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Chair: Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal



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• (1850)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Surrey—Newton, Lib.)): I call the public portion of the meeting to order.

We are resuming meeting number five of the House of Commons Special Committee on Afghanistan. Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of November 25, 2021.

I would like to remind all those present in the room to please follow the recommendations from public health authorities as well as the directives of the Board of Internal Economy on October 19, 2021, to remain healthy and safe.

Should any technical challenges arise, please advise me as we may need to suspend for a few minutes to ensure all members are able to participate fully.

Witnesses should be aware that translation is available through the globe icon at the bottom of the screen, where you can choose either French or English.

On behalf of all committee members, I would like to welcome our witnesses for this panel this evening.

First of all, we have the director of Afghan-Canadian Interpreters, Ms. Wendy Long. We have with us an individual for whom it's a very early morning in Turkey, Mr. David Theodore Lavery. For our third set of witnesses, from Aman Lara, we have Eleanor Taylor and executive director Brian Macdonald.

Everyone is on board. Welcome. Each group of witnesses has five minutes for opening remarks. Please watch your time.

We will start with Ms. Long.

Ms. Wendy Long (Director, Afghan-Canadian Interpreters): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

ACI is a grassroots volunteer group that started five years ago, originally in support of one interpreter. A Facebook page was set up to support this effort, and I quickly realized that there was no real way to bring these allies to Canada.

In 2017, I made contact with an immigration law firm, which submitted two humanitarian and compassionate applications pro bono. In 2019-20, I submitted a private sponsorship application for another interpreter, as well as three other ones for vulnerable young Afghans in Indonesia.

In November 2018, I launched a letter-writing campaign addressed to Minister Hussen and posted it on the Facebook page. Red T, which represents over 140,000 translators and interpreters from around the world, also wrote multiple open letters, appealing to Canada for a process. As the Doha peace talks progressed, the pleas for an immigration process mounted and concerns started coming in from veterans worried about those left behind. Some veterans had spent thousands of dollars in attempts to get interpreters here, without results, adding to their mental anguish.

Since 2018, I had been compiling files, and by the time Mr. Powlowski reached out to me, in January 2021, I had collected over 22 files.

I would like to thank Mr. Powlowski and Robert St. Aubin for their incredible work and tireless efforts and dedication on this front. We both worked diligently, with ACI gathering files together and forwarding them to Rob to action. Slowly, our ACI volunteer base grew, and media attention was growing as the situation in Afghanistan continued to deteriorate, though Canada still had no process and time was running out.

In May 2021, ACI launched the Afghan-Canadian interpreters relocation assistance initiative. On June 1, an open letter on behalf of ACI and 15 other international advocacy groups was sent to the Prime Minister as well as to ministers Mendicino, Garneau, Sajjan, and other NATO heads of state.

The following week we had our first meeting with IRCC, facilitated by Mr. Powlowski. At this meeting we stressed that we needed a fast and effective means to get people assessed initially and then more completely processed in either Canada or elsewhere. We stressed that there was no time or money for passports if people didn't already have them, and we recommended a refugee-type approach. Most applicants had no access to laptops or printers, and any process would have had to be cellphone-based, since any other method would expose the applicant to identity theft, fraud or death.

Extended family for new and old SIM applicants and all dependent family members were to be included in the application process, as many households are combined with widowed parents, nieces, nephews of deceased parents or single female siblings. In June, we ramped up our intake efforts with our own intake form and document request. By July 1, we had 117 principal applicant files and the number was increasing daily.

Finally, on July 22, a process was announced, the most generous and all-encompassing of any NATO member country. On July 28, email applications were sent out, and panic ensued because of the 72-hour deadline. Hundreds of veterans jumped into action to assist their Afghan allies in completing these forms. We mobilized groups like Northern Lights Canada and a vast network, even of Afghan refugees in places like Indonesia, to assist as well.

The embassy and IRCC staff worked diligently and did all they could with the tools and instructions they were given. Unfortunately for so many, Canada had left too little time to do the job right, and Afghanistan fell to the Taliban on August 15. Any hope for a swift but orderly evacuation went out the window, effectively leaving thousands behind again.

ACI makes the following recommendations moving forward: that we find an effective biometric solution; that we urgently address the backlog of emails and applications that have not yet received any response; that we remove the eligibility requirement to be in Afghanistan on or after July 22 for all SIM applicants; that we find an effective and consistent means to move those without passports; and that we declare *prima facie* for Afghans outside Afghanistan in order to facilitate private sponsorships and increase sponsorship agreement holder spots.

- (1855)

In closing, increased and effective communication and co-operation continue to grow between IRCC, GAC, CAF and organizations like Aman Lara and ACI. A surge in successful evacuations is evidence that this co-operation is effective and key in accomplishing our goals.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Long. That is perfect timing.

Now we will go to Aman Lara.

Between Ms. Taylor and Mr. Macdonald, you have five minutes.

Mr. Brian Macdonald (Executive Director, Aman Lara): Thank you.

Sheltered Path, or Aman Lara, is the non-profit organization of veterans, former interpreters and volunteers who get good people out of bad places.

In Pashto, “aman lara” means “sheltered path”. We were founded in the midst of this crisis by a veteran, Drummond Fraser, and his chief interpreter, Zabihullah Hamdard.

We exist because Canada needs an organization to support the evacuation of Afghans, both those who helped our war efforts and those who worked alongside us to advance Canadian democratic principles. Abandoning these people to a desperate state at the hands of the Taliban is unacceptable. We need to redeem our na-

tional honour and ensure they come to Canada. Every life we save is a victory.

Since its inception, Sheltered Path has helped almost 2,000 Afghans escape the Taliban. This month alone, we have evacuated 79 families, for a total of 449 people—each a valuable life, each a person who could make Canada stronger.

The situation in Afghanistan is fluid, but right now the problem with getting people out isn't the Taliban. It's the process.

We work closely with the Canadian government. We move only people who have a pathway to Canada and are approved by the IRCC. Once approved, we move people that very week, yet we have over 10,000 people on our list who are stuck in Afghanistan. Over half of them have applied, but have not yet been acknowledged by the Government of Canada. We can't consider moving them until they are in the IRCC system.

Of the remaining 5,000 people who are in the Canadian system, each needs at least one more step in the process to be ready to move. The crucial step is the confirmation of identity—biometrics. It's an essential security check to ensure that applicants are who they say they are. As Canada has no government presence in Afghanistan, the only way to confirm identity is to travel to a third country. Since we can't confirm identity in Afghanistan, applicants need a passport and a visa to get to a third country for processing. This adds two additional steps, which are controlled by two foreign governments, with all of the accompanying bureaucracy, delays and risks.

Two-thirds of our people don't have passports. To get a passport, Afghans are effectively telling the Taliban that they want to get away from them. Imagine: You're trying to flee the Taliban, but to do so you need to travel to an office that's controlled by the Taliban and give your name, the names of your family members, your address and all the fingerprints and photos of your family to the Taliban. Doing this exposes our people to great danger. As well, getting a visa to a third country is another obstacle. It exposes these families to another level of risk, and it can be expensive and time-consuming.

If we find a way to confirm identity inside Afghanistan, we can skip the steps of getting a passport and visa and bypass the involvement of foreign governments that we cannot control. With those obstacles removed, Aman Lara could move a quarter of its list almost immediately. We could move these 2,500 people directly to Canada, clear the backlog and free up government resources to process the remaining 7,500.

Finding a way to confirm identity in Afghanistan is our number one priority. We need the Government of Canada to work with us to find a solution.

• (1900)

Ms. Eleanor Taylor (Deputy Executive Director, Aman Lara): There is another important group stuck in Afghanistan. They are the people who risked their safety to advance Canadian democratic principles. They are the women leaders, the human rights advocates, the journalists and those who assisted Canadian journalists, the LGBTQ community and members of Afghanistan's persecuted ethnic and religious minorities. For them to even apply to Canada, they must be outside of Afghanistan and be registered as refugees, except they cannot get out of Afghanistan. These people are stuck in an unimaginable catch-22. We need to create a pathway for them to come to Canada.

Let's turn our attention to the events unfolding in Ukraine. We are shocked by the unprovoked Russian invasion, but we are encouraged to see the extraordinary and flexible immigration measures IRCC has put in place. Unlike the requirements for Afghans, families in Ukraine do not need to attain refugee status to come to Canada. Temporary resident permits and single-journey forms are being used to overcome policy obstacles. These measures should be applied in Afghanistan. The mechanisms exist. Let's use them.

In conclusion, we have three requests of government: one, work with us to find a way to confirm identity in Afghanistan; two, respond to the vast number of applicants who have not yet had their applications acknowledged; three, apply the immigration measures envisioned for Ukraine to Afghanistan.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Macdonald and Ms. Taylor.

Now we will go to Mr. Lavery in Turkey.

Thank you for being with us today. Please go ahead. You have exactly five minutes.

Mr. David Theodore Lavery (As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and ladies and gentlemen of the special committee.

I'm David Lavery, former non-commissioned officer of the Canadian Armed Forces. I retired in January 2000. I then served with the United Nations Department of Safety and Security, where I was asked to go in with a special team after 9/11. We provided humanitarian assistance throughout five years in that country.

I retired and moved on to the private sector. In 2010, I ventured back into Afghanistan to support a great Canadian risk-mitigating company called Canpro. We set up holistic life support. We were able to deliver a lot of areas of expertise to many clients and charities for 11 years.

In early July, I was approached by many people you're familiar with, who were previous guest speakers—VTN, ACI, the generals, and now Aman Lara and many more—asking me if I would be in a position to assist the Canadian initiative and help out the specific strategy with risk mitigation, ground troops, support, secure accommodations and much more. My team immediately went to work, working tirelessly to try to get these families into safe locations, and assisting.... In most cases, those families were in serious jeopardy from the Taliban.

August 15, as we know, was the fall of Afghanistan. The Taliban entered the city without a shot fired. Purely the myth and the psyche of pure evil were in the mindsets of everyone, which in turn created catastrophic events on an unprecedented scale. The sheer panic and despair created a desperate state or situation at every level. Desperate times equated to desperate measures, as we all witnessed. This was the worst experience I've ever witnessed in my lifetime.

I have specific points to address.

One, members of the asset team started in earnest, with our collected partners, to prepare for the inevitable: the evacuation of our Afghan applicants. Members of our team tried to reach out numerous times back to Canada—to GAC, IRCC and CAF—to offer our support and to provide them with our updates and capabilities, with little to no response or interest. In Kabul, I tried the same with the Canadian embassy and its GAC representatives, with failed concerns and failed interest. The lack of interest or will to engage with our assets at all levels had significant impacts.

Two, there was no representative of the Canadian embassy on the ground. The ambassador and his team's non-presence had a significant impact on getting out our Canadian Afghan applicants and families.

Three, I'm proud of our Canadian military, and I'm sure there's an explanation for why our military was not on the ground in advance to support our evacuation process in a timely manner. There were no CAF in our area until the evening of the 20th. It appears, from my personal observation, that our military presence—at least in the area where I was operating—seemed to be limited in its capabilities. It appeared restricted, as if somebody was holding it back.

Four, there was a lack of communication. With an expert panel of veterans and others supporting in one of the worst crises in modern-day history, why did CAF, GAC, IRCC and CEK not tap into reliable and trusted individuals and agencies? Who goes into a serious operation without tapping into known entities that have been on the ground prior to the event?

Five, I'd like to know why the Canadian government refused to evacuate my wife on that night when the Canadian military came in. At that point in time, they put us—and I say "us"—asset in a very uneasy term. I was there to assist with the evacuation, and they wanted to get me out of there without putting my wife on that plane.

In closing, my emphasis on my time spent in Afghanistan is important to understand the resources and capabilities that were offered and never utilized by the government. Sadly, as we watched and assisted as best we could with the resources we had, we worked in isolation from CAF, GAC and IRCC during those horrific days. The synergy, the expertise.... Working together would have seen different results. Please, let's learn from those lessons. We have proven our value, our capabilities, our credibility and our resolve. The government needs to invest in professional partners of asset, such as Aman Lara and ACL, to continue supporting our Afghan families left behind.

Thank you very much.

• (1905)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lavery. You saved us a few seconds in time.

Without any further ado, I will go to round one, with my Conservative colleague, Mr. Ruff, for six minutes.

Mr. Alex Ruff (Bruce—Grey—Owen Sound, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

First off, I extend my thanks to all our panellists tonight. Wow. Canada and Afghanistan owe you all a debt of gratitude for everything you've been doing from day one.

Wendy, you go back so long on everything that you've done.

Dave, Mr. Lavery, my first question is for you, because of your background and experience. I want you to provide a bit more context on the signs and signals of.... We knew this was coming and we should have been better prepared in starting that evacuation in a timely manner.

Can you elaborate on that, please?

Mr. David Theodore Lavery: Yes, we should have been better prepared, and we were doing the best we could as a collective body. That's what caught most of us off guard. We were anticipating the inevitable. Why weren't senior leadership and the government doing the same? The signs were there. Everybody was seeing those signs. We were passing this on back in July. Wendy and her team were advocating years before this.

The signs were there. We just don't understand. The senior generals on our teams, our godfathers and all the other senior veterans that you're looking at right now spoke so many times at so many levels, trying to gain interest. It was almost like we were treated as a rogue entity.

The signs were there. The Afghans themselves.... You could see the economy and the bank system. You could see what was happening inside Kabul at that point in time. Remember, the government was starting to become frail. It was unfolding in front of us. Other nations and the Canadian embassy at that point in time in Afghanistan did not want to engage with our team. The Canadian military didn't want to listen to us.

We could see the signs. Why couldn't anybody else? I guess I have to stop there and maybe let the rest of my colleagues jump in.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Thanks, Mr. Lavery. I'm going to direct it to and build off of that with Ms. Long.

You talked in your recommendations of the importance of collaboration between IRCC, the CAF, GAC and NGOs like yours and everybody else's on this call. One of the points that other witnesses presented in their testimony is that lack of coordination, the lack of one ministry that is in charge and the lack of impact that the embassy basically pointed out so early, and not having that leadership.

Can you expand on who you think should be in charge dealing with this going forward? What's the impact, having tracked it from day one, of not having that coordination going on in August?

• (1910)

Ms. Wendy Long: I can't speak to which entity should be in charge, but there should be someone in communication. It should be a team effort.

The CAF is responsible for confirming who in fact worked for and assisted our Department of National Defence. The embassy knows who worked for them. IRCC is the entity that, ultimately, is in charge of who comes to Canada, and there needs to be effective liaising with the NGOs and in case management, as well as with the other departments like GAC and CAF.

All of them have to work effectively together, and that's not what was happening all along. There was no effective partnership. They were not looking at it as a mission that all three entities should have been taking part in for the end goal of getting our people to Canada.

Mr. Alex Ruff: You spoke in your recommendations, as well, about the lack of response from IRCC, and said that people have reached out with emails.

Can you reiterate that number? Approximately how many Afghans have failed to get any response yet from the Government of Canada or IRCC?

Ms. Wendy Long: I would have to turn to Eleanor. I believe Brian said it was a good 50% who have not received any response from IRCC.

Ms. Eleanor Taylor: That's correct. It's 52% of those who are in our system—of about 10,000—who have not yet had their applications acknowledged.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Thanks, Ms. Taylor. Thanks again for your leadership.

My last question will go to you and Mr. Macdonald. It's to build off my previous question of who you think needs to be leading this, especially to resolve this biometric question in-country. That's absolutely the essential criterion that needs to be fixed to get people out.

Mr. Brian Macdonald: Thank you, Mr. Ruff.

It has to be a co-operative effort. We at Aman Lara are trying to come up with a solution. NGOs can be part of the solution. I think there are ways to provide identity verification in Afghanistan. We are looking forward to working with the Government of Canada, through this committee potentially, to provide those solutions.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Ruff. I appreciate that.

We'll go to Mr. El-Khoury for six minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

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

Welcome to the witnesses.

My question is for Mr. Macdonald.

The situation in Afghanistan is not normal. From your experience, could you tell the committee whether countries provide biometrics services in the actual country?

[*English*]

Mr. Brian Macdonald: Obviously, this is very sensitive material. I understand we're in a public forum, but I will say this. Aman Lara has reached out to other Canadian entities that have established security records with the Government of Canada. For example, almost all of our staff are former military, so at one point they have held a high security clearance. There are other entities in Canada, for example Reticle out of Brockville, that have these security clearances. There are solutions that can be found. I believe we can provide a service in Afghanistan.

It's a little difficult for the Government of Canada to contract it directly, but I think organizations like ours, NGOs that can operate in Afghanistan, could potentially gather that information on the government's behalf and provide that to the Government of Canada in a secure format, with the appropriate equipment and the appropriate security clearances, to provide a high level of service.

That's the sort of thing we are advancing. We hope the Government of Canada will take us up on the offer.

• (1915)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: When we assisted the Syrian refugees, things went well. The situation was much easier for the Canadian government to deal with because the Syrians had already left their country, but that's not the case with Afghanistan.

Are there countries that allow entry to people without visas or passports?

[*English*]

Mr. Brian Macdonald: Absolutely, there are countries that have been used. They call them “lily pad” countries. For example, the United Arab Emirates has provided some service for people who are undocumented, who can travel from Afghanistan to places like Dubai, where there's a special humanitarian village. The challenge is there are a lot of people who have already done that. If we use the Dubai example, that humanitarian village is full. It's full of people who can't seem to find onward passage to another country, so they have stopped accepting people. That's the challenge we face.

At Aman Lara, we look at whatever route we can find to get people out of Afghanistan, but we have to make sure they have an onward route to Canada. That's why verifying their identity and getting full approval before they leave Afghanistan is so crucial.

These third party countries exist. We are exploring them as avenues, but in most cases they're already full. Until the people who

are there move on, we can't put any more people into that system. That's the challenge we face.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: Thank you.

My next question is for Eleanor Taylor.

Were there cases in which flights were cancelled?

[*English*]

Ms. Eleanor Taylor: I'm going to seek some clarification. Which...? There may have been. I'm not aware of a specific flight. I have no knowledge of that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: Why do the Taliban guarantee the safety of Canadian officials or contractors sent there to conduct biometrics checks?

[*English*]

Ms. Eleanor Taylor: Is this still for me?

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: Yes, please.

Ms. Eleanor Taylor: Certainly we are not in direct communication with the Taliban, and we can't suggest that they guarantee anything. What we can say—and Mr. Lavery could corroborate this—is that we have been highly successful, with the support of Raven Rae Resources and their team, in moving around Afghanistan. There are mechanisms by which we can bring people in and get people out, so the notion of executing a team to perform the function that Mr. Macdonald described is eminently possible, based on our pretty robust experience.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: Mr. Lavery, when you were participating in operations there, were the Taliban in power, yes or no?

From your experience, what can we do now to better ensure the safety of women in Afghanistan?

[*English*]

Mr. David Theodore Lavery: That's the loaded one, but let me go quickly.

Yes, the Taliban right now—the de facto authorities of Afghan—have complete control of everything at this stage, and they are clamping down.

How can we better support the women who are still in Afghanistan? Again, I think that's going to be a political intervention. We're going to have to have diplomatic resolve at a higher level, keeping pressure on the de facto government right now to try to hold them accountable. They are still under the limelight. They are under the spotlight right now. However, as we see the war efforts going on in Ukraine, that's going to have dynamic effects on Afghanistan.

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

Thank you, Mr. El-Khoury. It was perfect timing.

We will go to my dear friend on the Bloc side, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, for six minutes.

• (1920)

[*Translation*]

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

Thank you to the witnesses for being with us today. I appreciate what you've done, what you continue to do and what you will be doing in the near future to help the Afghan people.

This is a very important committee. Our focus is the current humanitarian crisis. We are trying to figure out what can be done now and in the very near term.

A number of NGO representatives who appeared before the committee told us how difficult it was to carry out their mission in Afghanistan, delivering goods, providing humanitarian services and so forth. Since the Taliban are considered a terrorist entity, one of the challenges faced by NGOs who work with the Taliban is that they could be prosecuted under the Canadian Criminal Code. The NGOs are not to blame; in order to carry out their mission, they have to work with the Taliban.

Two weeks ago, I put forward a motion calling on the government to give NGOs assurance that they would not be prosecuted. This would have allowed NGOs to conduct their co-operative and humanitarian assistance work in the areas most at risk. Unfortunately, the Liberal Party—which, by the way, has a significant number of members on this committee—rejected the motion.

I wonder what message that sent to the NGOs on the ground.

I'd like to hear from Mr. Macdonald, Ms. Taylor, Ms. Long and Mr. Lavery, in that order.

[*English*]

Mr. Brian Macdonald: You're absolutely right. There is a challenge certainly in dealing with the Taliban or providing aid in Afghanistan, because it is an identified terrorist organization. I'm not a lawyer. I can't speak to the legalities of it. What I can tell you is that we conduct operations despite the Taliban, and we do our best to assure the safety of people in-country. We follow the law and we get people out of there, and we work closely with the Canadian government to do it. With those principles in mind, we assure the security of our people and ensure that they can get out of Afghanistan.

The Chair: Ms. Taylor, do you have anything to add?

Ms. Eleanor Taylor: No.

The Chair: Ms. Long, go ahead, please.

Ms. Wendy Long: ACI doesn't directly...and has never given any kind of money or had in-country operations. Although I do understand how NGOs can be handcuffed by that legislation, I'm not in a position to comment on what needs to be done to facilitate their ability to work within that sphere.

The Chair: Mr. Lavery, go ahead, please.

Mr. David Theodore Lavery: Thank you very much. That is a very hot topic to begin with, but I can assure the panel that all our members—my members supporting the asset team—govern our-

selves with best practices. We do not provide the de facto government direct funds. We cannot do that at this stage. We will not.

As for humanitarian assistance and work, and funds and development towards that, we know the UN is doing it. We know the UN is being provided support from the de facto government in providing escorts to move their charitable goods and their catering out into the field. It is happening at other levels.

I was back in-country last December, and I was meeting with many of the de facto government people in the ministry of the interior, the police departments, etc. They never come right out and ask for funds or any of that kind of stuff. It was one of those situations where we were not put into that position. It is a sensitive area we all have to be aware of. I think it should be something we look at more closely from the government's point of view.

The Chair: Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have two minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

Mr. Lavery, I was especially moved by your remarks. I have two questions for you.

First, what disappoints you the most about the government's response to the crisis in Afghanistan? Second, what recommendations should the committee make to help people on the ground immediately?

[*English*]

Mr. David Theodore Lavery: My biggest disappointment would be leaving all the people behind who we don't need to leave behind. We left so many people back there. In living it for 12 days in and out, and dealing with all our people on this panel trying to get as many people out as possible, and watching something unfold that we should have had a better grip of, I think our government could have done a better job. We should have been in dialogue, as we heard from all the other guest speakers.

We should have had better coordination, and with it better planning and appointing a perfect organization. I'm not going to blow our own horn but I can tell you right now it is working. We're the only ones getting people out the way we're getting them out. Give us the opportunity to get more people out. Work with us and we will work with the government. That is the biggest message right now.

We can do it. We're showing we're doing it. We need the support. We shouldn't be carrying and heavy lifting all of this on our own. This is a collective event. The objective is to get everybody out.

This is no longer an evacuation phase. We're now moving people out. The crisis has gone over and now we're worried it's going to shift elsewhere.

• (1925)

The Chair: Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you have six seconds, so it's your call. You have only six seconds.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Lavery, do you think the government will fulfill its promise of bringing 40,000 Afghan refugees to Canada by next year?

[English]

Mr. David Theodore Lavery: If you leave it for Aman Lara and us, yes, we will.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Now we will go to our last member of Parliament on this round.

Madam Kwan, you have six minutes, please. Go ahead.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair, and thank you to all the witnesses for your service and for your continuous efforts.

I'd like to ask all the panellists this question. You all raised the point that there are things you can do and you have talked to officials about that. My question is, when did you talk to these officials? Who are they and what was their response?

Maybe I can start with Ms. Long and go in the direction in which each presenter appeared.

Ms. Wendy Long: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Originally, you start with your MP. My MP was very aware that I had been advocating for first one Afghan interpreter and then others.

In January of 2019, I compiled a letter and an appeal from various veterans and current military for him to present to Minister Hussen, who was minister at the time, appealing for a meeting with them, with him or with a point person. Nothing came out of it. I followed up on it for the next month, and there was just no response from the minister or anyone from that department.

With IRCC, it had to be the point person. There was no actual policy in place to bring these people over, and it had to be a public policy decision. Given the immigration measures that were in effect at that time, there had to be a new public policy or an implementation of a previous one. IRCC had to be the entity to have that discussion with.

Mr. Powlowski had been trying for years as well, as had other veterans who had raised it back in 2006 and 2007 in the Thunder Bay area.

The Chair: Mr. Macdonald, go ahead, please.

Mr. Brian Macdonald: Thanks very much.

We consider ourselves partners with the Government of Canada. We have regular meetings with officials from IRCC and Global Affairs Canada. We meet with them almost weekly. As well, we have weekly meetings with ministerial staff. I must say that I am impressed with the attention they give us. They certainly give us time. They listen to our requests. We have a good flow of information.

We have made these points to you tonight and we've made them to them. I understand that these situations are challenging. None of these requests are easy. We are continuing to work with them. As my colleague, Ms. Taylor, said tonight, we are optimistic when we see the measures that have been applied to the Ukraine. In these di-

alogues with officials and ministerial staff, we're going to push them in that direction. We need them to bring these measures to Afghanistan so we have a pathway for the humanitarian cases in particular, and for people who are undocumented.

We have good access. We have good dialogue on a regular basis with staff. As I said right from the beginning, I am optimistic that we will come to them with a solution to do identification verification in Afghanistan. Hopefully we can get them across the finish line and get that option implemented.

I want to stress to Wendy, who's on the call tonight—

• (1930)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I'm going to move on to Mr. Lavery because I need to hear from all the witnesses, please.

Mr. David Theodore Lavery: I'll comment on the very beginning.

Back in July, we reached out to all the key people in the Canadian embassy, the security department and their program managers. We tried reaching out to the chargé d'affaires—the deputy. We sent a message off to them and the ambassador. The common response, especially when we were in the early stages, was that they were too busy, that they didn't really have time for us and that type of thing.

We kept on coming back at them. We utilized our team in Canada to try to get influence and to try to get the spark going. It just seemed like...maybe they were overwhelmed or maybe they were preoccupied with other issues, but the desire and the will to try to engage at that stage.... They pushed us aside.

That was, I guess, one of the pivotal points for us. It was the Canadian embassy's lack of engagement at that point in time, not only with me on the ground, but with our senior personnel back with the team in Canada.

That's all I would pass on at this stage.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

The reference to Ukraine was raised. The call for visa-free is going to be essential for Ukraine, and the government hasn't acted on that yet. I guess, similarly in this instance, dealing with the biometrics issue and waiving those documentations is key so that people can get out.

In terms of this, is your number one call for the government to waive the biometrics or engage with NGOs on the ground to get this work done to get people to safety?

Maybe we'll go to Mr. Lavery and then Ms. Long.

The Chair: Thank you.

You have 30 seconds. Please go ahead.

Mr. David Theodore Lavery: Yes, very quickly, you'd want to do both: engage with the talent on the ground and also have a waiver in place, but make sure you have the capability through that reliable partner on the ground.

Maybe I can turn it over to Eleanor or Wendy.

Ms. Eleanor Taylor: Our number one priority at Aman Lara is most certainly a way to confirm identity in Afghanistan. We understand that the Government of Canada has a responsibility to confirm identity. I want to make it clear that there sometimes is a perception that Canada requires a passport. Canada does not require a passport. The Afghan passport is required for Afghans who are leaving Afghanistan to cross the Pakistani border. That's not a requirement of the Government of Canada. Yes, we think we can deliver that requirement of the Government of Afghanistan, either directly or indirectly, to support them in that confirmation of identity piece.

The Chair: Thank you very much. That was seven minutes. The time is up.

On behalf of the members of Parliament and of this committee, I want to thank you, Ms. Long, Ms. Taylor, Mr. Macdonald and Mr. Lavery, for the pertinent information and knowledge you brought to this committee. All the best to all of you. You can now log off.

We'll suspend while we wait for the next panel's members to get on board.

• (1930) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1935)

The Chair: I call the meeting to order.

I thank the interpreters for being so generous in this difficult situation with the sound.

On behalf of the committee I would like to welcome both the witnesses. As individuals we have Mr. Corey Shelson and Mr. Stephen Peddle.

You have five minutes each. I would like one of you to go first, whoever wants to, otherwise I'll let Mr. Peddle go for five minutes.

Mr. Stephen Peddle (As an Individual): Thank you, once again, for inviting me here this evening. I'm a retired member of the Canadian Armed Forces. I retired as a senior intelligence officer with the rank of major. I deployed to Afghanistan, for the first time to Kandahar in 2007, and then again with Joint Task Force 2 in 2012 with Operation Attention.

During the initial tour, I had the pleasure of being a member of the OMLT team under, at that point in time, Colonel Wayne Eyre, now General Eyre.

I was embedded with a kandak of approximately 500 Afghans. It was during that time that I was introduced to Afghan interpreters. Being an S3 and S2 within a kandak—that is an operations officer and an Afghan intelligence officer—it was very important for me to be able to communicate with the Afghan officers, the Afghan troops and the Afghan citizens we were interacting with out in the battle space.

It was during that mission that I befriended a guy named Sangeen, who is still in my life today. He's the person who contacted me last summer to help his family, who were in dire need of help due to the unfolding events in Afghanistan. His family in particular were also quite involved with helping Canada, as his brother was also an interpreter, who went on afterwards to work for ATCO and KBR. His father was not an interpreter, but he was a senior officer with the Afghan National Army. He was a colonel, so again, another high-profile potential target for the Taliban.

For that reason, Sangeen reached out to me to assist his family in getting out of Afghanistan. That's when I became involved in this committee and with the Government of Canada's response at that time to get the Afghans out before, of course, things folded at the end of the summer of 2021.

During that time, I had numerous dealings with the IRCC. I had dealings with the SJS within the Canadian Armed Forces for vetting Afghan interpreters. I also had dealings with the embassy.

I took a front-seat approach to assisting with some of the paperwork that these Afghan families were trying to fill out, trying to give them clarity when they were on the ground as to the paperwork requirements for getting on those planes, eventually, and coming to Canada.

At the time, there was quite a bit of conflicting information. I know it was a very chaotic time in Afghanistan in July and August 2021. I witnessed it personally, as these folks were asking me to intervene and contact various members of our government just to get clarity on the requirements they needed to fulfill in order to move through the vetting process and immigrate to Canada.

Just to clarify, Sangeen came to Canada 10 years earlier, in 2012. It was in February 2012, under that special Afghan interpreter relocation program that was offered, I believe, between 2009 and 2012. I could be wrong on those dates, but I know he came in February 2012. He has been in Canada for 10 years. I have had dealings with him and personal contact over the past decade since he's come to Canada.

• (1940)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Peddle.

We'll now go to Mr. Shelson for five minutes.

Mr. Corey Shelson (As an Individual): Good evening. Thank you, everyone, for having me today.

My name is Corey Shelson. I served in the Canadian Armed Forces from 2002 until 2015, which included an eight-month deployment to Afghanistan in 2010 as a combat engineer troop commander.

Before I begin, I would like to first acknowledge the tragic events that are currently occurring in Ukraine and express my heartfelt sympathy for all those affected by Russia's brutal actions. In addition, I wish to express my admiration for President Zelenskyy and his leadership, and for the Ukrainian armed forces, who continue to defend themselves with courage and bravery in the name of freedom.

I would also like to acknowledge and express my appreciation to all of the members of the Canadian Armed Forces who served during Canada's mission in Afghanistan, including those who risked their lives to evacuate affected Afghans.

None of what occurred in Afghanistan should have come as a surprise, except the speed at which the Taliban took the country. My aim for today is simple: It's to tell you what I experienced during my involvement in the evacuation and provide this committee with a list of failures that I observed, which I hope will drive further root-cause analysis in order to derive some lessons learned for future non-combatant evacuation operations.

I would like to first list a few key dates. July 1, 2021 is when I came across a news article stating that the U.S. had withdrawn from Bagram airfield. July 5 is when I got formally involved, when an interpreter I served with, who was previously resettled for the special immigration program between 2009 and 2012, reached out asking for my assistance to help his family get to Canada.

On July 8, 2021, an open letter was penned by three previous task force commanders: generals Milner, Fraser and Thompson. That letter called for the immediate evacuation of stranded Afghans.

On July 23, 2021, then immigration minister Mendicino outlined what he described as a flexible and inclusive plan to relocate several thousand affected Afghan individuals. August 4 was when the first planeload arrived in Canada. August 15 is when the Taliban took Kabul. August 30 was when the evacuation ended.

On February 28, which is today, many, if not all of the applicants I began supporting, are still without a response. Most of them have not received a G number and still do not have a pathway to Canada.

The first issue I would like to address is our post-military campaign responsibilities. When Canada deploys troops, we must understand that our mission does not end with their return. I believe that we have damaged our credibility on the international stage by our behaviour. Remember that history cannot be rewritten and our actions are what will be remembered.

On that note, I would like to highlight that, for those interpreters who served with the Canadian Armed Forces and who were resettled between 2009 and 2012, the pathway for SIMS application did not open until December 9, 2021. I do not personally know of any who have made it to Canada.

Second, on the bureaucratic application process, providing forms that could be opened only in Adobe Acrobat Pro DC and requiring that they be signed, scanned and returned, demonstrated a lack of sensitivity to the situation on the ground and placed affected individuals at undue risk. There was also a lack of sensitivity due to a lack of translation into Pashto and Dari during our initial emails

that were sent out, as well as the number of email addresses that were being asked to respond to, most of which people could not spell.

Why were we even using email in the first place? How is it that we can't put together a more efficient manner to collect this information, like a portal? Our technical inabilities in a digital first world are absolutely appalling. It's also very eye-opening. I can tell you that if our government were a private business, we would be out of business.

Concerning our lack of agility, the following information I'm going to tell you was gathered through interactions with a number of individuals. I would like to ask that this be further investigated.

The first piece of information is that, when the special immigration program was announced, the IRCC had only two people to triage inbound emails. Around that same time, a call went out to internal government departments, looking for volunteers to take a contract inside the IRCC. That call went out to the CRA and Service Canada, and volunteers were screened and told they would begin any day.

Workers did not start until September, which was already after the evacuation ended. Everybody started answering phones, and it wasn't until October that some of these folks were asked to start to triage emails. They were instructed to look only at emails from August 23 onward, and it took until early November for all of the emails to be processed.

● (1945)

These facts are disturbing, considering the number of people who were waiting by their computer for a response from the IRCC.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Shelson. Your time is up.

We will now proceed to the round of questions.

The first person to go—I'm sorry, but somehow there is an echo—is Ms. Findlay, please, for six minutes.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay (South Surrey—White Rock, CPC): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank both witnesses immensely for your service, your deployment in Afghanistan and your service overall.

Stephen, I know you. I congratulate you as well on the honour of being invested in the Order of St. George.

This first question is for you, Corey, if I may call you that. Are you aware of any flights that left that should have been full and that were not full?

● (1950)

The Chair: Go ahead, Mr. Shelson.

Mr. Corey Shelson: I can comment on the flight that arrived on August 4. My understanding from our source is that approximately 40 individuals got off that plane, and my understanding is that the plane was basically filled with embassy staff, families and some key staff who were working for the embassy.

I found it interesting that then minister Mendicino was waiting on the tarmac to greet these folks and then spinning the media to make it seem like that was an evacuation flight, when I do not believe that it was an evacuation flight. You have to remember that a C-17 holds 188 people. To put 40 people on a plane during an evacuation that had already been announced is absolutely disgusting.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Do you have any thoughts as to why that happened that way?

Mr. Corey Shelson: Well, I'm going to hazard a guess that it had to do with an application process that was simply too bureaucratic and too slow, and they probably didn't have any other applicants that had approved applications at that point.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Major Peddle, you've talked about your relationship with the interpreters, and we've heard testimony in this committee that some of the allies who were helping—Afghan allies—weren't there just to help with language but sometimes with culture and navigating generally in a strange environment. Can you give us a little more detail on what you went through to bring those people whom you helped out of Afghanistan?

The Chair: Mr. Peddle, go ahead.

You are on mute. Please unmute yourself.

Mr. Stephen Peddle: Thank you very much. My apologies once again. I'm used to my home office, with the technology there.

My initial take on everything was, as previously mentioned, the complication of the paperwork and the format in which it had to be done. These folks, who didn't have Internet access, were in provinces outside of Kabul. To get Internet access, they were going to Internet cafés—which at that point, no doubt, had Taliban or sympathizers—to fill out paperwork articulating how they helped Canada join the war against the Taliban, so that they could eventually get their immigration approved and get on those planes.

One thing I was shocked and appalled by was the conflicting details given to the interpreters and their families. One was about medical screenings that had to be done before biometrics were collected. The directions they were given made no sense at all. For example, they were told they had to fill out a special medical screening form and have it done at a German hospital prior to being able to move on with the process. The email I have regarding that particular thing was from August 6. The German hospital had told them it would be six weeks to get in, if ever. I intervened and asked why medical screenings were even being done at that point in time in order to carry forward with the biometrics collection and vetting, at which point I got conflicting details from staff at the IRCC.

I involved MP Michael Cooper, here in Alberta, to advocate on my behalf as well. At the end of the day, the IRCC came back a few days later and said it was a mistake on its end. These screenings were not required at a German hospital in Kabul. The paperwork could, in fact, proceed as it should have days or weeks earlier.

When, eventually, they got through that screening process and were making their way on their own to Kabul for evacuation, they had little or no detail as to what was going to happen next, when the planes were leaving and how to get on those planes. I received quite a few emails over those days and weeks from about 13 of Sangeen's family members who were moving themselves across Afghanistan, trying to navigate through Taliban checkpoints to get to Kabul. Then, once in Kabul, there wasn't clear, concise direction given as to what would happen next and how to get on those planes.

● (1955)

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Stephen, I have only so much time and I want to ask, were you satisfied with the help from the Canadian government to get these people out, or did you have to go elsewhere to get help to do it?

Mr. Stephen Peddle: I was absolutely not satisfied with the help we got from the Canadian government. I ended up reaching out to other people on the ground, Afghans Sangeen had known and with whom I had worked in some capacity in my tours, to assist in telling them where it was safe to navigate across the country and where not to go, to the best of my ability. That was, at best, not even reliable information, but it was better some than none.

The whole paperwork process that was outlined confused me, as a federal employee of 28 years and a senior officer in the CAF, so I could only imagine what these Afghans were going through, with their lives on the line, to get this paperwork done to get out of the war zone, having known that they helped Canada for two decades and they would have targets on their heads being, again—

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Peddle. We're over time.

Mr. Stephen Peddle: I understand. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Findlay, for your questions.

Now we will move to Ms. Damoff for six minutes, please.

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

Thank you to both our witnesses for being with us this evening.

I listened to the previous panel and to this one, and I think it's important to remember that Canada's combat operations ended in 2011, and in 2014 we actually left Afghanistan. When we were trying to get these people out of the country we didn't have a footprint in Afghanistan, so we had to rely on other countries as we were moving forward.

The Government of Canada is dealing with the Taliban in Afghanistan, so we're not dealing with a friendly government; we're dealing with the Taliban, who, as you were mentioning, target individuals who were helpful to Canada.

Our previous witnesses talked about offering services to do biometrics in-country, but we don't even know—and I didn't have a chance to ask them questions—whether the safety and security of a company going in to do biometrics would even be guaranteed by the Taliban. It's such an unknown, and you folks know far better than I do the type of enemy we're dealing with that is running the government in Afghanistan.

It's just tragic that we are here, within a year, dealing with a crisis in Afghanistan and now dealing with a crisis in Ukraine. Canadians have always been so incredibly generous in welcoming refugees into our country, whether it's Vietnamese boat people or Syrian refugees—which happened since I've been elected—but I think we need to be careful when we're comparing Ukraine to Afghanistan, because Ukrainians can actually leave their country. Ukrainians can go to countries like Poland and have their biometrics done there, whereas my understanding is that Pakistan now requires exit visas. In the past, they would accept a letter from the Government of Canada saying, yes, this person was an interpreter, we will gladly bring them into Pakistan and then you can have them come to your country.

I think we need to be really careful. I'm not saying one crisis is better than the other, because both are absolutely horrific. However, we need to be careful that we're looking at how we can get folks who are still in Afghanistan into Canada, given the very serious constraints we're faced with, with a hostile government in power and with the inability to get those people to a friendly third country like we're seeing in Ukraine.

Mr. Peddle, you've worked with True Patriot Love, I believe, to bring people into Canada. I think we need to look moving forward. For the people you've brought into Canada, are we providing supports for them that they need once they've settled here? We want to bring them in, but we also want to make sure they have mental health supports, for example.

Have they got what they need once they've settled in Canada? If not, are there things we could be doing better to make sure they can adjust to our country?

• (2000)

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Peddle, go ahead, please.

Mr. Stephen Peddle: I've had lengthy conversations with Sangeen and his family members specifically. There are very good supports in place once they get to Canada; there is financial funding until they get themselves situated, housing, some education. Often,

though, it ends up being more of an individual basis for long-term success. I know it's who in Canada helps bridge the gap between that first year in Canada when they're getting situated and then getting them moving in the right direction to be contributing to Canada and working in society with language skills and education.

In my particular case, with the folks I've helped, I was very fortunate because Sangeen is an electrician by trade and owns a successful commercial electrician's company, so he's been helping Afghans who come into the Toronto area with various work sites and projects. I think my biggest concern—

Ms. Pam Damoff: Is he getting support from the Government of Canada to do that, or is he doing that on his own?

Mr. Stephen Peddle: He is doing that on his own, as a proud new Canadian and loyal to his people of Afghanistan. He has done a lot of very good work. He's been featured in many news articles and TV interviews.

I think he's an exception to the rule, though. I wouldn't think or say that this is the case with most refugees who come over. It's a bit more challenging if they don't know people who are willing to go that extra distance after they arrive.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Right. The government assists refugees for a year. Was he privately sponsored, or was he a government-sponsored refugee?

Mr. Stephen Peddle: Sangeen was a combat interpreter. He had interpreted for Canada for six years in theatre. He came over in 2012 under that special interpreter program. He was fortunate enough to speak impeccable English when he came to Canada, because he was an interpreter.

Ms. Pam Damoff: We expanded that program so that family members—

The Chair: Thank you very much, Madam Damoff. I'm so sorry.

We will now move to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

I want to thank the witnesses for their participation today and for the service they are providing. I also want to let them know that I will be giving them more time to speak than the previous member did. I'm not going to play politics. That's the first thing I want to make clear.

I want to ask you about mental health, an issue that was mentioned earlier. To me, one thing is very important, but we don't discuss it enough in this committee. How do Canada's veterans feel about not being able to help their Afghan partners and friends after giving them their word that they would? Does it give them anxiety or traumatize them? Is their mental health being affected?

Mr. Peddle and Mr. Shelson, you are the best people to tell us about that. I'd like to hear from each of you.

Mr. Stephen Peddle: Sorry, my French isn't good.

[*English*]

I didn't get any translation through this ear set.

What was the question? My apologies.

Mr. Corey Shelson: Same here; I didn't get the translation.

The Chair: I'll restart your question time, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Madam Clerk, can you check to see whether the translation is working?

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Miriam Burke): I think it's working now, Mr. Chair.

• (2005)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Can you hear the interpretation when I speak to you in French, gentlemen?

Mr. Corey Shelson: I can speak French, but I can answer better English.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I also speak English, but given my party, I will need interpretation, Mr. Chair.

[*English*]

The Chair: I agree.

I certainly would love to get it fixed if we can, Madam Clerk.

The Clerk: If I may, Mr. Chair, can I just check with the witnesses on whether they've selected the little globe at the bottom for the French interpretation?

Mr. Corey Shelson: I have it now.

The Chair: Okay. That's good.

How about you, Mr. Peddle? At the right-hand bottom corner, you should see "raise hand". There's a button there. If you click that button, you have the option of either English or French audio. You should be on English, please.

Mr. Stephen Peddle: I think the issue, Mr. Chair, is that I'm working off an iPad, so I don't think it will be the same as it is for—

The Chair: On the iPad, you should find interpretation somewhere.

Mr. Stephen Peddle: Oh, there we go. Let's try that.

The Chair: Okay.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, I will restart your time.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I hope so, Mr. Chair. I know you're fair.

Do you hear the interpretation now, gentlemen?

[*English*]

Mr. Stephen Peddle: Perfectly. Thank you very much.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I'll start over, then.

I said that I was going to give you more time to answer than you were given by the previous member. You'll be able to provide more in the way of answers.

The issue of mental health was brought up, but there's something the committee hasn't talked enough about, the mental health of veterans.

Veterans gave their Afghan partners their word that they would help them, but now that they see how difficult it is to provide that help—even impossible in some cases—how do those veterans feel? I'm talking about veterans who served in Afghanistan and want to help their Afghan partners but can't. How do they feel? Does it affect their mental health? Does it cause anxiety or even trauma?

I want to hear your views on that, since you are the ones who would know. I'd like to hear from Mr. Peddle, followed by Mr. Shelson.

[*English*]

Mr. Stephen Peddle: There is absolutely a correlation between our abandoning our Afghan allies and its becoming what we would possibly term as a "moral injury".

It's my understanding that many veterans like me—and I can speak for myself, for sure—have suffered greatly in watching Afghanistan tear itself apart. Watching us leave the folks behind who helped us and protected us while we were there took a toll on me.

I have other veteran friends and, quite frankly, their PTSD conditions are partially fed or aggravated by the fact that we have abandoned our allies, our comrades-in-arms, our brothers we were standing shoulder to shoulder with during combat operations. It's not something that is easy to work past.

I think many veterans like me are still struggling to this day, knowing that there are people who helped us, who are still over in Afghanistan being pursued by the Taliban for the work they did in protecting us when we were there.

The Chair: Mr. Shelson, go ahead, please.

Mr. Corey Shelson: I won't go on any further about the veteran mental health cause. Mr. Peddle did a great job of responding, and I agree.

I will speak to the mental health crisis that I believe there is within the IRCC for the folks who were answering the phones and the emails. As the veteran community, we built strong relationships with those folks inside the IRCC, and I believe this government has let them down.

Those folks were dealing with people calling—no different from somebody calling 911—and basically saying, "Save me. I'm going to die." You have to remember, most of these folks who left Service Canada and CRA to come over to IRCC for the purpose of answering the phones or answering emails did so because they wanted to help. They thought they could make a difference. Most of these folks were working from home, communicating by Microsoft Teams and accessing your portal through a VPN. Most of these folks have still not been acknowledged for all of their hard work. Most of these folks were trying tirelessly, with a completely broken processing system, to process the applications we submitted.

Within our government bodies, I am gravely concerned about how inefficient the application processing was. I think the folks who were answering the phones and emails were gravely impacted by it.

I would like to extend this one step further, to the national mental health crisis that we have. Try to book an appointment with a psychologist right now and you will find it is going to take upwards of four to six months, if you can even find somebody.

My question for this panel is, what are all of you doing to solve the mental health crisis in this country?

• (2010)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Your comments are extremely compelling. It's the first time the committee has heard them—hence, the importance of your participation today.

I've asked witnesses which recommendations the committee should prioritize in its report. We received a number of them: waive the administrative requirements; stop making people fill out forms online when their lives are in danger; remove the requirement to be a refugee for sponsorship by someone in Canada; and have a diplomatic presence on the ground, including in Pakistan, to help Afghans come to Canada.

Do you agree that those are priorities? If you had to pick one, which would it be?

I'd appreciate it if you could answer quickly. I don't have much time left.

[*English*]

Mr. Stephen Peddle: Some of this work could have been done in a third location outside of Afghanistan, like a triage. Some of the necessary steps to bring them to Canada could have been completed outside the war zone.

That could have made things far easier on everyone at the end of August, when things went sideways and people were trying to get on those last flights out of Kabul.

The Chair: Mr. Shelson, do you have something to say?

Mr. Corey Shelson: Yes. My number one priority is much greater than this. It's for the members of Parliament who represent all the citizens of Canada to start working better together.

I actually find it embarrassing watching everybody on TV. The rhetoric going back and forth across the House of Commons is embarrassing. We deserve better as citizens. The members of Parliament should have been sitting down at a table and coming to a solution to this problem, instead of yelling back and forth across the House of Commons and just assuming that our bureaucratic departments would figure this out.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Shelson.

Thank you, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe. I appreciate that.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I certainly agree with you, Mr. Shelson.

[*English*]

The Chair: Now we will go to Ms. Kwan for six minutes.

Please go ahead.

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

Thank you to our witnesses for your service and for your presentations today. Your presentations were particularly important in helping us to find out what happened and what went wrong, and of course in helping government to learn from those errors.

Going forward, one critical issue is still getting people out. From our last panel, we heard that 52% of the people who sent an email—the government had asked them to send an email—have not even had a response. I have sent numerous spreadsheets to the government about individuals in urgent situations, and I rarely get a response.

From that perspective, what is your recommendation to the government for addressing this critical crisis for the people who have been left behind, so they can know that help can and should be on its way? What should the government do to materialize that?

I'll start with Mr. Peddle and then I'll go to Mr. Shelson.

Mr. Stephen Peddle: If this is potentially a manpower issue, then this is a great opportunity for the Government of Canada to create more jobs for Canadians and put them to work on these phones or processing this paperwork. Potentially some of these new Canadians who have come over from Afghanistan, who speak English because they were interpreters and who also speak flawless Dari or Pashto, could be gainfully employed in helping their brothers and sisters in Afghanistan come to Canada.

I see this as a great opportunity to employ more Canadians in a meaningful capacity that will get these Afghans out. Going forward in the future with Ukraine, it could be the same thing.

• (2015)

Mr. Corey Shelson: One of the biggest issues here has nothing to do with manpower. I believe it has to do with the outdated IT system that the Government of Canada operates upon.

During my time working on this, I learned a ton about how these applications actually got processed inside the IRCC. Every Canadian and every Afghan should know that the portal you fill out online actually just generates an automated email that some human has to answer. That portal only actually started working close to Christmastime.

There are two different databases that these applicants' data was going into. The people answering the phones and emails don't even have access to one of them. I personally sent 15 different applications from 15 unique email addresses. Somebody within the IRCC, who was quite supportive, then looked up every single one of my emails. Guess how many they could find? One.

Where did all my emails go? Why can't our government workers access this information? There needs to be an investigation into the databases that are being used by the Canadian government. Where's all of this information? Where's all the data? Why are none of the emails being actually opened and answered?

Also, several of my emails were in spam. You're using Outlook and emails are going into spam. Could you imagine being stranded in Afghanistan and the email you sent in goes to spam? How is that possible?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: One of the issues that the previous panels raised is the fact that biometrics are required. It is impossible for people to get it right now.

Boots on the ground with the NGOs on the ground, people who would be able to do that work, and for the government to waive the biometrics from that perspective....

I'd like to get your view on the proposal to waive the biometrics and get NGOs and people on the ground, possibly former military personnel and others, to help with this work.

Go ahead, Mr. Peddle.

Mr. Stephen Peddle: Having been an intelligence officer previously, I've worked extensively with biometrics and the policies surrounding them. In this particular case, we're talking today—when we're not in Afghanistan—about potentially moving them outside of the country to do biometrics. If things don't screen positively, we can always potentially send them back. That could be one option if the Taliban are allowing people to leave the country, which they say is the case. I'm sure there are a lot of complications with doing so.

Other than that, maybe, like you said, we could temporarily waive biometrics. There's a time and a place to do it elsewhere, before we integrate them into Canadian society.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: A retired military panel has also suggested that, perhaps, for people to come to Canada, we could waive all of those requirements for them to come to Canada and then go through the process once they're here. If it doesn't pass muster, then you have a resolution to deal with that to return the individual.

Is that an option?

Mr. Stephen Peddle: I believe it is. This isn't the first time we've done it. The Kosovo refugees....

We bring them to Canada and put them in a secure place where they're under watch until they're properly vetted. Once they're vetted, we integrate them into the rest of society. If they don't check out, we have other mechanisms in place to send them back.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Kwan. That's right on the dot of six minutes.

[*Technical difficulty—Editor*] the second round, Mr. Ruff. You have four minutes.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Thanks, Chair.

First off, thanks to both of the witnesses for coming to testify and for your service. Please keep your answers as to the point as possible, as we have four minutes.

My first question is for you, Mr. Peddle. You're a former intelligence officer and obviously tracking this. Going back to how this was forecasted, we saw all the signs coming. In your opinion, could the Canadian government have taken more action sooner, to help get Afghans out?

Mr. Stephen Peddle: Absolutely.

The moment that President Donald Trump announced to the world that America was leaving Afghanistan, I think anyone who was in Afghanistan knew the writing was on the wall as to what was going to happen. The question was when, and then President Biden gave a date.

There were lots of opportunities long before July or August 2021 to bring all the Afghans who helped us, who we had records of, over to Canada. There is no excuse whatsoever for us to have waited until August 2021, when we knew that Afghanistan was folding. There's no excuse whatsoever for waiting that long.

• (2020)

Mr. Alex Ruff: Thanks, Mr. Peddle.

Mr. Shelson, you were working the ground very early in the evacuation process. What were you hearing from people on the ground, those Afghans? What were they hearing from GAC and from the Canadian government en route to the airport?

Can you expand on some of the challenges and what they were hearing?

Mr. Corey Shelson: It was quite chaotic trying to get folks into the airport. There was a gate that would open; people could move into the airport, and they would close the gate. It was simple. It was basically that, but we didn't really find out about it until afterwards.

Folks were being told to come to any gate and wait, but the Canadian forces were primarily manning one gate, the Baron gate. That was quite well known once we got to the aftermath of this.

People were being told.... Picture yourself.... I don't know if anybody has kids here. You have a few young kids, your wife, a two-year-old, a three-year-old and a four-year-old, and you get a call at four o'clock in the morning to pack up your family and get to the airport because your plane to Canada is coming. You grab your kids, throw them in a taxi and get all the way to the airport, and you wait, and you wait and you wait.

You have to remember that all of these folks had cellphones. They all had phone numbers. We were communicating with them. Why couldn't the Canadian government find a way to communicate with these folks on a one-to-one basis? Why weren't we enabling the Canadian forces on the inside of the airport to communicate with these folks on a one-to-one basis?

If we knew we weren't going to go to all the gates, why were we telling them to do that? We were just putting them at risk.

Mr. Alex Ruff: I'd like you to expand on that a little. Why was that occurring? Was it a lack of coordination among the different departments or the lack of one minister or department being in charge?

As well, there have been rumours and stuff—and I don't know if you have any first-hand knowledge. Was there any sort of interference in the prioritization of who was getting out on certain flights?

Mr. Corey Shelson: Well, IRCC was the department that applications would go through, and they were the ones who were calling people to the airport by email. The Canadian Forces were, in my understanding, manning the gates, and GAC had to approve the people who would get inside. So you had three different departments that weren't all talking to each other. We had folks getting called to the airport, but when they got there, their visa had the names of only some of the people, therefore GAC wouldn't let them in. You had IRCC not talking to GAC; CAF being told—and I spoke with several MPs, including Mr. Mendicino, who told me that the Canadian Armed Forces on the ground would have discretion at the gate. That never occurred. If your name wasn't on a GAC list, you did not get through the gate.

Furthermore, I think there should be an investigation into prioritization of non-Canadian nationals by the Canadian Armed Forces. I have heard that rumour.

The Chair: Thank you very much, and thank you, Mr. Ruff.

We will go to Mr. Dong for four minutes.

Mr. Han Dong (Don Valley North, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair.

Before I begin, I just want to address a point my honourable Bloc colleague brought up earlier. In my experience at committees, members may choose to use their time for a preamble to a question or may ask questions directly. It is entirely up to the member, according to the Standing Orders. I'm always respectful to my colleagues and to witnesses, but just for the record and for the benefit of the viewers, I want to point this out. I think MP Damoff actually made a few good points in her preamble. One of them was about looking forward, because I think that's a very important part of this study. It's looking forward at what kind of positive changes we can bring to the system.

With that, I want to thank the two gentlemen in the witness panel tonight for their service and for their time in actually sharing some of their views and their experience in evacuating Afghan people who helped Canadians.

Captain Shelson, you mentioned earlier on that there is quite a bit of bureaucracy. You think the system can be improved. Can you elaborate on that? Do you have any specific suggestions as to how the government can make our public service more flexible or more ready going forward?

• (2025)

The Chair: Mr. Shelson.

Mr. Corey Shelson: My question would be “What's the incentive?” What type of incentives are we currently putting in place inside of our government departments to get people to be more efficient?

Mr. Han Dong: But—

Mr. Corey Shelson: Let me answer my question, please, Mr. Dong.

Mr. Han Dong: I'm sorry about that. I apologize.

Mr. Corey Shelson: I find it interesting that Ms. Damoff and Mr. Dong had quite a large preamble at the beginning. I did not even get to speak to Ms. Damoff.

The Chair: Mr. Shelson, you don't need to make those comments. Just answer the question, please.

Mr. Corey Shelson: How do we improve it? There have to be incentives within our government departments to improve that, and right now, what I have observed within the IRCC during the application process is that there is very little accountability between different levels of management within government bodies. IRCC representatives that were spoken to couldn't even get answers from their bosses. It would take a week to get an answer about what to do with a specific application, and it was all being done remotely, through Microsoft Teams.

Again, if this were a private business, we would be out of business.

Mr. Han Dong: Could it be because of the COVID situation that they were working from home, or...?

Mr. Corey Shelson: Absolutely it was because of COVID—

Mr. Han Dong: I mean, you did give credit to the public service. I agree. You gave credit to the public service and frontline workers, and I too have numerous times shown my appreciation for their work during COVID. It's been very difficult. Some of them work 16-hour days to get the work done.

I will take your point back, though, because I'm also on the public accounts committee.

You also mentioned in public that in your view, Canadian soldiers were not given as much flexibility or latitude as their colleagues from some other countries were. Can you talk about what kind of flexibility you meant in those interviews?

The Chair: Mr. Dong, thank you. Your time is up.

Now I'm going to go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe. You have two minutes. Please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

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

Earlier, I simply said that I would be giving the witnesses more time to answer. I didn't say that was better; that was how the member took it.

Now I'll jump right into my questions, seeing what a limited amount time we have.

Mr. Shelson, I asked you earlier what your top priority was, and you said that members should stop yelling at each other and do something. That's great. I am seen as someone who can work with members across party lines. I want to work with all members to come up with solutions.

I want to know what your number one priority is in the very near term, so we can start helping our Afghan friends on the ground immediately.

[English]

Mr. Corey Shelson: Well, the folks are still there. Their applications still need to be processed. I can tell you, as a matter of fact, that most of them are backlogged. I don't know where the backlog is. I can't see into that. I would ask this committee to figure out where that backlog is and get it taken care of so that these applications start moving through.

We moved two individuals to Qatar about 12 weeks ago. We have not been able to move anybody since. Everything has completely ground to a halt.

[Translation]

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

Quickly, Mr. Peddle, can you tell me what your top priority is to help on the ground?

[English]

Mr. Stephen Peddle: Get them out on civilian flights if the Taliban will let them leave, and then go through the process of integration at a third location or here in Canada, under controlled circumstances.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: If things continue in the same manner, do you think we'll be able to bring 40,000 Afghan refugees to Canada by next year, as promised by the government?

[English]

Mr. Stephen Peddle: Right now I would say no. I think the number of folks we got out since September 1 has been abysmal. I do not believe for a moment that we're going to achieve those numbers unless we change things up.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you to both witnesses for their answers.

[English]

The Chair: Madam Kwan, you have two minutes. Please go ahead.

• (2030)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Mr. Shelson, I didn't get a chance to ask you or get your response on the question around biometrics. Do you mind answering that question now, please?

Mr. Corey Shelson: Do it in a third party country. It's already happening. Have a plan if those folks don't pass, because you're going to have a really hard time dropping them back off in Afghanistan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: How do people get to a third country? That's the other problem.

Mr. Corey Shelson: We're doing chartered air flights right out of the Kabul airport.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Should the Canadian government engage NGOs on the ground there to help with that work?

Mr. Corey Shelson: Absolutely.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I think there are severe limitations with respect to that at this moment as well.

You raised many concerns in terms of what's happened, and some of them you've cited at this committee. We don't have time to get all the examples of where things went wrong. Would you be able to submit to this committee the documentation outlining that?

I think part of the issue here is this: In order to move forward we also have to know what happened in the past. That's how we learn from mistakes. That's what I've been taught, anyway. Is that something you'd be able to do for our committee?

Mr. Corey Shelson: I will consider it, yes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

My last question, then, is for Mr. Peddle. I think I'm going to run out of time very quickly. In terms of government actions with respect to the backlog, one issue we've learned is that with the Ukraine crisis right now the government's not putting additional resources into addressing that issue. That means IRCC's using the same resources it currently has. Do you think that's going to be a problem?

Mr. Stephen Peddle: Yes. Just like in warfare, we can surge; we can reallocate resources to get a robust response in a limited amount of time, even if we're not capable of sustaining that over the long term. I don't understand why we can't do that in other government departments as well.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I want to thank both witnesses, Mr. Peddle and Mr. Shelson, on behalf of the committee members, for being here today and for the information that's very pertinent for our committee report and study. All the best.

I am suspending the meeting for a few minutes before we get to the next panel.

• (2030)

(Pause)

• (2035)

The Chair: I call this meeting to order. Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format, pursuant to the House order of November 25, 2021. Should any technical challenges arise, please advise me, as we may need to suspend a few minutes to ensure all members are able to participate fully.

Witnesses should be aware that translation is available through the globe icon at the bottom of the screen. Please select whether you want French or English audio, or none. We will be working, simultaneously, in both official languages.

I would now like to welcome our guests on behalf of the committee members.

From Concordia University, we have Julian Spencer-Churchill, political science professor; from Vector Global Solutions, we have Brandi Hansen; and from Women Leaders of Tomorrow, we have Friba Rezayee.

Welcome to all. I will give each and every one of you an opportunity to speak for five minutes. Please be on time, because we need members to ask questions.

We'll begin with Professor Julian Spencer-Churchill, for five minutes.

• (2040)

[*Translation*]

Dr. Julian Spencer-Churchill (Professor, Concordia University, Political Science, As an Individual): I'd like to thank Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe and the other members of the committee for inviting me today to discuss the issue of assistance to Afghan refugees.

I have taught at Concordia University, in Montreal, since 1998. I have never been to Afghanistan, but I carried out research in Pakistan and on Pakistan for 10 years, from 1999 to 2011. I interviewed close to 100 members of the military, intelligence personnel, police officers and politicians, and I have been to every province in Pakistan, except for Baluchistan.

Over the past 25 years, my western and Pakistani colleagues and I have been struck by the clearly low likelihood of success of NATO's mission in Afghanistan. I will speak more about that later. Our views were published numerous times, but our recommendations were systematically disregarded.

I want to draw your attention to three key points.

First, the economic development of Afghanistan depends on Pakistan, which is the gatekeeper for Afghan exports to India and abroad. Iran and Central Asia lack the infrastructural connection to a viable market. Pakistan has implemented ad-hoc measures since the expiration of the Transit and Trade Agreement signed in 1965 and updated in 2010.

Second, the Afghan foreign aid community has consistently attempted to sideline the role of Pakistan, with the help of western states, as part of an unrealistic and unsustainable effort to make Afghanistan independent of Pakistan.

Third and finally, the common narrative that Afghanistan's troubles began with the 1979 Soviet invasion is a false one, and is perpetuated by all actors for various reasons. The Soviet Union invaded to consolidate a regime that was quickly falling victim to rural revolts sponsored by Pakistan, one that would have probably fallen in 1982.

I'll explain why. The border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, delimited by the McMahon Line, is still not recognized by Kabul. In 1948, Afghanistan's defence minister—

[*English*]

Mr. Maninder Sidhu (Brampton East, Lib.): I have a point of order.

The Chair: Yes. I would like to suspend the meeting for a few minutes to check translation.

• (2040)

(Pause)

• (2045)

The Chair: I would like Mr. Spencer-Churchill to go ahead for three more minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Dr. Julian Spencer-Churchill : Thank you.

I was saying that the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, delimited by the McMahon Line, is still not recognized by Kabul. In 1948, Afghanistan's defence minister, Mohammad Daoud, threw his support behind the separatists of the North-West Frontier Province and Baluchistan, which led to a border dispute with Pakistan, lasting until 1963. The equivalent of a battalion was lost by Pakistan in a few years. Afghan trade was seriously disrupted, moving from the north to the Soviet Union.

In 1963, further to a blockade, Mohammad Daoud was dismissed by Afghanistan's king, Zahir Shah. This was followed by a decade that marked the culmination of Pakistani–Afghan relations. Transit and trade across Pakistan resumed. Afghanistan provided transit for Iranian weapons bound for Pakistan, and Kabul served as a base for Pakistani aircraft during the India–Pakistan wars of 1965 and 1971.

In 1973, Mohammad Daoud—

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry. The meeting is suspended for a few seconds.

• (2045)

(Pause)

• (2050)

The Chair: Mr. Spencer-Churchill, go ahead, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Chair, before we go any further, I'd like to know whether we can extend the meeting in light of the technical difficulties.

[*English*]

The Chair: Don't worry. I'll give you time, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe. You will have your whole time.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: All right.

[*English*]

The Chair: Mr. Spencer-Churchill, go ahead, please.

[*Translation*]

Dr. Julian Spencer-Churchill : Thank you.

In 1973, Mohammad Daoud overthrew the King of Afghanistan, declared support for Pakistan's separatists and triggered a series of internal coups d'état. The Pakistani Prime Minister, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, responded by reaching out to Afghan decision-makers, including the Muslim Youth organization at Kabul University, giving them refuge, money and weapons training.

A revolt sponsored by Pakistan and led by Faizani failed in 1974 and 1975. The failure of agricultural reforms accelerated Pakistani assistance to insurgents, resulting in a massacre of Soviet military advisers and Soviet intervention in late 1979.

The war in Afghanistan was set off by Pakistan, not the Soviet Union or the CIA, contrary to what Hollywood movies and conventional wisdom online claim. I have had countless public disagreements with U.S. and Canadian intelligence officials about that very thing.

Although Pakistan is not capable of influencing the government in Kabul, whatever it may be, Pakistan remains one of the main actors in the mess that is Afghanistan's economy. Until Pakistan is treated as a partner, any investment in Afghanistan's development will be wasted, like every penny spent over the past half-century.

Pakistan is simply asking for a return to the normalcy that prevailed from 1963 to 1973.

Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you very much [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

Now we'll go to Ms. Hansen for five minutes.

Ms. Brandi Hansen (Director of Operations, Vector Global Solutions): Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, ladies and gentlemen, honourable members, for allowing me to come and speak with you this evening.

My name is Brandi Hansen. I am a director for Vector Global Solutions in Canada. We're a non-profit organization. I'm also the director of operations for Ark Salus out of the United States.

We are a group of Canadians and Americans. We're mostly comprised of pilots, active duty, intelligence sector, individuals, analysts, business administration and government liaison. We were in Afghanistan in August and rescued over 1,000 Afghans prior to the gates falling in Kabul, so we have a proof of concept for evacuations. We also rescued 53 special mission wing individuals out of Uzbekistan with the co-operation of the Uzbekistan president. They are now relocated and resettled in the United States.

Our mission is global crisis response, not just to Afghanistan but on an international level.

We specialize in airlift. Our airlift has a NATO CAGE code. With an extensive past history of performance, we can land and depart in any country in the world. The charter is small; it is 180. It is not a commercial charter. We evacuate only individuals with accepted onward travel, with a clear travel path. We have a ground team. We have a logistics team with an extensive database. We have an intelligence team and a food program in Afghanistan. We also have resettlement, as well as a biometric team.

Our focus is primarily on all categories: orphans and unaccompanied minors, women, widows, targeted groups, vulnerable minorities, enduring relations—individuals who have enduring relations to the Canadian and U.S. government—and diplomatic missions. We presently have a very large diplomatic mission, with almost the entire Afghan cabinet within our care at the moment.

We evacuate frontline humanitarian defenders. We have a con-op catalogue—"con-op" is concepts of operations or missions—for Canada alone. Our objective is to identify all obstacles and come to tangible resolutions moving forward. I'm hoping to spend my time speaking with respect to the future and what we're going to be doing moving forward.

From my understanding, our objectives are biometrics, undocumented individuals, routes, airlift, intermediary countries and funding. At this moment, we're able to offer airlifts, two flights a week, 180 individuals, with onward travel—which means this would be perhaps individuals who have an enduring relationship with the Canadian government who already have applications accepted through IRCC.

Mr. Chair, please let me know if I go over my time. I have my head down in my notes.

• (2055)

The Chair: You have 90 seconds.

Ms. Brandi Hansen: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My recommendations for resolutions would be biometrics via contractor or subcontractor, perhaps not an NGO that's doing the evacuations but a third party, either inside Afghanistan or perhaps on a cruise ship at the port of Karachi in Pakistan, facilitating a floating humanitarian hub where you could do biometrics and then possibly....

The law changes, also, when you're in international maritime waters, and you could then sail to Canada as well, which would be economical.

I would recommend implementing similar immigration measures to those used for the Ukraine, or new, innovative ones, as what we've been doing hasn't been overly successful.

The one successful IRCC measure was the Canadian and U.S. co-operation on the safe passage to Canada for the 5,000 refugees who were evacuated and facilitated by the U.S.A. That has been a success. It would be my recommendation for the IRCC to gain another partnership with the U.S. Department of State, to perhaps do another 5,000 or 10,000, since that was a successful measure.

Airlift transportation is something that is accessible to Canada, through us with our NATO CAGE code, DUNS number and extensive past history. Rather than moving 200 to 300 a month, we are able to move 360 per week, according to our flight plan. That's 360 individuals a week, 1,440 per month, 17,000 per year.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Hansen. That was perfect timing.

Ms. Brandi Hansen: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: We will now go to the Women Leaders of Tomorrow and Ms. Friba Rezayee, for five minutes.

Ms. Friba Rezayee (Founder and Executive Director, Women Leaders of Tomorrow): Good evening, Mr. Chair. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to appear and speak before the Special Committee on Afghanistan today.

My name is Friba Rezayee. I was born and raised in Afghanistan. I am one of the first Afghan—

[*Translation*]

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

For health and safety reasons, the interpreter, who is doing their very best, can't interpret what the witness is saying.

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm going to suspend for a few seconds here again.

• (2100) _____ (Pause) _____

• (2105)

The Chair: I'm going to call the meeting to order right now. We'll figure out how we can manage.

I'm sorry, Ms. Rezayee. We do not mean it to be this way, but we just want to make sure that we are able to at least have questions for the other two witnesses.

I need unanimous consent from the members. Are the members in agreement?

Thank you.

Ms. Friba Rezayee: I have changed my headset. I have a better one. Does it work now?

The Clerk: Can we just have a few more words, please?

Ms. Friba Rezayee: I changed my headset. I have a much better headset. It's a \$200 headset.

No? All right. Please go ahead.

The Chair: Madam Clerk, we can go ahead with the meeting, because we have unanimous consent from the committee members.

At some point in time we'll bring it back to Ms. Rezayee.

We'll go to the members now. We can start with the first round.

Mr. Hallan, you have five minutes. Please go ahead.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Mr. Chair, I think I'm going to replace Mr. Hallan. He's involved in another event as well. Are you good with that, Chair?

All right. I'll just give my own personal attestation to the professor's comments, having spent a year and a half or more of my life in Afghanistan. I can speak to the complexity of the issue with Pakistan and Afghanistan.

My question is for the professor. Based on that, does it not underline the importance of why we should have tried to get as many Afghans out of the country before it fell to the Taliban?

Dr. Julian Spencer-Churchill : I don't mean to challenge the current policy of evacuating Afghans who co-operated with the Canadian Forces.

My point, which I've echoed for 20 years, is that the policies before that disaster happened consistently avoided Pakistan. For those of us working in Pakistan, it looked like it was policy-driven. I've been to many conferences once where I have raised the issue, and I have not been reinvented, so I can only assume there's some sort of conspiracy.

My interpretation is that on the military side, the Canadian Forces largely deferred to their American counterparts, who held a pretty strong line on not including Pakistan for a variety of reasons.

For the aid community, I just assumed that they didn't want to complicate the process. As long as they were being subsidized by Canadian government help, they were satisfied with not having to address the Pakistan issue.

Certainly efforts to help those in Afghanistan now are not affected by whatever Pakistan thinks.

• (2110)

Mr. Alex Ruff: All right. Thank you for that.

The Chair: Mr. Spencer-Churchill, can you bring your microphone a bit closer to your lips? Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Ruff.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Thanks, Chair. My next question will be for Ms. Hansen.

Can you further elaborate on the importance and maybe on your own understanding...? It's too bad the other witness couldn't testify, because one of my main concerns is around the women, children and visible minorities who are being persecuted under the Taliban and the importance of getting these refugees or these Afghans out of Afghanistan.

A concern I have under our current philosophy is that we're going to fill up the numbers that the government has committed to with people who have already safely gotten out of Afghanistan. They are maybe still in a third country, which isn't perfect, but my real concern is over those in Afghanistan.

The Chair: Go ahead, Ms. Hansen.

Ms. Brandi Hansen: My response at this time, to be entirely candid, is that with what we do we don't have a clear path as to how to get them out. The humanitarian, the vulnerable individuals and the people at risk are some of the most difficult at this time to be getting out of Afghanistan. A lot of them don't have documents, and they don't have an enduring relationship with the Canadian government. The agreement that Canada has with the United States with respect to individuals being evacuated and creating a path, with the Department of State writing those referrals, would certainly be something I could see as a tangible solution.

My understanding is that not all of these individuals have gone through the Department of State right away. They aren't in the U.S., and the U.S. isn't just sending them to Canada. These are individuals who are still getting their families out of Afghanistan; they're individuals over in Turkey or intermediary countries, a.k.a. lily pad countries. It's not that it's just for people who are at some sort of intermediary country and might be safe for the moment. I believe that this 5,000 agreement, which I believe is full at this time, which was specific to humanitarian and vulnerable individuals and targeted groups and minorities, is the best ticket for them to get out of Afghanistan. Perhaps we can hardwire it to make it more geared to getting individuals out of Afghanistan right now, rather than pulling them from intermediary countries.

I hope I answered your question.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Yes, that's—

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Ruff. I appreciate that.

We'll go to Madam Zahid for five minutes, please.

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

I will be splitting my time with MP Sidhu.

I wanted to ask a question to Ms. Rezayee, so if she could send us some information on that by written submission it would be really great. She has been a passionate advocate of women's and girls' education, as well as gender equality. I would like to have her input on what Canada can do to make sure the girls in Afghanistan have access to education and other humanitarian aid. If she can't respond now due to interpretation issues, if she could send us some information on that through a written submission, that would be great.

My next question is for Professor—

• (2115)

The Chair: Are the other members okay with this written submission?

Madam Kwan.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

For clarification, is it the intention of the committee to invite Ms. Rezayee back at another time? I understood that was what we were going to do.

The Chair: We can try, Madam Kwan, but if it's acceptable, we can ask for a written submission to the question. If you're okay with that, I think that would be perfect for now. If we find a spot, we can bring her in, but otherwise we're fully loaded.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Are you saying that if she sends written submissions, she would not be invited back?

The Chair: No. If we have a chance, we will, but if we can't find a chance, we won't, if that's okay with you.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Actually, it's not. I would like to have her back, because she's a witness I would really like to hear from.

The Chair: Madam Kwan, thank you.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: My request was for her to get us the information.

My next question is for Dr. Spencer-Churchill. I would like to ask him if he can explain what role Pakistan is playing in helping to get Afghans out of Afghanistan and in regard to their resettlement to other countries.

Going forward, what would his recommendations be for the role Canada can play to evacuate Afghans, especially as many Afghans don't have valid passports? What role can Canada play in getting them out of Afghanistan, and how can neighbouring countries help in those efforts?

Dr. Julian Spencer-Churchill : I have no specific information on the refugees; my background is obviously looking at the larger picture. I think Pakistan would be very amenable to helping Canada if Canada were to engage Pakistan, obviously with a price tag, for development. Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan is frequently exaggerated, but if it's tied to aid, Canada's had a very good experience at all levels of providing aid in Pakistan, and Pakistan is very likely to provide what Canada needs with the Taliban. Obviously, it means Canada will have to engage with the Taliban government and give them legitimacy. Unfortunately, I don't have more detail than that.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you for that.

I'll go to Mr. Spencer-Churchill really quickly to elaborate on my colleague's question.

Mr. Spencer-Churchill, you mentioned that you did a lot of research in Pakistan and in the region. Would you be able to provide some insights into how Pakistan or neighbouring countries can play a wider role in assisting our evacuation efforts? I know you can't really.... You said nothing specific in terms of refugees, but in terms of neighbouring countries, with your research in the region....

Dr. Julian Spencer-Churchill : Pakistan, as I mentioned in my comments, is an extremely narrow objective. The foreign aid community has given Afghanistan consistent assistance in avoiding addressing the main issue, which is recognition of the frontier. If anyone were to deliver that to Pakistan simply by opening a dialogue with Afghans, who have resisted this one policy request from Pakistan for a very long time, then Pakistan is very likely to normalize its relationship with Afghanistan and be a very co-operative conduit.

The main problem with Afghanistan and the west is that it's perceived to be a religiously intense country, where you have Takfiri political interests but no religious party has ever received more than 5% of the vote at the federal level. Not in the current Parliament, but in the previous legislature, about 20% of the legislators had dual citizenship with the U.S., Canada and the U.K. The body politic there is quite sympathetic with Liberal values. Obviously they're in a difficult spot for strategic reasons, but Pakistan is far easier to engage with than is frequently portrayed.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

I will go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for five minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

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

Thank you to the witnesses. Unfortunately, one witness had to leave us.

You're being here this evening is extremely important. I know it's getting late. Please don't blame the technicians or the interpreters. It's not their fault. They work very hard; our hats off to them.

Mr. Spencer-Churchill, I had a chance to review your submission to the committee. You don't pull any punches, you don't beat around the bush, no one is spared.

Should Canada endeavour to work with Pakistan more seriously when it comes to its relationship with Afghanistan? Is that the gist of your remarks this evening?

• (2120)

Dr. Julian Spencer-Churchill : Yes, that's right.

It's too bad that we didn't sign agreements with Pakistan on a range of issues during the 14 years we were in Afghanistan. The problem is that our development strategy didn't make sense from the get-go.

Now the challenge is evacuating people and reviving development efforts in Afghanistan. It can still be done, in my view. I repeat, I have a lot more development experience in Pakistan. During the Canadian International Development Agency days, we even had access to villages in the most culturally conservative areas of Pakistan. That's not the problem.

The problem is this idea that engaging directly with the Pakistani government is wrong. I have a different view. I have met with six of Canada's high commissioners in Pakistan, and they all agree that North America is culturally resistant to the idea of engaging with Pakistan.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: What you're telling us is important. We've heard from a number of witnesses who said that a Canadian presence on the ground, in Pakistan, would be beneficial and make it easier to bring refugees to Canada. What you're telling us is significant, then.

What are the benefits of a stronger diplomatic presence in Pakistan? What are the barriers?

Dr. Julian Spencer-Churchill : Are you asking about the benefits of being on the ground, in Pakistan?

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Yes, and I also want to know about the barriers. You brought up the cultural barriers, but are there others?

Dr. Julian Spencer-Churchill : The barriers flagged by the high commissioners include those created by our allies.

For example, initially, Canada had a program through which Pakistani officers would train with Canadian armed forces, just as they did with the French and British armed forces. That program was discontinued for more than 10 years, however, because of the Americans.

As a result of the program, Pakistan's army is now one of the organizations providing the most support for democracy. It may seem counterintuitive, but every time a coup d'état is staged to take control of the government, the army immediately tries to put it down. In almost every case, it gets involved in politics because civilian corruption jeopardizes the national defence budget. The army wants to fix that and get out of that corruption.

We had a significant influence in Pakistan through that organization, but the program was cancelled, before being renewed in 2015, if I'm not mistaken. Canada's approach is a bit schizophrenic: it doesn't know what to do and follows the advice of the wrong allies.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Basically, you're saying that, if the west wants to rebalance its relationship with Afghanistan, inevitably, Pakistan has to play a central role.

Dr. Julian Spencer-Churchill : Yes, always and on a number of levels, ranging from international refugees and security to intelligence and counterterrorism. All of it depends on Pakistan.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: The focus of this evening's meeting is the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. Logically, you're saying that Pakistan should play a central role and that Canada isn't doing what it should on that front.

Dr. Julian Spencer-Churchill : That's right, and Pakistani resistance is not the issue. I can give you examples of Pakistan's presence in Canada. The family of Pakistan's third-highest ranking commissioner lives in Oakville, Ontario. Pakistan's deputy chief of army staff, a former agriculture minister, lived in Alberta for a year. Canada has a lot of Pakistanis who hold high-ranking positions in Pakistan, but that escapes recognition.

• (2125)

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you for that information, Mr. Spencer-Churchill.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe. We appreciate that.

Without further ado, we're going to go to Madam Kwan for five minutes.

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

Thank you, witnesses, for your presentations. I would like to turn first to Ms. Hansen.

One of the issues we're faced with right now, of course, is that the Canadian government's refugee program for Afghans requires someone to be in a third country. However, many people are stuck in Afghanistan and are not able to get to a third country. From that perspective, what suggestions do you have so that we can help some of the people in Afghanistan to get to safety and be able to come to Canada?

Ms. Brandi Hansen: My response would be that we have a handful of intermediary countries, the third countries.... An operation like that would look like landing in Kabul.

The only thing I believe that's really holding us back from bringing people directly from Afghanistan to Canada is biometrics. However, if we're only dealing specifically with intermediary countries, we have Pakistan at the moment. We also have the UAE, and they have the humanitarian city there. The UAE has agreed to take individuals from Afghanistan if they have a flight from Afghanistan to the UAE, to their humanitarian city. They're willing to do that if the Canadian government is willing to start assisting with some of the backlog within the humanitarian city. At the moment, there are several individuals in Afghanistan who have onward travel to Canada. They've accepted travel. They have a clear path of travel, and all that's standing in the way is a flight to pick them up and transport them to the UAE. The biometrics are done there. There is a consulate there, a high commission, and then they go onward to Canada.

I believe the only thing standing in the way really is the flight and just for Canada to maybe say that we'll help with the backlog. You had all these groups that jumped in. You had these non-profit groups that jumped in, the evacuation groups. They pick people up, they drop them off in the UAE and say, "Bye." This is why we have a backlog there now.

We can use the humanitarian city. I have confirmation that we can use it. It's just a matter of maybe the IRCC saying, "Okay, we want categories. We'll take 100 orphans, 100 unaccompanied minors, 100 doctors," or whoever they want. As long as they see somebody helping them with the backlog at the humanitarian city in the UAE, we are able and allowed to use the UAE as an intermediary country.

How they would get there is through a non-profit organization such as ours, or perhaps another credible one in Canada, such as Aman Lara, or whoever has flights. If the government is paying for the flights, funding the flights, because the cost to run a flight is something.... It's very difficult to raise those kinds of funds.

My answer is that it's a matter of having the funding, picking them up in Afghanistan and transporting them to the UAE.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

You said that you have confirmation documentation. Would you be able to share that with the committee?

Ms. Brandi Hansen: I have confirmation through an organization in the UAE that runs the humanitarian city, and they control

95% to 98% of the flights that go into the UAE. I can certainly get you confirmation that the UAE is willing to take individuals to stay there as long as we are helping alleviate some of the capacity they have in the humanitarian city. I will get that for you.

Thank you.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

In terms of a third country, Pakistan is obviously a neighbouring country.

Mr. Spencer-Churchill, you indicated that it is an option as an alternative for the Canadian government to go to by way of helping Afghan [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]

In terms of the on-the-ground piece, Ms. Hansen, how do people, especially women who do not have a male accompanying them, get to that third country?

• (2130)

Ms. Brandi Hansen: The way they get through that is through organizations that have funding from the government or donations, who can afford to go there. They pick them up on the flight, and then they transport them to the intermediary country. A lot of these individuals are signed up with non-profit resettlement organizations or humanitarian organizations, and this is how they are located and manifested for flights. I'm happy to provide more information to you on that as well.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Madam Kwan, thank you.

On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank all of the witnesses, Mr. Spencer-Churchill, Ms. Hansen and Ms. Rezayee, for being here today.

I would also like to thank the interpreter for dealing with the situation that we had today.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, directly or indirectly, I didn't mean to blame the technicians. All I said is that we'll take assistance from them. On our behalf, I would like to thank the technicians as well for dealing with this. I know it's a stressful situation.

Please accept our big thank you, interpreters, technicians, technical team, Madam Clerk, and of course the witnesses who were here today as our guests.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Chair, I never thought that for a second. Don't worry.

[*English*]

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Okay, all the best.

The meeting is now adjourned.

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