainian government. Second, of course, is the occupation of Luhansk and Donetsk by heavily armed individuals, which prompted upwards of two million Ukrainians to abandon their homes and communities for safer ground. You should know that many of those who fled are women and children.

It's the situation of the Donbass IDPs that I wish to address today. In front of you is a map of Ukraine, with the heavily coloured areas where most of the IDPs have fled.

In my two years with the OSCE special monitoring mission to Ukraine, I made several trips to Donetsk and Luhansk where we met with displaced families. We met them in processing facilities, in temporary homes, in collective centres, and some families near Sloviansk were even sheltered in abandoned train cars. Most were forced out of their homes and villages—not having left voluntarily—by intense shelling, while others feared legitimate persecution by rebel groups.

At first most IDPs expected to be gone in just a few weeks or months, and hence they didn't take many of their belongings or much documentation with them, but as the situation in Ukraine devolved into a frozen conflict, the Minsk accords notwithstanding, many are now resigned to the fact that they may never go home.

The extent of the damage after months of intense, indiscriminate shelling is absolutely mind-boggling. Roads, bridges, factories, airports, railway tracks, and essential infrastructure have been severely damaged. Even if peace were to suddenly take hold, as the OSCE has documented, there is still a large amount of unexploded ordnance and land mines that make it very difficult for civilians to travel back.

Among the more than 9,000 killed so far are hundreds who have been struck by land mines. We now know that cluster munitions have been used, including by the Ukrainian side, and this poses a particular threat to children.

Just as a quick footnote, among the some 9,000 killed are 298 individuals from several countries who perished in the downing of MH17. I urge you, when you have time, to remember them because on Sunday, July 17, it was two years ago that the plane was shot down.

As I said, there are many who have legitimate fears about returning to areas under rebel control. Any IDP who has expressed critical opinions about the rebels is at risk. There are well-documented examples of writers and others appearing on so-called blacklists at rebel-run checkpoints. Similarly, there are well-documented cases of journalists and others being detained, tortured, or they have disappeared completely.

The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights recently said that it has investigated the deaths of at least 47 people in rebel-controlled areas. In one particularly troublesome case it obtained forensic evidence showing that a six-year-old girl, her mother, and her grandmother were killed by gunshot wounds to the head in the rebel-held area of Luhansk. It's believed they were abducted by Cossack members of the so-called LPR.

Many of the people who have fled their homes, communities, and jobs were professionals: engineers, journalists, business owners. While many have found employment in areas controlled by the Ukrainian government, many are still unemployed, working well under their previous pay grade, or have been forced to switch to less desirable professions, for example, as taxi drivers.

● (1315)

While the integration of Donetsk IDPs has been mostly smooth, this in itself is extraordinary, given how woefully unprepared the Ukrainian government was to process them. There are reports of discrimination against Donetsk residents in their host communities and regions. For example, they experience problems seeking employment, trying to get apartments, seeking spots for their kids in schools, and opening bank accounts. A lack of civil documentation creates additional problems for the IDPs, and we are seeing a growing number of undocumented children, potentially leading to a risk of statelessness.

I should also add at this point that although their numbers are not huge, there are some minority groups, such as the Meskhetian Turks, who are living in very dire temporary shelters in Donetsk. By some reports there are 2,000 Meskhetian Turks who have been forced to flee their homes in Ukraine since the fighting started.

What can Canada do, ladies and gentlemen? Well, for one thing we should be encouraging the public and private sectors to create more internship opportunities for displaced Ukrainians. Also a very important aspect of this, of course, is liberalizing procedures for young Ukrainians to be able to travel to Canada to take up scholarships and internships, and at the same time encouraging Canadian academic institutions to open more spaces for this category of Ukrainians.

I don't think anyone here can dispute the value of face-to-face contact of young Ukrainians with Canadian values, with Canadian people, communities, and institutions; yet there are many young Ukrainians who have been denied visitor visas to Canada for unexplained reasons. I know, for example, of one particular case in which a young Ukrainian woman, who had worked for at least one Canadian election observation mission in Ukraine and now works for the Government of Ukraine, was denied a visitor visa. I ask you, what kind of example are we showing, when Ukrainians who have worked for our country and upheld our values are rewarded with a “no entry” stamp in their passport?

Ladies and gentlemen, while it's very easy to paint the picture of the plight of IDPs in terms of numbers and trends, there is a human face, much of it, as I've seen for myself, very sad indeed. Along with colleagues from the OSCE, I have followed IDPs along the contact line who were so desperate to check on their properties and belongings that they risked their lives to cross the contact line to see what remained of their bombed-out apartments, to collect precious belongings from piles of rubble, and to take a private moment to trace the faces of long-lost relatives in photos that have been almost completely obliterated by soot and damage.

To close, I want to tell you that when I first came to work for the OSCE as a seconded Canadian spokesperson, our OSCE ambassador to the OSCE in Vienna explained to me how, in many multilateral institutions such as the OSCE, Canada punches well above its weight; for example, contributing a high number of Canadian monitors to the special monitoring mission. When it comes to assisting Ukraine and its enormous numbers of displaced peoples, let's also punch above our weight. Let's think outside the box, be innovative, and clearly demonstrate that we are people whose rhetoric is matched by action.

Thank you very much.

● (1320)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bociurkiw.

Now I'd like to ask Mr. Aleksandr Galkin, on video from Mariupol, for a seven-minute statement.

Mr. Aleksandr Galkin (Director, The Right to Protection): Chair and members of the committee, I am delighted to have such a great opportunity to share with you our regional humanitarian crisis in Ukraine.

The Right to Protection is a Ukrainian not-for-profit organization operating in close partnership with the global NGO HIAS. R2P protects the human rights of vulnerable populations, the internally displaced, refugees, the stateless, and those at risk of statelessness.

According to the Ukrainian minister of social policy, at the end of June 2016 there were almost 1.8 million registered internally displaced persons from Donbass and Crimea. The most pressing problem facing the internally displaced is housing. Although the state is legally obliged to provide accommodation to people for the first six months of displacement, the available social housing and collective reception centres have been limited. The latter have only managed to accommodate between 30,000 and 40,000 of the most vulnerable people.

Another acute issue facing IDPs is employment. In the regions with a high concentration of IDPs—for instance, government-controlled Donetsk and Luhansk regions—the labour market was tight even before the conflict. With increased economic pressure resulting from the crisis, the employment situation is deteriorating further. Discrimination is also common in the workplace, with many job postings openly stating that people from Donbass will not be considered.

From February through June 2016, the government suspended pensions and social benefit payments to about 600,000 internally displaced people and those living in non-government-controlled areas, without prior notification. The prolonged suspension of payments has had dire effects on those individuals for whom these payments were the sole source of income. According to R2P monitoring, 85% of IDPs interviewed were significantly impacted by the suspension of their social benefits and/or pensions. This situation has had a particularly detrimental effect on persons with disabilities, reduced mobility, and/or poor health. According to the government, it has recently resumed pension payments to 80,000; however, this means that around 500,000 Ukrainian citizens previously receiving a pension no longer do so and are presumably living in poverty.

The Government of Ukraine has linked the payment of pensions, which is a constitutional right, with the payment of IDP social benefits. The social benefits to IDPs are about $46 Canadian dollars per month, generally inadequate to meet housing costs or other expenses such as the transportation of children to school.

The guiding principles on internal displacement are meant to ensure that displaced persons are able to move freely during displacement. However, restrictions on the right to liberty of movement continue in Ukraine. At the end of June, crossing the contact line was dangerous. Because of the hot weather, many people spent hours in lines under the burning sun without access to shade or water. Journalists reported on the death of elderly persons waiting in line near the checkpoints at Zaitseve and Stanytsia Luhanska.

Electronic permits for crossing checkpoints between government-controlled areas and non-government-controlled areas are required, but there are many people unable to complete an Internet application because of a lack of skills or unavailability of computers.

Overall, people living in non-government-controlled areas continue to experience problems accessing essential services and adequate social assistance. In order to receive social benefits, people must either relocate to the government-controlled areas or regularly travel across the contact line. Some people—for example, unemployed adults of working age and families with lots of children—have become increasingly vulnerable due to lack of social benefits and exclusion from humanitarian assistance.

According to monitoring, 93% of IDPs interviewed who report residing in non-government-controlled areas were significantly impacted by the suspension of their social benefit payments or pensions. The majority, 79% of them, reported that they receive pensions from the Ukrainian government and the pension is either their main or only source of income.

The situation of people residing on both sides of the contact line remains especially dire. Their access to humanitarian and medical aid is impeded due to security reasons and the ban on cargo deliveries.

● (1325)

R2P monitors report that this situation is critical regarding access to health services in the buffer zones or small towns and villages located close to the contact line. IDPs in the rural areas in the south part of the Donetsk Oblast region, as well as inhabitants of buffer zones, complain about the absence of availability of medical services. No medical facilities or physicians can be found in most villages in the southern part of the Donetsk region along the contact line.

In December 2015, the Ukrainian Cabinet of Ministers adopted a two-year comprehensive state program to support the social adaptation and reintegration of the displaced until 2017, along with an accompanying action plan. The program and the action plan provide a framework for addressing various issues related to internal displacement, including durable solutions; however, in view of economic and financial constraints, no budgetary allocations have yet been made available for the program's implementation.

Initially, the institutional framework under which the government has been operating was complicated by many ministries tasked with supporting IDPs but without any real coordination among them. The Government of Ukraine has recently created the Ministry for the Temporarily Occupied Territories and Internally Displaced Persons of Ukraine; however, it's too premature to assess the ministry's performance.

Thank you for your attention.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Galkin.

We now move to Kiev, to our three witnesses who have spent time in incarceration in the occupied territories.

We will begin with the testimony of Ms. Iryna Dovhan.

Ms. Dovhan.

Ms. Iryna Dovhan (As an Individual) (Interpretation): Hello. My name is Iryna Dovhan. I live in a small town near Donetsk. Before the war events broke out in my region, I was the owner of a private beauty salon, where I worked as a self-employed esthetician.

When propaganda started to occur actively in my region in the summer and spring of 2014, I spoke out. I took an active stance and started campaigning among the people in the surrounding area for the unity of the state and I talked about the possible risks if a neighbouring state should intervene.

However, the events were developing very quickly, precipitately, and it was becoming impossible and dangerous to express one's opinion. In my own town, armed people wearing military fatigues started to show up, who spoke with a distinct Russian accent. Donetsk was completely filled up with military men. Artillery positions were beginning to be set up, there were more and more arms showing up in the region.

I drove out to the free territory, up to the first checkpoint of the Ukrainian army; I introduced myself to the Ukrainian military men, and talked to them. These people were wearing faded and torn clothing, they were starving, and they had no personal care supplies. There were all these horrific things, and this was my Ukrainian army.

On my return home, I became decisively involved in collecting funds for the Ukrainian soldiers. Other women joined me; because of the nature of my business, I was acquainted with a great many of them. We started collecting blankets, clothing, and bedsheets. We cooked meals and virtually daily we took risks to bring the food to the Ukrainian army.

With every passing day it was becoming more and more difficult. For our last trip, we managed to obtain some camouflage uniforms through volunteers in Kiev. We took them to the new deployment site of the brigade that we were helping. Having returned home, I was caught in a serious shelling attack. A shell landed in my backyard. My house was damaged. For several days I hid in the cellar, and my neighbours also hid in my cellar.

To avoid risks, I sent to the free territories all the notes that I took when people were giving me money to help the Ukrainian army. The person who was carrying these records was detained by the terrorists, beaten badly, and to save his own life he said that he was carrying things given to him by a "Ukropian", gave them my address, and told them that I was…that I had been actively campaigning for Ukraine and that I had a Ukrainian flag in my car.

Armed men came in two vehicles to get me. There were local people as well as military men who spoke with a Russian accent. They broke into my house and beat me up badly. I told them the code for my safe right away. They searched through the entire house, turning it upside down and taking everything of value right away—computers, TVs, and jewellery. They found two pairs of my husband's binoculars, which gave them the grounds to accuse me of being the sighter and spotter for the Ukrainian artillery, and they handcuffed and blindfolded me and took me to Donetsk to the Vostok battalion.

● (1330)

There I was subjected to rough interrogations; they wanted me to give them the names and addresses of the people who took part, together with me, in helping the Ukrainian army. I resisted as much as I could because I understood what this would mean for those people, so they sent me to be interrogated by the Ossetian unit, which was a part of this Vostok battalion. These were very cruel and heartless people. They beat me, stripped me, fired a pistol close to my ear, and threatened me with rape, and I said many of the things that I had not intended to say. I gave them the last names of people whom I knew to have already left town.

After I had told them everything, they took me to a square in Donetsk, put me next to a post, and wrote up a sign saying "murderess of children" and "agent of the punitive forces", and people passing by were beating me. Vehicles with signs saying "allahu akbar" drove up and those people also beat me and tried to shoot me through the kneecap. This lasted for about five hours.

In the meantime, I saw a man wearing a white shirt take a picture of me. He was a foreign journalist, and that photograph, which was published in *The New York Times*, saved my life.

Back there in the square, while I stood next to the post for about five hours, another faction tried to grab me, but those who brought me there fought them off and took me back to the Vostok battalion. Again I was subjected to cruel torture. They kicked me in the chest and sprayed gas from a cartridge in my face. I saw…I was in a narrow cell, in a room with about 10 military men. I saw other people brought there, being badly beaten and taken to some other cells for further interrogation.

I cannot tell you about all the horror that I lived through during those five days. I had nothing to eat or drink. I was not given any water. I am still unable to find the strength to talk about some details of what happened to me over there.

Thank you.

● (1335)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dovhan.

Now I'd like to ask Mr. Gennadii Afanasiev for his statement.

Mr. Afanasiev.

Mr. Gennadii Afanasiev (As an Individual) (Interpretation): I am Gennadii Serhiyovych Afanasiev, a released political prisoner. I was born in 1990, on the eve of Ukraine's independence, in Simferopol. I graduated from university with a degree in law and I was also a professional photographer.

At the time of the occupation of the Crimea by Russia, I helped the Ukrainian military who were in the Crimea and participated in protests against the occupation of the peninsula.

At first I did not accept Maidan because of the Russian propaganda, but later I realized what was happening and became its most sincere supporter.

On May 9, 2014, I took part in the Victory Day parade in Simferopol. I walked in a column holding up a photo of my great-grandfather, the pride of our family, because he participated in World War II. On the way, men in civilian clothes suddenly jumped me and pushed me into a car. It was not until later that I found out that these men were officers of the FSB. In the car they put a bag over my head and they kept hitting me in the stomach and head. They kept questioning me about participants in pro-Ukrainian rallies and threatening me, saying they were going to take me into the woods and make me dig my own grave. They brought me to my apartment, took my keys, threw me on the floor with a bag over my head, and conducted a search, but naturally did not find anything there.

Next they took me to a cold cellar where they kept me for 10 days, not letting me sleep, drink, or eat anything. During this time the FSB officers chained me to an iron table and kept punching me in the head, wearing boxing gloves so as not to leave any bruises. They would put a plastic bag over my head, choke me, and then beat me again, jeering and mocking me, but I said nothing. As it turned out, that was still decent treatment of me on their part, because later on serious torture began.

I had no lawyer with me throughout all this time, but I was surrounded by investigators from Moscow, stout fellows from the Caucasus, and FSB officers. They tortured and pressured me to give them facts that they wanted to hear, and which I did not know. So then they started demanding the most important thing from me—they wanted me to confess that on May 9 I wanted to blow up the Eternal Flame memorial. This was absurd, because they had detained me in public at a time when I was walking in a solemn procession toward the memorial.

This is unpleasant to hear, but I am forced to tell again and again about the things that I had to go through. People need to know what happens to those who are being illegally detained in the Crimea and in Russia, because I am not the only one like this. My eyes have seen many people in over two years, and such cruelty was not applied to all, but to those they needed or those who stood in their way.

They would put a gas mask on my head with a hose attached, and then unscrew the bottom valve and spray gas from a cylinder in there. I would choke on my own vomit. When I lost all connection with reality, they would remove the mask, give me ammonia to sniff, and then repeat the whole thing again and again. As a consequence of this cruel torture, I did confess my guilt in the end.

Then they demanded that I give evidence against Oleg Kolchenko and Oleg Sentsov. I kept refusing, so in response they connected electric wires to my genitals and sent the current through. They kept sending current through for a very long time. That was how they forced me to sign documents prepared in advance.

When they started forcing me to sign an agreement with the investigators, they pressed me against the floor while stark naked and started passing a soldering iron back and forth next to my body, telling me what was going to happen when this burning hot tool was going to get under me. Most importantly, they threatened to get to my mother and do the same things to her, and that had its effect.

It was not until the trial of Oleksander Kolchenko and Oleg Sentsov that I was able, in front of many witnesses, to talk about the torture and withdraw my testimony against these innocent people, whom I did not even know until then.

FSB operatives got even with me for that one time in Rostov by beating me up while I was in pretrial detention. Fortunately, thanks to the appearance of independent lawyers and rights advocates, it became possible to document these injuries, though none of the law enforcement people were brought to justice for these actions.

Still, their vendetta against me continued. The FSB sent me by prisoner transport to the gulag in the Komi Republic. The prisoner transportation itself was very hard. Air temperature reached 40-45 degrees Celsius. The railcars became so hot that they had to be cooled using a fire engine. Inside there was no water, no doctors, and completely inhuman conditions. There, in that correctional colony, in that gulag, I fell seriously ill. My body was covered with wounds that would not heal, and when they finally started to give me medications, those caused inflammation of the digestive system.

I was kept in a solitary cell. For more than two months and 15 days I had no way to communicate with anyone except for the prison administrators and the special services. I was kept in solitary confinement, in captivity, under torture, each day like another horror movie.

We could continue telling our story here for hours about the illegal investigations in Russia and about the fate of other young men and women who were near us. To other Ukrainians who end up as prisoners of war in Russia, I can give only one piece of advice: it's best not to end up there at all, because it is useless to count on a fair trial or humane treatment.

To the international community, I appeal with a plea and a request to fight for those prisoners of the Kremlin who are still in captivity, to support their families, and to maintain the sanctions against Russia until such time as the Kremlin will meet its commitments. Do not forget about the innocent people suffering in Russian prisons every day.

● (1340)

I thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Afanasiev.

Now I'd like to ask Mr. Oleksandr Gryshchenko for his testimony.

I'd also like to note that there have been sketches that have been appearing on the screen. Those are sketches by the artist Serhiy Zakharov, who was incarcerated in Donetsk. His testimony and his preferred method of bearing witness was through sketches of what he lived through.

Mr. Gryshchenko, the floor is yours.

Mr. Oleksandr Gryshchenko (As an Individual) (Interpretation): Honourable ladies and gentlemen, my name is Oleksandr Gryshchenko. Before July 2014 I lived and worked in the city of Luhansk in eastern Ukraine, which is currently occupied by illegal armed groups. I was working as assistant manager of the Luhansk regional veterinary hospital, and on July 15, 2014, I was detained by the Luhansk separatist militia while attempting to enter the building where our hospital's office was located. Without any justification, I was accused of attempting to install artillery fire spotting devices for the armed forces of Ukraine. They apprehended and searched me.

I had a camera with me, on the memory card of which the separatists found photographs of pro-Ukrainian protest rallies in Luhansk in which I had taken part, as well as some photos of the barricades in the Kyiv Maidan. As soon as they saw those pictures, the separatists said that I should be put before a firing squad on the spot or at the very least they should send bullets through my legs, but, they said, this was going to be handled by the special so-called "counter-terrorism unit", which they summoned immediately.

They took me to the Volodymyr Dahl East Ukrainian National University, which had been occupied at the time by a unit of the separatist militia called the Batman Rapid Response Team. "Batman" is the nickname of its commander, Oleksandr Oleksandrovych Bednov. In the dormitory basement, which they had converted into a prison, they subjected me to torture, demanding that I confess to working for the Ukrainian army.

They punched me and kicked me, used an electric stunner on me, strangled me with a noose, beat me with a length of plastic pipe, broke my fingers, and used a surgical saw to make cuts between the fingers of my left hand. They put me under enormous psychological pressure and poured a solution of an unknown chemical over me, also pouring it into my mouth. In the following days the separatists frequently came to my cell, humiliated me, punched and kicked me, and beat me with clubs for no reason at all. These abuses resulted in numerous hematomas, bruises, and broken ribs.

As a tool for beating, they also used a hard rubber hammer designed for auto body repair or for laying paving tiles. It was with just such a hammer that this unit's staff torturer nicknamed "the Maniac" broke my breastbone during a regular beating.

During my time in this basement I witnessed cruel, severe abuse and torture, and murders of the prisoners. In this basement I saw for the first time in my life the colour of human flesh, which was visible in wounds.

I have also witnessed several rapes. Let me give you an example. On the orders of the separatist nicknamed the Maniac, a young girl of about 15 was sent as a "gift" to the other gunmen on the front lines, to satisfy their sexual needs, and they took her there more than once.

Before my eyes, they tortured to death a man who, being in the state of alcoholic intoxication and not understanding where he was, said that he was "for the united Ukraine". Aside from this incident, I saw several corpses of detainees being carried out of the basement. There was an episode when, after beatings and torture, one of the detainees ended up with a ruptured spleen with internal bleeding. His life was saved only after urgent surgery to remove the injured organ at the city hospital.

I am aware of a case of a prisoner being forced by threats to record a video in which he pleaded guilty to engaging in the so-called "sabotage and intelligence operation". This video later showed up on Russian TV.

Among the members of the Batman RRT militia unit there were many Russian military men, and they didn't even try to hide the fact that they were from Russia. Some of them were also put in the cells briefly for different transgressions, in most cases for alcohol abuse. Sometimes they were brought in nearly unconscious because of the enormous amount of alcohol they had consumed.

The prisoners' conditions of detention did not meet any sanitary standards whatsoever. For more than a month they kept us in almost complete darkness.

● (1345)

People were grabbed and thrown in jail based on absurd accusations, just to have enough free labour and also to force these people to give the militants their money, houses, cars, and other property. Sometimes they took people with serious injuries, such as broken limbs, and made them work.

They often used prisoners for looting and plundering, for robbing trading company warehouses, and for renovating the buildings appropriated by the militia.

In order to conceal their crimes, information about which had begun to spread, Batman ordered the physical destruction of the prisoners who had stayed in the basement for a long time and had witnessed these crimes.

A group of prisoners, which also included me, was taken to another basement, which they were planning to bombard with grenades in a few days.

Our liberation became possible only because of the conflict between the leader of the so-called Luhansk People's Republic, Ihor Plotnytskyi, and the unit commander, Batman—that is, Bednov—who had been planning to keep this post, the highest in the so-called LPR, for himself, as well as because of leaked information about the crimes referred to above, and also because of a fortunate coincidence, which I cannot tell you about in detail because of a lack of time.

Overall, I spent nearly six months in captivity. As of this date, hundreds of my compatriots are held in similar conditions in the occupied territories.

I appeal to the progressive world not to forget about them, to demand that the Kremlin release them, and not to curtail the sanctions against the Russian Federation, which is fully responsible for the events taking place on the occupied territories in eastern Ukraine.

Thank you. *Dyakuyu*.

● (1350)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Gryshchenko.

Now we will begin the first round of questions. Mr. Afanasiev, you were initially incarcerated in Crimea. Who were the individuals who tortured you? What organization?

I understand that you were also tortured using electric shock. If you are able to, could you describe some of the torture you underwent? Of course, the first question is, what organization tortured you? Who were the individuals who tortured you?

Mr. Gennadii Afanasiev (Interpretation): I was detained by FSB officers and former security officials of the SBU, the Ukrainian security service, who had been working for Ukraine but switched sides and joined the invader.

Investigators from Moscow were in charge of the torture. It was Burdin, an operative, and the assistant Oleksandr. They were in charge of the torture, but the actual torture was carried out by the former SBU, the Ukrainian secret service officers who were eager to demonstrate their loyalty to the new occupation regime.

Specifically about the use of electric shock, they would wrap a damp cloth around my genitals, then wrap a wire over the cloth, and, using a device that looked like a field telephone, they would turn the handle and give me electric shocks, alternating as such. That was causing me excruciating pain that could not be tolerated. Then they would strip me naked, put me in uncomfortable positions, and threaten me with sexual assault. They would run a police club over my body, and then take a hot soldering iron while telling me in a twisted way what will happen when it ends up inside me, and what will happen after that, when I remain in prison for another 20 years, and what the other prisoners will do to me after this. This was very frightening.

Thank you.

The Chair: This question is to Ms. Dovhan.

We've heard that there is testimony quite regularly of sexual torture that takes place in the occupied territories. You alluded to this. How commonplace is sexual torture in those occupied territories?

Ms. Iryna Dovhan (Interpretation): At this point I cannot provide any specific proof, but I know about several instances of sexual violence.

The last thing that residents of my town, Yasynuvata, told me—this may have been ten days ago—was that a 17-year-old girl was admitted to the trauma unit of the railroad hospital in the town of Yasynuvata with her wrists and ankles covered in wounds. Apparently she had been held down by handcuffs. X-rays were done, and, while the injuries to her legs and feet were just dislocations, all the bones in her wrists, according to the orthopedic surgeon, were nothing but small shards. He had never seen a thing like that in all his years of practice.

This young woman was brought in the custody of the Vostok battalion, had X-rays done, and then she was taken away by the Kalmius battalion. I don't have any further details, and what happened to that young girl no one can say now. It's the latest case of what I am aware of, but I know about many cases like this one.

● (1355)

The Chair: Yesterday we heard from an official from the UNHCR that in 2015 there were an additional 800,000 internally displaced persons in Ukraine. That's on top of a million internally displaced persons from 2014, when the Russian military invasions began. The small piece of land that's currently occupied in Donbass had a population of about five million. Approximately 40% of the population is no longer there.

What are the conditions that have led to and continue to lead to what appears to be the wholesale depopulation of the, I guess, ironically so-called people's republics of Donetsk and Luhansk? What is causing this huge movement of hundreds of thousands of people?

Mr. Michael Bociurkiw: I think there are two answers to that question. As I recently told CNN, I've worked in some of the worst places in the world. I don't know what put me in that spot, but for UNICEF, for example, I've been in Gaza and the West Bank. I've been to spots in Donetsk that seem even worse than Gaza, in terms of destruction. It's that bad. I catalogued some of the infrastructure damage.

Then the other thing that is happening is that essential infrastructure isn't working in many places, including on both sides of the contact line. One of the roles of the OSCE special monitoring mission to the Ukraine, of course, is facilitation of access. The mission has been working on a weekly basis to facilitate the access of repair workers on both sides of the contact line. This obviously takes a lot of coordination on both sides. They have been able to repair a lot of crucial infrastructure, especially downed power lines, water mains, and that sort of thing. But then what happens is shelling occurs again and this infrastructure is downed once again. I will table it with the clerk later, but the OSCE special monitoring mission does have a thematic report on IDPs, and in there you'll find a catalogue of infrastructure that has been damaged.

The other aspect, of course, is the erosion of freedom and liberties. Also what is happening is what I call a creeping institutionalization by the rebel groups. For example, what they managed to do over the past few months is establish a new Russian curriculum in the schools and new business registration procedures, introduce the ruble and switch to the Moscow time zone.

On the erosion of civil liberties, I cited the report, from five days ago, of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. What it said—it was quoted in the BBC—is that there's a climate of "pervasive impunity" in eastern Ukraine and very few people have been held accountable for a catalogue of alleged summary executions. The OHCHR says that some of the cases could amount to war crimes.

What does this mean—I won't go on too long—for the people who have remained in the occupied regions? Well, a lot of them don't have a choice. They don't have the funds to go back, or many of them are disabled, or many of them just want to stay in their homes. We've met some elderly people who refuse to leave for government-controlled Ukraine. What they do, however, is that they cross over regularly to the government side to collect pensions, to shop for groceries, to get money out of the ATM. Remember that most of the banks are closed in the occupied territory, so they have to go back and forth at great, great risk to their lives. The gentleman there also did mention that many of them have to wait hours, or sometimes a couple of days, to cross the contact line.

Life, in short, to sum up, is terrible. As I've said, it's comparable to some of the most dire places on the planet. As I've said many times, the worst thing that could happen would be the international community, including Canada, averting its gaze from this humanitarian disaster.

● (1400)

The Chair: Thank you.

I have a quick final question of Mr. Galkin.

Last week I had the opportunity to sit down with Mr. Mustafa Dzhemilev and Mr. Refat Chubarov, and they related that 18 Crimean Tatar leaders were once again arrested last week. What they say is that there's clearly a methodical and meticulous plan that appears to be put in place of ethnocide of the indigenous people of Crimea, the Crimean Tatars.

Would you like to comment on that?

Mr. Aleksandr Galkin: Thank you for the question.

We mostly work with those who reside on the government-controlled territories, so I think that Mr. Afanasiev may answer this question better, if he's willing to do so. I'm sure about that, but I won't be able to add something more to what Mr. Chubarov and Mr. Dzhemilev have already briefed you. What we've heard from the few Crimean field missions is that indeed there is a deterioration of the situation vis-à-vis the Crimean Tatars in the peninsula. That's my concern generally.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now go to Mr. Saroya.

The floor is yours.

Mr. Bob Saroya (Markham—Unionville, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you to all of our witnesses for coming out and speaking to us, especially for the three victims. You have our sympathy. I can speak for all Canadians, we are with you any day of the week.

Michael, two years ago, there were no IDPs, and all of a sudden there are two million. It's unbelievable, unimaginable. There are people sleeping in the shelter stations, I think you mentioned, and there's the idea they would never go home. It puts tears in your eyes. My heart beats for these people from the bottom of my heart.

Michael, when you were observing in Ukraine, did you go through difficulties as an international observer? Can you speak to us on that topic?

Mr. Michael Bociurkiw: Sure. I'll be totally honest with you, and I don't think anything I'm saying has not been in our, for example, OSCE daily report or weekly thematic reports. One of the difficulties is freedom of access for the monitoring mission. This is happening on both sides of the contact line, the Ukrainian side and the side that's controlled by the rebels, but of course, it's much worse on the rebel side.

As most of you know, the Minsk accords require both sides to, for example, move heavy weaponry away from the contact line. There are prescribed distances that they should be removed to. Then what happens is that these heavy weapons are meant to be stored in monitored storage sites, but many times the special monitoring mission has been prevented from going to these storage sites to see if the weapons are still there. In fact, as we speak, over the past few weeks there's been a gradual escalation of violence and a big reason for that is that the heavy weaponry has been moved back into place and is being used.

The other thing is that there have been lots and lots of difficulties accessing the Ukraine-Russia border under rebel control. Believe it or not, the length of the Ukrainian border under rebel control is almost 500 kilometres. That's more than the distance from here to Toronto. On many occasions the mission has been prevented from going to the border, and this is a problem especially at night because a lot of railway lines cross the contact line and no one really knows what types of materials are taken over.

If I can speak from a personal point of view—maybe that was part of your question—working there is very difficult. As I've said, I've worked in many places around the world and the destruction you see...the psycho-social distrust among many of the children is a huge factor right now. It's very bad. Do you know that some families in Donetsk have spent weeks in underground shelters without seeing any daylight, without breathing any fresh air? There's a town called Shyroka Balka near Mariupol and that has been shelled constantly. There's no one there now, but a lot of the residents spent weeks in a shelter there. It's very difficult.

Finally, I should say that I mentioned MH17, and I've just come back from Malaysia by the way. I was there for the second anniversary. The special monitoring mission was the first international presence on the site of the plane crash, 24 hours after that plane came down. I can tell you that the images we saw were absolutely horrific. We were threatened by armed rebel groups, some of them intoxicated, some of them in very vicious types of states of attitude. Yet day after day we did gain more access and were able to get experts there to deal with the site, but on many occasions we were blocked. We were blocked while we were trying to get Malaysians there, and Dutch investigators. In fact, just quickly to wrap up, the Dutch have been trying to finish off their criminal investigation, but they have been blocked, especially in Luhansk, to do things like, for example, triangulate cellphone tower communications among the rebels.

It's a very difficult operating environment, but I'm glad that Canada is part of the mission to document what is going on and to facilitate access.

● (1405)

Mr. Bob Saroya: What would you like to see Canada and international society do to help? What sort of help do you need for the IDPs, especially in Ukraine?

Mr. Michael Bociurkiw: First of all I would like Canada to continue support to the special monitoring mission. It plays a crucial role. It's helped a great deal to alleviate suffering on both sides of the contact line. At the moment I think we have almost 30 Canadian monitors there. I think we could go a bit higher, and Canada should maintain, if not increase, its financial commitment to the OSCE. It does good work there.

I did mention a couple of ideas, such as encouraging the private sector to open up more internship opportunities for young Ukrainians and have more scholarship opportunities.

I mentioned the visa problems. I understand this has been alleviated. I have been told that under the previous government the reason there was a visa clampdown was because that government believed that people from Donetsk and Luhansk were coming to Canada as visitors and overstaying. I don't think the actions of a few bad apples are a reason to have a blanket clampdown on visitor visas from Ukraine. If anything, now is the time to allow them more access to Canada.

Finally, among that huge group of IDPs there are a lot of professionals, such as journalists, IT experts, and even fashion designers. I had hoped to wear my Ukrainian-made suit today. It was designed by a fashion designer in Donetsk who is incarcerated, but Air Canada lost my baggage so I couldn't wear my Ukrainian suit for you.

Many professionals, as I think all of us have indicated, have had problems seeking opportunities now that they have left their places of residence. Perhaps there could be a special temporary program in place to help IDPs, even from the professional class, to come to Canada to gain more experience and also to contribute to Canadian society.

We have a domestic overseas worker program for Filipinos. It's targeting a special country. Why can't the same be made for Ukraine, at least on a temporary basis?

Mr. Bob Saroya: Absolutely, thank you.

My next question is for Mr. Galkin. You are a director of a charity called the Right to Protection. From your side, what would you like to see from Canada? How can Canadians help from your charity's point of view?

Mr. Aleksandr Galkin: I'm sorry, I didn't hear you. Would you please repeat the question?

Mr. Bob Saroya: You are a director of the Right to Protection charity fund. How would you like to see Canada helping out from your side?

Mr. Aleksandr Galkin: Thank you for your question.

First of all I think that now, after two years since the onset of the conflict, when it comes to the displaced population in Ukraine, we should understand that this is to some extent quite an unusual crisis. It's mostly a pensioner crisis because 65% of the IDPs are pensioners, and children and single mothers are 20%-plus.

Most of the IDPs fall under the vulnerability criteria, and their integration is quite difficult. When we have people who are well it's much easier to integrate them, and when we have people who can sustain themselves, such as young couples in their twenties to forties who can move, they integrate on their own. The government knows they are there to help those people, and now in addition there is humanitarian assistance, which is of paramount importance to those who are on both sides.

In the government-controlled areas there is a great need for integration efforts to be done, and they should be done in a holistic manner. The Canadian government used to go through CIDA, but now CIDA does not arrange effectively in Ukraine. As a result, there is now direct aid from the Government of Canada. I think the Government of Canada can consider an increase of its help and support.

Civil society was a first responder to the crisis. During those two years, the civil society brought forward—

● (1410)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Galkin.

Mr. Aleksandr Galkin: —many sanctions of the Government of Ukraine, so the civil society also.... This is a very new civil society and—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Galkin.

Mr. Bob Saroya: Mr. Chair, the last comment is for the first victim who spoke, Mr. Gryshchenko.

I hope the person who tortured you with electric shocks, among other ways, will face the court in the Hague one of these days.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Saroya.

Go ahead, Ms. Kwan.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for their presentations.

My question is for you, Michael. In terms of action from Canada, you name some items. There's been a lot of discussion in the series of meetings that we've had about the internally displaced peoples. One suggestion that has been brought forward is the former program we had in Canada, the source country classification. I wonder whether or not that is an option for consideration and what your thoughts are with respect to that program, whether that would assist in this instance.

Mr. Michael Bociurkiw: Honestly, I've been overseas for so long that I'm not very familiar with the source country program. Does it allow a kind of special status?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The source country category basically allows for people in their country of origin to make an application without having to go through the UNHCR process or referral.

Mr. Michael Bociurkiw: Okay, yes. I think it's a great idea. We do call them IDPs, but basically these are refugees in their own country. I hate to say it, but it's looking more and more that this territory may not go back to Ukrainian control because of what the rebel side has done. It's digging in. It's looking like a frozen conflict now. Even if it were to return to the Ukrainian government, the reconstruction process would be in the billions of dollars range, and there would also have to be a massive kind of reconciliation process. I personally would like to see that. As I said, among these IDPs are very many professionals and they would be a contribution to the Canadian economy, to Canadian society, and not a drain. You know, we've seen how great a contribution the Syrian refugees have already made to Canada, so I think the same thing would happen. I've seen many examples where people from many countries have gone overseas to develop educational skills or work experience, and they go back to their country and make a huge difference.

I'll give one final note, because I think it needs to be said. Recently, as many of you know, there was a high-level Canada-Ukraine business forum in Toronto. One of the big issues in Ukraine right now is endemic corruption. Young people—and I know a lot of them; it's not just anecdotal—have a tough time making a go. They've done all the right things. They have a proper education and a great upbringing, yet they can't find a level playing field. Hence even more reason for them to come to a place like Canada, gain those kinds of values and work experience, educational experience, and go back when the time is right and contribute to the rebuilding of Ukraine.

● (1415)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

The other suggestion that you made was around a similar program to that of the domestic workers from the Philippines. Are you thinking about a temporary foreign worker type of program for the professionals, or are you thinking more about an immigration stream? I'm just trying to get clarification.

Mr. Michael Bociurkiw: I would like to see an immigration strategy. I've seen how the so-called new wave of Ukrainians have dealt with themselves here in Canada. They're doing very well. Borys, for sure, would know more about this than I do. Many of them are contributing solidly to the Canadian economy. Yes, that would be a good thing to do, practically and economically. I think it would also send a good signal to Ukraine. Our Canadian Prime Minister was recently in Ukraine. He had a very impressive visit and reiterated Canada's support for the country. This would be sending a signal that, yes, we do support them and the door is open to come to Canada. I think the sooner that happens, the better.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: On the refugee stream, I'm wondering if you are considering more of a government-assisted refugee stream or a privately sponsored refugee stream. In the other scenarios where we discussed this, in fact, I think pretty well all of the groups were suggesting a privately sponsored stream. I wonder if you can comment on that.

Mr. Michael Bociurkiw: There's a huge Ukrainian diaspora community here in Canada. I think that if this were privately sponsored by families or whatever, by the community, that would work very well. There are huge resources in the Ukrainian community. It's one of the most, if not the most active Ukrainian diaspora communities in the world. I think this could be done without putting a strain on government resources.

I've worked in the OSCE, so I'm pretty practical thinking, and I think from a public perception point of view it would be much better handled by Ukrainians, by families, and even non-Ukrainians who want to support Ukraine in one way or another.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: In terms of numbers, do you have any sense of the kinds of numbers that perhaps governments should be considering?

Mr. Michael Bociurkiw: One thing I've learned from the OSCE is not to speculate, but I think because I'm no longer with them, I can do a little speculation. My guess, and this is entirely a guess, would be in the tens of thousands, perhaps 100,000-plus. Again, Canada ranks very high in the Ukrainian psyche because of the support Canada has given and because of the visit by the Prime Minister.

Just quickly, aside from providing opportunities for them to come here either temporarily or permanently, Canada has historically played a very big role, for example, in the development of the media sector in Ukraine. I neglected to mention that aside from journalists having to flee Donetsk and Luhansk, many of the media institutions such as newspapers, radio stations, and TV stations in the areas previously occupied by the rebels—in Sloviansk, for example—were totally destroyed.

Even though these areas are back under government control, there aren't sufficient resources for these outlets to get up and running again, so perhaps the government could look at an assistance program through our aid arm to help Ukrainian journalists upgrade their skills, but also to put some of these media outlets back on stream.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Would that be through humanitarian aid directly?

Mr. Michael Bociurkiw: Yes, correct.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: What else could Canada do perhaps in conjunction with or in collaboration with the international community? What are other countries doing, and what are the opportunities in which Canada can work collaboratively with them? I think international aid would be one aspect of it, along with the other streams.

● (1420)

Mr. Michael Bociurkiw: International aid, indeed. When I was in Kiev the last time, the signals I was getting from colleagues there—and I won't name them—was that a lot more money is needed in terms of development aid from Canada to Ukraine.

I think one of the areas where Canada could play a very leading role is again in this battle against corruption, in helping, for example, to train officials to deal with that sort of thing. Also, Canada has been active in terms of training police officials, border guards, that sort of thing. That needs to be maintained, if not increased. It's really supporting those key institutions to develop to the level expected of a modern country.

The other area where we have been very active, and by "we" I mean Canada, and where we cannot let go is in the area of public health. I'm sidetracking a bit, but because I have expertise in this area, I'm going to say it. Believe it or not, in areas controlled by the Ukrainian government have the lowest immunization rates of anywhere in the world. It's lower than Somalia and places like that. A lot of this has to do with corruption, but a lot of it is because there just isn't the expertise there to do things like procure childhood vaccines, that sort of thing. Canada has contributed money for things like childhood vaccines, but it's the whole system that needs to be looked at and reformed.

Finally, Canada has played a very key role. We have great ambassadors at the OSCE and in Ukraine in terms of participating in finding solutions to bring peace back to Ukraine. That's what everyone wants, of course, through participation in Vienna and the Minsk accords. That sort of participation needs to continue. We need to find a solution to this conflict, because it has cost too many lives and displaced too many people.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Virani, the next round is yours. It's a seven-minute round.

Mr. Arif Virani (Parkdale—High Park, Lib.): Thank you very much to everyone. To Michael, and to everyone who's joining us from Mariupol and Kiev, I would say, *duzhe dyakuyu*. Thank you very much for being here.

My riding in Toronto is home to part of that diaspora you were mentioning, Michael. The country, as you have accurately indicated, is replete with a huge Ukrainian diaspora that dates back 125 years. It is very well integrated, very well established, and very vocal. They communicate to people like the chair, and they communicate to people like myself about the concerns they see on the ground.

I wanted to start my questioning by asking you a bit about a fact we've heard a lot about here today, the scope of the displacement. The sheer numbers are staggering, as Mr. Saroya outlined. In the span of two years you're looking at nearly two million people in movement.

Can you describe to us a little about the movement of people leaving the Donbass, how far they are moving within the country, and what impact that's having on local infrastructure and institutions in the rest of Ukraine?

Mr. Michael Bociurkiw: Okay, sure. That's a great question.

The map shows where most of them have gone, but most want to stay in areas close to the Donetsk and Luhansk. Many of them are Russian-speaking, and you find that in oblasts closest to the conflict zone. These are Russian-speaking areas. That close proximity allows them to cross back and forth to check on their properties, agricultural lands, and so on.

The problem is that many of these oblasts are becoming overwhelmed. As far back as 2014 the OSCE had reported that the capacity for NGOs, for civil society groups, and for oblast governments to support IDPs was already running out. I don't mean to be too harsh on the Ukrainian government, but they were woefully unprepared for this massive outflow of people. Probably any government would be, but it took a long time for them to get up to speed.

I can tell you that cities like Mariupol and Dnipropetrovsk, where a lot of the IDPs have gone, have basically said, “No vacancy, we can't possibly support any more”. It's important for two things to happen. One is for collective centres where IDPs live to continue to be supported. The other one is that they need to be found permanent housing. A lot of them are there with their children, and they brought very little with them, so this integration process needs to happen more.

The other thing I can tell you, aside from housing needs—I mentioned the lack of civil documentation—is that political rights are also going to be important if they're going to stay in areas controlled by the Ukrainian government. Elections are coming up, so they need to be part of that as well.

Finally, I think a lot has been said already about their mobility crossing back and forth over the contact line. Aside from being held up for hours or overnight by both sides at checkpoints, there's also the threat that if people are stationary along the contact line, with a lot of shelling happening, you're putting this massive number of people in danger. I believe over any given month as many as 100,000 civilians cross back and forth over the contact line.

Aside from the shelling, you also have the threat of land mines. Neither side has lived up to their full commitment to put signage to warn that there are land mines present. This is a responsibility they have to take upon themselves.

● (1425)

Mr. Arif Virani: I would like to ask you, Michael, and also Mr. Galkin in Mariupol, about this point you were making about what I would call “supports for civil society”. Given that you've indicated there's a situation where unfortunately the facts on the ground will not change, and people will not be returning to the Donbass, then they'll either stay in Ukraine or they will be resettled elsewhere. You mentioned a couple of things. One of the things that's been communicated to me on the health front—you mentioned public health—is that there are people from the Ukrainian Canadian Congress who have come to me and said that we need to support the displacement, which is occurring because of the war against Russian separatists, with supports connecting facilities in Canada with facilities in Ukraine, such as medical support and training for occupational and physical therapists. This has been suggested to me by Renata Roman of the Ukrainian Canadian Congress.

You mentioned media, but is there also an avenue to bridge not just the students—and I'll come back to the students—but also the faculties and academics here in Canada with their counterparts in Ukraine to help build up some of that civil society infrastructure? If you could perhaps address that at all....

Mr. Michael Bociurkiw: Yes. I'll be brief so that the other person can also speak.

It's easy to be very critical of Ukraine. However, there are bright lights, and of course one of those is civil society—a very strong civil society. It continues to thrive in Ukraine; however, they need support because resources are very scarce in some areas.

That international connection, especially with Canada, is very important. Our ambassador to Ukraine, Roman Waschuk, when I sat with him last time, outlined some of the co-operation areas that exist. One of them, for example, is between Toronto Sunnybrook Hospital and the children's hospital in Lviv in western Ukraine. That has helped a great deal in boosting that hospital's capacity to operate.

As I already mentioned, media is another area, and IT is a big one. The problem we have here in Canada is that we have great ideas, we create great IT firms, but then what happens is that they can't raise money for second-stage financing or growth, and—guess what?—they end up going to the United States. I would like to see whether there are areas in the IT sector to explore that could help our Canadian IT companies survive and thrive even more.

There are many areas to explore. I don't think this is the role only of the government. Perhaps there could be a way to encourage the private sector to support this. I, for example, have encouraged my own premier, Christy Clark, to think about doing a provincial trade mission to Ukraine to explore such ties, and I think other provincial governments should do likewise.

Mr. Arif Virani: I think the concluding of the trade agreement will help in that regard.

Mr. Galkin, could you address the point about supporting civil society to raise awareness about what's going on in Ukraine, perhaps assisting with institutions in Canada or assisting institutions in Ukraine? Do you have any thoughts on that?

Mr. Aleksandr Galkin: Thank you for the question.

First of all, the civil society badly needs some technical support, because most of the support coming from the international donors is handed off to either international organizations or UN organizations. Then most of the civil society actually is a bit blocked from support. For instance, the humanitarian country team is composed of international organizations and UN organizations.

Civil society actually needs some skills. It needs to be trained. For instance, when we speak about media and information, most of the grassroots organizations don't have any idea how to weave their messages to the targeted audiences in media terms. I think there is also a great need for information strategy for the government, which does not have any strategy for composing messages involving IDPs and for how to improve the overall understanding to raise awareness of IDPs among the population.

In terms of health, psycho-social assistance is still the great need.

● (1430)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Galkin.

Ms. Rempel, take five minutes, please.

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

I would like to carry on the stream of questioning around supporting civil society infrastructure, or just general social infrastructure in Ukraine, to assist with some of these issues. Canada has been assisting in Ukraine through Operation Unifier for a while. I know that we've assisted through this mission in training Ukrainian troops in areas of explosive ordnance and disposal, military police training, medical training, flight safety training, logistics modernization. Has this operation been useful in terms of improving the lives of civilian Ukrainians?

Mr. Michael Bociurkiw: It's a very good question. I think this type of assistance takes a long time to actually show itself, to materialize, and I'm not only talking about Ukraine but many of the countries I've worked in, especially for UNICEF. The important thing is that we don't look at short-term gains, but long-term gains.

Again, I mention the C-word, corruption in Ukraine, and I think there Canada can assist on two levels. One is the political pressure. In order for corruption to really disappear in Ukraine or to be diminished, if we can put it that way, political pressure needs to be leveraged. Also, and I'm not sure the Prime Minister brought it up during his recent visit, but Joe Biden, in his previous visit, sure let the Ukrainians know that they need to deal with it.

The other one is the practical training. Supporting organizations that monitor corruption, that monitor civil liberties, is very important. Again, I mention this because a lot of countries can spend a lot of money on training, that sort of thing, but if this pervasiveness, this attitude of corruption continues, these gains will be hard to realize, I'm afraid to say. Again, this observation comes from what I've seen in other countries as well.

I think our embassy in Ukraine, especially under Ambassador Waschuk has done a really good job in terms of mapping out and exploring how we can get the best bang for our buck in Ukraine. For example, he's talked a lot about that thriving IT sector, especially in western Ukraine, which is actually doing business with some world-class companies, including Canadian Tire, believe it or not. We need to help these sectors survive and thrive as much as we can.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Just in the time I have remaining, I know that Operation Unifier will be up for renewal in 2017. Do you believe this is worthwhile and that the Canadian government should extend this mission? You spoke about it taking time to see the results of this type of initiative. Would your recommendation be to extend the mission?

Mr. Michael Bociurkiw: Yes, absolutely.

I think our assistance to Ukraine has been very targeted so that we don't just take a broad-based approach. From everything I've seen, I think we've targeted sectors that hold a lot of promise, and this includes, again, that IT sector, because there are so many Ukrainians who have expertise.

I'll give you a quick example, and this was at the Canada-Ukraine business forum on display. It's the only one of its kind in the world. There's a company in western Ukraine that has developed an interactive table for restaurants, for customers to come and order goods. They can build their menus, and that sort of thing. In fact, the Prime Minister was giving it a test drive when he was in Toronto. The problem is that they don't have the capacity to seek seed funding or more funding to hit that global market. I think that's perhaps another area where we can have bang for our buck.

● (1435)

Hon. Michelle Rempel: You spoke about the corruption, and obviously this is a very important issue with regard to Canada's relationship with the Ukraine. Before the 2015 federal election, motions calling for the Government of Canada to adopt Magnitsky legislation and sanctions were unanimously adopted by the House of Commons. There is legislation before the House right now. Do you think it's important for Canada to send a unified, strong message in this particular regard to deal with some of the issues you mentioned?

Mr. Michael Bociurkiw: I think we have to be very strong in speaking with the government, and not only the Government of Ukraine but with other governments, too, where corruption is a big problem. I'm not going to name names; you know what the countries are. This is something that for some reason doesn't seem to go away very easily. It's endemic in the judiciary, law enforcement, and a whole number of areas.

We have to remember, too, that this culture of corruption is something that is probably mostly a legacy of Soviet times. These things are not easy to brush away, but I think by now we're so far into the administration of President Poroshenko, that more concrete results could have been seen.

I should mention just briefly—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: With my time remaining, could you comment specifically on the Magnitsky legislation and Canada's support for that.

Mr. Michael Bociurkiw: Which is tied with seeing improvements.... I think if legislators feel that all political levers have been expended, then you need to look at other tools to get a government to adhere to international standards. I'm not a big advocate of that type of tool, but if we feel that we've expended all other avenues, then that should be done.

Just very quickly, I'm sorry I forgot to mention this. The other big role Canada has played, of course, is in election observation missions. It's very important that we continue to have the resources and make our people available to monitor the conduct of elections throughout Ukraine.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: I'm just wondering if any—

The Chair: Thank you.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Oh, sorry.

Thanks.

The Chair: Mr. Ehsassi, five minutes, please.

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

First of all, I want to thank everyone for appearing before this committee. It's been very helpful, focusing on various aspects of the situation in Ukraine and how Canada can best assist.

Michael, you touched on the culture of pervasive impunity. You noted how a variety of international organizations are saying that the situation there is verging on war crimes. We've heard from witnesses who have recounted the atrocities they've been subjected to.

This bring us to the amazing work you're doing in monitoring the situation, in cataloguing all of the atrocities that have been going on for two years. The issue is transitional justice. Do you think transitional justice does have a role to play? Is that something, given our Canadian know-how, we should be supporting? Especially given that there has been a cataloguing of atrocities, one would think we'd have to put it to good use. Of course, we can't use the European Court of Human Rights, but there must be other avenues that should be explored and considered. I say that because unless there is some accountability and there is some semblance of justice, this whole concept of reconciliation will never take place. What are your views on the scope of transitional justice and the best means to achieve that?

Mr. Michael Bociurkiw: First of all, I have to be very careful with what I say, because even though I'm not with the special monitoring mission, I do have former colleagues still very active there. There's a limit to what I can say for safety and security considerations.

You mentioned reconciliation. As this huge community of IDPs stays in their host communities longer and longer...and by the way, a lot of them have also gone to western Ukraine. People in Lviv, for example, have done a marvellous job in terms of hosting them, accepting them, and welcoming them. However, there may come a time when some sort of reconciliation process needs to be put into place to help different sides reconcile their differences.

The other thing Canada should be supporting or encouraging the government to do is this. I think in 2014 a series of round tables around Ukraine took place. People from both sides were invited to speak there. I thought those were very useful. I think about four or five took place, and then for some reason the government dropped the idea. But this sort of process, rotating round tables where people from different sides can speak and talk about their differences and how we can move forward, is very important to do.

● (1440)

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you.

Mr. Galkin, I'll ask you, if I could, about the prospects for transitional justice and how Canada can contribute on that front.

Mr. Aleksandr Galkin: Would you please define the question, if you don't mind?

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Yes. A number of different organizations have been very active on the ground, trying to make sure, to the best of their abilities, they catalogue all the atrocities that are taking place. Many are of the view that transitional justice is something that should be taken very seriously.

I'm wondering whether you're familiar with that area, and, given the impediments that are there for the European Court of Human Rights to get involved, whether there are any alternatives you can think of.

Mr. Aleksandr Galkin: If you are speaking about, for instance, Amnesty International reports last year about inhumane treatments by both sides of the conflict, we believe, for instance, that Ukraine is supposed to sign the Rome Statute in order to be a responsible signatory on one side of this conflict as well, but the government is not very willing to do that. As well, within society there is quite a negative point of view toward these reports, because they actually divulge some negatives and undermine some of the mythology of the Ukrainian government.

I believe justice for the interim period should be very much supported. The Canadian government should also consider how to lobby or to advocate for the implementation of justice for the Government of Ukraine.

The Chair: Thank you.

I'd like to thank all the witnesses for their testimony and insights. I would like to particularly thank the three witnesses from Kiev who suffered horrific atrocities while incarcerated in those militarily invaded territories of Ukraine. Thank you so much.

We will now suspend for two minutes to allow the next panel to appear.

● (1440)

(Pause)

● (1450)

The Chair: Welcome back.

Appearing before us for the second panel today are Ms. Chantal Desloges, from Desloges Law Group, and Ms. Janet Dench, from the Canadian Council for Refugees, who is appearing by video conference from Montreal. Appearing from Winnipeg by video conference is Mr. Brian Dyck, chair of the Canadian Refugee Sponsorship Agreement Holder Association.

Welcome, and we'll begin with Ms. Desloges, with seven minutes, please, for your opening statement.

Ms. Chantal Desloges (Lawyer, Desloges Law Group, As an Individual): Thank you very much for the invitation to address you today, and thank you all for giving up your time in your constituencies this summer to look at this really important issue.

I'm an immigration and refugee lawyer. I've been working in this field in one capacity or another since 1994. I am certified by the Law Society of Upper Canada as a specialist in refugee law and also as a specialist in immigration law.

In general, Canada has a refugee resettlement program that is the envy of the world. There are many countries today that are looking at our resettlement program as a model and are thinking about how to adopt various aspects of it for themselves. We are doing really well in this regard, and I'm really proud of us, but I think we can always do things better.

What do I think are the chief problems when it comes specifically to minority communities? Well, first of all, internally displaced persons are completely left out of our Canadian resettlement program. This has to do with the definition, legally, of what is a convention refugee, both internationally and in our domestic law. It requires someone to be outside of their country of nationality to initiate a claim. This concept hearkens back to the time when the convention was drafted in 1951, which was post-World War II, which was a very different type of conflict than the types of things we see today.

The second issue has to do with a lot of the minority, very vulnerable, communities being located physically in areas that are either literally inaccessible safely or at least inaccessible by the UNHCR. The problem this creates is tied to the fact that we have basically wholesale subrogated our refugee selection to the UNHCR.

The UNHCR is a wonderful organization. I admire it very much. However, they have their own limitations, which they themselves will freely admit, and frankly speaking, Canadians didn't elect them to make these kinds of decisions as to what's best for us. The UNHCR simply doesn't and cannot have a presence everywhere in the world where they're needed, and they're hampered by their own logistical and financial concerns. They also do not have a mandate over internally displaced persons. So again, the group of IDPs is completely left out in the cold.

I've read the written deputation sent to the committee by Rainbow Railroad. They are experiencing the same frustrating experiences that many of the other witnesses before you earlier today and yesterday described, including long delays and processing times by the UNHCR and people often living in dangerous conditions while waiting years to get a UNHCR appointment.

May I also say that I think the best thing we can do for vulnerable minorities all over the world is to eradicate ISIL—whatever it takes. That should be a top priority for our society.

On a more immediate level, however, specifically in the immigration context, there are domestic steps we can take. For example, relieving private sponsors of much of the red tape that now binds them up would free the sponsorship communities to help the people they want to help. This has worked very well in past years with specific communities, whether religious, sexual orientation, or ethnic. Allow Canadians to decide for themselves who they want to sponsor, and allow Canadians to put their money where their mouths are and back it up with finances.

Caps on private sponsorships for the sponsorship agreement holders are also a major problem. It's not only the existence of the caps, it's the unpredictability of those caps, which do not allow sponsorship agreement holders from year to year to know how many people they're going to be able to sponsor.

It also, I think, makes sense to draw certain distinctions between groups of people, not to discriminate against those who are not prioritized but to recognize the simple reality that some groups are singled out and horrifically targeted by their persecutors. If the persecutors themselves draw those distinctions, it only makes sense that our response has to be proportionate. Every refugee faces a well-founded fear of persecution, but not every refugee is a genocide victim. Not every refugee is a survivor of sex slavery. We're talking about apples and oranges.

True equality doesn't always mean treating people exactly the same. Sometimes we have to treat groups differently in order to make them equal. All refugees need protection, but not all of them need permanent resettlement. Some of these minority groups will never be able to go home, even after the war is over. This is unlike many of the current displaced groups, who will be able to go home once the war is over. For example, a lot of the Muslim majority will be able to go home and will, in fact, want to go home.

We need to also be asking ourselves very serious questions about why many of the neighbouring Arab countries, some of whom are very wealthy, are not doing more to protect their own co-religionists and people who share a similar culture and background. A very small minority of Middle Eastern countries are shouldering more than their fair share of that burden.

● (1455)

The error of the previous government was not acting fast enough and not acting on a large enough scale to respond to the Middle East refugee crisis. The numbers that were admitted overall were comparatively small. Most of those were privately sponsored, with very few government-assisted, and with very long processing times.

What are the legal and administrative tools available to us to alleviate some of these problems that are facing us? The first is the increased use of the humanitarian and compassionate provisions in section 25 of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act to cover off situations where people are not outside their country of origin—for example, internally displaced people—and people who do not have UNHCR recognition. That would cover people who are not able, for whatever reason, to access UNHCR registration or to access UNHCR camps.

I'll give you an example. I had two or three files in which I had previously requested section 25 H and C discretion from the immigration department, and the processing office in Winnipeg had absolutely no clue how to handle a request like that in the context of a sponsorship for a refugee. It was unbelievable to me that this could have been the case, but it was the case: they did not know how to handle it, statutory discretion. For this reason, I think if we're going to use section 25 more liberally, then there will have to be a specific directive written to visa officers, and immigration officers inland, on how to exercise that discretion and on the proper parameters for it.

Second, lift or at least better manage the caps on sponsorship agreement holders. Private sponsors are really excited right now, and they're willing to back up their enthusiasm with their wallets. I say let them loose. Let them sponsor however many they're prepared to financially support.

In addition, in terms of waiving interviews for groups like the Yazidis, who testified this morning, why not waive their interviews with CIC? Everyone knows they're refugees. They're prima facia refugees. They really only need to pass their security and medical screening. Why are we interviewing every single one of them? Not only does it create backlogs but it also creates a situation where it's difficult to send Canadian visa officers into these various areas without a risk to their security.

I actually raised this in an interview not that long ago with IRCC personnel. I was told that they can't waive the interviews. They have to interview them for security. That didn't really make sense to me, because every immigrant to Canada under every category has to pass a security check. The vast majority of people who immigrate to Canada do not have to do a personal interview for a security check. That doesn't make sense. When I proposed that perhaps the interviews could be done by Skype or by video conference, I was told, no, that was not suitable, because it wouldn't allow someone to judge their credibility properly. That's interesting, because many refugee claims in Canada are adjudicated by video conference. Why is it okay for inland claims but not okay for outside of Canada claims? This could alleviate a lot of the backlog.

Finally, there's the more systematic use of temporary resident permits under section 24 of IRPA for urgent cases involving immediate risk. TRPs are sometimes issued, but I find they're issued very sparingly. Perhaps a more liberal use of that particular vehicle would be very helpful. Reports about attacks on Yazidi communities, for example, first came out in August 2014. In conjunction with the Office for Refugees of the Archdiocese of Toronto, who I believe testified yesterday, and One Free World International, who I believe will testify tomorrow, I helped to draft a proposal to CIC. This was in early 2015 under the previous government. That proposal was to do with a project for resettlement, a small-scale project for women survivors of sex slavery from ISIS in the minority Yazidi community. My expertise was strictly on the legal side. I know nothing about the logistics of such things.

No action was taken on that proposal despite numerous follow-ups. That proposal was again renewed when the new government came into power with the new minister, and again no action was taken on that despite several follow-ups. The only time that proposal got any attention was after the last sitting of this committee, when these similar issues were discussed. It appears that this now is on the right track, and I just want to say thank you to the committee and congratulate you on your work, because it is making a difference.

Thank you.

● (1500)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Desloges.

Next is Ms. Janet Dench.

The floor is yours.

Ms. Janet Dench (Executive Director, Canadian Council for Refugees): Thank you very much. I am here today to represent the Canadian Council for Refugees, which is an umbrella organization with about 180 member organizations, many of which are heavily involved in resettlement.

First of all, I'd like to congratulate you for putting the focus on vulnerable refugees. Canada's resettlement program should be designed to respond effectively to vulnerable refugees globally. At times in its history, Canada has used economic criteria to select refugees for resettlement, which is not appropriate. The immigration regulations still require that those resettling to Canada be able to successfully establish themselves in Canada.

I have a couple of comments about internally displaced persons. While refugees, by definition, have fled their country of origin, IDPs are displaced within their own country. This distinction is more than just one of geography. From a legal perspective those who are outside their country need to rely on the international community, whereas someone within their country is entitled to expect that their own government will protect them. For this reason IDPs are not generally considered for resettlement, which is a solution for people who need some other country to provide protection and a permanent home.

International law assumes that people facing persecution will seek protection within their own country if they can reasonably do so. Refugee claimants in Canada are regularly asked to explain why they could not have gone somewhere else in their country to escape persecution. This is known as the internal flight alternative.

In some cases, IDPs do not enjoy the protection of their own government because the government is unwilling or unable to provide protection. In such cases, the person may need international protection, but it is because of the lack of protection available and not because they are displaced.

Currently, Canada's immigration regulations exclude from resettlement anyone still in their country of origin. This was not always the case. Before October 2011, Canada had a source country class. This class provided for resettlement of people still in their country of origin.

The CCR recognizes that there are a number of challenges in using resettlement to respond to people still in their country of origin, including political and diplomatic issues with the source country; security issues for Canadian officials processing the case and for those being processed; and serious problems in identifying an organization that can do referrals, given that this is not part of the UNHCR mandate. The CCR opposed the elimination of the source country class. We wanted to reform it to make it work, and we maintain that position.

I have a comment now about equity. CCR shares the horror felt by the committee over the human rights abuses suffered by the Yazidis, as well as by many other religious and ethnic minorities. At the same time, we need to be careful about targeting specific groups, as it can compromise equitable treatment. Often there are individuals at extreme risk who do not fit within a specified group, but are just as deserving of priority consideration. We should not say to someone at risk that you won't be considered for resettlement simply because of your religion or ethnicity. In this regard, we note the dishonourable recent history of Canada trying to force a bias in referrals from UNHCR. The principle of non-discrimination is a fundamental one, and it must be respected scrupulously.

The issue of equity is a particular concern for the CCR and its members at present in the context of the current focus on Syrian refugees. Many individuals and institutions are generously reaching out to support Syrian refugees. As welcome as that is, when the benefits are directed only to Syrians, there is an injustice to other refugees. In particular, Canada's resettlement response has not been good to African refugees. As a result, we believe it is important to design policies and programs that are equitable to all refugees globally without targeting particular nationalities or ethnic groups.

We also have concerns about the politicization of the refugee selection system. We need to avoid having decisions made based on which groups have the best lobbyists, which groups have the best access to the minister's ear, or which groups catch the media's interest. We note the rise in recent years of ministerial priorities in the private sponsorship program, which we consider very problematic.

The UNHCR has the mandate to identify vulnerable groups for resettlement. We recommend letting the UNHCR take the lead. This does not exclude having open consultations about Canada's resettlement plans in dialogue with the UNHCR.

● (1505)

We're worried about the urgent protection program. Sometimes vulnerable refugees need very quick resettlement. Canada has an urgent protection program that should allow Canada to respond to vulnerable refugees facing imminent protection threats. However, sometimes Canada struggles to meet the timelines for the program. We would like to see the government use the successful experience of doing the rapid processing of Syrian refugees to find ways to move refugees very quickly when there are urgent protection needs.

Now I will mention other immigration measures. Canada can respond to human rights crises by opening up immigration possibilities that are not strictly tied to the refugee category. This could reduce some of the legal and diplomatic issues. For example, the CCR has been recommending that Canada offer temporary resident permits to Syrians with family in Canada.

Finally, a word about alternatives to resettlement. Canada can play an important role in ways other than resettlement to support IDPs and refugees. The UN report on Yazidis has a series of recommendations, and in fact, resettlement is not one of them. Governments can and do engage diplomatically, provide funding, advocate for the rights of IDPs, and respond in other ways. Since our organization's expertise is in the area of immigration, which is also this committee's mandate, we do not pretend to have specific recommendations to make, but many NGOs are engaged in these issues and can give input.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Dench.

Now we move on to Mr. Dyck, who has seven minutes.

Mr. Brian Dyck (Chair, Canadian Refugee Sponsorship Agreement Holders Association): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you for this invitation to speak to this committee.

The Canadian Sponsorship Agreement Holders Association is a group of about 100 sponsorship agreement holders, or SAHs, as we call ourselves, who facilitate the application process and settlement of most of the privately sponsored refugees who arrive in Canada. For the most part, SAHs respond to people who come to our doors. That makes our work slightly different from what the government is doing. Typically, our selection process involves working with someone in our community who is worried about friends or relatives who are refugees. So we're not looking at the global needs structure, but at what's in front of us.

Though the refugee resettlement pie is much bigger this year, and we're very thankful for that, and it's bigger than it's been in a long time, many SAHs worry about that slice being carved off and parts of it being lost to us. This is a worry because of the restrictive caps on new sponsorship applications for SAHs that have been part of our environment since 2012. As you know, the caps were brought in to deal with the long wait times and backlogs of applications, which were indeed a problem. Because African visa offices were the most oversubscribed places, these caps have impacted African sponsorships particularly hard, as they deal with many old cases there.

Between 2012 and 2015, by my rough estimate, about 2,000 Africans were sponsored to come to Canada. By comparison, last year alone SAHs were able to submit almost 10,000 Syrian and Iraqi sponsorships—and that doesn't include what was done in Quebec, as I don't have those numbers—because they were prioritized and there was no cap on those two populations in 2015.

Prioritizing one group necessarily has an impact on the whole Canadian resettlement system and can cause problems elsewhere. While no one wants to get into the morbid science of comparing one refugee's plight with another's, there are many who wonder why someone who has been waiting for more than five years may need to continue to wait while others appear to be zipping through the process because they're prioritized.

There are certainly compelling reasons why some refugees need to be resettled on an urgent basis. Canada already has a system for that —the urgent protection program that's been talked about. However, as a rule, SAHs want to see applications processed in the order that they came into the system to see equal access to sponsorships from around the world. That's why I think it's important to focus on building a robust refugee resettlement system that can handle the ongoing demands and at the same time respond to the urgent protection situations that come up. That's something that will take careful building and planning to put resources where they're needed and to realize the efficiencies.

In terms of resettling internally displaced people, Canada, of course, had a unique program to deal with this a number of years ago called the source country class, which has been talked about already. While many were resettled to Canada over the years through this program, there were a number of problems with it, which have been highlighted. It was limited to a few countries that were available, the embassies designated were often difficult or even dangerous to access, and many people who applied did not qualify, so the rejection rates were high.

I worked for the Mennonite Central Committee, and we, as MCC, were somewhat involved in source country sponsorship in Colombia because we have had a program working with IDPs for many years in that country. Generally, our programs were focused on helping IDPs to find new life within Colombia because, most of the time, moving the IDPs away from the threat they were facing eliminated the threat: the threat did not follow them. If, however, they continued to get death threats, we tried to walk with them in the process and apply for resettlement in some cases.

For a number of reasons we never did very much of that. Our first option was always local integration because that's what worked the best. We knew that it wasn't easy to resettle and for most displaced people that's not what they want. They don't want to go to a place like Canada. They want to stay closer to where they are. Also, we knew that if this were a key focus for us, it would be dangerous for our staff and the people and churches who were involved in this. We were also beginning to see more fraud as people began to see this as a way to get to Canada. So there were problems with that. If Canada embarks on a program like that, I think it would be important for us to think about how to deal with this selection process in a way that's safe and effective and fair. That's not going to be a simple thing to figure out.

● (1510)

Finally, I think it's important to keep in mind that resettlement is but one tool in our tool box in responding to forced displacement. I note that the report from the UN that this committee referred to does not mention resettlement in its recommendations. The focus instead is on trauma healing and rebuilding of the communities.

The Mennonite Central Committee has worked in the Middle East for decades, including in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and in Syria itself. Our partners of all faiths on the ground are not really talking to us about resettlement. When we asked them what was best to do, the response was along the line of help us to reach out to our neighbours who are in need. That involves development work, and more importantly involves working at relationship-building in this community.

In Iraq, for example, our partners work with Yazidis and Christians and other groups on trauma healing, which extends across religious boundaries. In Syria, thanks to grants from the Office of Religious Freedom, we have seen Christians and Muslims working together on relief and development projects, and even standing up for each other in the face of violence. These are small steps, but can be the seeds of peace in a place of conflict—conflict that is often imported into the region.

I know there are many forgotten groups around the world and this committee has been hearing from them. To hear the plight of those people is a very important thing. However, it can be difficult to decide whom to help when we cannot help everyone. Many of us who are SAHs struggle with this on a daily basis, and it's the hardest thing we do on a regular basis, deciding where we can help and where we can't. We as SAHs handle this in a number of ways and we do what we can.

Stepping back for a minute from the SAH world, it's important to have a global discussion on how best to use the limited number of spaces for resettlement available each year from various states, and to use them well. As you think about recommendations it will be important for you to think not just of the people who come to you with these compelling stories, as important as they are, but also how that resettlement can work together with other efforts to work with victims of forced displacement.

Thank you very much.

● (1515)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dyck.

Ms. Zahid, you have seven minutes, please.

Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.): I want to take this opportunity to thank all of our witnesses for providing their input today and for all the work they are doing in settling the new immigrants in this country.

My first question is for Ms. Chantal Desloges.

As we all know, sponsorship agreement holders can identify the refugees they want to sponsor, which is one way for those not prioritized by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and IRCC to be resettled in Canada.

What in your opinion is the right balance between the privately sponsored and the government-assisted refugees? What percentage of the total number of immigrants do you think is the right level for the refugees?

Ms. Chantal Desloges: I'm a big fan of the private sponsorship of refugees program and less so of government-assisted refugees, although I do think that government-assisted refugees do have their place in our program.

If it were up to me, I would much more heavily weight the balance toward private sponsorship simply because the demand is so great right now, and there's really no downside risk for Canadian society or Canadian taxpayers.

As to an overall percentage, I don't really feel qualified to say what the total mix of refugees versus economic class or family class immigration should be. I really hesitate to comment on that.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: You are more inclined towards the privately sponsored refugees in the total mix of the refugees.

Ms. Chantal Desloges: I am.

I think if the government is going to spend money, it should spend money towards helping private sponsors do the wonderful work they're already doing.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: The government-assisted refugees are usually considered to be more vulnerable. What is your feeling on that?

Ms. Chantal Desloges: As I said, I wouldn't say that you should totally eliminate government-assisted refugees. I think that possibly for smaller, targeted projects for specific groups of people maybe it would be a good idea. However, I wouldn't say that government-assisted refugees are necessarily more vulnerable than privately sponsored ones, just that the privately sponsored ones have more local Canadian support after their arrival.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: How does the internationally accepted legal definition of “refugee”, which requires someone to have crossed an international border, complicate the ability of the international community to provide assistance to the internally displaced people?

Ms. Chantal Desloges: Yes, that's a huge problem. I think in terms of IDPs, that's our number one legal challenge in that department.

I would really hesitate to tinker with the definition of “refugee”, which has stood in good stead for such a long time. I think rather than think about changing those things, we should focus on not reinventing the wheel. Using section 25, exempting people from that requirement in the right circumstances would achieve the same thing without requiring legislative overhaul.

But I do think you're right to identify that; it's a very significant problem for IDPs.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Is there any other country you know of that has done that?

Ms. Chantal Desloges: I'm not aware of that.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: My next question is for the Canadian Council for Refugees.

Since yesterday, we have heard about some of the groups of people who are vulnerable, but with your broader perspective and the number of people you deal with, could you outline different groups of internally displaced people around the world and what challenges those groups are facing?

Ms. Janet Dench: There's a very large number of people who are internally displaced, and they do tend to be forgotten in various different ways. It's a complicated business to respond to internally displaced people. Their situation in some countries can be particularly vulnerable because they are within their own borders, and if their own government is unwilling or unable to protect them, then it's difficult also for the international community.

The UN obviously cannot just walk in to any country and act as it wishes. It has to have the approval of the government of that particular country. There was a period when the UNHCR was really putting a lot of focus on internally displaced people and there was a bit of an effort internationally to try to find some solutions to those problems, but then it seemed to go a bit off the agenda.

I believe that the new high commissioner is wanting to push it back and to get more attention. I think that if the Canadian government were willing to play a leadership role diplomatically to try to address more attention to finding feasible solutions for internally displaced people, that would be a terrific contribution that Canada could make.

● (1520)

Mrs. Salma Zahid: You know that resettlement is not the only solution. Based on the resources available, as an international community, what can we do, other than the resettlement, to help the internally displaced people?

Ms. Janet Dench: I think that the Canadian government is engaged, in terms of funding, for example. There's a lot of reliance by IDPs on support from the international community that Canada can and does contribute to and could do more.

As I say, there are ways of engaging diplomatically, playing a role in discussions locally and with other governments and UN agencies to ask, “Well, in different circumstances, what are some of the solutions that could be found for people?”

There's also a question of highlighting the protection needs, because of course the concerns for IDPs are whether or not their rights are being properly protected.

Canada can both directly raise those issues and encourage the host government to respect people's rights.

It can also support local people, IDPs themselves, who organize themselves in order to draw attention to the ways in which their rights are not being respected. That's another way that Canada can provide some support.

The Chair: That's it.

Ms. Rempel, for seven minutes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I might just use some time to make a few comments because we've had so much testimony in the last couple of days.

I can accept criticism of our government's approach. I am happy to do that. What I can say is that we did our best in terms of.... I think it was right to say that we were going to put a focus on vulnerable, persecuted, and ethnic minorities. I don't accept the testimony we just heard here that we shouldn't be doing that. I think it's very easy for us to become bogged down in bureaucracy, and I realize that we have to act quickly in certain situations.

It would be very difficult for someone not to be moved by the testimony that we heard from people in Ukraine, from Nadia Murad today.

To your comment, Ms. Desloges, I realize that while there are situations where people are affected—everyone is affected—there are people who are affected more.

I can accept criticism. Can the government realize that they need to act and change their position? I'm putting that on the table.

I was on a television panel many months ago with one of the members in this room, and he made a comment that we make no bones about treating Syrian refugees differently. But when pressed on why that was, he couldn't respond. I think that's where the government has an opportunity here. I think we do need to treat certain cohorts differently so that we can respond quickly to needs. That's not saying that somebody's case is more or less valuable, but there are situations, as we've heard from many disparate groups with many disparate political affiliations today, where we need to act. I think that's very important and I think that's something that we've heard loud and clear. I think we need to have clear criteria when we are acting in those situations.

The comment that not all groups can go home afterwards, I think is absolutely valid. I think, when we have a declaration of genocide, that's very clear.

Some of the witnesses said that the UN report doesn't deal with resettlement. I find that completely false. On page 39, paragraph 212 (g), the UN itself asks us to accelerate the asylum applications of Yazidis. In my understanding—and we have legal experts here who might clarify this—an asylum claimant is someone seeking asylum and a refugee is someone who's had a successful asylum claim. To say that it doesn't do that, I think, is just crazy, and misses the point of the whole report.

As for the comments around bias in referrals, I certainly don't want to see our refugee process politicized either, but I think that we need to ensure that the principle of helping people who are facing genocide—for example today—needs to be enshrined in our immigration system when it comes to refugees.

I'll just very briefly ask for some comments. There's been much raised about the source country class—I think that's what it's called. I know in 2012 when subsection 25(2) of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act was implemented, that was done in response to the fact that we heard from the community that the source country class was not nimble or flexible enough, or didn't offer the minister enough immediate authority to go in and help people.

The criticism of how we operationalize that, I think, is valid. I think that the government has an opportunity here to direct the department on how to do that. I'd love to get feedback on that as well.

The comment around...and I know I'm burning my time, Mr. Chair —

● (1525)

The Chair: Perhaps we could start with—

Hon. Michelle Rempel: —but I can use my time however I feel.

The other thing that I'd like to see is an examination of our actually.... The government has now imposed a cap, or an exemption from the cap that was previously there for Iraqi nationals. I think that given the designation of genocide by the United Nations and the minister's admission that it is actually happening, this is an opportunity for the government to do some of these things.

Ms. Desloges, with the amount of time that I have left—I think I have a couple of minutes left—I was just wondering if you could provide some additional feedback or clarity on some of the comments that I've just made.

Ms. Chantal Desloges: I agree with Mr. Dyck. We can't help everyone. So at some point, we have to set parameters. We have to prioritize. In fact, we're already prioritizing. If you look at Mr. Casasola's testimony yesterday, he talked about how the UNHCR selects which priorities they're going to designate in terms of resettlement. They're already putting priorities in place. It's just that not everybody will necessarily agree on what those priorities are. So it's not an issue of prioritization; it's an issue of how we prioritize.

The UNHCR is a very large bureaucracy. If you try to make a policy change, it's like trying to turn around the *Titanic*. It simply cannot be as fast as everybody would want it to be. As I said, it's a wonderful organization, and I'm not criticizing it. It's just that it's a very large organization.

Look at the fact that it wasn't until 2007 that the UNHCR actually publicly recognized that Iraqis needed to be resettled. There had been people targeted for eradication in Iraq since 2003. It took four years for the UNHCR to announce publicly that it was in favour of resettling them.

Those are just two examples of my point.

I respect my friend, Janet Dench, so much, but I don't think this is about politicizing, and it's not about lobbying. We're talking about groups that are subject to genocide. It's not who has the loudest voice; it's who is being targeted for these kinds of horrific crimes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel: Thank you. That's all.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Kwan, you have seven minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you to all the witnesses.

I think we've reached an interesting juncture in the meetings we're having on the issue of how to address the crises that exist and the great needs that are there.

On the issue of genocide, we heard compelling testimony earlier today about the need for action. How do we deal with groups of women and girls who are enslaved sexually and face horrific circumstances, as an example? We heard also from the Sikh and Hindu communities in Afghanistan about the situation they are in. With regard to the LGBTI community, I believe some 63 countries have declared that it is illegal for someone to have a different sexual orientation. How do we deal with these situations?

On the question of prioritizing, I actually get all the arguments presented here about the inequity of prioritizing and picking out a particular group. Of course, not doing so also means that there are situations where particular groups are singled out and targeted with tremendous, horrific atrocities. How do we solve these problems? I think that is the question before us today.

Source country has been identified for the people who are inland and have no stream within which they can make applications today. Is part of the solution actually bringing back the source country classification?

I wonder if I can get a quick answer from everybody around the table. That's my first question, and I would like a quick answer, because we're limited to seven minutes.

● (1530)

The Chair: Who would you like to start with?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: We'll start with Ms. Desloges, and then we'll go to Janet and then to Brian, if that's okay.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Desloges.

Ms. Chantal Desloges: Source country is one possibility. Use of agency discretion is another possibility, which would not require a legislative change.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Janet.

Ms. Janet Dench: Yes, I agree. We regretted the fact that the source country class was eliminated. It did need some reform, but we would be very interested in finding ways to make it viable.

As Chantal has said, there are also other mechanisms that can be used and that can be more flexible, such as the use of TRPs, temporary resident permits.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Brian.

Mr. Brian Dyck: I don't know if I have much to add. I think source had problems, but there could be a mechanism to work with internally displaced people. I think it would take a lot of work to figure out what that would look like in terms of different environments to work with, the selection process, and getting people out physically. There are challenges. But certainly, thinking about how we can relate with IDPs as a resettlement tool is something to think about.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I would then invite all of the witnesses to provide additional submissions to the clerk on that issue, on what you think the reform needs to be and how we can overcome these challenges that exist.

The second phase of my question is on the inequities that exist. Given that we have all these crises going on, how do we square this circle then? Can we, for example, keep the generalized priorities that already exist, which the UNHCR already processes? The government, by the way, when they brought in the Syrian refugee initiative, had already identified priorities as well: women, children, families, and the LGBTI community.

The problem that's surfacing right now, particularly, for example, in those streams that have been identified to be priorities, are with the LGBTI community. They have no way of tracking it. In fact, they have no idea how well we're doing on that score.

We need a different mechanism when we know that those individuals are at a particular risk. What can we do to help them make applications and get into the stream, likewise with the Yazidi women and girls and so on?

I won't name all of the groups that have presented, but in that situation, is there something we can come forward with, say in the source countries with these particular groups, that these are specialized programs we would target in that instance to try to address the immediate crisis that our international community is faced with today?

Again, I'll go around the table for quick responses because I think I'm quickly running out of time.

Chantal.

Ms. Chantal Desloges: I think there are two separate issues here.

There is prioritization of refugee referrals from UNHCR, and also how you deal with people who don't meet those criteria. I think that all it would take in terms of resettlement is to let the UNHCR know that we want to add, or take away, these specific priorities for any given time. All we have to do is let them know that these are the kinds of people we want.

In terms of your other question on source country, the issue with source country is that it's everybody from that country who is in a refugee-like situation. That doesn't really help if you're trying to target a specific subgroup. I think section 25 would be more suitable for something like that.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Janet?

Ms. Janet Dench: I'd like to highlight the situation of Africa. More than a third of the people in need of resettlement are in Africa, but they tend to be marginalized again and again.

Of course, the committee has heard very many compelling cases, and I'm sure we would agree that they should all be priorities. However, I also want to urge that there are other groups you are not hearing about who probably have just as compelling stories and cases for them to be priorities.

The other point is to highlight the gender-related analysis. Canada used to be known for having a leadership role in terms of resettling women at risk. We seem to have fallen off on that side. I think it would be good for us to look again at the ways in which people are persecuted and at risk, particularly on the basis of their gender.

● (1535)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Brian?

Mr. Brian Dyck: I think one of the things we should think about is getting out of the silos of the Department of Citizenship and Immigration and Global Affairs Canada, and even thinking in terms of different streams of immigration and looking for multiple tools to deal with situations.

We could look at a particular region or a particular country and the conflict there, and look at many different ways that we can solve it. Resettlement could be one piece, and private sponsorship in particular can be a piece of that, but it's making sure that it fits with everything else that's going on. That takes collaboration across departments, I think.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Tabbara, for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara (Kitchener South—Hespeler, Lib.): Thank you. I'll be splitting some of my time with Mr. Virani.

Thank you all for being here.

We've heard a lot of testimony. I think everyone will agree that the issue of refugees is not going to diminish. If there's instability and conflict in war zones, in war-torn countries, we're going to have refugees, we're going to have people fleeing destruction.

You mentioned eradicating ISIS or Daesh. Everyone in this room would agree with you that that is one objective, but there would still be more militants going up in the ranks. There would still be another militia group. So security and stabilization of a country is imperative. I think the international community needs to work very hard on that. Daesh is not the end-all of militant groups that are causing destruction. There are many others in the world, including in El Salvador, Honduras, etc.

However, I want to talk a little about prioritization. This is why we have a second group or an institution that looks at the most vulnerable. They have a set structure to look at the most vulnerable. We've been talking in this committee about Christians, about Sunni Muslim, about Shia Muslims. No one's mentioned people who maybe aren't even practising a faith. They're very vulnerable people as well. I think that's something this committee needs to add in.

I have a question to ask Mr. Dyck and Ms. Dench. You mentioned the need in Africa. I wanted to touch on that. You mentioned that the refugees are left out there and politicized.

Can I begin with Ms. Dench, and can you elaborate on that?

Ms. Janet Dench: The caps that Brian Dyck was referring to have been particularly affecting refugees from Africa. There have been very serious limits on the number of refugees who can be sponsored out of Africa. The timelines for processing have been particularly long. The other constraints mean that it is very difficult for a private sponsor to put in an application to sponsor an African refugee. We are hearing a lot from our members who are of African origin, who point out the very vast and compelling needs in the region and who see that there is a lot of response from Canada—and rightly so, nobody is questioning that—to the situation in the Middle East. The scale of the problems is highlighted right now in Kenya, where the Kenyan government has said that it is going to close the refugee camps and create a forced return of people to Somalia, affecting hundreds of thousands of people potentially. Of course, there are many people there who are extremely anxious about that situation and there are many vulnerable people who are in those refugee camps. That's an urgent situation, which many of us feel is not getting the attention it deserves.

We can also speak of the situation in Eritrea, where very serious human rights abuses are going on. Canada has some level of responsibility in that we have Canadian companies that are involved in mining in that country and have been alleged to have contributed to the abuses in terms of the workers at those mines.

So I think we need to do more to pay attention to the situations in Africa and to respond to the refugees there.

● (1540)

Mr. Brian Dyck: Janet touched on a lot of important things. I think one of the things we're seeing this year that's exciting, because the landing targets for privately sponsored refugees this year is 17,800, is a lot of arrivals from Africa. Very few new cases are going in, but there are a lot of arrivals. For many of us, it does feel like we're turning the corner and that we might get a chance to see more new sponsorships.

There are a lot of desperate people there. If you think of Eritreans in particular, they're one of the populations who are fleeing across the Mediterranean in large numbers. You don't do that unless you're very desperate.

There are people in Canada who really want their friends and relatives to be here because they're very worried about them and they feel very frustrated because there have been limits placed on what they can do.

Mr. Marwan Tabbara: Thank you.

I'll pass it on to my colleague.

Mr. Arif Virani: Mr. Chair, I have a clarification, and then two short questions for Ms. Dench.

In the speech by Ms. Rempel, she referred to a television interview. That was with yours truly. She indicated that I failed to respond to why the government had been making a massive effort to settle Syrians as a priority.

This is what I said at that time on the CBC and what I'll say again now: it's because the largest international humanitarian crisis since World War II involves Syrian nationals. We've heard that of about 60 million people in movement in the world, 12 million of them are Syrian. I said that then. I guess Ms. Rempel just couldn't recollect that. It's quite apparent to our government, and quite apparent to the Canadian public, the magnitude of the crisis. Apparently it's not apparent to her.

Ms. Dench, thank you for your testimony. You used the words “dishonourable recent history” in referring to Canada when you said it had attempted to specify or favour particular ethnicities among the UNHCR referrals. Could you clarify that? Were you speaking about the areas of focus program of the previous government?

Ms. Janet Dench: No, we were speaking about the selection of Syrians, knowing that the Canadian government was preparing to make an announcement in December 2014 of its commitments to bring in Syrian refugees. The announcement was delayed because, as we understand it, and which seemed to be confirmed after the fact, Canada was wanting the UNHCR to accept that it would discriminate on the basis of religion. One of the fundamental, basic principles of refugee protection is that it's a measure against discrimination, so it was completely unacceptable. Of course, the UNHCR was not willing to accept Canada's making such an announcement. We were ashamed as Canadians that Canada would be taking such a position, and we're glad that in the event, that has not come into place.

The Chair: Thank you.

I would like to thank all of our panellists for their insights, their recommendations, and the tremendous work they do with some of the most vulnerable around the globe.

Thank you so much.

With that, our meeting is adjourned.