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# Special Committee on Afghanistan

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Chair: Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal





## Special Committee on Afghanistan

Monday, January 31, 2022

• (1855)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Surrey—Newton, Lib.)):** I call the meeting to order. Welcome to meeting number two of the House of Commons Special Committee on Afghanistan. Pursuant to the House motion adopted on December 8, 2021, and the motion adopted by the committee on December 13, 2021, the committee is meeting to study humanitarian assistance measures in place to bring relief to the Afghan people.

Today the meeting is taking place in a hybrid format pursuant to the House order of November 25, 2021. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application. The proceedings will be made available via the House of Commons website. Just so that you are aware, the webcast will always show the person speaking rather than the entirety of the committee.

Today's meeting is also taking place in the webinar format. Webinars are for public committee meetings and are available only to members, their staff and witnesses. Members enter immediately as active participants. All functionalities for the active participants remain the same. Staff will be non-active participants and can therefore only view the meeting in gallery view.

I would like to take this opportunity to remind all participants in this meeting that taking screenshots or photos of your screen is not permitted.

Given the ongoing pandemic situation and in light of the recommendations from the health authorities as well as the directive of the Board of Internal Economy of October 19, 2021, to remain healthy and safe, all those attending the meeting in person are to maintain two-metre physical distancing and must wear a non-medical mask when circulating in the room. It is highly recommended that the mask be worn at all times including when you are seated. As well, you must maintain proper hand hygiene by using the provided hand sanitizer at the room entrance.

As the chair, I will be enforcing these measures for the duration of the meeting, and I thank all members in advance for their co-operation.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules to follow.

Number one, members and witnesses may speak in the official language of their choice. Interpretation services are available for this meeting. You have the choice at the bottom of the screen of “floor”, “English” or “French”. If interpretation is lost, please inform me immediately, and we will ensure that interpretation is

properly restored before resuming the proceedings. The “raise hand” feature at the bottom of the screen can be used any time if you wish to speak or alert me, as chair.

For members participating in person, proceed as you usually would when the whole committee is meeting in person in a committee room. Keep in mind the Board of Internal Economy's guidance for mask use and health protocols. Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. If you are on the video conference, please click on the microphone icon to unmute yourself. For those in the room, your microphone will be controlled as is normal by proceedings and verification officers. When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your microphone should be on mute.

I remind everyone that all comments by members and witnesses should be addressed through the chair.

With regard to the speaking list, the committee clerk and I will do the best we can to maintain a consolidated order of speaking for all members whether they are participating virtually or in person.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses, and express our appreciation to them for being with us this evening, especially as many of you have agreed to come on short notice. I will also note that some of you are currently in other time zones where it is quite late or early, so thank you for being here.

We have Mr. John Aylieff from the World Food Programme, and Mr. Patrick Hamilton from the International Committee of the Red Cross.

When we resume after the first panel, I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the new witnesses when they come on.

We will begin, and witnesses will have five minutes. I'm not going to remind you, but please pay attention when you are speaking to ensure you are within your time allocation.

With this, I would like to start the meeting.

Mr. Aylieff, go ahead for five minutes to make your presentation to the committee, please.

• (1900)

**Mr. John Aylieff (Regional Director, Asia and the Pacific, World Food Programme):** Publishing: I have clarified this, adding that he is regional director for Asia and the Pacific Mr. Chair, thank you very much.

Allow me to thank the distinguished members of the Special Committee on Afghanistan for your engagement with the country. There could be no better or more important time than now. Today, millions of people in Afghanistan—young children, families and communities—stand at the precipice of inhumane hunger and destitution.

This last year, 2021, was always going to be a tough year, with the worst drought in 30 years, the most intense period of conflict in decades and the impact of COVID-19. However, one factor above all provoked a precipitous surge in hunger and desperation: the suspension in August of international budgetary support that once represented 75% of the national budget, the suspension of development aid and the freezing of the country's foreign reserves.

Today in Afghanistan, 95% of households struggle to put food on the table. Twenty-three million people require food assistance. Nearly nine million of them are one step away from famine, and one million children, according to UNICEF, are at risk of perishing this year from acute malnutrition.

The humanitarian struggle and the human cost of what is playing out in Afghanistan today are immeasurable. In a hospital in Kandahar, I recently met Fatima, a one-year-old girl weighing three kilograms. Her brother lay emaciated in the next ward, with a distraught and desperate mother, herself malnourished, running between them and watching her whole world disintegrate.

Fatima's father has not worked for weeks. The job market has simply collapsed, with no liquidity, no oxygen in the economy, small and medium-sized businesses going under, casual labour opportunities nowhere to be found and the price of bread up by 50%. Fatima and her family are symbols of millions of other Afghan families who cannot cope today and, sadly, their number is growing every single day.

When others fled the country, WFP stayed in Afghanistan after the Taliban took Kabul in August to deliver life-saving assistance to millions of Afghans who did not have the option to leave. We stayed, alongside other organizations represented here today. We are now running WFP's largest-ever operation in Afghanistan, a program which by the end of 2021 had fed 15 million people.

WFP programs save lives, feed families, treat the malnourished and keep girls in school. Furthermore, WFP's programs provide stability, or a semblance of stability, in a country where economic collapse is forcing people to make desperate and perhaps even unimaginable decisions, including selling their own children to survive or joining extremist groups for monetary incentives.

To date, we have received fairly good co-operation from the Taliban, who have respected our humanitarian rules of engagement. In any conflict environment there are daily operational challenges, but we have addressed them rapidly and boldly with the Taliban and they have co-operated in troubleshooting incidents and addressing our concerns. WFP has unhindered access to every one of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, and every one of WFP's female staff are working today.

Our critical constraint going forward is funding. In spite of immense generosity from donors, WFP runs out of money in early April. We stand before a funding gap of \$1.9 billion for 2022 alone,

and we have absolutely no visibility on donor funding streams after that. To keep our operation going to feed 23 million people, we need \$220 million U.S. per month, and we are terrified of what will happen when the money and the food run out.

Recent sanctions waivers have been useful and facilitate hard currency entering the country to support humanitarian efforts. However, I must stress today that humanitarian aid alone cannot avert an economic collapse. It cannot shore up the banking system, prevent small and medium-sized enterprises from faltering or create jobs on anywhere near the scale that is needed.

I want to be really clear. If the economy is left to collapse, millions more Afghans will be in urgent need of assistance. Humanitarian needs will reach levels we collectively cannot meet. Once this occurs, we will witness destabilization and mass movements across borders. We will see exactly the sort of environment in which extremism flourishes. That's why we must work together to give Afghans better choices to ensure a future for the millions of children at risk.

- (1905)

There is a segment of the population that still has a voice, that will contribute to a stable, moderate, Afghanistan, that will demand a country in which girls can be educated and people can live without fear. We cannot afford to turn our backs on that segment of the population.

I would like to laud Canada, which has been a strong partner for WFP in Afghanistan for literally decades. We sincerely thank you for providing \$66.5 million Canadian in support to the humanitarian community since the takeover by the Taliban on August 15, 2021. The WFP commends you also for the important study you are undertaking and recommends that in that study you focus on food security and nutrition as being fundamental to addressing the crisis at hand. At the moment, this is a hunger emergency.

To conclude, Mr. Chair, working together as an international community, we can prevent calamity in Afghanistan, but doing so will require sustained focus, sustained engagement and sustained resource flows.

Mr. Chair, thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Aylieff.

You were well under six minutes. That's great.

We are now going to give the floor to Mr. Hamilton.

Mr. Hamilton, go ahead, please.

**Mr. Patrick Hamilton (Head of Regional Delegation, United States and Canada, International Committee of the Red Cross):** Thank you very much indeed, Mr. Chair.

I would very much like to echo the sentiments of Mr. Aylieff in congratulating the special parliamentary committee of Canada for being engaged and consulting with us on this day on this extremely critical issue.

My name is Patrick Hamilton. I'm the head of the International Committee of the Red Cross's delegation to the U.S. and Canada.

To be clear, the International Committee of the Red Cross is the founding member and founding body of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, incorporating all of the national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies globally including the Canadian Red Cross.

We are a Swiss private organization with our headquarters in Geneva, with a mandate derived from the Geneva Conventions, the laws of war to protect and assist victims of conflict and violence around the world. We have a very strong relationship with the evolution and implementation of those laws of war around the world.

We are an organization of some 20,000 staff working in 100 contexts around the world, the vast majority of our focus being in those contexts of intense conflict, which have included Afghanistan for an unbroken period of the last 35 to 37 years. We have a very long-standing history with Afghanistan and have been there over the last numerous decades, as has WFP, in terms of trying to provide humanitarian responses to Afghans affected by the numerous rounds of conflict and violence that have so sadly affected the population over that period.

We still have some 1,800 staff based in Afghanistan today. They, like the WFP, have remained in country throughout the last months since the seismic events of August and have continued to focus on bringing a humanitarian response to the population of Afghanistan, where we have focused in particular on the provision of health services, and where we are currently providing support to some 28 provincial-level hospitals all around Afghanistan, support that incorporates everything from the payment of salaries through to the running costs and medical provisions.

We have stepped in to provide such systemic-level support to these Afghan hospitals as something that is really beyond precedent, as far as our normal *modus operandi* is concerned, because of the gravity of the situation today in Afghanistan.

Here I would very much also echo Mr. Aylieff's sentiments that we feel that considering all of the concerns that have gone with those 37 to 40 years of conflict and suffering in Afghanistan, the ICRC has never been more concerned about the population of Afghanistan than it is today. We feel that the Afghan population is really on the brink of catastrophe and that the centre of that catastrophe is, indeed, the situation of economic paralysis and the total absence of liquidity today in the Afghan market.

Our director of operations was speaking earlier today about a visit he made to Afghanistan back in early November. He said that when he arrived at Kabul airport and then was driving around Kabul, at first glance he had the impression that there was material in the markets, that there were people out in the bazaars, and so he said to his colleagues, "This looks relatively normal", and they responded, "Look again. Look closer. Do you actually see anybody buying anything?" He couldn't.

In the further trips he did around the country, he really saw an economy and markets that have ground to a halt because nobody has any money. This is really having a major impact on the lives of millions of Afghans all across Afghanistan today.

Through the hospital program we have engaged in, we see the impact of this in particular with severely malnourished patients who are arriving at these hospitals, in particular young children, many of whom are being forced to share space, sometimes two, three or four to an incubator at a time, because there are not the numbers of incubators to be able to cope with the numbers of children being brought in, or the heating apparatuses and other things that would go to ensuring that the conditions in the hospital are adequate to deal with the scale of the caseload that is coming in.

• (1910)

What made this situation all the more devastating for our director of operations when he was there was seeing how many of these children were spending a month receiving treatment in these hospitals, going home, but then returning a month later because they were not receiving the food that they so desperately needed back home because there was no food and there was no money.

Of course, these circumstances arrive on top of multiple years of severe drought in Afghanistan, the broader COVID impacts, including the economic impacts of COVID, and then obviously these cumulative decades of conflict.

**The Chair:** Mr. Hamilton, can you wrap up, please?

**Mr. Patrick Hamilton:** Our key messages to you are that it is desperately important that the international community, including the Canadian government, engage today. It is essential that liquidity be brought back into the Afghan system. There is a need to ensure that the central bank can begin to function once again and can be supported to do so. It is essential that public sector services be enabled to function again and that the people who run those, the bureaucrats, are able to carry out their jobs, whether they are teachers, doctors, water engineers or others, so that the 420,000-person workforce that used to operate those essential services be enabled to do their jobs and be paid for doing them. As well it is essential that humanitarian actors like ours are provided with a carve-out from sanctions regimes to allow us to continue our work.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Hamilton.

We're going to the honourable members now. The first round is six minutes. Please keep the time in mind.

The first speaker on the list is from the Conservative Party.

Mr. Brassard, please go ahead for six minutes.

• (1915)

**Mr. John Brassard (Barrie—Innisfil, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our guests for being here. There's no question that the situation is dire in Afghanistan, and I think it's important to hear that directly.

Mr. Aylieff, quickly, are you on the ground in Kandahar? Did I hear you correctly, or are you outside of the country currently?

**Mr. John Aylieff:** Mr. Chair, and honourable member, I'm phoning in from Bangkok at the moment.

Our teams with our 600 staff are in all parts of Afghanistan.

**Mr. John Brassard:** Thank you, sir.

Part of the purpose of this committee—I'm not sure whether you've seen the motion—is to speak to the government's contingency planning as it relates to the events surrounding Afghanistan.

The question is for both of you, because I'll note that on February 29, 2020, American and Taliban diplomats signed a peace agreement in Doha, Qatar, which saw the agreement for U.S. withdrawal of troops for the Taliban to stop the attacks on the Americans. On April 14, 2021, U.S. President Biden announced the withdrawal of America's remaining troops in Afghanistan by September 11, which was the 20th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. At that point, was either of your organizations expressing concern to the international community or directly to the Canadian government about what you thought was going to happen in terms of a humanitarian crisis that was going to occur if and when the Taliban did take over? Were there any discussions at that point with Canadian officials?

I'll start with Mr. Aylieff and then go to Mr. Hamilton after that.

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Aylieff.

**Mr. John Aylieff:** Thank you very much, Chair.

I would say that before that agreement was signed and before the Taliban swept through the country and took over, the humanitarian situation was already very dire. There was the worst drought in 30 years; there was intense conflict, and, particularly in the year preceding the takeover in August, there were unprecedented levels of displacement, and hardship was rising. From early 2021 we were highlighting rising humanitarian needs. With Canada, with whom we have regular dialogue and regular contact across all levels, in the capital, but certainly also in Afghanistan, we were in constant contact about our concern about that humanitarian situation. What I think no one foresaw, however, was the precipitous takeover of the country by the Taliban, and I think that generated and created an immensely complex both political and humanitarian situation.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Hamilton.

**Mr. Patrick Hamilton:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Yes, I would again very much second Mr. Aylieff's comments about the fact that we were also engaged very much in the worsening humanitarian situation in Afghanistan, in any case, in the first half of last year. We've had a 20-year standing engagement with the international coalition and its members in Afghanistan and on the humanitarian situation there. We're expressing concerns about the escalating humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan, but as Mr. Aylieff says, I don't think any of us foresaw just how rapidly things would change in terms of the circumstances as the coalition pulled out.

**The Chair:** Mr. Brassard, you have a minute and a half.

**Mr. John Brassard:** Things were changing rapidly, as you know, gentlemen, and started changing rapidly around May and in-

to July as the Taliban starting making gains across the districts and territories in Afghanistan.

Who specifically within the Canadian government would you be dealing with, which departments? Whether it be government officials through IRCC, Global Affairs Canada or International Development, who specifically would you have been talking to at the time?

**The Chair:** Mr. Aylieff, go ahead, please.

**Mr. John Aylieff:** Thank you, Chair.

Our relationship is with Global Affairs Canada, which I wanted to add had already provided, in the course of 2021, \$14.5 million Canadian to the World Food Programme.

That allowed us to do two things. One was to bring urgent, life-saving humanitarian assistance to over two million people in 26 of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. Secondly, part of that funding was supporting WFP's humanitarian air service, which is absolutely fundamental in moving humanitarian workers from all organizations around the country to over 20 locations, allowing humanitarians to get into the deep field.

Thank you.

• (1920)

**The Chair:** Mr. Brassard, you have one more minute.

**Mr. John Brassard:** Thank you.

Mr. Hamilton, you spoke about displacement and migration. We've heard stories about families living out in the open and being hunted, and homes being destroyed. Can you describe, in the context of what we're hearing, just what your organization is seeing on the ground?

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Hamilton.

**Mr. Patrick Hamilton:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

We are, as I mentioned, present in most of the provinces around Afghanistan today, and obviously have been concerned about some of the allegations and reports you're alluding to. We have not been able to observe any of those events first-hand or to document them ourselves.

On the other hand, we have been engaging with the new Taliban authorities, the de facto government, on their obligations with respect to international humanitarian law—for example, the protection not only of civilians, but also of health services and health staff—and we have a long-standing engagement indeed with them over their behaviour on conflict, in line with our mandate related to international humanitarian law. We are obviously very concerned, as mentioned, by the allegations you report, but haven't been able to witness or document those ourselves directly.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Hamilton,

Thank you, Mr. Brassard.

Now we will go to Mr. El-Khoury of the Liberals for six minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to welcome the witnesses.

We're fully aware that Canada remains present in areas where military conflicts or violence occurs. I think that the Canadian government recently announced \$56 million in emergency humanitarian aid for the Afghan people.

How does this money actually support the people of Afghanistan?

Based on your experiences on the ground, do the Taliban impose conditions that must be met in order for your organizations to use international funds to operate?

My questions are for both witnesses.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Aylieff. Do you want to go first and then Mr. Hamilton?

**Mr. John Aylieff:** Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's my pleasure to answer the question from member Mr. El-Khoury.

As I say, we're grateful for Canada's financial support, not just to the World Food Programme but to all humanitarian agencies working on the ground.

I want to point out that with humanitarian operators, assistance provided by donors goes through us directly to the people. We adhere very strictly to principles of independence. No money or assistance is channelled through the Taliban or through government structures, if you will. We have insisted from day one on full independence of our actions. That means that any assistance is based on an independent assessment of needs, that our assistance is distributed only by our implementing partners, and that monitors are present at every single distribution. This allows us to keep our operational independence as part of our broader humanitarian principles.

The Taliban on the whole have facilitated humanitarian operations across the country. We have better access than we did when the war was going on, and they've respected, largely speaking, the rules of engagement.

In the aftermath of the takeover on August 15, there was a sort of crackdown on humanitarian workers, female humanitarian workers coming to work in certain areas. Bit by bit and through soft diplomacy behind closed doors, we have renegotiated that now, and I can happily say that all women workers from WFP and many, I believe, humanitarian organizations are now back at work without conditions. Some of them have to have a male escort in certain areas, but I would stress that that was the case in certain areas before the takeover of the Taliban.

So it's challenging to work with the Taliban, but we're finding a way through, insisting on the humanitarian principles and particularly on our independence.

Thank you.

• (1925)

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Hamilton, go ahead, please.

**Mr. Patrick Hamilton:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you also to the honourable member for the question.

I have a very similar answer to Mr. Aylieff's. Again, I say a huge thank you to the Canadian government for the \$4.5 million Canadian that funded the ICRC's programming in Afghanistan during 2021. We equally seek to spend that ourselves directly, through the different programs we have in Afghanistan, while trying to ensure that all of that money gets directly to those for whom it is intended.

In the wake of the Taliban takeover, we have insisted to them and the authorities that we will continue to insist on our independence and on being compliant with all of the standard ways in which we generally tend to operate as a neutral, impartial, independent humanitarian organization.

Talking in particular about the hospital support project and program that I referenced previously, we actually signed an MOU with the Taliban, with the new ministry of health authorities, let's say, with the understanding that we would not be channelling any of our financing through the ministry itself but would be paying directly the money in salaries, for example, to the doctors, cleaners and health staff in all of these different hospitals ourselves, to each individual staff member. We have our own International Committee of the Red Cross monitoring mechanisms but we have also engaged a German-Dutch third party monitoring company that is also carrying out monitoring for us independently to ensure that the funding that we put through that program is delivered directly to the intended recipients. We are very aware of the need to act in compliance with the various legal parameters and we take with great seriousness the need to ensure that we are in compliance with those.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Hamilton.

Mr. El-Khoury, we have only 15 seconds left if you have something to add quickly. Otherwise I'm going to the Bloc.

**Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury:** Yes, please.

[*Translation*]

I'm glad to hear that you negotiated something behind the scenes that benefits women.

In terms of your activities in Afghanistan, are there any long-term programs specifically designed to support the rights of women and girls in the country?

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Witnesses, we can come back to it and you can answer it at some point, or quickly, Mr. Aylieff or Mr. Hamilton, if you want to say something in 30 seconds.

**Mr. John Aylieff:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Very quickly, for WFP—it's a very good question—we are engaged in school feeding, where we aim to give one million girls incentives to come back to school. I would stress that's mainly at the primary level at the moment, but also, in eight provinces, we're also giving incentives for girls to attend secondary schools, some of which, as you know, are open.

Secondly, we're doing vocational training for women. This is something that we were doing before the takeover, but we have managed to continue that program critical to give these women a sense of hope for the future, if I may put it like that.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

I'm going to the honourable Bloc member, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Please go ahead for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

I want to start by thanking the witnesses who are here today.

As you may know, this committee was created to focus on the current humanitarian crisis. It's about looking beyond the political games and really focusing on the present and the very short term future to help the people who are suffering. We really want to see concrete recommendations and results quickly. That's what this committee is all about.

I'll try to ask my questions quickly. They're for both of our witnesses.

Canada currently considers the Taliban regime a terrorist entity. On the ground, does this affect humanitarian aid?

• (1930)

[*English*]

**The Chair:** We will have Mr. Hamilton and then Mr. Aylieff.

**Mr. Patrick Hamilton:** Thank you very much indeed for the question, honourable member. It's a key question.

We see the authorities in Afghanistan, in light of their previous role, as a party to the conflict in Afghanistan, and therefore, within the scope of international humanitarian law, as a belligerent party with whom we, as a neutral, independent humanitarian organization, are obliged to engage with, precisely to try to protect and assist the people who are affected by the hostilities they are engaged in with the other parties to the conflict. Then, secondly, also now that there is the de facto government of Afghanistan, whose de facto governance clearly has a very substantial impact on the people living in the territory that they currently de facto govern.

Our programming, our presence in Afghanistan, is clearly driven by the humanitarian needs that exist amongst the Afghan population and the desire, the obligation, to respond to those needs. Clearly, on the one hand, we are very conscious of the need to avoid trespassing over the various sets of counter-terror legislation by providing any types of direct material supports to the Taliban as an entity.

At the same time, clearly, in these circumstances, we are obliged to engage with them to try to ensure that for the people we need to assist and protect, we can assist and protect them by having access to them, and by having the agreement from those authorities to be able to carry out our work in the way that we do.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Aylieff.

**Mr. John Aylieff:** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and my thanks for the question from honourable member Brunelle-Duceppe.

I think that just to underline the fact that the Taliban are a terrorist organization reintensifies our need to remain independent. I spoke about independence in answer to the last question, but that makes this even more critical.

The sanctions carve-out by the UN Security Council has helped immensely to give us the space to operate, and that's all we really needed: the space to operate in a context of where even paying the utility bill of our offices, just to give an example, would otherwise have been at risk of breaching sanctions. The humanitarian carve-out given to us by the Security Council has been critical.

I would just really belabour one point, however. The fact that the Taliban are a terrorist organization—designated—does immensely complicate the current situation, because it has led to the suspension of development aid and the freezing of foreign reserves.

I make no comment on that as a measure. My obligation there is to point out, as has Mr. Hamilton, that the economic crisis, which has been precipitated by that suspension, is very real. As we've said, people cannot find jobs. The levels of hunger and poverty are going up. By mid-2022, if we remain on this current trajectory, there will be almost universal poverty in Afghanistan: 97% of people will be under the poverty line.

We need to find ways, without recognizing the Taliban, without getting away from the fact that they are a terrorist organization, to breathe some oxygen into the economy. Otherwise, humanitarian needs are only going to rise.

Thank you.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** At that point, this—

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have one minute—

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Do I have any time left, Mr. Chair?

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Go ahead. You have one minute.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Okay. Sorry, Mr. Chair. It's just that the responses are really insightful.

At that point, what can we do? Obviously, it's difficult to get the Canadian people and the people of Quebec to accept that our government no longer considers the Taliban terrorists. On your end, this doesn't help you either in terms of the humanitarian crisis.

What's the solution? Do you have any suggestions?

• (1935)

[*English*]

**The Chair:** You have 20 seconds to propose them.

We have Mr. Aylieff and then Mr. Hamilton.

Please keep the time in mind.

**Mr. John Aylieff:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I would say that we operate first on the levels that are acceptable and that we can control. That means a fully funded humanitarian program. We recognize that the bill for that is immense, at over \$4 billion for 2022, but that is the fundamental starting point.

Second is investing in some of the basic services work that Mr. Hamilton of the ICRC was talking about and which organizations like the ICRC are engaged in. If we can't ensure that more than 20% of the health clinics are open, we are going to have an even deeper crisis.

I think these are the starting points that are less controversial while we try to grapple with an admittedly incredibly sensitive and difficult issue of how the economy will be supported in some shape or form.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Mr. Hamilton, you have 15 seconds if you want to say something. Go ahead, please.

**Mr. Patrick Hamilton:** Very quickly, I think our hospital program represents a very interesting model that is potentially scalable in terms of, on the one hand, doing some kind of deals with the Taliban as governance, whilst at the same time ensuring that funding is not channelled to them whilst it is channelled into the essential services that are so needed. That needs doing also for the central bank, so—

**The Chair:** Thank you.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Thank you.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** I will go to Madam Kwan from the NDP.

You have six minutes, please.

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

I first want to thank both witnesses for your organizations' incredible work during this very difficult time and, of course, not just during this humanitarian crisis, but in many humanitarian crises across the globe.

In terms of the situation before us, the committee is charged with looking at the humanitarian aid piece, of course, as well as the issue around providing resettlement support for Afghans. I'll leave the latter piece aside.

We were just talking about the issue around carve-outs, the issue around humanitarian aid at the scale of need, and the crisis that currently exists in Afghanistan. I wonder if both witnesses can give us some very specific actions that the Canadian government could do.

I recognize that in 2021 humanitarian aid was provided, but you just mentioned that in 2022 \$4 billion is needed. For example, what do you think the Canadian government needs to do in that regard to address that aspect of it, and then, further to that, on the carve-out question and the larger economy question?

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Who wants to go first?

Mr. Aylieff, do you want to take this? Go ahead.

**Mr. John Aylieff:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Ms. Kwan, for the question.

I'd like to recognize the carve-outs being critical in allowing us to operate. In terms of what Canada could do, I'd like to also recognize what Canada has already done, which goes beyond the funding support that I mentioned for 2021 and the \$65.5 million Canadian that has been provided since August 15 for the region. I'd like to recognize that first of all.

What lies before us is a major crisis, and I would say two things.

First, the international community collectively, unfortunately, needs to step up even more. As I said, the prospects of running out of funding as a humanitarian community are absolutely terrifying. One million children at risk of dying is only the beginning. We're already seeing utter desperation out there. People are selling their children into early marriages. People are out with their goods on the streets, selling their carpets. People are borrowing money. We're seeing a horrendous situation unfolding. Collectively, with the international community, a way needs to be found to mobilize more humanitarian funding.

The other thing I would add for Canada, if I may—again, lauding your focus on women and girls over the past few years as a key pillar of your aid program—is that there is no better country at the moment to be focusing on women and girls than Afghanistan. The plight of women and girls is much talked about, but the funding flow for programs supporting women and girls needs to be increased. With its special knowledge and track record in this area, if Canada could focus on women and girls, that would be a recommendation to the committee.

• (1940)

**The Chair:** Mr. Hamilton, do you have something to say? Otherwise, I will go back to Madam Kwan.

**Mr. Patrick Hamilton:** Yes, if I may, Mr. Chair. That would be appreciated.

Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

In reference to the carve-outs, the UN carve-outs are a really significant step forward. What we would certainly encourage the Canadian government to do now is look at how those carve-outs at the UN are reflected in Canada's domestic legislation, and to ensure that humanitarian organizations like ourselves and our programming are adequately protected from the sanctions regimes that we talked about. The ICRC would be very happy to engage with the Canadian government on how that might be realized, having developed quite some expertise in the area of sanctions and carve-outs over recent years.

Likewise, Canadian governmental funding to humanitarian organizations is incredibly important, as Mr. Aylieff rightly states. That being said, we are firmly of the belief, as we mentioned at the top, that humanitarian action won't be enough in these circumstances. There is a need to work with other international allies and partners to ensure that liquidity is enabled into the Afghan market once again and that it is able to begin to function also through the provision of essential services. In particular, this is through providing those essential services that target women and children, be it through education or health services where we have likewise been investing, in particular in maternity hospitals and training facilities, including those for doctors and nurses, which are first and foremost staffed by women.

As Mr. Aylieff says, these are the areas in particular where the Canadian government can be a very significant support to Afghans at this point in time.

**The Chair:** Madam Kwan, you have one more minute.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** Mr. Hamilton, I want to touch on our local Canadian regulations, if you will.

Are you speaking specifically to section 83.03 of the Criminal Code, whereunder organizations and staff could be deemed as financing terrorism and lose their charitable status if they engage in humanitarian work? On that note, have there been any conversations with the Canadian government about providing an exemption to organizations such as yours?

**Mr. Patrick Hamilton:** It's partly in reference to that, but not only that. We see a broader need for UN Resolution 2615 to be further integrated into Canadian domestic legislation more broadly to ensure that it is brought fully into line with international humanitarian law, or IHL.

However, the article you referenced is also a consideration, and it is something that we are interested in having further engagement with the Canadian government on going forward. This is certainly an area in which we are interested in continuing conversations.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Madam Kwan, your time is up, but you have 20 seconds to ask Mr. Aylieff a quick question.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** Just to follow up on that, Mr. Hamilton, have there been any conversations currently with the Canadian government on those provisions that you spoke about?

**Mr. John Aylieff:** Yes, we have had certain dialogues with Global Affairs Canada on the issue, more to aid our understanding and to ensure we're in line at the moment with those provisions in your law as we implement Canadian-funded programs in Afghanistan.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** Mr. Hamilton, has there been ongoing conversation right now?

**The Chair:** Could we have a quick answer, please?

**Mr. Patrick Hamilton:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Yes, I can confirm that we are in the process of discussing the sanctions legislation with Global Affairs Canada.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** And the response...?

**The Chair:** Thank you, Madam Kwan. That's seven minutes and 32 seconds.

I would like to call this panel to an end because it's 4:45, so it would only be fair to the second panel if they can be here for 45 minutes. I hope all the members are in agreement.

On behalf of all the members, I want to thank both witnesses, Mr. Aylieff and Mr. Hamilton, for the excellent information.

If you want to submit in writing anything that you know you have not covered, or if our members have asked a question that you would have responded differently to, we would welcome that. Thank you, and all the best to you.

We will suspend for a few minutes before we go to the witnesses on the second panel.

● (1945)

(Pause)

● (1950)

**The Chair:** I call the meeting back to order. Thank you very much.

I would like to make a few comments for the benefit of the new witnesses, whom I want to welcome to the committee.

Before speaking, please wait until I recognize you by name. When you are ready to speak, you can click on the microphone icon to activate your mike. I would remind you that all comments should be addressed through the chair. Interpretation in this video conference will work very much like at a regular committee meeting. You have the choice at the bottom of your screen of either the floor, English or French audio. When speaking, please speak slowly and clearly. When you are not speaking, your mike should be on mute.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses and express our appreciation for your being with us this evening, or this morning in Kabul. Many of you have agreed to come on short notice, which we appreciate. I will also note that some of you are currently, as I said, in other time zones, where it is quite late or early, so thank you for being here.

From the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, we have Mr. Ratwate and Ms. Imseis; from the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, Dr. George Varughese; and from World Vision Canada, Mr. Messenger and Ms. McKinlay.

Mr. Ratwate, I will give you the floor.

You have five minutes between each organization. Please keep the time in mind, because I don't want you to be cut off. Make it five minutes sharp so we can finish this off, please.

Go ahead, Mr. Ratwatte.

**Mr. Indrika Ratwatte (Director, Regional Bureau of Asia and the Pacific, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees):** Thank you, Chair and honourable members, for giving us the opportunity to talk to you.

Since the events of last August, UNHCR and other organizations working on the ground have been warning of a humanitarian catastrophe in Afghanistan and the risks of further displacement.

The collapsing economy, deepening poverty, and the most severe drought and crippling food shortages seen in decades are pushing over half of Afghanistan's population, as we know, into extreme levels of hunger. The situation is especially tenuous for the 3.4 million people who remain displaced due to conflict within the country, 80% of whom are women and children.

Together with our partners, UNHCR has stayed and delivered in Afghanistan throughout the tumult of 2021, assisting close to one million Afghans with cash assistance, emergency shelter and essential relief items. Amidst harsh winter conditions, humanitarian response has become even more critical than ever before. UNHCR has scaled up its field presence with the deployment of 264 additional staff in the region, including 69 international staff, bringing our footprint to a total of 337 in the country.

Thanks to the support received, we are already seeing some glimmers of hope despite the challenges. An estimated 170,000 internally displaced Afghans have returned home since August 2021, buoyed by the fact that many parts of the country are more secure than they were before, due to the end of the conflict. As the international community, we must seize such opportunities to ensure that the hard-earned gains of the last 20 years do not fall away.

Despite the uncertain situation in Afghanistan, we cannot forget the Afghans who also previously fled the country and are being hosted in neighbouring countries. Iran and Pakistan, notably, have continued to host over 2.2 million registered Afghan refugees and over four million other Afghans for over four decades. Despite facing their own security concerns and socio-economic challenges, further compounded by COVID, they have pursued inclusive policies towards refugees, particularly in the areas of education and health care. Their generosity cannot be taken for granted, and support for host countries must be increased. To this end, UNHCR, complementing the HRP that was launched for Afghanistan, in January launched a regional refugee response plan requesting some \$623 million to support Afghan refugees, as well as the host communities in neighbouring countries.

Over the last year, UNHCR has recorded that some 160,000 Afghans have sought international protection in neighbouring countries. Many more Afghans find the present situation untenable and continue to use irregular means to reach neighbouring countries. UNHCR remains very concerned about the risk of continued human rights violations against civilians in Afghanistan—particularly women and girl children—in this evolving context. Given the fluidity of the situation and the debilitating conditions inside the country, the risk remains high that increasing numbers may feel compelled to flee the country and move onwards within and outside the region.

It is with this in mind that UNHCR's work in the region, underpinned by the solutions strategy for Afghan refugees, also remains focused on solutions. While life-saving humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan is required and essential to address the most urgent needs, complementing this with programs to stabilize Afghan populations in Afghanistan and refugees in neighbouring countries remains equally critical. These programs require humanitarian and development resources, which are crucial to averting a deepening of the crisis and to maintain a focus on building resilient communities and pursuing solutions. That being the case, UNHCR and partners have adopted a community-focused, area-based approach in 55 priority districts in Afghanistan focusing mainly on investing in basic services such as access to health, education and livelihoods that benefit all Afghans—including the internally displaced and returnees—with a view to stabilizing communities and mitigating further displacement.

In the same vein, resettlement will remain a critical protection and solutions tool for individuals with acute protection needs, preserved as a life-saving mechanism for those with heightened vulnerabilities. A significant increase in UNHCR's resettlement capacity in neighbouring countries has been initiated already, with 164 staff deployed in the first quarter of 2022 to enhance resettlement from those countries.

● (1955)

UNHCR welcomes Canada's commitment to expand third country solutions for Afghan refugees through resettlement and other pathways. These spaces are extremely valuable for Afghan refugees who have previously arrived and for those who are arriving now and have arrived more recently. To this end, UNHCR is grateful for Canada's pilot economic mobility pathways project aimed at expanding labour mobility pathways.

Finally, UNHCR is grateful for Canada's deep commitment and support and stands ready to continue our valued partnership with the Government of Canada to ensure that the humanitarian assistance and third country pathways continue to address the most acute needs of Afghans, but we can and must do more in Afghanistan's greatest hour of need.

Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much, Mr. Ratwatte. When you answer the questions, if you could hold your mike closer to your mouth, that will help the interpreters.

I'm now going to go to the next panellist. From the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, we have Mr. Varughese.

Go ahead for five minutes, please.

**Dr. George Varughese (Principal Adviser, Humanitarian and Development Assistance, United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan):** Thank you, honourable chairman, committee members, excellencies and friends of Afghanistan. Greetings from Kabul and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan this morning.

It is a privilege for me to brief the honourable House. I should like to proceed by summarizing important contextual factors and highlighting critical humanitarian needs. I'll then list what the UN humanitarian partners have delivered thus far, and end with current developments and our plans to continue to support the people of Afghanistan in this time of need.

When the events around August 15 occurred, the international community's humanitarian development and peace initiatives were already confronting persistent insecurity and varying levels of conflict. The erosion and illegitimacy of the incoming government amidst pandemic and other governance crises, recurring climatic stresses, especially consecutive drought seasons, and the extreme aid dependency and the low economic productivity of the country meant that economic sanctions impacted instantaneously and resulted in a sudden and severe economic collapse. Sanctions continue to affect the economic recovery. Banking and the private sector continue to display this chilling effect. Development partners, especially NGOs, struggle to bring in funds in adequate measure. There is a record displacement of 9.2 million people in and around Afghanistan. The loss of educated, technically competent Afghans is a significant constraint on future recovery.

As others have said, Afghanistan is facing a catastrophic, yet preventable, humanitarian crisis. Severe drought and disruptions to agricultural production have increased the risk of food insecurity and water shortages. One in two people do not know where their next meal is coming from. One in four pregnant women and one in two children are malnourished. Over half the population needs humanitarian and protection assistance; of these, 11.8 million are women and girls.

Afghanistan's health care system is facing severe shortages of medical supplies, fuel to heat hospitals and food and money for staff. This is while the health care system is confronting five outbreaks: acute watery diarrhea, measles, polio, malaria and COVID-19.

As many of you know, the UN launched a flash humanitarian appeal in September and raised \$1 billion to support humanitarian efforts. As a result, 18 million Afghans received life-saving assistance; 10 million of those received food assistance and eight million of those also received health care, primary and secondary services; 275,000 children under five were treated for acute malnutrition; and half a million people were provided with water and sanitation assistance.

The UN has worked through 158 partners, alongside other international and national NGOs, civil society and community-based organizations.

To address the critical nature of the Afghan crisis, the United Nations Security Council also adopted a new resolution on December 22, 2021, that helps expand assistance from humanitarian to basic

human needs. The issuance of new general licences by the U.S. Department of the Treasury that align with the UN Security Council resolution also assists in expanding the scope of assistance from purely humanitarian to the inclusion of essential services for Afghans in need.

Similarly, growing support from the member states of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation is an additional and important source of assistance to help mitigate the Afghan crisis in the coming years.

Some recent developments that I wish to brief you on include two recent international events in Kabul that were organized by the de facto administration. The first was organized to discuss humanitarian assistance with partners. The second was organized to present the de facto administration's economic recovery plans. These are forms of engagement that the de facto administration has begun to ramp up. At each of these events, the UN and its partners have emphasized that women's and girls' rights are critical to Afghanistan's political stability, security, economic development and chances of building lasting peace. Without the full participation of women, Afghanistan's GDP has been estimated to drop quite significantly.

We are concerned that gender inequality continues to shape the humanitarian crisis. Women and girls have seen a rapid deterioration of their rights, including their rights to freedom of movement, to work and to access all levels of education. We will continue to promote and advocate for the rights of women and girls in all of our engagements with the de facto authorities.

The recent engagement of the de facto administration with Afghan domestic and diaspora civil society in Oslo is encouraging.

- (2000)

Another new development is the appointment yesterday of the chief of the Afghan public maternity hospital, Dr. Malala Faizi, who has become the first woman official in the administration. As you all know, a Hazara was appointed as a deputy minister of the economy earlier on.

Going forward, honourable members and chair, the UN and humanitarian partners will use what is called a "One-UN Transitional Engagement Framework" for Afghanistan, which we launched on January 26 of this year. Three strategic priorities will guide the transitional engagement framework as the UN system adapts to the new environment and as conditions become more conducive in the spring. These priorities are life-saving assistance, sustenance of essential services, such as health and education, and the preservation of social investments and community level systems essential to meeting basic needs.

As the prior speaker said, the life-saving assistance is supported by a humanitarian appeal of \$4.4 billion. If ramped up, this assistance will provide the delivery of life-saving food and agricultural support, health services, nutrition, emergency shelter protection, water and sanitation and education. In addition, we will focus on another two objectives of sustaining essential services such as health and education, supporting community systems and creating opportunities for young people, with a requirement of about \$3.6 billion.

As the world comes together in aid of—

● (2005)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Varughese. You are at six and a half minutes.

**Dr. George Varughese:** I will conclude. Thank you.

Moving forward within this quarter, we will prepare a joint reporting mechanism, as well as a risk management matrix across the UN, and focus on coherence across the funding mechanism.

I conclude my briefing with thanks to the people and the Government of Canada for the recent assistance of the \$50 million in Canadian dollars pledged to support this.

Thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We will go to World Vision Canada with Mr. Messenger and Ms. McKinlay.

You have five minutes to speak. Please go ahead.

**Mr. Michael Messenger (President and Chief Executive Officer, World Vision Canada):** Thank you, Mr. Chair, for inviting World Vision Canada to contribute today. I'm joined by my colleague Julie McKinlay, who is our liaison with our colleagues in Afghanistan.

World Vision began emergency relief operations in Afghanistan in 2001. More than a decade later, our programs have expanded to sectors that include health, nutrition and child protection. We work with such donors as UNICEF, the World Food Programme and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. We've partnered with Global Affairs Canada as well as the EU, U.S., German, Australian and U.K. aid agencies.

In March 2019, just two years ago, I visited our team in Afghanistan. Even then, humanitarian assistance was critical to help vulnerable populations survive in the face of a growing food crisis. I also witnessed development work that was tackling the root causes of poverty. I left the country encouraged by the progress I saw, and by how Canadians had helped us bring about positive changes, and yet was overwhelmed by the scale of the need and worried about the future. Those needs are so much greater today.

We want to convey two key messages. First, the children of Afghanistan are facing a dire humanitarian emergency that is only getting worse. We must ensure that assistance reaches those who are suffering. Second, we urgently need to tackle legal barriers that are preventing Canadian organizations from providing humanitarian assistance.

Children in Afghanistan are in crisis. Over half of all children under five suffer from acute malnutrition. Afghanistan today has the highest number of people facing emergency food insecurity in the world. That's a terrifying 35% increase from the same time just last year. According to the Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict, Afghanistan is the most dangerous country in the world to be a child. They are subject to grave human rights violations, including attacks on schools and hospitals, physical and sexual violence, and inequality for girls. Millions of children in Afghanistan are growing up knowing little beyond conflict, displacement and multi-dimensional poverty. As the economic crisis deepens, households, as we've already heard, are being forced to adopt extreme coping strategies. Our teams have also told us of families selling their daughters for future marriage in return for payment.

That's why I want to turn to our second point. Canadian laws are preventing Canadian-based organizations like ours from getting the most assistance we can to Afghan families. You have heard from other witnesses about the sanctions carve-out internationally. We can speak from a Canadian organizational perspective on where there is a critical gap.

At World Vision Canada, we have funding and supplies that are needed now but that we cannot send to our teams on the ground. As just one example, we had two containers ready to ship full of packets of ready-to-use therapeutic food, which is used to treat children facing the severest forms of malnutrition. This medicine can literally bring children back from the brink of death by starvation. Our teams on the ground pleaded with us to rush this food to our clinics. Each container could help more than 900 children. It was heart-breaking that we had to say no.

This is because the Taliban is on Canada's Anti-terrorism Act's list of terrorist entities. The view is that payment of direct or indirect taxes or fees to them in any form, even for goods like these, would be in violation of this Canadian law. Canada's Criminal Code section 83.03 and related provisions are also specific. Charities, organizations and other persons are prohibited from directly or indirectly facilitating "any transaction in respect of property" that is controlled on behalf of an identified terrorist group.

We urge Canada to take whatever steps are necessary to allow Canadian humanitarian assistance to flow to those in need. The UN Security Council resolved in December that aid to Afghanistan should flow even in the face of anti-terrorism sanctions, but Canada is out of step. Based on external legal advice, our understanding is that the Minister of Public Safety could provide an exemption to the restrictive provisions through section 83.09 of the Criminal Code. In fact, we believe he and his department have an urgent obligation to do so.

There are other countries with similar laws that have recently made exemptions or adopted a more pragmatic and flexible approach to get assistance into Afghanistan. In fact, in World Vision's global federation, Canada is currently the only office that is unable to provide funds or goods to that country.

We urge the government to find a solution that would allow Canadian organizations to meet their humanitarian imperative and deliver assistance in Afghanistan without facing the risk of criminal sanctions. We should take whatever steps are possible so that the counterterrorism provisions do not undermine the delivery of neutral, impartial and desperately needed humanitarian assistance.

• (2010)

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Mr. Messenger. That was well under five minutes.

Now we have 19 minutes left and have four spots to speak, so I will give five minutes to each party if we are all in agreement.

The first will go to the Conservatives. I see that my own member of Parliament, Ms. Findlay, is here.

It's between you and Mr. Hallan and Mr. Chong to decide for those five minutes.

Who wants to go first?

**Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan (Calgary Forest Lawn, CPC):** I'll go.

**The Chair:** Okay, Mr. Hallan. Go ahead, please.

**Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan:** Thank you, Chair.

My questions will be for Mr. Ratwatte from the UNHCR.

It was no secret that people would be displaced, the ones who were fleeing violence. We had seen this before when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan and even most recently in 2001. It was no secret that people were going to be displaced, and there should have been a plan.

At any point was the UNHCR contacted by any department within the Government of Canada, whether IRCC or Global Affairs or any other department, before August 2020 to give a heads-up that this was the situation and that it might deteriorate?

**The Chair:** Go ahead.

**Mr. Indrika Ratwatte:** Thank you very much.

In anticipation of the situation deteriorating, in September 2020 we launched a contingency planning process looking at, as you rightly said, that potential displacement—

**Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan:** I'm sorry to cut you off, but my question was whether before August 2020 the UNHCR was given any heads-up by any department from the Canadian government that this was going to happen?

**Mr. Indrika Ratwatte:** You mean before August 2020. I understand. I thought it was 2021.

In August 2020, not—

**Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan:** I'm sorry; I meant 2021.

**Mr. Indrika Ratwatte:** The contingency planning we did in December 2020 was presented to governments, including the Government of Canada.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

Unfortunately, an issue is preventing the interpreter from doing the job at hand.

[*English*]

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

Mr. Ratwatte, because we need to have the translation, it's very hard unless you speak very clearly with your microphone close to your mouth. That would be helpful.

**Mr. Indrika Ratwatte:** In December 2020, in preparation for potential displacement from Afghanistan, there was a contingency plan drawn up by UNHCR and shared in March or April with all member states, including the Government of Canada. Therefore, support from the Government of Canada for preparation and contingency planning was included. Also, some \$7 million was given to UNHCR in 2021. Some of this was used to prepare, to have contingency stocks in place around the region. We did have support from the Government of Canada [*Technical difficulty —Editor*] to our contingency planning that was presented.

• (2015)

**Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan:** Thank you.

Can you please table that with this committee, Chair?

**The Chair:** Okay.

Mr. Ratwatte and other witnesses, if you have any information that you can voluntarily table, or if members ask you for any, you will be able to give it to the clerk.

**Mr. Indrika Ratwatte:** There is the contingency plan.

**Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan:** According to UNHCR's publicly available data, over 2.6 million Afghan refugees have fled Afghanistan. How many of those Afghan refugees have you been able to refer to Canada, either under the protected persons class or under one of the special immigration programs created?

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Ratwatte.

**Mr. Indrika Ratwatte:** I will defer to my colleague Rema, who can answer this one with more detail.

Rema, over to you.

**Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis (Representative in Canada, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees):** Thank you, honourable member.

To date, we are able to confirm approximately 392 referrals by UNHCR to Canada since August 2021.

**Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan:** Of the cases that you did refer as refugees to Canada, how many of those were in Afghanistan?

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Ms. Imseis.

**Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis:** None of the referrals made by UNHCR would be of individuals who are still present within the borders of Afghanistan. In order to be classified as refugees, they would need to have crossed an international border, so none of those people would still be in Afghanistan.

**Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan:** Again, have all of those people made it to Canada or there are still some left?

**Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis:** I would have to confirm for you if all of those who were referred have actually arrived in Canada. There has been a series of delays that have been occasioned by COVID travel restrictions, so I cannot tell you with one hundred per cent certainty but can confirm it.

**Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan:** Are those processing delays? Can that be tabled, please?

**The Chair:** Okay—

**Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis:** I'm sorry. I didn't catch all of that question.

**Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan:** I asked, are those processing delays? Also, the information you mentioned on the numbers that have been processed and the refugee claims, could that be tabled?

**Ms. Rema Jamous Imseis:** I would be happy to confirm the numbers of departures and arrivals to Canada.

**Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you. Your time is up, Mr. Hallan.

Now I will go to the Liberals.

Between Madam Zahid and Madam Damoff, you have five minutes.

Go ahead, please.

**Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.):** Thank you, Chair. I will share my time with Ms. Damoff.

My first question is for Mr. Ratwatte.

What work are you doing to ensure that women's and girls' rights are protected in Afghanistan and to make sure they receive the humanitarian aid? My riding is home to hundreds and thousands of Afghans, and I hear heartbreaking stories of their concerns about their nieces and sisters. Could you provide some information on this and the role that UNHCR is playing?

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Ratwatte.

**Mr. Indrika Ratwatte:** Thank you, honourable member.

As our colleague from UNAMA also said, the approach has been very much as a point of advocacy first with the de facto authorities to ensure, first, that UN female staff and colleagues are able to come to work and have unhindered access to communities. I'm happy to report that for UNHCR we have about 95% of our female colleagues back in the office as part and parcel of colleagues who visit the field, do field assessments and approach communities to look at their needs. That's the first step.

The second is ongoing support and advocacy around the access for girl children: to have access to education at all levels. This is a continuing sort of advocacy that we do with all our UN partners.

Lastly, I think the most important part we do is that when we meet with communities, particularly those in the UNHCR's purvey—the internally displaced and conflict-displaced families—we focus very much our entire assistance by starting with female heads of households, girl children and women's issues. We intervene where we need to at the field level, but the assistance is also designed very much to look at their needs and mitigate their vulnerabilities.

As you rightly said, honourable member, the needs are there and, as we speak, they are very challenging. In Oslo, we did hear that now, as of March, all children, girl children, will have access to education, but I think we have to continue to be vigilant. Also, really, the next step is to ensure that women professionals and women have more access to the workplace, which remains a huge challenge.

Thank you.

• (2020)

**The Chair:** Now we have Ms. Damoff, please.

**Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.):** Thank you, Chair.

Through you, I'd like to thank all the witnesses for being with us tonight and for the work they're doing under incredibly difficult conditions.

My question is for Mr. Messenger. I've had conversations with your organization about the challenges you've had in delivering aid on the ground. I'm wondering if you could give us some examples of what some of our Five Eyes partners are doing to deal with this issue of the Taliban being a terrorist organization and how they're able to get around that to deliver aid, some examples that we could perhaps use here in Canada.

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Messenger.

**Mr. Michael Messenger:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for the question.

Yes, as you know, we have had constructive dialogue on the issue for several months now at various levels of government, from the responsible desk officers at Global Affairs to joint organizations and meetings with others.

You're right. In fact, I mentioned that Canada is one of the few countries in our World Vision federation that is not able to deliver aid or get Canadian funds or Canadian goods to assist in the humanitarian response. At the moment, the majority of humanitarian programming funded by the U.S., the U.K., Germany and the EU has resumed, and Australia has recently announced an exemption.

There may actually be some specific limitations on us in Canada because of our Criminal Code. I would have to look, and we'd have to consider the various carve-outs, approaches, exemptions or guidelines that have been done by the other organizations. We can certainly speak to our colleagues in those other offices to get examples of this, but it may also be a made-in-Canada solution to look at our specific legislation to determine the limitations.

**Ms. Pam Damoff:** I think I only have 30 seconds left, but it would probably be helpful. Maybe you could share that with us.

I'm thinking about both the short-term and the longer-term solutions to be able to get that aid and that food on the ground for those kids.

**Mr. Michael Messenger:** We can certainly provide some examples of what's happening elsewhere, as well as some of our positions and the legal counsel that we've received on how we may be able to get around the current limitations on our activities here in Canada, both in the short term and the longer term.

**The Chair:** Thank you. That was well under five minutes.

Next we have Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe from the Bloc for five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

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

I want to thank the witnesses here today.

As I said to the panel before you, what matters to us right now is the humanitarian crisis.

Mr. Messenger, I really appreciated hearing you address, in your opening remarks, the issue of the Taliban being considered a terrorist entity and how this affects your organization.

We're here to find solutions to help you provide assistance to the people. You brought up a good point. We'll look at how legislation could be changed.

Could you provide a brief rundown of the current food crisis in Afghanistan?

[*English*]

**Mr. Michael Messenger:** I'm going to ask my colleague who is the expert on this, Ms. McKinlay, to answer that question on our behalf.

**Ms. Julie McKinlay (Director, Fragile and Humanitarian Programs, World Vision Canada):** The food crisis in Afghanistan right now is amazingly dire. The statistics have been shared in the past. There are 24.4 million people in need—half of the population—and one in two children is at risk of starvation, so the need for immediate action is immense.

We have programming through organizations like the World Food Programme, which enables us to get those emergency nutrition supplies. We are able to provide general food baskets to meet those needs.

It's important to keep in mind that the food shortages lead to other problems. Families are making impossible decisions around who eats around the table and in their family, and if they need to sell a

child into early marriage because it's one less mouth to feed. It's one of the most dire food situations.

With the drought and the challenging harsh winter conditions, it's not expected to get better; it's going to get worse much more quickly.

• (2025)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Thank you.

Mr. Ratwate, I think that you're the expert who can answer my question, since you work for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

At the moment, a large part of the Afghan population is determined to leave the country. Can we expect a wave of migration similar to what happened in Syria, for example?

[*English*]

**Mr. Indrika Ratwate:** The situation is extremely dire inside Afghanistan, as colleagues have said. However, there are two components here. One is the humanitarian crisis which, if not mitigated, will basically destroy any coping mechanisms and coping systems that Afghans have. This will lead to further internal displacement; in this case, I think it would be cross-border because the vulnerabilities are such.

Indeed, if we are unable to make those two investments.... One is the immediate humanitarian need. The second is, as we were saying and as was elaborated by my colleague Rema, looking at the humanitarian developments that wish to stabilize the populations where they are in Afghanistan. We will see flows outside for sure. That, I'm afraid, will not just be to the neighbouring countries; it might be beyond, because the coping mechanisms of Afghans are hanging by a thread, as the secretary general said last week at the UN Security Council.

The primary effort should be to make all the investments to stabilize Afghans within Afghanistan, and at the same time support the host countries that we are able to, should we—God forbid—have a new influx of refugees that the host countries are willing and able to take.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Thank you.

Do I have any time left, Mr. Chair?

[*English*]

**The Chair:** You have one minute.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** I'll keep it short.

Mr. Varughese, you're on the ground. What's happening to members of the LGBT community in Afghanistan right now? There has been a great deal of concern about this since the Taliban came back to power.

Can you tell us what's currently happening on the ground?

[English]

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Varughese.

**Dr. George Varughese:** Thank you, honourable member. It is very clear that this is not a priority for the de facto administration, along with other minority concerns. As you know, providing security, even for minorities.... I think minorities have been a struggle for them. They are trying to do their best, but attention to the LGBTQ community is not a priority for them. We don't really see actions related to that. Of course, in all the exchanges we have witnessed, they have given some messaging to allay fears that all Afghans should stay, that all Afghans are welcome to stay, and that they will be supported, but the actions on the ground are few and far between.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Madam Kwan from the NDP, you have five minutes, please.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses for the work you're doing.

My first question is for you, Mr. Messenger, related to the issue around the anti-terrorist regulations and laws that Canada has in place. You mentioned Criminal Code section 83.03. One of the issues that I think the government could undertake to address is to provide an exemption to organizations such as yours so that you can actually deliver the urgently needed humanitarian aid in Afghanistan. Has that request been made by your organization to the Canadian government?

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Messenger.

**Mr. Michael Messenger:** Yes, as I mentioned, we've had constructive dialogue on this, including proposing a number of options and sharing an external legal opinion that would suggest that section 83.09 of the Criminal Code may allow the Minister of Public Safety to carve out an exemption. We think we should look pragmatically at how that can happen. We've had ongoing engagement.

At the moment, to date, we're not aware of an acceptable solution that would immediately help us address the horrendous challenges we're facing without leaving our organization at considerable risk of being in breach of the Canadian criminal or anti-terrorist or sanctions regime. It's a challenging risk for us in the face of uncertainty.

• (2030)

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** Can you advise us on when you had that conversation with government officials?

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Messenger.

**Mr. Michael Messenger:** As I said, we've had constructive dialogue for several months now. A number of parts of government have been seized with this issue, but we have not yet resolved it. It goes back to, certainly, the fall since we've had conversations around the possibility of raising this issue. World Vision along with other organizations has raised this and has had this ongoing dialogue.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** Thank you. If you could table all relevant documents to the committee for our consideration, that would be very much appreciated.

I'm also wondering about this: Has the government been asked to provide explicit guidance to Canadian CSOs on what is permissible within the current regulatory regimes? Other jurisdictions have done it. Has the Canadian government offered any assistance to you in this regard?

**The Chair:** Go ahead, Mr. Messenger.

**Mr. Michael Messenger:** As I said, we've had back-and-forth constructive conversations. We've raised a number of the issues and the need for an exemption or guidelines exactly as you suggest. We have been received with great interest. We understand that various ministers, including Minister Sajjan in Global Affairs, have been focused on this, but to date we have not yet received any guidelines that would allow us to release the funding or the goods that we mentioned before that we'd like to get to Afghanistan.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** Thank you very much.

Well, time is of the essence, and the urgency is clearly there. I can't imagine what it must be like for your workers and your organization to not be able to deliver aid when you see the crisis that exists right now, where children are literally starving. I would say that time is of the essence. We need the government to respond ASAP.

I want to turn to a different question for the representative from the UNHCR. Part of the issue, of course, with the resettlement support—which is not the only solution but certainly part of the solution—is that people within Afghanistan cannot get UNHCR designation. This is an ongoing problem. People have to get to a third country to get to safety to access that.

I wonder whether or not this is an issue that has been brought up by your organization with the minister and what suggestion you might have to address this crisis. Would waiving the UNHCR designation requirement at this time, under these extraordinary circumstances, be appropriate?

**The Chair:** Mr. Ratwatte or Ms. Jamous Imseis.

**Mr. Indrika Ratwatte:** Thank you, Madam Kwan.

As my colleague mentioned, by mandate and international law, refugees have to cross an international border as refugees to benefit from UNHCR's work and solutions. One part of what we are doing right now is really robustly increasing our resettlement capacity in the neighbouring countries, because Afghans are coming across to these countries, but within Afghanistan we have advocated for bilateral mechanisms to enable Afghans to get out of Afghanistan. At whatever third locations they can then come to, we are available to extend our good offices, but waiving that requirement at this point in time, Madam Kwan, I don't think would be possible.

Thank you.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** Thank you.

Yes, within UNHCR, that is not something within your authority to do, but it's certainly within the Canadian government's authority to do so, as is allowing people to get to safety. Otherwise people in dire circumstances would not be able to do so.

I wonder, Mr. Messenger, if you've seen on the ground, for the women and the girls particularly who have been actively persecuted or who are in hiding, what they can do to get to safety if refugee status cannot be obtained?

**The Chair:** Mr. Messenger, be very brief. Your five minutes is up.

**Mr. Michael Messenger:** This is a challenging question. I'm going to ask Ms. McKinlay to answer since she is closer to what's happening on the ground.

**The Chair:** Ms. McKinlay, go ahead, please.

**Ms. Julie McKinlay:** Thank you.

That's a very challenging question in a short amount of time. The situation is changing minute by minute. We do what we can to support our teams on the ground and encourage them to find the safest point they can, but that does change. There's a lot of uncertainty and lack of clarity, I think, even for our teams who have submitted applications for asylum to other countries. An encouragement

would be ensuring that there is a response to those applications so families know what their status is and can plan accordingly, but it's very challenging.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Thank you very much, Madam Kwan.

With this, we'll end this panel. On behalf of all the members of Parliament and all parties, I would like to thank all of you witnesses for the pertinent information you have brought forward. I would like to thank you but also request that if you have anything further to submit, please do so to the clerk, and then we'll be able to incorporate that information.

Thank you again. All the best to you all. With this, hopefully, I have a consensus of committee members to adjourn the meeting.

Thank you.

We are adjourned.

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