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Chair: Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal



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• (1830)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Surrey—Newton, Lib.)): Good evening. I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number seven of the House of Commons Special Committee on Afghanistan, created pursuant to the House order of December 8, 2021.

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 the public health authorities, as well as the directive 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 that all members are able to participate fully. Our witnesses should be aware that translation in English or French is available through the globe icon at the bottom of their screens. Please select it now, so that it's easier for members later on.

Before we begin, I want to flag a change in schedule to the honourable members. Unfortunately, the Minister of International Development, the honourable Harjit Sajjan, is not available on April 11, as we had reported. He's available to appear on April 4, along with the departmental officials.

On April 4, we will have Sean Fraser, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship and officials for the first hour, and Minister Sajjan and the officials for the second hour.

Also, the Minister of National Defence is unable to appear before the committee on April 4, as proposed in the work plan, but is available to appear on May 9. The minister would appear for the first hour, with the Department of National Defence and Canadian Armed Forces officials appearing for the full two hours.

If everyone is in agreement, the clerk can confirm this with the minister's office. Do any of the members have any objection? I see none.

Madam Clerk, I respectfully ask that you follow up with the ministers. Thank you.

Now, on behalf of all committee members, I would like to welcome our witnesses for our first panel. This evening, we have Alison MacLean and Djawid Taheri. From the Tenth Church refugee

ministry, we have Katherine Moloney, a representative for Afghan families.

Welcome to each of you. You will have five minutes for opening remarks. Please make sure that you respect the time, so the members can have their time.

It is my understanding that Ms. MacLean has a video. That will be part of your five minutes, Ms. MacLean.

Now let's start with Ms. MacLean. Go ahead for five minutes, if you're ready.

Ms. Alison MacLean (Documentarian, Producer of *Burkas2Bullets*, As an Individual): Thank you very much for allowing me to speak with the group.

I have spent a great deal of time in Afghanistan. I did four combat camera embeds with six NATO countries. I am currently helping to sponsor a number of families, two of which are in Pakistan. I have been struggling, of course, with IRCC's capabilities, etc.

I'd like to start off with a two-minute clip from *Burkas2Bullets*, which I want to show to bring everyone up to speed on Afghanistan and the reason we're here this evening.

I will finish up with the final three minutes. It's just two minutes, so we can start it now, please.

[Video presentation]

Thank you very much.

One of the reasons why I wanted to show that clip is the continual presence of ISIS-K and the attacks at the airport, which of course you know about, that happened in Kabul. My two families were at the airport at the time. Luckily, they were not injured. Sadly, I had to have them go back to the airport to attempt a military airlift, which they were not able to get on to, due to the Taliban blocking the terminal.

My main presence here this evening is because the so-called operation Afghan safety program has not expedited the refugee requests. IRCC is understaffed. We are not able to get families, who have been in flight for seven months in third countries, access to Canadian embassies, because the staff are overwhelmed with requests.

I have two families, as I said, who are being privately sponsored, and we have great help from Canadians and Rotarians, etc. Many of you know that Canada arrived late to the evacuation and left early with planes half full. We left our fixers and translators in limbo. The families I am currently supporting and helping are fixers I worked with for years. They're in flight because they are on Taliban lists.

Canada has left them stranded. The Taliban have Canadian blood on their hands. I do not believe we should be negotiating with them. Qatar should be doing a great deal more, and the UAE countries. I do not support Canada sending money to Afghanistan.

● (1835)

The Taliban are using starvation techniques to control the population—a standard war crime—and this is one of the reasons why we need to support IRCC more. We need to get money into the immigration program so that families such as the ones I've been helping for seven months, with Rotarians' help, will be able to get into Canada.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. MacLean, and thank you for your courage and your documentary.

Now we'll go to a lawyer by profession: Mr. Djawid Taheri.

Please go ahead for five minutes.

● (1840)

Mr. Djawid Taheri (Lawyer, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair and honourable members of the committee.

I appear before you as an Afghan Canadian lawyer who himself once was welcomed to Canada as a refugee, back in the 1980s. That was when Afghanistan was actually invaded by the then Soviet Red Army, much like the tragedy we witness in Ukraine today.

As a refugee lawyer, in the past 20 years I have had the honour of listening to some of the most horrific and heart-wrenching accounts narrated by Afghan refugees fleeing their homeland. Over the years, my colleagues and I have come to learn of the Taliban's propensity to some of the most horrendous violence imaginable, and how those targeted by the group end up being tortured and killed on the basis of no more than a mere suspicion.

Therefore, when Taliban forces took power in Kabul and entered the city on August 15 of last year, we had no doubt as to the terrifying future and atrocities that awaited those who stood for democracy, freedom, gender equality and human rights.

In the weeks that followed, my colleagues and I worked around the clock fielding hundreds of calls and emails from Afghans seeking resettlement in Canada in order to save their lives. We wrote letters to the government and, in the aftermath of the Taliban takeover, we attended several high-level meetings with ministers of the government and officials. There, we put forth recommendations and discussed Canada's response. We also found ourselves on the receiving end of a flurry of inquiries from the community as to the specifics of Canada's response and how the government intended to help.

However, once Canada announced its pledge to resettle 20,000 vulnerable Afghans, which was later increased to 40,000, the im-

pediments appeared insurmountable to those of us in the legal community. For one thing, requirements for Afghans to be in a third country clearly shut the door to those targeted individuals who were still inside the country and moving from safe house to safe house to save their lives and evade the Taliban.

Furthermore, the eligibility criteria for the special humanitarian program turned out to be extremely narrow, excluding many at-risk groups, including women fearing gender-based persecution. Under the program, once prospective refugees somehow do make it to a third country, they are required to obtain UNHCR acceptance, UNHCR referral and, basically, refugee recognition by the UNHCR host country. The problem is that in none of the countries bordering Afghanistan is the UNHCR actually doing that. It's not available.

Also, none of the neighbouring countries have their own system of refugee determination. Tajikistan was the only one that was doing it before, but post-August 2021 they stopped, because I guess they were overwhelmed by the flood of refugees that ended up in that country.

While Canada's special resettlement program is set up with good intentions, in my respectful, humble opinion it is unable, in its current form, to respond to the crisis in Afghanistan in an effective and timely manner. What's more, the UNHCR prerequisite also makes it impossible for Canadians to resettle Afghan refugees through the programs that are designed for private sponsorship programs, such as the group of five private sponsorships.

There are currently literally hundreds of groups in Canada that are ready, able and willing to sponsor Afghan refugees from third countries, but they cannot do that, because of this particular requirement for the UNHCR recognition. This prerequisite is prohibitive and must be waived, as was done in the case of Syria back in 2015.

Having said this, however, when we look at the government and how the government is utilizing simple and expeditious measures to facilitate the resettlement of Ukrainians to Canada, one starts to wonder: Why isn't this possible for Afghan refugees? Since August 2021, only 8,500 Afghans have been resettled in Canada out of the 40,000 pledged. For Ukrainians, we have resettled over 7,000 in the first three months alone, since January.

● (1845)

By comparison, Canada resettled 25,000 Syrian refugees in a matter of about 100 days, meaning that when there's a will, there always is a way.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Taheri. We appreciate your presentation.

We now go to the Tenth Church refugee ministry's representative for Afghan families, Katherine Moloney, for five minutes.

Please go ahead.

Ms. Katherine Moloney (Representative for Afghan Families, Tenth Church): Mr. Chair and honourable members, I'm immensely grateful for the opportunity to speak with you today.

I'm here representing Tenth Church refugee ministry and the community of over 150 Afghan refugee claimants we serve.

I am from Australia. My husband Samih is from Syria. We met in Lebanon and now call Canada home.

Samih is a grateful recipient of Canada's open-handed generosity to refugees. While I have never been a refugee, as a survivor of torture, I have an abiding respect for Canada, which is internationally recognized as a place of refuge and welcome for those fleeing conflict and crisis. Indeed, today is a monumental day for us. It is the three-year anniversary of Samih's arrival in Canada. He is now eligible for citizenship.

Samih and I serve two refugee ministries in British Columbia, where we live. He and I have formed and facilitate multiple refugee settlement teams to welcome refugees currently held in Australian immigration detention. We do this with organizational partners Mosaic and Ads Up Canada. We also serve the Tenth Church refugee ministry, which provides extensive settlement services and social support to Afghan refugee claimants. Indeed, some of our closest friends here in Canada are members of the Afghan community.

However, at the outset I want to acknowledge that most of my Afghan friends are themselves unable to appear before the special committee because of the extreme risk doing so would pose to their loved ones in Afghanistan. I come, therefore, with deep humility and speak out of relationships of respect, reciprocity and responsibility.

I refer you first and foremost to the document entitled "Defining Family", which contains the voices of Afghans in Canada as compiled by Journey Home Community Association and Tenth Church refugee ministry. This is the message the Afghan community wish the Government of Canada to hear. Building upon this document is a second, which contains recommendations for a coherent and consistent family reunification policy specific to the Afghan crisis.

Canada defines family members as one's spouse and dependent children. This narrow definition places Afghan families at risk. Afghan families typically live together as multi-generational households, and thus immediate family includes parents, siblings and children of any age. As well as parents and unmarried siblings, other dependants include those in the household and those who are financially dependent.

The Afghan definition of "family" matters because the Taliban target family members. The Taliban hold an entire family responsible for the actions of one family member and operate under a revenge model, which requires the life of a family member in place of a person who has evaded capture. Thus, whole families face deferred risk for the actions of one family member, including a Canadian-based family member.

There is, however, current precedent for expanding the definition of "family". The special family reunification program offers permanent residence for extended family members of a subset of former Afghan interpreters. Under this program, extended family includes parents, siblings and children of any age. Moreover, Afghans who assisted the Canadian government can apply to resettle their de facto dependants, where de facto dependants are defined as those who live in the same household or who are financially or emotionally

dependent. Both of these initiatives more adequately reflect the reality of Afghan families.

Addressing the current policy gap requires an expansion of the special family reunification program beyond interpreters. Specifically, the expanded special family reunification program should offer permanent residence for the Afghan extended family members of Canadian citizens and permanent residents. In exceptional circumstances, and where there is evidence of risk, the expanded special family reunification program should include de facto dependants. To ensure fairness, the processing of applications should prioritize those with evidence of risk and/or the presence of additional risk factors.

In sum, Canada needs a streamlined extended family reunification policy to respond to the Afghan crisis. Expanding the definition of "family" for Afghan family reunification demonstrates both compassion for and cultural sensitivity to the particular risks experienced by Afghans.

Thank you.

● (1850)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Moloney. Thank you for your compassionate work in the community.

We'll start with the honourable members.

First and foremost, we'll start with my own member of Parliament, Madame Findlay, for six minutes, please.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay (South Surrey—White Rock, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I don't know if that makes me responsible for everything you say and do, but I'll be careful about that. It's a good thing we're friends.

Alison, it's very good to see you again. I know that you've gone four times to Afghanistan and filmed there, at great risk to yourself.

I have some questions. I know you generally look through a woman-focused lens. Are women who served in the Afghan republic security forces being targeted by the Taliban?

Ms. Alison MacLean: Yes. This is one of my disappointments in Canada. I watched Afghan policewomen and military women rise and develop in Afghanistan over a 10-year period. Sadly, Afghan policewomen are being hunted down and executed. Most recently, a former policewoman, who was eight months pregnant, was dragged out of her home and executed in front of her children and neighbours. The Taliban continue the reprisal killings. I have families in hiding, both in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and they are on Taliban hit lists.

This is what's happening right now. The women are being targeted. Any woman who worked in the security forces is at risk.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: When you were embedded in Afghanistan, what signs, if any, did you see of the Taliban's resurgence and the republic's weakness to stop it?

Ms. Alison MacLean: I documented the Taliban extensively. Particularly in 2010, I was with Canada and the U.S. forces. In 2012, 2014 and 2016, I was supported by four other countries, primarily Germany. I was all over Afghanistan.

The Taliban were and still are, in my opinion, in lockstep with ISIS-K. ISIS-K is just an extension of the Taliban. NATO forces and the intelligence services, Canadian included, for whatever reason chose to ignore how serious the Taliban resurgence was.

In 2016, ironically, I went in with Russian forces into Kunduz. They were able to push back, with NATO forces, the Taliban resurgence in 2016. It took all of less than a week to do that. I was with six different countries on that mission.

However, after that moment, they should have realized that the Taliban were gaining regular footholds, and it was ignored. I don't understand why the intelligence communities, worldwide and NATO-wide, ignored journalists who were on the ground and warning about this issue.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you.

What impact do you think the absence of female police officers under the Taliban regime will have on public safety and women's rights in Afghanistan going forward?

Ms. Alison MacLean: Going forward, we know already that 14-year-old girls are being taken from their homes and forced into marriage. I know personally of many cases of Afghan young girls being traded to Pakistan Taliban. Not having Afghan policewomen to manage domestic violence.... The Afghan policewomen in the past were able to manage and work with young girls and women. That no longer exists. It's tragic. As well, with education, of course, the schools are closed again after grade six.

• (1855)

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Do I have any more time, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: You have two minutes.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Can you share with us the perspective of those women you've worked with and the women you still have some contact with regarding why the Afghan republic collapsed and how the international community should respond?

Do they feel heard, or do they feel lost right now?

Ms. Alison MacLean: No, actually one of the most exciting things for me in documenting the rise of Afghan women in general, as well as police and military women, is that I saw a confidence that I don't think has existed in other generations. The women I'm in continual contact with now.... I am helping to support five families with the help of Rotary and private citizens. We're supporting a number of women and girls in Afghanistan. They do feel betrayed. They are also very concerned about the international community even considering supporting the Taliban.

Qatar, unfortunately, in my opinion [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] one of the architects of the destabilization of Afghanistan. They should be doing more to push education. Qatar reveres education. Girls are allowed to have education. They should be applying pressure on the Taliban.

The Chair: You have 25 seconds.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Is there anything else you want to share with us, Alison?

Ms. Alison MacLean: I'd like to share my concern over the failure of operation Afghan safety. I have two fixers and their families

at risk in Pakistan who cannot go back to Afghanistan. They're on a list. I am struggling trying to get them to Canada, although we have housing for them and private sponsorship. This is a failure. It's unacceptable. They kept me alive.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Findlay.

Now we'll go to Mr. Sidhu for six minutes.

Mr. Sidhu, go ahead, please.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu (Brampton East, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'd like to welcome all the witnesses here with us tonight. Thank you for sharing your insights.

I'd like to go to Ms. Moloney first. You mentioned streamlining processes for family reunification. I know on this committee we try to be very forward-looking and I think as a committee we ought to think forward and learn from the past.

What processes do you think should be in place to help streamline things to help with family reunification? Please take your time.

Ms. Katherine Moloney: I'm not sure if you have received a copy of the policy recommendations that I sent out. In that document, I've detailed how we can potentially bring these processes together.

First, I think we already have some really great programs, which just need to be expanded. That would mean that the small subset of recipients for the current special family reunification program would be broadened to include all Canadian citizens and permanent residents who have extended family at risk in Afghanistan. That very program that is already in existence could be widened for all Afghan Canadians.

We can also learn from the other program that is for Afghans who assisted the Canadian government. This program is a wider program and allows de facto dependants—and de facto is quite widely defined. In certain circumstances, particularly where there's established risk, aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews who are specifically at risk should be considered under the same extended family reunification program.

I do propose that, because we need to have a streamlined and fair approach, we consider using the risk factors that are already in use by the Canadian government, which are particular to the special humanitarian program. The five categories listed are women leaders, human rights defenders, journalists, persecuted religious and ethnic minorities, and LGBTI people, but also Afghans who assisted the Canadian government.

Like the rest of the programs for Afghanistan, we need to prioritize the processing of family reunification.

Thank you.

• (1900)

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you for that.

Mr. Taheri, would you like to add something here?

Mr. Djawid Taheri: I'm in agreement with Ms. Moloney. Family reunification can be done quite easily. The definition of family, the way it is currently done in Canada, is quite restrictive. We're a very small group of individuals who actually fall under the word "family", whereas, as was stated earlier, the family in the context of the Afghan culture is quite big. Even siblings are not allowed to come, let alone aunts and uncles. We're talking about some of the people who actually live together. They were dependent on each other at home.

Those people who have the means are in Canada. They were accepted as refugees, or they are permanent residents. They are unable to assist their family members. There has to be a way to do this because, by virtue of their connection to the west, these individuals and their family members would be targeted and are being targeted in Afghanistan.

I have a lot of refugee clients from Afghanistan who arrived here in the past six or seven months and have been accepted, but they can't sleep at night because ultimately they worry about their very close, immediate family members who are still in Afghanistan, and nothing can be done to bring them to safety.

Mr. Maninder Sidhu: Thank you for sharing your insight, Mr. Taheri.

Ms. MacLean, I'd like to ask you a question. You shared with us the documentary on the wonderful work we're doing with the female officers in Afghanistan. You mentioned that you really don't want to see any type of money being sent to Afghanistan, and I'm well aware of why.

What is your belief on sending humanitarian aid? How do you think humanitarian aid should be delivered in Afghanistan? As you know, there is a focus with gender-based violence, as you mentioned, and we want to make sure that we support women and children.

I just wanted to hear your thoughts on that.

Ms. Alison MacLean: I absolutely support a humanitarian aid corridor that Canada funds and manages. I do not believe sending money into Afghanistan is a good thing. However, I do believe in sending, for instance, Doctors Without Borders and the Red Cross. Our Canadian military is more than capable of doing a humanitarian aid drop that Canada manages and controls. There are many people, like myself, who know the country. I've actually been there six times—four times with combat embeds. The humanitarian aspect is essential, but we cannot be providing money to the Taliban.

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

We'll go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Go ahead, for six minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

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

I thank all the witnesses who are here to participate in our study, which is extremely important.

To conduct this study, we decided to focus on the humanitarian crisis. There are obviously lessons to be learned from the manage-

ment of the crisis. The members of the committee decided that there should be something to learn from this. What can we do, now and in the very short term, to help the Afghan people, who are currently experiencing a tragedy of immeasurable proportions?

We have been conducting this study for some time now, and I have had the opportunity to ask some witnesses what the committee report's top priority recommendations should be in order to make a difference. They named several: suspending administrative formalities such as forcing someone to fill out a form on the Internet when they are in mortal danger; not having to have refugee status to sponsor someone from Canada; and having a diplomatic presence on the ground, in Pakistan and elsewhere, to help Afghans come to Canada.

I'd like you to tell us what you think.

Do you support these recommendations? What is your top priority? It is extremely important that we know this before we write our report.

I would like Mr. Taheri to answer the questions first. After that, Ms. Moloney and Ms. MacLean can answer them. I would like to hear from all three of you.

• (1905)

[*English*]

Mr. Djawid Taheri: Honourable member, my first priority is ensuring that the recognition under UNHCR for each refugee be waived, be eliminated, as was done in the past. In fact, this is not something that was in the law in the past. It's only in the past decade or so that this came to be.

We've always made exceptions in certain circumstances. The government has to treat this situation as an emergency. We need help today, not two years from today.

The government has indicated that the program is going to be implemented in the next two to three years. That's too long. We have the capacity to do this a lot sooner. We don't need to have people stuck in third countries and a never-ending saga of a determination process. We could have them just the way we are doing it with the Ukrainian community. We can bring them here and then process the paperwork in Canada. That can be done. People can be issued temporary visas to come to Canada. Instead of the standard six months, we can extend it to a year or two years. In the interim, the biometrics can be done. Whatever needs to be done in terms of paperwork, there will be support here for those potential refugees and they can get the help they need and the protection they require.

Given the circumstances and country conditions, a prima facie situation as far as refugees are concerned, we have to recognize that these people need the help of countries such as Canada. To allow more time to pass, we're exposing a lot more people to risk, and in my opinion, that's not okay.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: What you just said is interesting.

Ladies, I'm going to let you speak, don't worry.

Mr. Taheri, what explains the disparity between the structure set up in the Ukrainian crisis and the one set up in the Afghan crisis? Shouldn't there be standard measures to speed up the processing of applications during a humanitarian crisis, regardless of where it occurs on the globe?

[English]

Mr. Djawid Taheri: I guess Canada is learning from its mistakes of the past seven or eight months. It's learning how to handle an emergency situation, and that's good. However, at the same time, we should not forget the initial crisis. We can't just start something and then move on to the next crisis. I can't agree with the fact that....

Ukrainians are in need, just as Afghans are. I myself am a victim of such an invasion from the same country, back in the 1970s and 1980s. Therefore, I understand and I feel for those people, but at the same time, we should also recognize that Afghanistan has been in turmoil and conflict for the past four decades, non-stop. I think we all owe it to those people—

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I totally agree.

[English]

Mr. Djawid Taheri:—particularly the ones who have sacrificed their lives in the past 10 years for the cause of democracy and human rights. They have dedicated themselves, committed to and supported our mission.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I don't want to cut you off, Mr. Taheri.

[English]

The Chair: You have 50 seconds left.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: However, I would like to leave the floor to the other witnesses.

Mr. Chair, do I have any time left?

[English]

The Chair: You have 40 seconds.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Taheri, I'll come back to you afterwards, in any case.

Ladies, I would like to hear your priorities.

[English]

Mr. Djawid Taheri: Absolutely.

The Chair: You still have 30 seconds.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Ms. Moloney and Ms. MacLean, can you both name a priority?

Mr. Taheri, I will come back to you afterwards.

[English]

Ms. Katherine Moloney: Thank you for the question.

My number one priority on behalf of Afghans living in Canada is that their extended family is able to join them to be safe here in Canada. That is especially for parents, children of any age and siblings, but also, where there is substantiated risk, other dependants as well.

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

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Ms. Maclean, I'll get back to you later.

[English]

The Chair: Now we'll go to Ms. Kwan for six minutes, please.

Go ahead.

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

Thank you to all the witnesses for their presentations.

You're absolutely correct, in the sense that when Canada undertook the Syrian refugee initiative, we waived the refugee determination requirements. However, that is not being done in this instance. In fact, any of the refugee sponsorships from the group of five process also would not get the waiver of the refugee determination process. From that perspective, it means that people would not be able to get out within the 40,000 that the government wants to resettle.

I hear that this is your number one priority for the government to undertake. Why do you think the government is not proceeding with it?

I actually don't understand it. I've talked to the minister, it feels like a million times, raising this issue, but they're refusing to acknowledge this and move forward. Do you have any speculation as to why that is?

• (1910)

The Chair: Whom did you want to question?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm going to ask all the witnesses, if I could, please.

The Chair: Okay. We'll start with Ms. MacLean.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Sure. We'll start with Ms. MacLean.

Maybe you can give a quick answer so that we can move through the process with others.

Ms. Alison MacLean: Thank you.

I believe that IRCC is completely understaffed. Our embassies, particularly in Pakistan, need to have more staff. They're overwhelmed. I have two families who have waited two months in Pakistan just for one interview, and that has not occurred.

It is about staffing. We need to increase the numbers. IRCC is overwhelmed, and they are not able to process the files.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay.

Go ahead, Mr. Taheri.

Mr. Djawid Taheri: To me, it's mind-boggling that the government is so firm in not waiving this requirement. Back in August, I actually wrote an open letter to the Prime Minister and the other ministers involved. It was submitted to them. That was one of my recommendations right at the outset.

Subsequently, at every meeting we've had, this issue was raised, and we were promised that likely they would think about the technicalities and get back to us, but so far it hasn't been done. It would make so much sense, and it would make the work of resettling Afghans a lot easier.

Most important, as I stated, there are a lot of Canadian groups in Canada who are willing, ready and able to actually undertake all the work that is needed to settle these refugees in Canada, including the costs—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Mr. Djawid Taheri: —but they can't do it because of this.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you. I'm sorry. I don't mean to cut you off, but I need to get to the next witness.

I will go to Ms. Kandalaft.

The Chair: It's Ms. Moloney.

Ms. Katherine Moloney: Yes. That's not official yet. I'm going by my maiden name here.

I think the reason why Canada is not issuing temporary visas for Afghans where they are for Ukrainians is that there is a perception of badness. I think there is a fear that Afghans fleeing the Taliban may in fact be Taliban, and while that is not substantiated, I think that's the fear.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'd like to follow up with you, Katherine, if I may.

One of the key issues, of course, is about family reunification, which you have illustrated and pointed out. In fact, I'm a product of Canada's immigration process, whereby extended family could sponsor someone to come. That's what happened to me and my family back in the 1970s, yet successive governments have done away with this program, and now we're only bringing it forward on a selective basis to selected individuals.

Is your number one priority to say to the government that they at least should expand the extended family reunification sponsorship program to Afghans as well?

Ms. Katherine Moloney: Absolutely. That is the message that the Afghan community is pushing for the government. Yes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay.

Now, one of the issues we've heard from other witnesses is this. Many people are in Afghanistan. They can't get out. The requirement for the program is that you have to be in a third country, but they can't get out to a third country. Other witnesses have indicated, though, that the Canadian government can deploy the military and other resources to help Afghans get to safety and into Canada. What are your thoughts on that?

We'll start with you, Katherine, and then we'll go up the list.

• (1915)

Ms. Katherine Moloney: Thank you.

With regard specifically to families of Afghan Canadians here, I think that if they are in receipt of a visa, then they are able to cross a border to Pakistan and get to Canada, so the Canadian government is able to offer safety to people who are in Afghanistan and are at risk.

The Chair: You have 20 seconds.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I have 20 seconds, so I will go to Ms. MacLean, if I could.

Ms. Alison MacLean: Actually, I have helped three families, first to leave Afghanistan legally through visas and passports, and then to have them moved to Pakistan, because Canada does not have a presence and would not allow interviews for my refugee families from Iran, which I think is also a mistake. Iran was safe, and cheaper. Pakistan is overwhelmed. We have to pay \$250 every two months to get two-month visas. Pakistan is not allowing longer visas for the refugees, so it's a cheap cash crunch.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kwan. That is your time.

Now we'll go to Mr. Ruff for five minutes, please.

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

My thanks to the witnesses. I don't even know where to start here. You've reaffirmed, in the bad sense, just how bad things are. I had two tours in Afghanistan. I know first-hand what the Taliban is capable of doing. I, myself, and you and others had been speaking out about this before Kabul even fell. As you said, Ms. MacLean, it was shameful that we arrived late and we were out early.

I just want all the witnesses to again highlight—because I think your testimony did it phenomenally—why it's so important to get them out. I know some of you have refugees or Afghans who are already out of the country, but I really want you to, again, highlight briefly the risk faced by these former Afghan women police officers, former Afghan police, etc.

Would you like to start, Ms. Moloney?

Ms. Katherine Moloney: Sure. I don't know if there's time, but I would love to give a couple of examples.

I would like to give two representative examples of families who could be helped if Canada introduces an expanded special family reunification program specific to the Afghan crisis. At the outset, I note that I use these examples with the permission of the Canadian-based family members of both families and I'll refrain from using names of people or organizations, which could identify these families.

The Canadian-based family member of family A is an absolute delight. She's a social butterfly with a bubbly personality and a beautiful heart. She is beloved by all. She works two jobs and in addition to her own family, provides financial support to multiple families in Afghanistan. When she was living in Afghanistan, the Canadian-based member of family A held a senior role supporting literary programs throughout the country. She undertook this at great personal risk and in time was forced to flee for her life. Because she is a high-profile female, her family faces deferred risk of Taliban reprisals. They are also at risk due to their own activities. Indeed, this is a family of prominent women's rights activists and human rights defenders. The sisters in particular face extreme risk. The younger sister has had her activism televised nationally.

Since taking over in August, the Taliban have forcibly entered and searched the family's home. Mercifully, the family narrowly escaped through a window. Around the same time, the Taliban issued the entire family with an order of execution. The family are now in hiding. Believing that they would increase their risk of capture if they remain together, they have separated in the hope that at least half of them will survive. All face extreme and immediate risk of execution if captured.

With family B, the Canadian-based member of family B is a really great guy. At first he may come across as rather serious and formal, and he certainly is a structured thinker who ponders matters deeply, but he also has a brilliant dry sense of humour and he's well respected in the community. He is a senior professional who works a second job so that he can provide for his Afghan-based family. My husband and I really enjoy spending time with him.

The Canadian-based member of family B was engaged in economic development when he was in Afghanistan, but fled to Canada when his work made him a target of Taliban reprisals. He is now a responsible Canadian citizen. His Afghan-based family are passionate about nation building, community development and the defence of human rights. The father served for almost two decades as a leader in the community and a high-profile social activist who even co-founded a non-profit organization. Tragically, the father was murdered by the Taliban in 2020.

The female-headed household remaining in Afghanistan comprises the mother and three adult siblings. The three siblings, who have all served in the non-profit organization, are well-known women's rights activists and human rights defenders. In response, the Taliban have issued a letter to the non-profit that condemns all workers to death. Moreover, the daughter, who has additional vulnerabilities, is now facing an imminent forced marriage by an influential family who have the support of the Taliban. Her brothers have been threatened with death if they don't hand the sister over to a marriage that is against her wishes. Because of the multiple and immediate threats to their lives, the two brothers are now in hiding and living separate from their mother and sister, who are housebound. Their situation remains extremely precarious.

● (1920)

Mr. Alex Ruff: Thanks, Ms. Moloney, for highlighting the importance of getting these people out of Afghanistan now.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ruff.

We'll go to Mr. Baker for five minutes.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Yvan Baker (Etobicoke Centre, Lib.): Thanks very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all of our witnesses for their testimony here today.

Ms. Moloney, I want to follow up, if I may, on what you were just saying. You were talking about family B. Forgive me if I misunderstood the specific circumstances, but I'm wondering if you could tell us a little bit about how we could help family B, in your view.

Ms. Katherine Moloney: In my view, this family, and all Afghan families who are at risk, should have the capacity to be resettled in Canada.

The current situation is that they cannot be reunified because they are parents and siblings, and therefore they don't fall under the classification of family reunification. If we were to extend the definition of families for the Afghan crisis, specific to family reunification, this family and other families in similar situations could find safety in Canada and be supported by their Canadian-based family member.

Mr. Yvan Baker: Ms. Moloney, are family B that you were describing currently in Afghanistan?

Ms. Katherine Moloney: They are, yes.

Mr. Yvan Baker: If the change you're talking about were made, tell me a little bit about the process. Could this family safely leave Afghanistan?

Ms. Katherine Moloney: They could legally, or illegally, leave, but it would substantially help if the Canadian government were to issue a temporary visa for this family.

Mr. Yvan Baker: What I'm wondering about—and I'm genuinely asking for your help just to understand—is how they would make their way out of Afghanistan. I'm thinking they would need to make their way to a bordering country. Am I right? Help me understand that aspect of things.

Ms. Katherine Moloney: That's correct.

Of course, the travel would be dangerous. There are people actively searching for them to kill them, but it would be possible. Neighbouring countries have the authority to let families through if they have a visa. That would secure their onward journey.

Mr. Yvan Baker: If the family doesn't have the visa and chooses to leave to go to a bordering country, what happens if they arrive at that border checkpoint without that visa?

● (1925)

Ms. Katherine Moloney: There is substantial risk to that family. Even if they were to make it out to a neighbouring country, some countries are removing Afghan refugees after a maximum of three months. If they were removed back to Afghanistan, they would face incredible risk, because they would be handed back directly to the Taliban. Many families are actually not fleeing because of the risk of being sent back after a short period of time. They need to secure a safe passage to countries like Canada so that they can make the onward journey.

Mr. Yvan Baker: I'm going to continue to pursue this aspect of what families would have to go through. You've spoken a little bit about the countries they would be travelling to. What about the Taliban in Afghanistan? Are there exit requirements? How would that work? How does that aspect of things work? What do people have to go through to leave Afghanistan?

We've talked about the journey, but there is also the situation at the border. Is the Taliban guarding the border? What does that process look like?

The Chair: Please be brief. You have 20 seconds.

Ms. Katherine Moloney: There is risk both to get to the border and at the border. It's a harrowing journey for people to make, knowing that they are on hit lists, that they are being hunted and that if they are identified they can be killed. It's an incredibly difficult journey, but one that many families choose to make in the hope that they can be resettled.

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

For two and a half minutes, we'll go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Please go ahead.

[Translation]

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

What was just said was interesting. Many of you have mentioned that when these people cross the border to seek refuge, their nightmare is not over. Each neighbouring country has its own rules. From what I understand, they then appeal to local organizations or authorities.

Wouldn't their safety be better assured if Canada had representatives there? Ms. Moloney, I think you could answer that question.

[English]

Mr. Djawid Taheri: Yes.

Ms. Katherine Moloney: Sorry, I think my colleague wants to respond.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Yes, go ahead, Mr. Taheri. You seem to want to answer this question.

[English]

Mr. Djawid Taheri: Thank you.

Yes, definitely. The problem with the third countries is that after a certain amount of time, they will be deported. They would not extend their stay in that country. While they're waiting, they will be sent back and basically handed to the Taliban.

In fact, I had one individual, a single mom with two children, who fled to Iran. They were deported from Iran, and luckily they were able to bribe some people at the border so that they wouldn't be handed to the Taliban. They still managed to get in the country and to somehow get back. They slipped out of the country back to Pakistan, from where they managed to get out.

As mentioned, it's a very harrowing journey. It's very dangerous and fraught with all kinds of risk. If there was a possibility of helping people while in the country and providing them with some kind

of mechanism to get out, using temporary visas and so on, it would be unbelievably amazing. It would save so much time and so many lives, for sure.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: That would require Canadian personnel on the ground in these third countries. That's what you are asking for, that's what you would like to see in the recommendations of the report. Do I have this right?

[English]

Mr. Djawid Taheri: That's correct.

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

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: We'll now go to Ms. Kwan, for two and a half minutes, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I have two quick questions.

One is, when you speak of the temporary residence visa, do you mean a temporary residence permit, which is something that the minister can authorize and issue to individual families who are particularly at risk? If the minister did that, they would have a travel document to try to get to safety.

I just want that clarified, and then I have another question to quickly ask.

I'll first go to Ms. Moloney, and then I'll go to Mr. Taheri.

• (1930)

Ms. Katherine Moloney: That is absolutely the case.

I have applied for ministerial interventions and I am awaiting a response.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: How long ago was that?

Ms. Katherine Moloney: For these two families, actually....

I think we need to roll this out a little bit more widely than the minister having to authorize all of these. It needs to be a more streamlined approach.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'll just jump in very quickly.

With previous humanitarian crises that have happened.... The minister actually has the authority to broadly authorize temporary residence permits for all the people in that particular country to access. It's not a one-by-one process.

This is what you mean, for the government and the minister to issue temporary residence permits broadly to Afghans who need to get to safety. Is that right?

Ms. Katherine Moloney: Absolutely.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Mr. Taheri, could you respond very quickly? I think I'm almost out of time.

Mr. Djawid Taheri: That's absolutely the case.

The minister does have the authority to authorize a TRP with respect to a particular population, in terms of emergency settlement or situations of crisis such as this. TRV or TRP, travel visas or permits, either way, would assist Afghans to get to Canada and follow up with the rest of the process while in this country.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The problem with TRVs is the arduous process. Even with the Ukrainian situation, people have to get the biometrics and do all of that stuff, which is hugely problematic. I think TRPs would be more expedited.

As it stands now, people who've submitted a request for assistance to get to safety, such as the cases of your two families, Ms. Moloney.... You submit an application, and then you don't hear anything. That's what I'm seeing right now. People are not getting a response at all from the government. You're not getting a file number, a G number, and you're stuck in the system in the middle of nowhere.

Is that correct?

Ms. Katherine Moloney: Absolutely, it's a significant limitation.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

On behalf of all the members of the committee, I want to thank all the witnesses for being here today, and for their contributions.

We'll suspend for a few minutes to prepare for the second panel.

• (1930) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1935)

The Chair: I call this meeting back to order.

I would like to welcome our second panel this evening. On behalf of the committee members, I welcome Sally Armstrong, journalist by profession; and the former chairperson of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, Sima Samar, who is not here yet. From Human Rights Watch, we have Heather Barr, associate director.

On behalf of the committee, I welcome all of you.

You will each have five minutes. Please respect the time.

We'll begin with Ms. Armstrong, for five minutes, please.

Ms. Sally Armstrong (Journalist, As an Individual): Thank you.

[Translation]

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you tonight.

[English]

I think we are among the last to speak and I'm pretty pleased about that. I don't usually like being last, but in the last few days, we have managed to see evidence, very clear evidence, that the Taliban have not moderated. They are the same hateful, misogynist, mostly illiterate thugs that they were when I first met them soon after they took over in 1996.

I am a journalist. I covered them then, and I have covered Afghanistan ever since, so I'm very pleased to have this opportunity

to address your committee tonight to bring facts as I know them that you can deliberate.

I have three points to make: the Taliban, the Afghans and the Canadians.

First, we have the Taliban. They were born out of a system that was created by misery and poverty. They were educated at madrasahs in Pakistan, where they learned hatred and misogyny. They couldn't govern then, when they took over in 1996, and then cannot govern now, but this time, they sold themselves as "moderated" and they did that to a world that had been coached by former president of the United States Donald Trump and his gang to begin to overlook Afghanistan.

I can tell you that from mid-August, when they strutted into Kabul, my social media platforms, my WhatsApp and my Messenger are doing: whipping young women and handing the whip from man to man around a circle while the women scream for mercy and suffer the pain of the whipping. Besides that, the Taliban, as they took each village, demanded a list of all the girls over the age of 14 and all the widows under the age of 44 to give to their soldiers because, according to them, they're allowed four each that God told them they had the right to have.

These are the miscreants that former American president Donald Trump negotiated with, and his actions in ignoring the Afghan government—which certainly had problems of its own—and elevating these thugs as conquerors whipped them into a frenzy to make demands such as releasing hardened criminals, murderers, into the community. Also, they kept saying they had moderated their views, although whenever they were asked, "How do you now view sharia law?", they wouldn't answer the question.

Pundits refer to the Taliban as a rigid version of sharia law. That's not so. There's not a word in the Quran to support what the Taliban have done. Then and now, what they've done is that they've hijacked their own religion for political opportunism. They got away with it then, and they're getting away with it now. What do they do with it? They thrash girls to show they're serving God. The only difference today is that they've been joined by discontented jihadis from around the world, men who couldn't give a fig about the Geneva Conventions or military codes of conduct.

Let's talk about the Afghans. Imagine saying that the Afghans couldn't defend themselves. It makes me think that in one year the scientists found a vaccine to save all the people in the whole world, but in 20 years, their politicians and the politicians from the countries that came, presumably, to help them could not find the path to peace. How can anyone blame those innocent people, who were totally sold out by their warlords, by their tribal leaders, by their own government and, frankly, by all of us?

Now let's talk about the Canadians—the true north. As you know, it has been said that our 20 years there were a failure. Well, I can tell you something about those 20 years. I can tell you that while your tax dollars were at work, the life expectancy in Afghanistan went from 47 years to 63 years. That's not a failure. That's a miracle.

● (1940)

Then, when they were in trouble and we all went away and said, “You're on your own now”, Canada said, “We'll take the vulnerable ones, we'll take them fast, and over time we'll take 40,000.” That didn't happen. It didn't happen because IRCC either was incompetent in doing its job or chose not to do its job. There are so many excuses. One of them said to me, “Well, we're not digitalized, you know.” In 2022? That's pretty shameful. Or it's “We're overworked” or “We're overwhelmed.” None of these are excuses.

The Chair: Ms. Armstrong, your time is up.

Ms. Sally Armstrong: Okay.

The Chair: We will come back to you.

I would now love to welcome the former chairperson of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, Ms. Sima Samar.

Ms. Samar, you have exactly five minutes to make your presentation. Please go ahead.

● (1945)

Ms. Sima Samar (Former Chairperson, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, As an Individual): Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today.

I am Sima Samar. I'm a medical doctor by training, but I spent all of my life defending human rights and fighting for equality for women in my country. Among my other responsibilities, I was the first Minister of Women's Affairs after the 2001 fall of the Taliban, and served as the chairperson of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission for 17 years.

Afghanistan has been at war for 44 years. It began with the coup by the pro-USSR Afghans, followed by the military invasion by the USSR in 1979, and the war continues with the Taliban military takeover of Afghanistan for the second time. Unfortunately, the western and Arab countries chose the most conservative group of Afghans to train, equip and support in the fight against communism.

Women became the main victims of war. Since they were not carrying a gun and were not an active element of the war, they were not seen as necessary to be included in decision-making, and they experienced restrictions on their freedoms and rights. We witnessed the killing of our loved ones, the destruction of our property and our social fabric, forced displacement, and the degradation of our position in society during the past years of conflict. However, we still stand for our rights and freedoms and struggle to protect our human dignity in these most difficult times.

You have all watched the scary scenes in Afghanistan, after the Taliban took over, in the media and on social media, but the situation is so much worse than what you see. Most of the time, I cannot

find words to describe it. Imagine the level of desperation needed to sell your children or your organs to feed the rest of the family.

Afghanistan is a collective failure of Afghanistan, the Afghan government, the Afghan people and the international community. It has been a failure of accountability, the rule of law, justice and a commitment to human rights.

Twenty years of international community engagement gave some space for the improvement of human rights and women's rights, and a space to exercise basic democratic and political rights in Afghanistan. However, these advancements for women's rights and human rights were sacrificed for political advantage in Afghanistan and abroad.

History has shown that if you want to destroy a nation, you do three things.

First, you make half of the population inferior and second-class citizens. In this way, you start the mentality of male superiority, and the women are inferior in the family, which then transfers to the whole society, including the political leadership.

Second, you destroy the education system in the country. People who want to control the population, of course, can easily control the uneducated people.

The third action to destroy a nation is to devalue human rights and principles, equality and the rule of law. When there is no respect for human rights and the rule of law, then violations of human rights become a daily practice.

During this violent conflict, the people in my country have been caught between the extreme left, which is pro-USSR and communist, and the extreme right, which is the Taliban. Currently, the people who are in power practically ignore Afghanistan's obligation to the human rights conventions that were ratified by Afghanistan.

The humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan is very serious. Many have been displaced. People cannot find food or shelter. Most have no income or access to job opportunities. The humanitarian crisis got worse with a governance and economic crisis, on top of the drought and the COVID pandemic, which had already devastated the people.

My recommendations are as follows.

First, humanitarian aid is a temporary solution to save lives, but there is a report of unequal distribution of the relief program. Some of the Hazara districts are receiving very little, as the Hazara-headed NGOs were not included in the distribution. There has been no transparent and equal distribution of relief to the people in need. There should be no tolerance for corruption or discrimination.

Second, women should be involved in all levels—on policy, on distribution and on receiving the aid—and also people with disabilities and people who are internally displaced.

- (1950)

Third, human rights values and principles should not be negotiated away under any circumstances. Respect for culture, religion and even sovereignty of the country should not be used as an excuse.

Fourth, accountability and justice should be part of the agenda pressed with the Taliban. One of the reasons for our collective failure is lack of attention to issues of accountability and justice for international crimes, which has promoted a culture of impunity—

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Samar. Your time is up. We will come back to you.

Ms. Sima Samar: Thank you.

The Chair: Now we'll go to Ms. Barr for five minutes. Please go ahead.

Thank you.

Ms. Heather Barr (Associate Women's Rights Director, Human Rights Watch): Thank you.

Thanks for holding this hearing, and thanks for inviting me. If I look a bit sleepy, that's because it's 4:30 in the morning in Pakistan, where I am, but I felt I couldn't miss a chance to talk with you.

The human rights situation in Afghanistan, as Dr. Samar said, is deteriorating. It's going from extremely bad to even worse, with new signs of this every day, including extrajudicial killings and abductions, censorship and intimidation of the media, and violations of women's rights.

As you know, on Wednesday, the Taliban extended the ban on girls' secondary education. On Friday, they began blocking women from leaving the country without a male family member escorting them. On Sunday, they segregated the parks and blocked foreign media. The Taliban are systemically violating women's rights to work, study, protest, speak, travel, access health care, live free from violence and have a political voice. There's no reason to think there aren't more crackdowns coming.

I want to talk about what Canada, as a country with a feminist foreign policy, should do in this crisis. As you know, Canada is one of four countries that sent troops to Afghanistan in the last 20 years and that also have a feminist foreign policy. The others are France, Germany and Sweden. These four countries have a special responsibility to Afghan women and girls.

The crisis happening in Afghanistan right now is the most serious women's rights crisis in the world. It's the most serious women's rights crisis the world has faced since 1996, when the Taliban took over the last time. If feminist foreign policy doesn't mean standing with Afghan women right now, in this crisis, it begs the question of what feminist foreign policy means, and risks the conclusion, "Not much".

For the last seven and a half months, there's been inadequate leadership, inadequate coordination and inadequate political will, globally, applied to defending women's rights in Afghanistan. The Taliban's actions in the last week should help drive greater political

will and coordination, but many have been looking to the United States for leadership. It's clear now that leadership is not coming from that quarter. It's time for the countries that have pledged to have a feminist foreign policy, including Canada, to fill that gap.

There aren't any easy solutions, but there are actions that Canada can and should take.

First, I listened to your previous panel talking about the resettlement of Afghans. It's absolutely clear that Canada should urgently assist Afghans who can't live safely in Afghanistan to resettle, and it should urge other countries to do the same. People at heightened risk include human rights defenders—including women's rights defenders—women who were in high-profile and non-traditional roles, members of the LGBT community, and journalists.

Here in Pakistan, I hear every day from Afghans who are trying to make their way to safety, some of whom are still in Afghanistan, some of whom are stranded here in Pakistan, and many of whom sound suicidal. Some of them are specifically waiting on Canada, and waiting and waiting. Canada has the power to help them survive this crisis and rebuild their lives.

I also want to talk about how to help make life bearable for people in Afghanistan. The international community needs to take a set of coordinated steps together, and Canada should be a leader in that process. There are four steps.

The first is to deny the Taliban legitimacy, end the exemption on the travel ban for their leaders, stop having meetings with them outside Afghanistan, end high-level meetings, end photo ops with them, and only send delegations to meet them that are at least half women and include Afghan women.

The second is to do everything possible to protect human rights defenders, including the women, girls and men who are coming out to protest the secondary school ban. Speak up immediately and loudly when activists are abused, abducted or detained.

The third is to adjust your funding decisions. Don't fund discrimination. Fund only programs—for example, parts of the education system—that equally serve women, men, girls and boys, and invest in alternative education to assist girls who have been shut out of school.

The fourth point—my last point—is, don't punish all Afghans for Taliban abuses. Dr. Samar talked about the humanitarian crisis. People are starving in Afghanistan because of decisions made in the White House and other foreign capitals. Donors must do everything possible to meet humanitarian needs and unblock Afghanistan's economy so that it can function, while also maintaining pressure on the Taliban over human rights.

● (1955)

The tragedy unfolding for women and girls in Afghanistan right now has risks for all of us. If the Taliban can do this with little international response, it will embolden enemies of women's rights everywhere: in this region, in your region, everywhere. Feminist foreign policy has to mean feminist solidarity and, right now, the people who need Canada's solidarity most desperately are Afghan women and girls.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Barr, for speaking to us all the way from Pakistan.

We will proceed to the rounds of questions.

First, we will go to Mr. Ruff for six minutes. Please go ahead.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Thanks, Chair.

Thanks again to the witnesses for clearly highlighting how urgent it is for Canada to step up and do what we can to help these Afghan women and children, all Afghans who are in dire need, and the human rights defenders.

I agree with you, Ms. Armstrong. In 20 years, we did make a difference, in that there's a whole generation of women and girls who got an opportunity they'd never had before, and I honestly believe that some of them down the road will help take Afghanistan to the next steps. That's the seed of optimism, if I can have any with how terrible the situation is.

My first question is for you, Ms. Barr. It's about Pakistan, where you're situated, and the importance of the pressure that's coming. Is there pressure within Pakistan itself about the safety network there for those Afghans who are getting out? They are either being turned back.... Is the Taliban putting pressure, through its networks, to target these individuals? The previous witnesses talked about those hit lists that are out there. They're going after these human rights defenders, these targeted minorities, etc.

Can you expand on how important it is to act urgently? What's the situation of support in Pakistan?

Ms. Heather Barr: I've definitely heard from people who fled Afghanistan because they were unsafe there, and also felt unsafe in Pakistan. The biggest difficulty that Afghans in Pakistan are facing is that they can't live here. Other witnesses have talked about how you only get a 60-day visa, so you're in this constant cycle of trying to renew your visa. If you don't have a valid visa, you can't rent a place to live and you can't get a SIM card. You actually can't leave the country without getting special permission to leave the country if you're undocumented.

People are looking at a situation.... People have made it here and they have no pathway to any other country, so they're living perma-

nently in this situation. They can't send their kids to school and they can't work. I think many Afghans are going back to Afghanistan because they're running out of money and they can't feed themselves. At least if they go back to Afghanistan, they'll hopefully have family members who will take them in.

The biggest problem is that they can't actually survive here.

Mr. Alex Ruff: Thanks, Ms. Barr.

My next question is for you, Ms. Samar. You made a number of recommendations, and my question is how we implement some of them. With the unequal relief that's going to different minorities, women and the education side of the house, I'm concerned. I guess I'm pessimistic, having been there myself, about the ability to influence and enforce that. It's why I think we need to be doing more to get people out.

Can you expand on how you think we could implement your first two recommendations?

Ms. Sima Samar: First, it is really important to work on a mechanism to monitor things properly, and that can be done through the UN and NGOs that are working in the field in the local communities.

The second point is that we are aware of the very serious situation of humanitarian crisis, but now we should try to involve.... It should be a condition to the Taliban that the international community will not give humanitarian relief to the people unless there are women who are making decisions, who are responsible for its delivery and who are receiving it. They have to accept that, and they will accept that, because there's a lot of pressure on them. I think that is really important.

The third point, which I insist on, is that the international community should be really strong on human rights. As Heather Barr and my colleague have both said, we worked hard in order to implement some of the principles of human rights in Afghanistan, and that is all gone. If the Taliban wants to be recognized by the international community, they have obligations and they have to accept human rights. There should not be a negotiation on human rights with the Taliban. It should be clear.

The fourth point, which I again insist on, is accountability and justice for the crimes they committed, including arbitrary killing, torture every day, arbitrary arrest and the violation of human rights. The only country in the world that officially banned women's and girls' education is Afghanistan. Is that acceptable? If that cannot be counted as war crimes or crimes against humanity....

● (2000)

Mr. Alex Ruff: I'm still, I guess, almost cynical about the Taliban and whether they care. I think our challenge is that we need to step up and we need to do more to get these people out.

Ms. Armstrong, there is only about half a minute left. Could you just expand a bit on what you were talking about right from the get-go, the fact that the Taliban hasn't changed and they're going to go back to their old ways, and just how terrible and dangerous the situation is.

The Chair: Your time is almost up.

Could you be brief, please?

Ms. Sally Armstrong: I'll make one comment.

IRCC has to get up to speed. They have to do the job they're supposed to do. In this country, those excuses are just not good enough. We are not getting vulnerable people out because our people are not doing their jobs.

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

We will move to Mr. El-Khoury for six minutes. Please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

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

I also thank the witnesses.

We recently learned that the Taliban regime will ban young girls from attending school and that some parents are selling their underage daughters. In my opinion, this is practically a crime against humanity. We know very well that women's rights are not respected.

[*English*]

Before I go further and ask my question, with all respect to Ms. Armstrong, when you end your comments by saying that either the IRCC is incompetent or they don't choose to do so, I categorically refute that. I can assure you that they are very competent, and they have a strong will to do so, but let me give you some of the issues.

First of all, if you compare it to Syria or to Ukraine, the situation is not the same. Getting out of Afghanistan is a terrible process. In Syria, they were recognized by the United Nations refugee commissioner. You know very well that in Afghanistan more than 2.6 million persons have been displaced.

[*Translation*]

Canada has taken in the largest share of refugees and is committed to resettling these people. For over three years, Canada has been a world leader in this area. The Department of Citizenship and Immigration must view the safety of Canadians as a priority.

If we speed up the process and let anyone into Canada, can you guarantee that no Taliban or Islamic State people will enter Canada? That would be a security problem. That responsibility rests on the shoulders of the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration and all levels of government in Canada.

Ms. Armstrong, these are the questions I would like to ask you.

What can the international community do to help these women and girls and to reduce the number of displaced people and refugees?

Can you name one country in the world that has done more for Afghans than Canada?

• (2005)

[*English*]

Ms. Sally Armstrong: Is your question to me?

I agree with what you said. This is our wheelhouse. Canada is terrific at this. We've shown it over and over again. Communities across this country and spiritual centres can do it.

I can tell you, sir, that I have been trying to get Afghans out of Afghanistan since August. I have a paper trail as long as you like to show that IRCC does not respond, or they ask a question and then don't respond or they don't issue the letters required. They are simply not doing the job they're supposed to do. You seem to be angry that I'm pointing that out. Well, I can imagine how upset people whose lives are at risk are when they're getting these nonsensical forms and they're not getting a reply. I don't understand why that is happening. I have had meetings with people there who say, "We're overwhelmed. We have too much work." Then hire more people.

I feel your anger with what I said, but I stand by what I said. Canadians are good at this. We are, I dare say, the best in the world at bringing in people, resettling them, restarting their lives, but if we can't get them here, then we can't do that for them.

I believe the government needs to put a great deal of attention and effort into IRCC, even if it takes money, so they can do the job that Canadians expect them to do.

Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury: I'm not angry at all, but I'm giving you facts and I'm giving you reasons in terms of the responsibility of our government. I ask you, give me the name of one single country in the world that has done more than Canada. I gave you a number, about the 2.6 million Afghans who are displaced and what Canada did.

Anyway, Madame, my second question is also for you.

[*Translation*]

What might be the potential consequences of prohibiting women from participating meaningfully in political, economic and social life for Afghanistan and this region?

How do you see the role of the international community, and can you deny Canada's role as a leader in this regard?

[*English*]

Ms. Sally Armstrong: Again, as Heather Barr said, that's who we are. We've said we are the community that can promote women into those positions so they can be part of the living country. There have to be ways.

You know, sir, I wish I could say to you that this is what you need to do—this, this and this—and we solve the whole problem. What I feel is that we should put people together in a room who know what to do and who have new ideas, like those scientists who got a vaccine in a year. Get people together. Clearly what we're doing isn't working.

We have a lot of evidence around the world right now, Ukraine being a perfect example. We need people who are aware, as you are, of policies and aware, as Dr. Samar is, of situations on the ground, and as Heather Barr—

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. El-Khoury, your time is up.

We will proceed to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for six minutes, please. Go ahead.

[*Translation*]

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

I thank all the witnesses who are appearing to contribute to this study, which is very important.

I don't think the witnesses are here to be berated or hectored. I think everybody is here to contribute to this study, which is to look at the current humanitarian crisis and what can be done now and in the short term. This is more important than any little partisan war.

Ms. Armstrong, you were questioned by my colleague Mr. El-Khoury. I would like to know what priority you think should be reflected in the recommendations of this report. This report is important because it will determine what needs to be done now and in the future for the people of Afghanistan, and how Canada can help them.

What do you think that priority is?

I will then ask Ms. Samar and Ms. Barr the same question.

• (2010)

Ms. Sally Armstrong: Is the question addressed to Ms. Samar?

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: The question is addressed to you first.

What do you think should be the priority among the recommendations in our report?

[*English*]

Ms. Sally Armstrong: I completely agree with the recommendations.

The Chair: Dr. Samar, go ahead, please.

Ms. Sima Samar: I think—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Is there a problem with the interpretation, Mr. Chair?

If so, I would not want it to be taken out of my time.

[*English*]

The Chair: Don't worry. I'll take care of it.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Ms. Samar, what priority do you think should be among the recommendations in the report this committee will write for the Canadian government?

[*English*]

Ms. Sima Samar: Number one is support for educational programs at any level, at all political and funding levels, focusing particularly on women and girls, because I believe education is the strongest tool to fight against ignorance.

Number two is support for access to health services, including reproductive health and access to contraception, because we really need to reduce the number of children in order to reduce the firewood for the terrorists groups.

Number three, we all need to have an honest, comprehensive assessment of what has been done wrong or what has gone wrong in order to have a better-coordinated, long-term strategy for a country like Afghanistan.

Number four, again, the problems in Afghanistan will not stay within our boundary walls. They will reach anywhere.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much, Ms. Samar.

Ms. Barr, I'd like to know what you think the priority is, but first I'd like to hear your opinion, as you are part of a non-governmental organization working on the ground.

The representatives of some NGOs testified before the committee; they said that it was very difficult for them to do their work on the ground. Indeed, since the Taliban are considered a terrorist organization, NGOs are afraid of being prosecuted for a violation of the Canadian Criminal Code.

Is this a problem experienced by the NGOs you work with on the ground? How could we address this?

[*English*]

Ms. Heather Barr: I'll answer first what my first priority would be. I would really like to see Canada reaching out to France, Germany and Sweden, and working together to step in and guide where feminist foreign policy should be taking global policy for all countries on Afghanistan.

It is worth mentioning how much consensus there is across countries about the fact that what the Taliban is doing on women's rights, and other human rights, is beyond the pale. We've seen condemnations over the school ban from the OIC, Turkey, and Qatar. Everyone agrees. What's missing is leadership, and I want those four countries to provide that.

In terms of your question about operating on the ground, we don't actually have anyone in country. We're having a very hard discussion about whether we can go or not, because the risk is not to us, but to the people we would talk to. We are very afraid that if we went and interviewed people, and did research in Afghanistan, the Taliban would retaliate against the people we spoke with, and we would have no ability at all to protect them. That is one of the constraints we are facing, more than the issue about being classified as a terrorist group.

That's a very hard thing to figure out. For the moment, we've been doing our research remotely in ways that still bring a lot of security challenges. We're seeing a lot of concerns about the monitoring of people's phones, social media, and so on. It definitely feels like there is a net tightening in some very frightening ways.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you very much, Ms. Barr.

The NGO representatives who testified before the committee told us that since the Taliban are recognized in Canada as a terrorist group, they could be prosecuted under the Canadian Criminal Code if they do business with them.

Are you aware of this problem?

• (2015)

[English]

Ms. Heather Barr: We are not facing that problem, because we're not delivering aid, but I think that's a serious problem. It's one the Canadian government can address, and should address. It is important for all governments, and the UN, to make it clear that anyone who is delivering humanitarian assistance, and other important aid, is not going to be subject to sanctions, because they have no choice but to engage with the Taliban in delivering that type of assistance.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Ms. Barr.

[English]

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

We'll now go to Ms. Kwan, for six minutes, please.

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

Thank you very much to the panellists. Those were exceptional presentations from all of you.

In terms of helping Afghans get to safety, we've heard from the previous panel and other witnesses that one of the key barriers is the fact that the Canadian government requires refugee determination from the UNHCR, and that is impossible for people to get, because there are no UNHCR offices operating there.

Would you support the call for the government to waive the refugee determination requirement for Afghans?

I will go to Ms. Barr first, but I'd like to have all the witnesses answer this question.

Ms. Heather Barr: Absolutely. I went through this process myself, trying to assist one particular family and trying to get help

from UNHCR here in Islamabad. You go to the website, and it says you can't come to its office without an appointment. To get an appointment, you have to call a particular number. I called that number 29 times. Most of the time, it just rang and no one answered. Three times someone answered, and then hung up on me.

I'm a privileged white American lawyer who works for an NGO, so I tweeted about it, and somebody sent me a phone number of a friend who works at UNHCR. I was able to get an appointment that way, but that's not a route available to Afghans who come here and don't necessarily speak English or Urdu, and can't get a SIM card if they don't have a valid visa. It's impossible.

Another friend of mine was similarly trying to help a family get to the UNHCR, so they could register. She said she was calling the same number, and she got through the 258th time she called. That's a completely unworkable system that's set up to stop people from accessing it.

Absolutely, Canada should waive that requirement.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Ms. Samar, I would ask you the same question.

Ms. Sima Samar: I fully agree with Ms. Barr. I think the other solution would be to have more staff for UNHCR in those countries where we have a lot of refugees, if the first one is not possible. But I think I'll go for the first part—that they waive that. Really, it's the staff of the human rights commission and well-known human rights defenders who are still in the country and taking a lot of risk, unfortunately. Some people who have not been at risk have already been evacuated.

There should be a very honest and thorough kind of program run by Canada or any other countries that are really trying to help.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Ms. Sima Samar: I think young women are more at risk—that is very clear—and the minority groups, which are facing challenges and attacks every day.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Go ahead, Ms. Armstrong.

Ms. Sally Armstrong: I could tell the same story. It began in August. You'd be getting a hundred requests a day. That went on all the way to October. People were asking, begging. You'd be working with journalists for human rights, working with the military people, trying to get people out.

It is simply not good enough. We can do better than this. The idea of... Let them get here, or even get to a lily-pad country, and sort out the biometrics later. That's a better way to proceed, but I still say that we need to go to IRCC and find out what's wrong. Something's wrong.

I have all their documents. I have all these letters. It's just not acceptable.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Well, part of the problem, as I understand it, is this. People send in to the special number or email that the government has provided to them, and unless you fall into the categories of what the government wants to target, you won't actually get a response. Even in cases of human rights advocates and activists, they are not getting a response.

We just heard from a previous panel about two families that I'm trying to assist. I've sent letters to both the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister of Immigration. I have not gotten a response.

So here's the problem: The government is not responding to these individuals. They're not getting a file number. Sometimes you get a response that says, "I can't help you with those families, because there are no file numbers." Well, they can't get a file number because IRCC won't respond to them. We're walking around in a giant circle, getting nowhere.

Maybe I can start with you, Ms. Armstrong. Is that the problem that you're experiencing?

● (2020)

Ms. Sally Armstrong: Yes, 100%.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Ms. Sally Armstrong: You know, I don't like knocking my... I'm very proud of this country. This does not make me proud. Why don't we fix the problem? It's wrong. We need to fix it.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Go ahead, Ms. Barr.

Ms. Heather Barr: I don't know the details around how the Canadian system works, but I want to say that there's something extremely arbitrary about who got out and who didn't.

As Dr. Samar said, many high-profile human rights activists are still trapped in the country. It's just because they decided not to go to the airport in late August, or they tried to go to the airport and they couldn't get into the airport. They thought, "Let me give it a bit of time and see what happens." They thought, "I'm safer hiding in my house. I'll try to go in a few weeks."

We now know that for many people, that was the only opportunity, and they missed it—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Ms. Barr, I'm sorry. I'm going to interject here. I have only 30 seconds left. I want to ask you a very direct question, because you're in Pakistan right now.

The government says that people should get to a third country, but people can't get out of Afghanistan to Pakistan. What if the government actually had resources available in Pakistan to help Afghans get out to Pakistan? Would that be an option?

The Chair: Please make it a quick response.

Ms. Heather Barr: There's definitely a need for much more support here. That would have to be negotiated with the Pakistan government, which might be challenging, but it's certainly worth a try.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Kwan.

Without wasting any more time, we will go to Mr. Redekopp for three minutes, and Ms. Damoff for three minutes. Then we will go

to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for a minute and a half, and Ms. Kwan for a minute and a half.

Go ahead, please, Mr. Redekopp.

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

You know, even though we're far away from it here in Canada, MPs get drawn into this too. I have an example of a letter I received, which I will read: "Please save my life and my family. We are in a bad mental and physical condition and I live in a secret place in a bad security situation. House-to-house searches have begun in different parts of Afghanistan, and it is possible for us to be captured and killed by the terrorist Taliban at any moment. I sent an email to your country's immigration office. Only one email came in and no other confirmation email came to reassure me and my family. Please, please, please, save me and my family." That was sent directly to me.

Ms. Armstrong and Ms. Barr, you both gave some examples similar to this. This is not an uncommon situation, from what I can see.

Ms. Armstrong, you were quoted as saying, "I am not one who likes to criticize my government." You actually just mentioned that. You said, "I think governing is a hard job and they're in the business of trying to please most of the people all of the time and that's very tough to do. But what happened here was a neglect of duty."

I'm just wondering if you could comment a bit more on that. How much of what we're seeing here is created by the Taliban versus a neglect of duty? What are your thoughts on that?

Ms. Sally Armstrong: The Taliban are not going to help you solve this problem. Training them, teaching them, scaring them to death or promising them something isn't going to do it. We know how to fix this problem. As all of us have told you, and the same letter that you just read, it's the incomplete communication; it's leaving people hanging; it's having people write to us and say, "What's wrong with me? How come you're not...?"

We all know of a very delicate case, and I won't go into detail, about underage girls we were trying to move out. It took Canada three months to get the paperwork done—just enough time for the story to spread around and those girls to get caught by the Taliban.

This is not acceptable for our country. We know how to do this well. Instead of just blaming IRCC, we have to go in there and fix it. This is not acceptable for Canada.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: I have another question related to that.

One of the things I've heard from different people is that there is a risk that if we bring in people from Afghanistan too quickly, we might get some terrorists in Canada. That's a fear that people in Canada have. Can you comment on that, please?

Ms. Sally Armstrong: You could say that with every single refugee program we've ever instigated. The terrorists are running Afghanistan; they're not trying to come here. I think that is a very poor and weak and wrong conclusion to draw in the face of vulnerable people who need us to help them. I'm very sorry to hear that, and I've heard it many times.

• (2025)

Mr. Brad Redekopp: I agree with you, and I'm glad to hear you say that. That would be my feeling as well.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Redekopp. You're right on time.

Now we'll go to Ms. Damoff for three minutes.

Please go ahead.

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

To all our witnesses, thank you for everything you've been doing.

Ms. Armstrong, Ms. Barr said that we should resettle those who can't live safely in Afghanistan, except that we know that all of the women and girls can't live safely in Afghanistan, and we can't resettle every single woman and girl in Afghanistan right now. You've been working on the ground through the repression of women's rights, going full circle to being able to see women go to school and be members of Parliament, and now we're going backwards, which must be devastating for you.

What specific options does Canada have to improve the lives of those women and girls who can't flee the country? Women can't even leave right now if they're not accompanied by a man, so it wouldn't matter what we did at Immigration. How can we support those women and girls who are left in Afghanistan right now?

Ms. Sally Armstrong: There are all kinds of programs already happening. Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan has been at work setting up online education. A lot of that is going on, just exactly as I remember Dr. Sima Samar keeping her schools open while the Taliban threatened to kill her throughout their first ruling.

There are things we can do. We can get an online program going. There are ways people have found to get funds to people. It's not enough. It's a band-aid. The other thing we need to do is figure out.... You can't take everyone out of the country, and you can't rebuild the country if you take all the best people out. I'm thinking of your panellist, Dr. Sima Samar. How can we work to get them back in, to force the Taliban...? Without them, we're not going to go anywhere.

We have to help the people inside while we get the really vulnerable ones out. Again, we know how to do things like that. We have people, many of them on your committee, who can sit down and say, "We need a better plan. We know how to do it." If Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan can keep going throughout this ghastly time, then surely we can find other ways.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Do these women have access to the Internet in Afghanistan?

Ms. Sally Armstrong: They do. Many do, but not all.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Right.

Ms. Sally Armstrong: Is it correct, Dr. Samar, to say that the majority probably can't read? But, you know what, I have grandchildren whose reading is pretty poor, but having a tablet in their hand is certainly moving them forward in reading. Look at the changes in that country. These girls are on the Internet and they're finding out the rest of the world doesn't live like this. They were prepared to make the changes their country needed.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Damoff.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you.

The Chair: Now we'll go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for 90 seconds.

Please go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I will try to ask my question quickly.

Ms. Samar, a few weeks ago I read in a newspaper that a Taliban delegation had visited Switzerland at the invitation of an NGO. The Taliban called on the international community to work with the "Islamic State of Afghanistan" and especially to respond to the need for humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan. If one takes the demands that have been made at face value, one can deduce that the Taliban want to facilitate humanitarian assistance by creating a secure corridor for goods and personnel.

Ms. Samar, what do the Taliban want from us by doing something like this?

[*English*]

Ms. Sima Samar: Well, I think they want to save their own face. Of course, if there's aid provided in the country, the Taliban is taking the responsibility, saying that they are doing it and that it's their governance, although it's not their governance.

The second point I would like to mention again is that we really need to focus on education. I insist that there are NGOs working on the ground. Everybody is not out of the country.

The third point I would like to mention is the lack of response from the Canadian immigration. I'm a recipient of the Order of Canada. They told me that I have the right to have a special immigration visa for Canada, but I didn't get a response from them, so imagine if—

• (2030)

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

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Ms. Samar.

[English]

The Chair: We'll move on to Ms. Kwan for 90 seconds.

Please go ahead.

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

I'll ask this in my last minute and a half.

It's true that we can't get everyone out, but certainly we can try to get some people out, particularly those who are so highly targeted that they are on a list to be hunted down.

One thing I think Canada can do to bring more people to safety is to extend the family reunification process for extended family sponsorship. This is something that the Canadian government has done for Ukrainians, but they have not applied that to Afghanistan.

I'd like to get comments from the witnesses on whether or not they think the Canadian government should extend this special immigration measure to Afghans.

Ms. Sima Samar: Of course. We're lobbying for it, from my point of view.

Ms. Heather Barr: Yes, absolutely. I think the contrast between how Ukrainians and Afghans have been treated has been very painful and difficult to explain, except with reference to racism and Islamophobia.

Ms. Sally Armstrong: I agree. Why wouldn't we do that? With Ukraine and Afghanistan, it is the classic good versus evil story, and heaven knows evil must not win.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Kwan. Your 90 seconds are up.

I want to thank Ms. Armstrong, Ms. Barr and Dr. Samar for the work they do to make vulnerable humans' lives better. On behalf of the committee members, thank you very much for your input to the committee. All the best to you.

Now we'll suspend for a few minutes to prepare for the third and last panel.

• (2030) _____ (Pause) _____

• (2035)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

I would like to welcome our third panel this evening.

From Afghan Community Vancouver, we have Mr. Wadood Dilsoz, director. From Women Leaders of Tomorrow, welcome back, Ms. Friba Rezayee. I hope your mike and system work better this time. From the Women & Peace Studies Organization, we have Wazhma Frogh.

Welcome to each of you on behalf of the committee members. You have exactly five minutes, so please respect the time.

We will start with Mr. Wadood Dilsoz for five minutes.

Go ahead, please.

Mr. Wadood Dilsoz (Director, Afghan Community Vancouver): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I am Wadood Dilsoz, joining you today from the traditional and unceded land of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh that people call Vancouver. I am a member of the Afghan community and have volunteered with the Afghan Canadian Association of B.C. since 2005.

I am also a community activist, mostly involved in refugee settlement support and advocacy for Afghan refugees and our community members. Our group is called Afghan Community Vancouver. It includes 1,200 families, and we also have a Facebook page that has over 4,600 followers.

Since the Taliban took over in Afghanistan, we have received hundreds of phone calls. I was in contact with the majority of these vulnerable families, men and women, requesting help from our community and our government, and we have a list of these individuals who fall into the categories that our government announced as at risk and who could be resettled to Canada, including women activists, members of parliament at the provincial councils, journalists, prosecutors, judges, female doctors and nurses who work in military hospitals, Canadian Forces contractors, Canadian embassy employees, and volunteers and officers who were trained by and worked with the Canadian military.

The local Afghan community is grateful for the solidarity and commitment received from the government. What I want to emphasize today is the need to facilitate the resettlement of those at risk. The UNHCR designation overseas that is needed for the resettlement takes a very long time. Families who have done their biometrics in Pakistan have been waiting months for the response.

As examples, I have Bizhan Aryan and Naseer Fayaz, well-known TV anchors who escaped to Pakistan and were given their first appointment with UNHCR in June of this year. That's a very long wait time.

During the Syrian crisis, sponsorship of refugees from within the country was allowed. That's not the case for Afghans. Although for both crises, resettlement of 40,000 refugees was considered, Afghanistan's population is two times higher than Syria's, and we had a military presence in Afghanistan.

The temporary resident program and the issuance of work permits and study permits are part of the response to the Ukrainian crisis, but they haven't been considered in the response to the Afghan crisis. Canadian involvement in Afghanistan has been very profound in the past 20 years, and we had a military presence in the country that has created close ties between the two countries.

The Afghan National Defense and Security Forces supported the Canadian mission and were fighting international terrorism shoulder to shoulder with Canadians. We have abandoned those soldiers and officers, who became the victims of wrong politics in Afghanistan and who have been targeted and killed on a daily basis in the past seven months. We do not have them in the at-risk category for resettlement to Canada. This could be reviewed and changed.

The Afghan community requests the following: eliminate refugee documentation requests, increase the number of refugees, ease the process of acquiring temporary resident status or work and study visas for Afghans, allow sponsorship of refugees from within Afghanistan, include military personnel in the at-risk category to be considered for resettlement, and support local Afghan organizations to become allies in refugee settlement and integration.

Last, the Afghan community of Vancouver is ready to collaborate with IRCC to provide support to new refugees on their settlement and integration journey in a culturally safe way.

Thank you very much.

• (2040)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Dilsoz.

We'll go to Ms. Friba Rezaeey for five minutes.

Please go ahead.

Ms. Friba Rezaeey (Founder and Executive Director, Women Leaders of Tomorrow): Good evening, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak and appear before the Special Committee on Afghanistan this evening.

My name is Friba Rezaeey. I was born and raised in Afghanistan. I was one of the first Afghan women to compete at the Olympic Games, in 2004 in Athens, and I am also the first Afghan woman Olympian to participate and compete in a combat sport. I am now the founder and executive director of Women Leaders of Tomorrow. We are a registered non-profit society in Vancouver, B.C. Our mandate is to empower women and girls through sports and education.

Following the return of the Taliban in August 2021, we have received countless messages from Afghan women and girls begging us to save their lives by helping them leave Afghanistan. Among them were—and still are—successful female athletes from the volleyball, cycling and judo teams. We were successful in assisting 148 Afghan women students to be evacuated to the United States, with the help of American humanitarian organizations.

However, the response from the Canadian government has been extremely disappointing. The IRCC's bureaucratic policies have made it impossible for Afghan female athletes to reach safety in Canada.

On November 25, 2021, I wrote a letter to the Right Honourable Prime Minister explaining the dire situation of our female athletes and describing the human rights violations now occurring in Afghanistan. The entire Canadian women's soccer team—gold medallists from Tokyo 2020—signed my letter.

The situation for female athletes is dire in Afghanistan. Members of our teams have been threatened by the Taliban with a punishment of 110 lashings in public or the death penalty. A female member of our volleyball team, Mahjabin Hakimi, was murdered under highly suspicious circumstances when the Taliban captured the capital.

The Taliban government forbids women in sports, as it is contrary to their strict interpretation of sharia law. They have suppressed all athletic participation of women in public. This was the Taliban's first decree. The Taliban is hunting from door to door and looking for women athletes and women who advocated for women's rights. If Canada does not evacuate them soon, they will die.

Canada played a vital role in Afghanistan by advancing women's and girls' empowerment and education. Afghans are devastated to see that our rights and freedoms were halted overnight. The Canadian government promised to evacuate women leaders, human rights defenders and women athletes. Thousands of Afghan families have been evacuated to Canada, but only 15 female athletes.

Many of our athletes are also students who want to pursue their higher education in Canada. These are the best and brightest young Afghans. Multilingual, educated and ambitious, they have overcome cultural and economic hardships—especially the women—to achieve ambitious goals. They have risked seizure, physical attacks and death to fight for equality, the right to an education and the rule of law, which Canadians take for granted here. They understand at a visceral level the fragility of democracy.

Women Leaders of Tomorrow has helped many Afghan women to obtain full-ride scholarships to Canadian universities, but their study permits and student visas have been denied by the IRCC on the grounds that they are unlikely to return to Afghanistan. Nine women engineers are completing their studies in Kazakhstan. They want to complete master's degrees at Canadian universities to qualify and work in their professions. Their non-renewable Kazakh visas will expire in August of this year. What will happen to them? They can't return home.

We call on the Canadian government to honour its long-standing promises to these Afghan women scholars, athletes and human rights defenders by actively assisting their entry into Canada and by instructing the IRCC to issue study permits to fully funded Afghan refugee students.

• (2045)

The U.S. Doha agreement represented—

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Rezaeey. We will come back to you.

Ms. Friba Rezaeey: Thank you.

The Chair: Now we're going to move to Ms. Wazhma Frogh for five minutes.

Go ahead.

Ms. Wazhma Frogh (Founder, Women & Peace Studies Organization – Afghanistan): Thank you.

I'm honoured to be part of this hearing, and I look forward to sharing my perspective from Afghanistan on what we have been going through.

I want to start with a small story from my experience. I work with a group of 200 women on a daily basis in Afghanistan. These are women peace-builders and women leaders—women who have not been in the media. These are the women who have actually stopped suicide bombers and worked with the mothers who stopped suicide bombers. These are the women who actually stopped madrasas from teaching suicide terrorism to kids, and these are the women who have gone to the Taliban jails and freed prisoners. So these are like women leaders in the provinces. I won't get into more details than that, due to concerns for their security.

The organization I run and its partnership with Canada have been waiting for so many years—at least the past six or seven years—in Afghanistan. There is one experience I would like to recall. Some Canadian military members wanted to talk to women to see how they could actually start looking at issues of women, peace and security, which is a Canadian mandate, but also as part of their engagement with Afghans. I took a group of 15 women in Kandahar by bus from the city to the airport so they could meet the members of the military. I won't go into further details. Imagine 15 women who took that risk, because going to a military airport was not just risking their lives but for a woman it was considered to be literally like prostitution, and she would literally have been stoned to death. But these women took the risk, because they were working with the mission that we needed to engage women in the security sector. That's what my organization focused on. Today, all 15 of those women are in Afghanistan and living in a very difficult situation, hiding from one province to the other.

For the past six years, through the Canada fund, my organization was able to get around 10,000 women into the Afghan police. We had a formal engagement with Canada and the Ministry of the Interior, and we got women into NATO training programs and also into the police forces. Canada has had a long-standing women, peace and security plan and mandate.

We thought this would actually continue, but I don't see what happened on August 15 as an isolated event. It didn't just happen overnight. I'm actually surprised when I hear officials and parliamentarians say that they were taken by surprise. Nobody listened to us women. We had been talking about it. We had been telling the policy-makers and the global leaders that things were going so wrong in Afghanistan and to please listen to the women and not to make deals with a group that excluded the Afghan government.

The Doha deal was the start of Afghanistan's political surrender. It was not August 15. It was the Doha deal that actually gave legitimacy to a group that did not even include the Afghan government as a signatory, and that was when things started getting much worse in local communities. As an organization working in the local communities, we started reporting on the fall of different districts and provinces, even right before August last year.

I would like to thank Canada for the announcement regarding the Afghan refugees. Some of my colleagues have made it to Canada after six or seven months of being in Albania, or having been evacuated directly from Kabul, so we are grateful for this big support, but at the same time I would also like to echo the concerns I heard from the previous panels in terms of the lack of response. My own parents had to wait for seven months, during which we never heard anything from IRCC about the status of their case.

● (2050)

I would also like to share the focus of the SIM, the special immigration program for Afghans. I would very much like the focus to expand beyond translators and also to see the number of women applicants, women leaders applicants...because in Afghanistan the translators have been mostly men with the military. It's important. I would very much ask for quotas and gender disaggregation, with the way Canada talks about women in leadership, as well as women, peace and security.

I come with—

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Frogh. We'll come back to you.

Now, we can go to the honourable members.

First, we'll go to Mr. Redekopp for six minutes. Please, go ahead.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Thank you, Chair.

Ms. Frogh, one of the last things you said was to listen to the women. That's good advice at the best of times. Even here in Canada, I think all of us need to take that advice. I appreciate that, and I will work very hard in my own life to use that advice.

I'm concerned about something and it has to do with the facts. If you look at some facts, the government has promised 40,000 Afghan refugees. Immigration minister Sean Fraser told me last week at committee that we're at about 9,500 or so right now. That's in almost nine months. That's a little over 1,000 a month. He was also quite happy to tell me that there were 10,000 Ukrainians who have come to Canada in three months. That's a much higher rate.

I would like to get your opinion on this. Are we dealing with some racism issues in Canada? Is there Islamophobia? I know there are differences between people coming from Ukraine versus Afghanistan. Do you think that some of that is at play with what's going on here?

I'll start with Ms. Frogh.

Ms. Wazhma Frogh: I think there are a lot of operational-level challenges too, with a lack of systems to respond to people. At the same time, the third country phenomenon has been very difficult for us Afghans. Right now, my colleague has travel authorization to travel to Canada, but they do not have Pakistani visa and they cannot obtain Pakistani visa. There are also political and security risks to many Afghans travelling to Pakistan. We have had members of the Afghan security and other forces who are detained in Pakistan.

It's about the operationalization of this whole challenge. The third country is the major challenge, the system of response. At the same time, it's also about the lack of any Afghans going to other countries. It's not just Pakistan. Look at the number of embassies open in Kabul. They cannot get visas, they cannot go.... Now the Taliban has stopped women from travelling as well.

We don't have any hope of getting to the third countries.

• (2055)

Mr. Brad Redekopp: All right. Thank you.

Ms. Rezayee, what are your thoughts on what I was asking, about possible racism and Islamophobia?

Ms. Friba Rezayee: I'm a Canadian citizen now. I'm very proud and I'm honoured to have been given the citizenship. I love it here very much, but it disappoints me to a great extent to see that racism exists and it's oblivious, to separate the Afghans from the Ukrainians, given the history and the fact that we both have been the victims of the same troll here. Afghans share the pain of Ukrainian folks, because the Russian occupation did brutal things to Afghans. The only difference is that, back then, because the world did not have social media or an Internet connection, they could not advocate and they could not broadcast in two seconds what was going on. Now, people in Ukraine can. That is, in fact, what's happening.

Here in Canada, we hear that human rights are universal, but they're not. When it comes to human rights, people pick and choose. It became a buffet for people to help certain people and not help other people. What we have been seeing—and what I have been personally witnessing since August of last year—is that one group of people has monopolized the IRCC. As Wazhma mentioned, they have only been evacuating and focusing on male interpreters. As much as we would like to see those families seek refuge and find safety in Canada, it's also important to focus on female leaders and female athletes.

Let's check the comparison. There are 9,000 families versus 15 female athletes. That is unacceptable. We need to open the category. We need to reach out, because Canada gave us a definition of people at risk. They are highly vulnerable people and people coming from ethnic minorities, such as the Hazara people, LGBTQ people and women athletes.

We need to help everybody at the same time. There's space for everyone. There's space for Ukrainian folks. There's space for women leaders.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Ms. Rezayee, I have another question on that. You mentioned that you had women with full-ride scholarships, but the visas were denied. Were we talking about one or two people? How many cases do we have of that?

Ms. Friba Rezayee: I'm talking about 20-plus students at the moment. They have even received acceptance letters from very good, reputable universities like Simon Fraser University, UBC and the University of Calgary, but their visas have been denied on the grounds that they will not return home.

What I would like to suggest to the Canadian government and IRCC is to start a pilot project for the student visas. These are the youngest and brightest people who will rebuild Afghanistan. Afghanistan relies on them. We need to invest in these people to equip them with education, and they will become the leaders of tomorrow.

We know what's happening. We have been devastated by what has been happening in our home country. My own brother was beaten by the Taliban. We are ethnic Hazara minorities, so we have been victims of the Taliban directly.

We want to see that changed by the IRCC as soon as possible.

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

We will move to Mrs. Zahid for six minutes, please.

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

Thanks to all three of our witnesses.

My first question is for all three witnesses. I would like to focus on the challenge of getting people who are currently in Afghanistan and who need protection out of the country and on their way to safety, especially the vulnerable women and girls. We know it's not as easy as just booking a flight. The Associated Press reported this weekend that the Taliban are refusing to allow women to board flights if they are not accompanied by a male guardian.

Could you speak to the challenges that women and girls, especially in households without men, face in leaving the country? What can Canada do to help them?

I will start with Ms. Frogh.

Ms. Wazhma Frogh: Thank you.

I very much think you are also talking about the war widows. We have two million of these women who are living in different parts of the country and do not have any male members of the family, because they have lost them to the war. They literally do not have any means to get out of the country. Evacuations could be one way or, for example, there could be some special measures where they could be provided a visa to a third country, and then that third country would take the case further.

Other than that, I'm also thinking about the importance of engaging with Afghanistan, because how many people can you evacuate, how many people can you sponsor to Canada? We have a population of 40 million, so I very much think Canada needs to plan its engagement in Afghanistan if it really cares about the communities left behind.

I work with 200 women on a daily basis. There are many organizations engaged on the ground. Also, the focus should be on putting pressure on the Taliban. They need to be pressured into accepting today's Afghanistan.

• (2100)

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you, Ms. Frogh.

I'll ask Mr. Dilsoz to provide his point of view.

Mr. Wadood Dilsoz: I think it's a big challenge for Afghan women. I speak daily with many women in Afghanistan, and they talk about the challenge of not being able to leave the country without a male. The only way that I think we could offer this is with a third party who could speak with the Taliban. There has to be pressure put on the Taliban in order to accept these measures.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Ms. Rezayee, go ahead.

Ms. Friba Rezayee: Thank you so much, Ms. Zahid.

It's a fact that the Taliban has imposed strict sharia law on Afghan women. They require women to be accompanied by a *mahram*, a male guardian, as soon as they leave home.

I would suggest to IRCC that they need to focus on their job. They need to do their work, to issue those visas for the applicants who have applied. Let the Afghans figure out and take care of their business on the ground, because Afghans are very good at manoeuvring ourselves on the ground. We will take care of arranging a *mahram* and making sure that they will go to the airport or the border safely. All we are asking from the government is to give them those visas.

People like the ones on this panel, like me and my family, and so many other volunteers.... We call ourselves the "sleep-deprived volunteers". We share the burden of IRCC's work, and we are providing the government with solutions, because we are doing most of the paperwork. We are the people who are helping them with the allowances, cash, money for food and rent on the ground. The government just needs to issue visas for them, that's all.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Thank you, Ms. Rezayee.

My next question is for Ms. Frogh. Close to 10,000 Afghans have already arrived in Canada. Can you please explain how countries can prioritize whom to resettle, given that there are millions of vulnerable Afghans, and that one country alone cannot resettle all vulnerable Afghans.

Ms. Wazhma Frogh: The vulnerability of each group is different. For example, we have young women in all sectors: women in sports, women in business, women in media. Young women should be a category that is provided priority for visas, as well as women-led households, families with older women who have kids they have to look after, and at the same time ethnic minorities. For example, there are the Hazaras, Shias, Uzbeks in Afghanistan. Ethnic minorities also need to be provided opportunities. I think Canada needs to broaden its scope beyond just the translators. As I said before, the women who worked with the Canadian military are right now inside Afghanistan.

We don't know how to get answers. We don't know how to get connected.

Mrs. Salma Zahid: Are there any other barriers women and girls are facing in the relocation and resettlement process?

Ms. Wazhma Frogh: The challenge of going to another country still applies to them as well, because they cannot travel on their own or, for example, if they do not have a visa arranged. Engaging Qatar or Pakistan politically is so important to get these women out.

• (2105)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mrs. Zahid.

We'll move to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, for six minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

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

I want to thank the witnesses, again. With their expertise, we will be able to do things better and be better. That's the purpose of our study.

Ms. Frogh, your comments are very interesting, as are those of all the other witnesses.

You mentioned minorities. At the beginning of our study, we had a representative from the Hazara community. In June 2021, before the Taliban took over, Mr. Mirzad gave powerful testimony to the committee. I was particularly moved when he said that the life of a Hazara in Afghanistan is that of a death row inmate, living on probation, waiting for an imminent execution. I believe that this sentence is even truer today, as this is now the daily life of a majority of Afghans, Hazaras or not, who want to flee the country.

Can you tell us what the situation is for Hazaras, at the moment, in Afghanistan?

[*English*]

Ms. Wazhma Frogh: On the daily reports, I actually collect a lot of reports that I share with the UN Security Council and members of the government in Canada. What you hear in the media, the restrictions.... Women have been literally banned from the public, so you do not see women in government and in any jobs. Women have also been banned from any non-government spaces.

At the same time, the community members are facing challenges. They cannot go around. Women have been stopped from travelling without a *mahram*. There are different vulnerable groups. As I said before, ethnic minorities are there. The Tajiks themselves are not an ethnic minority, but it's one of the ethnicities that are very much under attack by the Taliban. We get reports on a daily basis of the killing of people.

The media has been banned. This week, the BBC, the Voice of America, and all of them were stopped in Afghanistan. We are afraid that in a few days we will lose the Internet as well, and then we would never hear what is going on inside Afghanistan. The situation is as terrible as I'm actually talking about.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Ms. Frogh.

Ms. Rezayee, I want to congratulate you on all your important work.

I will be brief, as I my speaking time is limited.

To your knowledge, as of today, how many Afghan female athletes have been accepted into Canada for resettlement?

[English]

Ms. Friba Rezayee: Thank you so much, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

There have been only 15 female athletes so far. Our volleyball team, cycling team and judo team are all in hiding, either in Afghanistan or in Pakistan. They're actually sending me messages every day. Many of them have applied to IRCC, and they even received letters and correspondence from IRCC, but they still haven't received their visas to be able to travel to Canada.

One good example is that of one of our judo athletes, whose house was raided by the Taliban. The Taliban searched her house looking for any documents she had as an athlete ID, so the Taliban could use it against her.

We have an 18-year-old waiting for her study permit in Pakistan. She has been accepted at an all-girls boarding school in Canada with a full-ride scholarship, and she wants to become the first Afghan female president. She is stuck in Pakistan and she's all by herself. She has completed her biometrics, all her applications and everything. She's just in limbo now. I would love to see her receive a response from the Canadian High Commission or from the third party in Abu Dhabi where they process student visas.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: This is very important—

[English]

Ms. Friba Rezayee: The situation is dire—

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Excuse me for interrupting you, but what you are telling us tonight is important. What you say will indeed find its way into the report. It is important that we know why being athletes puts these women at such high risk in Afghanistan.

• (2110)

[English]

Ms. Friba Rezayee: Thank you so much for asking that question, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe. I appreciate it.

The reason the Taliban has banned women's sports is that women's sports are forbidden under the Taliban's sharia law, because they send sexual vibes to men. Women's sports bring visibility to women's bodies, and that is haram—according to their interpretation of sharia law, not the modern Islam. Therefore, they're at high risk. They're in danger.

One of the members of our volleyball team was murdered suspiciously when the Taliban took over, and the rest are in hiding. One of the members of our volleyball team recently sent me a picture of herself. The Taliban found her and they beat her and she had bruises all over her body.

What I would like to see is for Canada to honour its promises. Canada promised that they will evacuate women leaders and human rights defenders. Athletes are human rights defenders. I was a human rights defender, because my participation at the Olympic Games as the first Afghan woman brought Afghanistan back to the world arena, to world sport, for the first time after the fall of the Taliban, and that inspired hundreds of Afghan women to join sports. It was a sports revolution.

Now we're all going backwards. When the Taliban returned, it felt like Afghanistan was hit by a giant meteorite and it set us back 30 years.

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

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Mr. Chair, let me just emphasize how important what Ms. Rezayee just said is. We all have children. I, for one, have three, two of whom are girls who play sports—volleyball and soccer. They will never be denied sports. After hearing this testimony, I think it's important to highlight it.

[English]

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

We'll go to Ms. Kwan for six minutes, please.

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

Thank you so much to our witnesses for their presentations and knowledge of what's going on there.

I'd like to go first to Ms. Rezayee. You indicated that if the Canadian government provided a temporary residence permit to Afghans, they would be able to get to a third country and then come to Canada. Is that correct?

Ms. Friba Rezayee: Yes, that is correct, Ms. Kwan.

As I mentioned previously, all we need is those solid, exclusive visas. There are so many Afghan families and Afghan athletes who don't even need to be on the IRCC flight. They could even arrange their flights themselves. All they need is those temporary residence visas—or any travel document, any permission, that allows them to come and seek refuge in Canada so they can be alive.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: The athletes you've talked about, the women you've talked about, for whom applications have been submitted but are sitting idle in IRCC system, when did they apply?

Ms. Friba Rezayee: We applied for their applications in August of last year. As soon as the government collapsed, we started to contact the government, because we knew what was coming and we needed to reach out to the Canadian government as soon as possible. Their applications are still pending.

We have received a confirmation from IRCC that they have the list of our volleyball team, but they're not doing anything about it. They probably use it as a souvenir—I'm sorry, but they're not doing anything about it. They confirmed that they have the list. They have the names of our volleyball team.

My question is, when can they ensure that the volleyball team will be safely evacuated to Canada?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Have they been given file numbers?

Ms. Friba Rezaee: No, absolutely not.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: So they're just sitting there.

Ms. Friba Rezaee: They have received the list. They're just sitting at the IRCC office.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: All right. Thank you.

I'd like to go to Mr. Dilsoz, please.

It's my understanding that you've also submitted a long list of individuals, of Afghans who need to get to safety. Did any of them receive a file number from the government or a response from the government?

Mr. Wadood Dilsoz: They received only a confirmation. It was an automated confirmation. They haven't received anything, zero response.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: When was the application or the contact made with the IRCC?

• (2115)

Mr. Wadood Dilsoz: I have many people on my list. Some of them started from August 15 or 16, and onwards. The dates are different.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay, but none of them has received a response.

To the question around being able to leave Afghanistan and then get to a third country if they were given a travel visa or temporary resident permit from the Canadian government, would you agree that if that was done, Afghans would be able to get to a third country? It would be fraught with risks, and I'm not trying to minimize that, but would they have some capacity to do that? Or is that a reason for the government to then say, well, they can't even get to a third country, so there's no reason we should process their applications?

Mr. Wadood Dilsoz: For some of these individuals, the IRCC suggested to me that if they go to a third country they would be able to help them. A few of them left Afghanistan. I can say some are journalists. One of them is a very well-known anchor, but none of them received any type of help or response. When they applied to UNHCR, as suggested to us by IRCC, the waiting list to meet with UNHCR is months long.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Aside from the government needing to waive the refugee determination requirement, another thing that's a roadblock for Afghans to get to safety is the fact that the government requires them to be in a third country. I think that's why they're not processing their applications.

To all the witnesses, would you say that what the government must do at this point in time is to change that immigration requirement and to say that Afghans do not need to be in a third country in order to make their application?

I will start with Ms. Frogh, who has not spoken yet.

Ms. Wazhma Frogh: Yes, absolutely.

If, for example, they are given a travel authorization.... Many of my colleagues received travel authorizations during the August evacuation. If that could be provided, or temporary permits, they will arrange somehow, with all the risks, to go, or maybe even to go from Afghanistan to another country. That is one step towards addressing it.

In August and September, my organization submitted...45 women who have been working with the Canadian military in Afghanistan, who have implemented Canada fund projects with Canada's embassy. None of those women have made it to Canada, and we have not heard a word from them. Even Canada's ambassadors have been involved. They were contacting IRCC on our behalf, but there has been nothing yet.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Kwan.

We'll go to the second round, with three minutes for Ms. Findlay, three minutes for Ms. Damoff, 90 seconds for Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe and 90 seconds for Ms. Kwan.

We'll start with Ms. Findlay. Please go ahead.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I only have three minutes, so I have to ask you for quick answers.

Ms. Rezaee, I understood that in your testimony you said that only 15 women athletes have made it from Afghanistan to Canada. I'm concerned that the government is not understanding the urgency of the Afghan situation. Can you say why women athletes are at such high risk in Afghanistan?

Ms. Friba Rezaee: Thank you very much for that question.

The Taliban forbid women's sports, as I mentioned, because it sends sexual vibes to men, brings visibility to women's bodies and brings visibility to women in general. Therefore, it's forbidden for them.

Therefore, their lives are at risk, because the Taliban see women athletes as those people in society who corrupt the young, who corrupt Islam and who act against Islam, which is unacceptable for their government, and—

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: They are at risk of death. Am I correct?

Ms. Friba Rezaee: Absolutely. The punishment in place under the Taliban regime is being lashed one hundred times or the death penalty—

• (2120)

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you.

Ms. Friba Rezayee: —and our office has been receiving many letters from the Taliban with threats that either they would be punished publicly or they will be executed.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you.

Mr. Dilsoz, how many Afghan refugees have arrived in the Vancouver area since the return of the Taliban in Afghanistan?

Mr. Wadood Dilsoz: In terms of those I have met with, around 400 or 500.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: What types of supports does your organization provide them?

Mr. Wadood Dilsoz: We provide shelter for them, and we also communicate with them culturally in order to introduce them to Canadian culture. Also, we work with their kids' schooling and we invite them to our events, so they are coming to our events in order to get introduced to the Afghan Canadians here in Vancouver.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Can you just tell me, do you have capacity for more, capacity to help more Afghan refugees?

Mr. Wadood Dilsoz: We have some volunteers who want to work with us, but still, we need some support from the government, as I mentioned in my statement. We need support from the government to help us.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: But you're willing, correct?

Mr. Wadood Dilsoz: Yes.

Hon. Kerry-Lynne Findlay: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Ms. Friba Rezayee: If I may add to that, yes, there are so many volunteers who would love to raise the capacity and to welcome new Afghan refugees.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Findlay.

We will go to Ms. Damoff for three minutes.

Please go ahead.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you so much, Chair.

Ms. Frogh, you talked about how women can't leave the home without being accompanied by a male, and about the number of Afghan women who are currently widowed. We also know that Afghanistan has one of the highest rates in the world of people who are living with disabilities. Those women may actually have a male living in the house but are unable to go out because that spouse is living with a disability. How could Canada get those women out of the country?

The second part would be, if we can't get them out of the country, how can Canada...? What specific options could you give us to be able to support those women and their families? Because they can no longer work, and they may not be able to leave the country.

Ms. Wazhma Frogh: Thank you.

This is a point that I'm working on every day. We have 40 million Afghans left behind, and all of them will not be evacuated, so we need to find ways to help them. One of those is that Canada needs to have a plan on how to engage with Afghanistan. One is of course the evacuation and the emigration of refugees, but at the same time, it's also about how Canada continues its engagement.

I propose a female special envoy from Canada. I request that you, the government, work on a female envoy for Afghanistan who actually starts engaging with the Taliban and starts discussions on how to get support to these women. Yes, the joblessness is challenging, and of course the humanitarian crisis is there, but also, the women's organizations are active in the country despite all the challenges, so there is a need for continued funding for them, resources for them.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Can I ask you something, though? On our previous panel—I don't know if you were watching or not—one of the witnesses said that we should absolutely not be engaging with the Taliban, because it legitimizes them.

Ms. Wazhma Frogh: Because I work with so many women on the ground and I see that millions of Afghans are actually starving, it is my continued advocacy that we need to engage with the Taliban, but that does not mean recognition.

There is a need for tight criteria attached to our engagement. That engagement should mean public diplomacy and putting pressure. It should also mean supporting national and international organizations.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Is there any way to get these women out of Afghanistan, though?

I have only 15 seconds left.

Ms. Wazhma Frogh: Yes, there is. You need to work with third parties and other women's organizations that have actually started working—

• (2125)

Ms. Pam Damoff: If they can't leave without a male, how do we get them out?

Ms. Wazhma Frogh: We will find ways. We have to find ways.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you for all your work.

Thank you to all the witnesses.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Damoff.

We will go to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for 90 seconds, please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Ninety seconds is very little time.

I want to thank the witnesses for being with us.

I will give the closing remarks, in order, to Ms. Rezayee, Ms. Frogh and Mr. Dilsoz.

What is your top priority? You each have 30 seconds.

[English]

Ms. Friba Rezayee: I want to add to Ms. Frogh's point about engaging with the Taliban. This is the time when Canada needs to listen to Afghans, because we know what works and what doesn't work in Afghanistan. The western countries and the NGOs collapsed in Afghanistan because they didn't work with the Afghans. We need to work with the Afghans if you want support.

To answer Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe's question, the number one priority is visas for our female athletes and study permits for our students.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Ms. Frogh, it's your turn.

[English]

Ms. Wazhma Frogh: For me, there would be two number one priorities. One is to actually put a quota for 50% women applicants—for women leaders and young women—within the 40,000 allocations you have. The second top priority is that Canada needs to appoint a female envoy for Afghanistan whom we can talk to on a regular basis.

Mr. Wadood Dilsoz: I would add that we have to change the measures, so that we have the same measures as for Ukraine. We have to foresee that for Afghanistan as well.

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

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I extend my thanks to all of you.

[English]

The Chair: We will go to Ms. Kwan for a minute and a half, please.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I want to go back to the last question, because one of the huge roadblocks for people to get out is the immigration measure that requires people to be already in a third country. Without the temporary travel permit, they cannot get to a third country.

My question then, for Ms. Rezayee and then Mr. Dilsoz, is this: Should the government change the special immigration measure that requires Afghans to be in a third country in order to access immigration supports?

Mr. Wadood Dilsoz: Absolutely, it has to be changed.

As we speak right now, someone is being tortured or someone is being killed. This is unfortunate. I think we have to change these measures.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Ms. Rezayee.

Ms. Friba Rezayee: Absolutely. What we're asking of the Canadian government is doable and achievable.

Please remove the third country requirement, as well as the documents from UNHCR. Our female athletes are in Islamabad at the moment, but they can't have any documents from UNHCR in order to qualify for the IRCC application.

Our need is very basic and also very doable.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

Very quickly, you mentioned the students. If they apply for a student visa from Afghanistan, they will be rejected because IRCC says that it doesn't believe they will return to their home country.

What do you suggest that the government should do with respect to that?

Mr. Wadood Dilsoz: Currently, of the students coming to Canada, half are staying in Canada. They don't leave. They work here and they continue living here, so it's not the case that—

The Chair: Ms. Kwan, that was your two minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm sorry about that.

Can I get the witnesses to submit their answers to me for that question? They didn't get a chance to answer.

The Chair: Sure.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: If they could do that, it would be much appreciated.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Kwan.

On behalf of the committee members, I want to thank the witnesses for the work they do in the lives of the most vulnerable and for sharing their thoughts with us today. I appreciate that. I wish you all the best.

Also on behalf of all members, I would like to thank the interpreters for staying for three long hours. I know it's not easy, particularly with the accents of people like myself.

I also want to thank the technical and support staff, as well as the clerk, the analysts and the staff from the members' offices.

It's work well done. Thank you.

The meeting is adjourned.

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