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# Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

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Chair: Mrs. Salma Zahid





## Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration

Thursday, May 12, 2022

• (1100)

[English]

**The Chair (Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.)):** I call this meeting to order. Welcome to meeting number 23 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

Given the ongoing pandemic situation and in light of the recommendations from recommendations from health authorities as well as the directive of the Board of Internal Economy on Thursday, November 25, 2021, to remain healthy and safe, all those attending the meeting in person are to maintain two-metre physical distancing and must wear a non-medical mask when circulating in the room. It is highly recommended that the mask be worn at all times, including when seated. Proper hand hygiene must be maintained by using the hand sanitizer provided in the room. Please refrain from coming into the room if you are symptomatic.

I remind all members and witnesses that all comments should be addressed through the chair. When you are not speaking, your microphone should be on mute, and your camera must be on if you are participating virtually.

Today we are here to study the main estimates 2022-23 and to receive an update on application backlogs as requested by the committee. I would like to welcome the minister to this committee. He will be here with us for the two hours. Thanks a lot also to the officials who have joined him.

Today we are joined by the Honourable Sean Fraser, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, and also by officials from the Department of Citizenship and Immigration. We are joined by Caroline Xavier, acting deputy minister; Marian Campbell Jarvis, senior assistant deputy minister, strategic and program policy; Daniel Mills, senior assistant deputy minister, operations; Catherine Scott, assistant deputy minister, settlement and integration; and as well as Hughes St-Pierre, chief financial officer and assistant deputy minister, finance, security and administration.

Thank you, minister, and officials. I welcome you.

You will have five minutes for your opening remarks. Please begin.

**Hon. Sean Fraser (Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship):** Thank you very much, Madam Chair.

[Translation]

Good morning, everyone.

It is a pleasure to be here with you today.

[English]

It's becoming a matter of routine that we get to show up, and I really appreciate the conversations we have at this committee.

It's good to be here again this time to present details of the 2022-23 main estimates for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada.

[Translation]

IRCC remains dedicated to working with the committee to support our immigration, refugee and asylum systems.

We are committed to maintaining Canada as a leading destination of choice for the world's most talented and skilled people, and as a country known for its dedication to meeting international humanitarian commitments.

[English]

As the committee is aware, we plan to continue our efforts to attract record numbers of skilled workers to help our economic recovery from the pandemic. In addition, we're going to continue to prioritize family reunification and offering shelter to the world's most vulnerable.

In support of these commitments, these main estimates that we are discussing today reflect the total funding of \$3.9 billion. This represents a net increase of \$654.4 million compared to last year's main estimates. The most significant additional allocation in the main estimates is \$208.8 million for the implementation of the multi-year immigration levels plans.

To ensure that Canada has the workers that it needs to grow our economy and address our labour shortages, our immigration levels plan aims to continue welcoming an increased number of newcomers in order to continue our recovery from the pandemic. Specifically, the additional funding will allow us to resettle totals of 431,645 permanent residents in 2022, and next year we will see 447,055 new permanent residents.

• (1105)

[Translation]

This builds on our previous plan, with an increased focus on supporting our economic resurgence and post-pandemic growth.

The government also remains firmly committed to our humanitarian efforts, including our plan to resettle at least 40,000 Afghan refugees over the next two years.

[English]

More than 12,600 Afghan refugees now call Canada home, and we're going to continue working with our partners in the region and using all other means available to secure safe passage for those aiming to leave Afghanistan and for onward travel to Canada. To support this undertaking, the main estimates contain \$106.2 million to support the Afghan resettlement commitment.

They also include \$83.5 million for the interim federal health program. As you know, Madam Chair, this program provides temporary health coverage to resettle refugees, asylum seekers and other groups until they are eligible for provincial or territorial health care plans.

These main estimates contain \$173 million for the interim housing assistance program.

[Translation]

This program provides financial support to provincial and municipal governments for extraordinary interim housing pressures that result from costs related to both the COVID-19 pandemic and increased volumes of asylum claimants in recent years.

[English]

Madam Chair, as I discussed at a previous appearance, our government is building a modern immigration system that will position Canada to compete on the global stage for the world's best talent. We're already the top destination of choice globally for workers who would like to resettle in another country. We have to make sure our system allows us to take advantage of that fact.

To proceed with building a new, modernized digital and data-driven immigration system, the main estimates also include \$33.1 million. As we further adapt our processes to new technology, IRCC continues to explore more options to uphold and improve our client services. Therefore, to support our client support centre, \$22.1 million is included in these main estimates.

[Translation]

These are the most significant allocations in the 2022-23 main estimates.

[English]

As you're aware, we're committed to an immigration system that supports our economic recovery, addresses our labour shortage, meets the needs of newcomers and serves the interests of communities across Canada. The main estimates we're presenting will help us achieve this.

[Translation]

Once again, thank you to the committee for this opportunity to meet with you.

[English]

I would now be pleased to answer any questions you may have. Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

We will now proceed to our rounds of questioning.

We will begin our first round with Mr. Hallan.

You will have six minutes. You can please begin.

**Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan (Calgary Forest Lawn, CPC):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

First and foremost, thank you to the officials for being here. I'll say it was a pleasure to tour Europe with the minister, and especially with Mr. Mills. Thank you, officials, for everything you're doing.

Right off the bat, I'd like to have the minister and the officials, if they can, provide documents or table with this committee a few things from testimony that we heard from the defence department at the Afghan committee. The first is the number of Afghan cases referred to IRCC by GAC and DND. Secondly, out of those cases, how many are currently in process? The third is the number of those cases that IRCC has made a decision on, whether approved or refused, and if they're refused, the reason for the refusal. Lastly, how many of those cases were withdrawn?

Perhaps we could please have those tabled as soon as possible with the committee.

Minister, Afghan interpreters have brought up concerns about their families, whether they're in Afghanistan or outside, who are being treated as security threats. With respect to the number of people referred by DND or GAC, or Afghans who have applications in the SIM who worked for the Canadian government and their families who have applied for the program, do you know how many have been labelled or identified as security threats to Canada after you've gotten their application from GAC or DND?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Actually, I have some information on your first question. Maybe I'll summarize that, and then address your second point. I do think there was potentially some misunderstanding about the difference between principal applicants, who may have been referred by different departments, and the total number of people who are coming.

With respect to DND, there are actually 3,470 people who have been referred through DND who are in Canada already, and just shy of 3,000 additional people who have been referred by DND who are approved to come to Canada, some of whom might still be in Afghanistan and some whom may be elsewhere.

• (1110)

**Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan:** We were told there were actually 3,800 who were approved by DND, and only 900 have come to Canada, according to DND.

Because of the shortened time, if we can have those things tabled, I think we could go from there. Off the top of your head, were any identified or labelled by DND or GAC as security threats afterwards?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** I don't know of the specific individuals who have been labelled as security threats. You won't be approved to come to Canada if you don't pass the biometric assessment, so it's hard to understand which category you're talking about. But I will get you a summary of the number of people who are in Canada and the number of people who've been approved as well. We can provide that information.

I do want to address your second point about the interpreters, because it's really important.

There's not an internally held view that there is a class of people who have served Canada who pose a security threat to our national interests. To the extent that anyone holds that view on anything I have said, I want to make it absolutely clear that is just not the case. We do have a robust security screening process that helps confirm people's identities and to screen for that sort of thing, but for the people who've served Canada as interpreters or otherwise, please know, that is not my view, nor is it the Government of Canada's.

**Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan:** Could the officials confirm that those items will be tabled? Could we could get one of the officials to okay that?

Mr. Mills could you, or anyone...?

**Ms. Caroline Xavier (Acting Deputy Minister, Department of Citizenship and Immigration):** Madam Chair, I can attest that we will make whatever information we have available, as per the request of the member.

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

Minister, it's been almost 12 weeks since I asked a question about visa-free travel for Ukrainians. We passed—obviously without the support of the Liberals in this committee—visa-free travel. Even in the House of Commons, visa-free travel for Ukrainians was passed.

Almost 12 weeks ago, you said it would up to take 12 weeks to set that program up. Is that something you've tried to start, or is it something that would be considered? It was passed in the House of Commons and in this committee, and it's been almost 12 weeks now.

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** We made a decision not to proceed with visa-free travel in our Ukraine program and instead put in place the Canada-Ukraine authorization for emergency travel. From my perspective, the program is working very well.

We pared off the vast majority of criteria that would normally lead to a finding of inadmissibility, with the exception of biometrics. You had the opportunity during our trip to travel to Warsaw, where you saw the new biometrics collection facility. When we were there, we saw that people were in and out in less than 10 min-

utes in most cases. Our capacity to process people exceeds the demand that's being put on the system, so the numbers in the inventory will continue to come down if that remains the case.

This has not proven to be a barrier for people to access the program. Maybe it did in the first or early weeks, but right now it seems to be moving quite well, with more than 100,000 people approved.

We've made a decision to stick to the Canada-Ukraine authorization for emergency travel, rather than to enter into a visa-free travel regime in the middle of an armed conflict.

**Mr. Jasraj Singh Hallan:** We are hearing concerns that... It's not about the process when we get there. Obviously, the biometrics do not take much time to do. It's about getting the appointment. We're still hearing that it's taking weeks. People have to travel to get them done. Sometimes they're not in the best situation to go there. That's why we asked for this. We continue to hear complaints about that.

Can the minister and his department also table how many applications were refused or rejected after biometrics, when it comes to any type of security threat or something that was brought up?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** We can provide a summary of the number of applications that have been received, the number of approvals that have been granted and the number of refusals. I think we can do that. The specificity to an individual, obviously, would not be permissible, but as a category, I think we can provide those numbers.

**The Chair:** Mr. Hallan, I'm sorry for interrupting, but your time is up. You can come back in the second round.

I will now proceed to MP Ali.

You will have six minutes. Please begin.

**Mr. Shafqat Ali (Brampton Centre, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you, Minister and officials for being here.

Through you, Madam Chair, to the minister, I'd like to first of thank you for your hard work dealing with the Afghan refugees and the Ukraine situation. I truly appreciate your hard work.

My question to the minister is this. I noticed in the estimates that the operating expense for the 2022-23 fiscal year for citizenship and passports is \$566.7 million. The fees paid by applicants represent about 66% of the amount, so the government is only required to cover 34% of that overall expense.

Do the estimates take into account the cost associated with the current surge?

• (1115)

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** I may have to seek a bit of clarity from my officials on the specific budget line item that you're referring to. Rather than have me provide information you might not be looking for, maybe one of our officials on the line could explain whether that takes into account the current surge that we're seeing in this year's main estimates.

If you could clarify whether that includes the additional 500 staff who have been added for the purpose of processing passports as well, that might be helpful. Do we have that information?

**Ms. Caroline Xavier:** I can confirm that, yes, we have put in the forecast what was expected for this fiscal year as part of the budget request.

What I would have to confirm—and I'm seeing if my CFO will be able to confirm this—is whether or not it also took into consideration the additional funding related to the comment that our minister made.

**Mr. Shafqat Ali:** Thank you.

Minister, the 2022-23 estimates call for a \$10-million increase in grants for the interim housing assistance program, a \$15-million increase in grants for the settlement program, a \$4-million increase in grants for the resettlement assistance program and a \$6-million increase in grants for the international migration capacity building program.

Could the minister give us some insight into the nature of these grants and the impact of adding a total of \$35 million to these grants?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Yes, this is an important thing to understand. These numbers are not arbitrary. They reflect an increased number of people who are coming to Canada through different channels. One of the things I think is really helpful to keep in our minds is that, although there's a short-term cost when you want to increase settlement supports for people who come, the long-term return of having more people living in our communities, working in our communities and raising families in our communities is enormous.

The increases in spending that you'll see reflected in the main estimates are a direct result of the decisions we've taken to bring more people to Canada when it comes to the settlement categories. For something like the interim housing assistance program, that's the kind of thing we work on, for example, in partnership with provincial governments that may be required to take on additional expenses as more people enter their particular province.

These numbers that you've cited are a direct reflection of the fact that our ambition and need to have more people arrive in Canada continue to grow. From my perspective, the short-term cost of making sure that people are set up for success when they arrive is dwarfed by the long-term return the people provide after moving to and living in our communities.

**Mr. Shafqat Ali:** Thank you.

Among the tens of thousands of Ukrainians we are expecting to seek refuge in Canada, there will be a thousand young people like the Ukrainian parliamentary intern in my office who will want to continue their education in Canadian colleges and universities.

They will not necessarily have the funds available to pay the level of tuition fees that Canadian residents pay, let alone the level of fees that international students are required to pay. There don't appear to be any full or partially funded scholarships for those who come here under the Canada-Ukraine authorization of emergency travel.

Has there been any discussion with provincial governments about improving the situation of these students?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** First of all, I had the opportunity to join for the celebration yesterday evening that welcomed, I believe, 41 Ukrainian interns. Every party in the House of Commons was represented. It was one of the most moving things I've seen in a very long time, when our new arrivals broke into the Ukrainian national anthem. I just want to say thank you to all who were there. It was a moment in my life that I will hold with me for a very long time.

With respect to those who wish to study, we made a decision early on that we would attach eligibility, either for an open work permit or a study permit, to those who come under the Canada-Ukraine authorization for emergency travel. I have not personally had conversations to address the costs with provincial governments, though they may be as much with educational institutions as they will be with any level of government.

I am of the view that those who come to study in our institutions make extraordinary economic, social and, frankly, cultural contributions to our communities, to the extent that there's an opportunity for us to explore possibilities. I'm open to it. We have not put in place a plan to address this, as it's quite atypical for the immigration department to engage in questions around scholarships, for example.

However, to the extent that we can look at what tools we have to make it easier for people to live, work and study in Canada, I'm extremely interested from a humanitarian point of view to do the right thing to support people fleeing vulnerable circumstances, but I believe it's in our self-interest to support people who wish to make those kinds of contributions to our communities.

• (1120)

**The Chair:** Thank you. Your time is up.

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

You may please begin.

[*Translation*]

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

Once again, Minister, thank you for taking the time to appear before the committee. You are very available to this committee, and we are very grateful to you.

There is a very serious scourge raging these days in Quebec, particularly in the Montreal metropolitan area. I'm talking about shootings. Day after day, we see shootings related to criminalized groups, and there are deaths. They happen because gun trafficking is very prolific. Today, it's almost easier for criminalized groups to buy a gun than a pint of milk at the corner store.

We have been told that a quarter of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, or RCMP, officers deployed in Quebec are managing the Roxham Road instead of dealing with gun trafficking at the border.

Minister, when will you ensure that the safe third country agreement is suspended?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Thank you for the question.

I certainly agree that the problems with guns and gun violence are a scourge.

I will take the liberty of answering the question in my own language, because I will be using technical terms.

[*English*]

One of the things that I think is important is that, when we look at the reason that RCMP officers may be engaged—and I will be careful not to dabble too much in the Public Safety Minister's sandbox here—it's to enforce the laws we have on the books.

It's essential, when we look at our domestic and international legal obligations, that we don't ignore the responsibility we have to enforce those laws. I expect what you're getting to is the engagement of the RCMP who may be involved with processing people who have crossed the border and claimed asylum. What's important to realize is that, if we don't have people set up to process people as they come across the border—

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** I'm sorry, Madam Chair. The minister knows that I only have six minutes, and his answer is a bit too long.

Minister, my question is not complicated: when will the safe third country agreement be suspended?

At present, some RCMP officers are managing Roxham Road instead of doing their job, which is to tackle organized crime and arms trafficking. If this agreement were suspended, that road would be closed. You know that very well, Minister.

Yesterday, the prime minister told us that the government was in discussions with representatives of the United States to modernize the agreement. According to the information I have obtained, these negotiations have stalled, and they are not a priority for your government. What is happening right now is very serious. The situation at Roxham Road has led to an increase in gun trafficking, and the Quebec market is flooded with illegal firearms. As we speak, people are dying. Criminal groups are taking advantage of the situation, since the RCMP cannot do its job properly.

What are you waiting for to suspend the safe third country agreement?

[*English*]

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** One of the issues I have with the argument you've laid out is that there's a real challenge. You've suggested to just close things down. I don't know if that means you would put a structure in the way.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Minister, they will apply at the border crossings once you have decided to suspend the agreement. That is obvious. Everyone knows it.

The Association québécoise des avocats et avocates en droit de l'immigration, or AQAADI, is asking you to do this, because it would not only be easier for the RCMP and the Government of Quebec, whose intake capacity has been reached, but it would also be more humane for the asylum seekers. Instead of going through the back door, they would go through the front door at a border crossing.

• (1125)

[*English*]

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** I appreciate your point of view, but I think you may be ignoring one of the series of problems that approach would create. The border with the United States is very long, and there are many other points where a person could simply enter. There are fields all along the border that a person could move through.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Minister, how long has the agreement been in existence? It has been in existence since 2004. How did we proceed before it was adopted? There were international agreements with Canada. Asylum seekers went through border crossings, Minister.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, I'm sorry for interrupting. I have stopped the clock. All the comments should be directed through the chair, and we should allow the minister to answer the questions.

I will start the clock back and you can start.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** I'm sorry, Madam Chair. The minister is also my friend, and I like him a lot.

Before the agreement was adopted, there were international agreements. People went through the border crossings and made their applications there. Why would it be different if Canada suspended the agreement?

Everyone says—except your government, of course—that the problem is that this agreement is not suspended.

[English]

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Look, even if you speak to the UNHCR, they would still insist that the principle of safety of countries is really important. When you're looking at humanitarian resettlement and asylum seekers, it's important that we provide regular venues for people to seek refuge and protection from the violence they are fleeing, but it's not the same thing as an ordinary, say, economic immigration program, where a person would be able to say this is the country I would like to come to. It's a different stream of immigration altogether.

The circumstance that you have just laid out would potentially create a circumstance where it would become an unmanageable volume of people who would be seeking to come in for the purpose of seeking asylum, and I don't think that's the best or most effective way to actually manage the situation.

I also think if you, without putting the proper thought into place....

I'm sorry. I see you're trying to jump in.

[Translation]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Minister, are you telling me that before this agreement was signed, in 2004, the situation was unmanageable?

[English]

**The Chair:** I'm sorry for interrupting.

Your time is up, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[Translation]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** No, things were going very well.

[English]

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Madam Chair, maybe I'll take 10 seconds.

I think everyone will acknowledge that there needs to be improvements to the situation. With the provincial government in Quebec, we both work to make sure that we can help cover the cost of housing and health care for people who come across—

[Translation]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** What they are asking you—

[English]

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Hold on for one moment.

Also, we are working to reach a long-term solution with the United States that actually improves the situation on a go-forward basis. These are things we're engaged with and will continue to work on.

**The Chair:** I'm sorry for the interruption. The time is up.

Before we go to the next member, a reminder to all the members and the witnesses that all the questions should be directed through the chair. Once you ask the question, please give an opportunity to the witnesses to answer the question. Only one person should speak at a time.

We will now proceed to Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan, you will have six minutes. You can go ahead, please.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the minister for coming back to our committee and to his officials as well.

I'm getting increasingly worried about the fact that I think IRCC's system is overwhelmed and unable to cope with the situation. GAC referred Afghan files to IRCC and it appears that they're lost in the system. Afghan lawyers who worked with the Canadian embassy have referred 28 files to IRCC. To date, they have not received a response from IRCC—no invitation and no G numbers. Representatives following this case just contacted IRCC last week around this. They were told that they need to ask GAC to resubmit those referrals. That was from IRCC officials.

Why is IRCC asking GAC to resubmit these applications? Are they lost in the system?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Thanks for the question.

I don't have any reason to believe that any files are lost in the system. Without speaking to the specifics of individual cases, I think you're hitting on an issue that I can try my best to provide some clarity on.

Prior to the last federal election, we made a decision to resettle 20,000 Afghan refugees. Subsequently, we campaigned on a commitment to increase that number to 40,000. Bear with me for 30 seconds. There has been a significant number beyond the 20,000 who have now been formally brought into the process. The total of those 40,000 spaces is not yet filled. That will be filled after we get these referrals from folks.

I expect that everyone who will be brought into the program—or who have reached out and will not be brought into the program—will have an answer in a very short period of time. I'm guessing it will be in the next few weeks.

I did have the opportunity to speak with a representative of the group that you referred to, just a few days ago. I anticipate that, within a matter of weeks, there will be clarity for all of those who've reached out seeking to become part of the program.

● (1130)

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** It troubles me, the very fact that IRCC has asked for those files to be resubmitted. The minister says the files are not lost. If they're not lost, why is IRCC asking for those files to be resubmitted?

We also just heard from the Department of National Defence that they submitted 3,800 files to IRCC by way of referrals. These are individual Afghans whose files have been verified by the Department of National Defence. They advise that only 900 of them have been accepted.

What's happened to the other files?



The minister says not to worry, that they'll get to it. Meanwhile, media reports are indicating that people are being tortured. Afghan interpreters—those with enduring relationships to Canada—are being captured by the Taliban and tortured. Every second of the day counts for the lives of these individuals.

I am absolutely astounded with the process here. If the files are not misplaced or lost, or if somehow IRCC officials can find them, why are they asking for them to be resubmitted?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** I share your perspective on the need to act in a substantial and urgent way. I remind folks that although I said 12,600, another plane arrived yesterday and there are approximately 12,900 people who are here. There is another plane—

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** I'm sorry, Minister. I don't need those numbers. I need you to answer the question, please.

**The Chair:** Speak one person at a time.

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** I think the public needs these numbers. This is really important.

People coming through the special immigration measures are landing here tomorrow as well. There are going to be more flights more or less every week.

Yes, there are people who may have made a contribution whom we are going to continue to bring here, but in terms of DND referrals, 3,470 people are in Canada now under the special immigration streams that came from DND. Another 2,956 have been approved. The total number of SIM applicants who are actually in Canada—

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** I'm sorry. I'm going to interrupt the minister for a second here.

Saying how many people have come, versus how many applications, is completely different. We know, for example, that the former interpreters have submitted 300 applications, for a total of 5,000 people amongst those. Using those numbers does not actually answer the question. I'm sorry, Minister.

Please, the answer that I'm looking for is why the IRCC is asking people to resubmit their files if they're not lost. If the minister can't answer that question, I ask him to ponder it and submit an answer to the committee, because I don't want to hear numbers again.

I need to get on with my next question.

In terms of discrepancy in treatment, I have a file on a situation where people asked the UNHCR for a referral. That was back in March and they got an appointment for June 14. They told the UNHCR that they couldn't wait because their visa would expire in Pakistan. Meanwhile, in a similar case, they went directly to the high commission of Canada and they were processed.

How is it possible that there could be discrepancies of this magnitude in the treatment of files?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** One of the things that's a real challenge when we're dealing with our refugee resettlement initiatives is that, when we rely on referral partners, sometimes they're facing unique pressures that are beyond the control of the Government of Canada.

UNHCR's capacity in the region, if I go back to the timeline that you were talking about, was only starting to ramp up around the

end of the first quarter of this particular year. Depending on where a person goes, which referral partner they use, the timelines that those third parties are working with can vary significantly.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** Then why on the website is the government telling people to go to the UNHCR for a referral? Instead, they could have gone to the high commission for a much quicker turnaround. Why don't they put it on the website? Why don't they tell people to go to the high commission?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** There are a number of different referral partners that we work with, and the UNHCR has referred millions of people and given refugee status determination around the world and in the region. We have a number of different partners that we work with, and depending on which stream you're coming through and your potential eligibility, who you go to may vary based on the nature of why you would be a qualified applicant for Canada's Afghan refugee resettlement programs.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** I can tell the minister that the UNHCR's response to that family was—

**The Chair:** I'm sorry to interrupt—

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** —it's not their problem when your visa expires before you can get an appointment.

**The Chair:** Ms. Kwan, I'm sorry for interrupting, but the time is up.

As members of Parliament, we hear very heartbreaking stories in our constituency offices. I know a lot of people are going through a lot, but we have to be mindful that we are respectful to our witnesses. Let's work together.

Now we will go to our second round, and we will start with Mr. Redekopp for five minutes.

Mr. Redekopp, go ahead.

● (1135)

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

Thank you to the minister and all the witnesses for being here.

Minister, chapter 18 of *House of Commons Procedure and Practice* lays out the rules about the financial cycle and the main estimates. It says that members have the right to have their grievances addressed before approving requirements of the Crown.

As you're probably aware, one of the grievances that I have deals with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada operations and leadership relating to your associate deputy minister on the production of papers motion that we have that's before IRCC. As you're likely aware, there are some issues with redactions in documents that were finally sent over just yesterday, but there are still two documents that have redactions that we have not been able to see.

When Madam Xavier was here at the committee last week, she was somewhat dismissive about the absolute constitutional authority of the House of Commons to send for documents. Indeed, she actually said that the IRCC was able, through client-solicitor privilege, to redact documents, which I don't believe is true.

I guess my question for you is, bearing in mind that you are also a member of Parliament, a member of the House of Commons, and not just the minister, do you agree with your deputy that IRCC has the authority to override the House of Commons' constitutional authority and withhold information from this committee?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Look, before I address your question, I want to address Madam Chair's comments before.

Let me just say I don't consider any of the questions that I've been asked to be disrespectful. I think if people bring passion and energy to their questions based on the things they really care about, that's appropriate, and I don't mind difficult questions. It's my job to be here and take them.

With respect to Mr. Redekopp's question about the issues around document production and procedure, I think it's for this committee to make decisions about the needs of the committee to do its work. I had been through a similar issue on separate committees before I was a minister, and there is a natural tension that sometimes requires committees to sort things out over time between the laws that bind civil servants and the parliamentary procedures that parliamentarians agree to. I've spoken with quite a number of people over the last number of years who have differing points of view on this particular question and I think reasonable people can disagree.

**Mr. Brad Redekopp:** The issue is that the redactions are to be looked at by the law clerk, so you're essentially saying—or your department is saying—that you don't trust the law clerk to do the job and that the department is going to do the redactions. That's what I am asking you. Do you agree with your department on that, that it is the right way to go?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** I don't think it's for me, as the minister, to proclaim on a dispute on procedure that's before this committee. I think it's for the members of this committee.

**Mr. Brad Redekopp:** I have another question, then.

The production of papers motion asked for documents and specifically asked for all briefing notes, memos and emails from senior officials. I've gone through all the batches that were distributed, and there was one little document that had a few emails in it, but for the rest of it there were no other emails. There were other documents and things.

You have 9,000 people in your department, with hundreds of managers. Can you honestly tell me that besides the very few—these few emails—that went to the deputy minister, zero emails have been exchanged between managers on the subject of racism in the department?

There were lots of fancy presentations made. With COVID, everybody is working remotely. I find it difficult to believe that there were no emails, which should have been released in these production of papers.

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** I think you'll appreciate that, with a department as large as the one that I am responsible for, I don't have a line of sight into the specific email exchanges between people who work in the department.

What's important is that I do have full faith in the officials' ability to review and comply with the instructions that have been included in document production requests, but I think what's important is to understand the process that was employed.

I can't speak from a place of personal knowledge about those individual emails that you're referring to.

**Mr. Brad Redekopp:** Do you think it's reasonable to assume that there probably were some emails?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** I think it's important that I don't make assumptions. I wasn't copied on those emails. I don't know what they would have been and I do have faith that my officials would not be trying to not share them for any dubious purpose.

**Mr. Brad Redekopp:** I want to change gears a little bit to the visitors and international students.

There was a motion yesterday, M-44, talking about the international people who are coming in here. There are people who are living horror stories. I specifically want to talk about the caretaker program. Madam Xavier told me that this is a priority for your department, yet it doesn't seem to be that way.

My question is this: If it is a priority, the numbers in your report show that it is not being successful. How do you account for that?

• (1140)

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** I'm sorry. Can you just provide clarity?

You started with international students and then referred to caretakers. If you're referring to caregivers, there are about six different programs that have existed in the last couple of years. Can you just clarify?

**Mr. Brad Redekopp:** I was referring to the \$267 million for visitors, international students and temporary workers, and I want to focus on caregivers in that category.

**The Chair:** Your time is up. You will have an opportunity to—

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** I would maybe invite Mr. Redekopp to.... I took some of the time. If he wants to send a question afterwards, through the committee, I could provide an answer in writing.

**The Chair:** Okay.

We will now proceed to Mr. Dhaliwal.

Mr. Dhaliwal, you will have five minutes. You can, please, begin.

**Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Surrey—Newton, Lib.):** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Madam Chair, I want to thank the honourable minister for being with us today and staying for the full two hours.

From the work we get in our offices, this immigration file is not a very easy one. This is probably one of the most tedious and difficult files, and I want to thank the honourable respected officials who have joined and the staff at IRCC for the work they do to serve Canadians every day.

I would also like to echo the comments made by the honourable member, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, that the minister has been very accessible to this committee and it shows in the number of appearances he has made. I also want to thank the minister for his recent visit to my riding of Surrey—Newton and for participating and responding to many questions and concerns from those at the grassroots level. The minister's hard work and advocacy are much appreciated, and I look forward to hosting him in Surrey again some time very soon.

My question to the minister, Madam Chair, through you, is this: On April 22, the honourable minister made an announcement that express-entry draws for the federal skilled worker and Canadian experience class candidates are set to resume in early July. With Canada having a low unemployment rate, a high number of vacancies, an aging population and a low work rate, could the honourable minister please touch on the importance of reopening the country to qualified skilled workers?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Thanks. That's very generous of you with your comments. It's unnecessary, but I appreciate it nevertheless.

Immigration is an economic portfolio, in addition to being a humanitarian portfolio. In my view, it's never been more important than it is today that we embrace immigration as an economic growth strategy.

I look at the extraordinary economic recovery from COVID-19 that we're living through right now. Despite the fact that we've seen record job growth and the lowest unemployment rate since we started keeping track of those statistics, before the omicron variant hit us at the end of the year, there were 965,000 jobs available in Canada. We cannot fill those jobs with a domestic labour force. If we want to maximize our economic potential as a country to pay for all of the things we enjoy, we need to bring more people into that workforce to kick-start even more economic growth.

The announcement that you referred to included an additional component as well, which was for the extension of post-graduate work permits of people that had recently expired or were soon to be expired, so they'll be able to continue to stay and work in Canada.

With respect to the resumption of the draws for the Canadian experience class and federal skilled workers stream, this is really important. There was a significant pause as a result of the decision that was taken during the pandemic to not process certain streams as we were trying to deal with a closed border to protect the public from the spread of COVID-19. It put real pressures on the system. I recognize that some of these people may have been in Canada and may have been eligible for the TR to PR program instead, for example.

The advantage to that pause is about to reveal itself in a very positive way. When we resume the draws in July, we're also going to be back to the ordinary service standard rather than having an unpredictable amount of time before a person will be resettled as a

permanent resident. Getting back to a reasonable volume and a reasonable processing time is not just good to give peace of mind to the applicant but certainty to potential employers as well as to when their new, highly skilled talent is going to arrive at the workplace.

This is going to make a very big difference and is going to allow thousands and thousands of people to come and make a contribution to our communities.

• (1145)

**Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal:** Madam Chair, the minister has also made some policy changes to the program TR to PR stream as well.

Could the minister elaborate on how it will help those 90,000 individuals who have applied under the TR to PR stream?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Yes. You're testing my memory a little bit. I didn't go over my notes from this particular announcement immediately before I showed up.

People who came through the TR to PR program and are fully resettled as permanent residents are here and don't need further support. There were certain restrictions on the TR to PR program that pre-existed my time as minister, including restrictions on their ability to travel and the ability of their family members to apply from overseas.

By making changes to those programs, we're going to make life a little bit easier for people we recognize might still be in the process for a period of time. It will free them up to have opportunities to perhaps travel or have more flexibility in having family members join them. This is an important.

Thank you, Mr. Dhaliwal.

**The Chair:** I'm sorry for interrupting, Minister. The time is up for Mr. Dhaliwal.

We will now proceed to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, please, the floor is yours.

[*Translation*]

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

I do not have much time, but I would like to tell you that I too like you and that I have a great deal of respect for you.

Minister, do you find it acceptable that a quarter of the RCMP officers deployed in Quebec are assigned to the management of Roxham Road, rather than to the fight against arms trafficking at the border?

[*English*]

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** I think you're pitching an argument, and I fundamentally disagree with the pretense that you've laid out.

The proportion of the force that's dealing with one issue versus another is not the problem. Are there adequate resources to deal with all of the challenges that a particular community faces? That's the challenge for me.

Do I think it's acceptable that there is gun violence in Canada? No.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** No, that's not the question.

[*English*]

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** But I think it's an important pretense that underlines your question.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** No, that is not it at all.

Minister—

[*English*]

**The Chair:** One person speaks at a time, please.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** I am sorry, Madam Chair, but I really do not have much time.

Minister, that is not what I am trying to claim at all. What I'm saying is that if we didn't have to manage Roxham Road under the safe third country agreement, those officers would be deployed differently and more efficiently.

Don't worry, I know you're a family man and you care about gun violence. Precisely because you care, your government should be aware that the safe third country agreement must be suspended while it awaits modernization. Indeed, the prime minister told us yesterday that negotiations were underway with the United States to modernize it.

In fact, Minister, how far along are these negotiations?

How long do you think it will take to reach an agreement? Time is of the essence.

[*English*]

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** I'm not in a place to reveal bilateral discussions with the United States. Suffice it say that we have discussions with our American partners on the safe third country agreement, but I have not lined up a specific date where everything is going to be complete.

I have a mandate letter commitment to work with the United States to modernize the safe third country agreement, but there's not an established date when everything will be complete. It's something we need to continue to work on.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** I understand that negotiations are underway and that they must remain secret. I am not asking you to disclose the content.

However, can you tell us how soon you hope to sign this agreement and how long you think it will take? People are waiting for it.

[*English*]

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** There's not a declared timeline that I can point to and say it's only going to be this amount of time.

I can reassure people that we're going to continue to work with our provincial counterparts on things like housing, health care and improving our asylum system while we continue to work towards modernizing the safe third country agreement.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** So this is not a priority for your government.

Thank you.

[*English*]

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** That's not true.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We will now proceed to Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan, you will have two and a half minutes. Please begin.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

The minister has said that it's wrong to separate families, yet this is exactly what's happening. I have an Afghan family, a former Afghan interpreter and his brother, who have been left behind. All the paperwork has been done.

I wrote to the minister about this back in March. It was March 30 to be exact. He has referred it to his staff. As the weeks pass, the IRCC staff still can't even find the file on this situation. They are saying that they are looking for the file and waiting for officials to send it to them.

Just how long does it take within IRCC to get files so they can follow up on cases?

● (1150)

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Thank you.

The answer depends on an individual case file. We don't yet have a completely digital system where you can search a database from start to finish and simply pull up a file. I very much want to change this in the years ahead. We have, in many ways, a paper-based system that can be antiquated in certain elements. It can require us to have to reach out to offices on the other side of the world, which may actually have to dig out paper applications that have been submitted. They then have to relay information back.

This is something I desperately want to change because in the 21st century, we need a 21st-century immigration system. The investments have already been made. The work is under way, but how long it takes depends on the facts of an individual file.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** Minister, this request was made at the end of March. It is now mid-May and staff have just come back to say that they're looking for the file. Of course, as with all the other applications of Afghan individuals, they sent an email to the officials, so it is in the system somewhere. It's not a paper file; that is for certain.

I hope the minister understands the gravity of the situation and the discrepancy of how things are being dealt with. It seems to me that files cannot be found, most certainly not in an expeditious manner, let alone trying to process it in an expeditious manner.

I brought to the minister, back in February, a request through this committee for a budget breakdown of the \$85 million. I got a response back, in this binder, of nothingness that says there's no such information that could be provided and that detailed planning and associated costing is currently taking place.

Does the minister have the detailed planning that he can table to the committee now?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Do I have the liberty to provide an answer?

**The Chair:** Yes. You can give a quick answer.

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Every budget line item is not fully established. To be very quick, the areas that the \$85 million are going towards are study permits, work permits, TRVs, proof of citizenship and reducing the PR card inventories. In order to address specific budget line items, there's still a certain amount of work to allocate how much money goes to each of those five lines of business.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

We will now end our second round and this panel with two and a half minutes for Mr. Genuis and then two and a half minutes for Mr. El-Khoury, because this panel ends and then we have to go into the second panel. We have to vote.

**Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC):** We have time for five minutes.

**The Chair:** Then the second panel would be shorter.

We have to vote after we end this panel, the minister will give opening remarks for five minutes on the backlog issue and then we will go into a round of questioning.

You will have two and a half minutes now.

**Mr. Garnett Genuis:** Thank you, Chair.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** On a point of order, Madam Chair, if we have to vote on this, then we need to do that in this first panel. The next panel should not be cut short. We should have the full hour for the next panel.

**The Chair:** That's what I said. After two and half minutes and two and a half minutes, we will vote and then proceed to the second panel.

Please, Mr. Genuis, go ahead.

**Mr. Garnett Genuis:** Minister, on the issue of Hong Kong, it's been devastating to see recent events out of Hong Kong and the arrest of 90-year-old, retired cardinal Joseph Zen, as well as Canadian citizen Denise Ho, a well-known singer and songwriter, and various others. I'd appreciate your comments on these arrests, and also recognition that there are significant concerns persisting about the immigration measures that are in place for Hong Kong. The special measures don't apply to human rights defenders and pro-democracy activists who don't meet certain economic criteria. The programs look more like they're constructed with economic objectives in mind, instead of to really target human rights defenders.

Another concern about these measures is that they exempt criminal charges under the national security law from consideration, but they do not exempt from consideration the criminal charges related to pro-democracy activism that were made under other laws. There are people who were charged under laws other than the national security law for legitimate pro-democracy activism, who have had challenges being able to access the Canadian immigration system.

Are you contemplating further changes to the special immigration measures around Hong Kong to address those specific problems that I've identified?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** The challenges you described are twofold, as I understand it. One is potentially more of an economic than a humanitarian focus. The second is the breadth with which the exemptions for the national security law apply, where it could be more broadly applied to pro-democracy activities.

On the first question, I'm not as concerned about the challenges there because of the nature of the more widely available travel that people from Hong Kong have to Canada, because we don't have an ordinary visa regime. We have the electronic travel authorization, which allows people more freely to enter Canada regardless of the purpose of their travel.

On the second question, I'd be interested if this committee has feedback. My personal view is that if we're dealing with activities that have been criminalized by a regime with whom we may have many points of disagreement, and if those criminal charges don't reflect reprehensible behaviour, in our view, or certainly criminal activity, in our view, then I would be interested in the recommendations this committee may have.

● (1155)

**Mr. Garnett Genuis:** Thank you.

I'll just go back to the first point. The issue is that we're excluding people who have been prominent pro-democracy protesters and activists, for instance, if they're high school students, if they're not yet graduates. Why would we exclude human rights defenders who clearly should be able to come to Canada based on the principles of these program, yet aren't formally graduates yet?

**The Chair:** I'm sorry for interrupting, but time is up, Minister.

**Mr. Garnett Genuis:** Perhaps I can get a response in writing, at least. Thanks.

**The Chair:** We will have to move to Mr. El-Khoury.

You will have two and a half minutes for your round of questioning. You can please begin.

[Translation]

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

Thank you, Minister, for coming to visit us so often and for explaining so many interesting things to us.

[English]

I would like to mention something at the beginning regarding the violence in our cities, Mr. Minister. Part of this happened in my riding. It must be known to everyone that a good part of the responsibility also goes to the provincial police of each area. Everything is not just on the federal side.

[Translation]

Here are my questions.

There are a number of programs and grants that are increasing significantly.

Are you able to tell us about the major steps taken compared to previous years in this regard?

Are there any new tools or pilot programs in the 2022-23 main estimates that you would like to bring to the committee's attention?

Can you tell us how the 2022-23 main estimates will address the links between economic growth and immigration?

Thank you, Minister.

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Thank you for the question.

The review of measures in the main estimates is a very important function of the committee.

These amounts have not increased by accident. They stem from the decision to increase the number of newcomers to Canada. This is essential, in my view, to promote the national interest. The economy is doing very well, but this will improve it.

[English]

It's not enough to be excellent. We have to increase the margin by which we are excellent compared to competitor economies. The increase in the numbers that you see in the estimates is a reflection of the decisions that we've taken to bring more people here to fill the gaps in the economy so that we can experience economic growth.

There was one piece I was a little unclear on, the second element to your question. You mentioned a pilot program. Was there a specific pilot, or just generally funding?

**Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury:** Is there a new pilot program in 2022-23 that you would like to express, or a new idea?

**The Chair:** I'm sorry for interrupting, Mr. El-Khoury.

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** I have many I'd like to....

Are we out of time?

**The Chair:** Yes. If you could, please give a quick 10-second answer.

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** I'm very excited about the new flexibilities we're going to be pursuing in the express-entry system, which is

going to allow us to target, with more precision, workers to fill the gaps in key sectors than is possible under the current system.

I have much more to say, but maybe at my next committee appearance.

**The Chair:** With that, we end our rounds of questioning.

We have to vote on the main estimates 2022-23, and then we will start our second panel.

DEPARTMENT OF CITIZENSHIP AND IMMIGRATION

Vote 1—Operating expenditures.....\$1,539,424,462

Vote 5—Capital expenditures.....\$30,355,221

Vote 10—Grants and contributions.....\$2,126,826,012

(Votes 1, 5 and 10 agreed to on division)

IMMIGRATION AND REFUGEE BOARD

Vote 1—Program expenditures.....\$254,883,504

(Vote 1 agreed to on division)

As the chair, shall I report the votes on the main estimates to the House?

**An hon. member:** On division.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We will now suspend the meeting for a few minutes and then go into the second panel, where we will have opening remarks.

● (1200) \_\_\_\_\_ (Pause) \_\_\_\_\_

● (1200)

**The Chair:** I call the meeting to order.

I would like to thank the minister once again for appearing before the committee. This panel will be on the applications backlog and processing times.

Minister, I would like you to provide your opening remarks for five minutes. You can begin, please.

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Thank you so much, Madam Chair.

[Translation]

Thank you, Madam Chair.

[English]

I'd like to now turn to address the issue of application inventories and processing times at IRCC.

My view, I think people will appreciate, is that immigration is critical to the well-being of our communities, and that newcomers play an essential role in addressing some of our most severe labour shortages throughout the pandemic and as we enter the economic recovery phase.

The past few years have posed real challenges that would have been beyond imagining just a couple of years ago. Immigration systems around the world have been affected by the pandemic as a result of lengthy border closures, travel restrictions and public health measures that have prevented people from going to work, particularly in jurisdictions where they may not have been able to adjust to work from home as easily as they have in Canada, depending on the line of work.

• (1205)

[Translation]

Yet at the same time we continued to receive applications, leading to frustrating delays and substantial file backlogs. My department is working hard to resolve these issues.

We have made great efforts to mitigate the effects of the pandemic, partly through digital solutions and program innovations.

[English]

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada has modernized its processes by increasing the digitization of files, offering online intake for many lines of business and allowing for greater remote processing of applications despite office closures that forced staff to work remotely where that was an option.

As a result, and in spite of the global pandemic, IRCC made over half a million decisions and welcomed over 405,000 new permanent residents in 2021, which is the greatest number of newcomers in a single year in Canada's history.

[Translation]

This was possible in part because we established a pathway to permanent residency for people who were here in Canada on a temporary status, including temporary foreign workers, students and others making a positive contribution to Canada's economy.

[English]

Additionally, in the midst of the pandemic, we made a decision to step up with a significant contribution on the world stage to accept at least 40,000 Afghan refugees as well as tens of thousands of Ukrainians.

In spite of this increasingly large and complex workload, we are seeing that we are able to reach some pretty important goals. Already IRCC has surpassed its goal to make 147,000 permanent residence final decisions in the first quarter of 2022, which is double the number during the same period of time in 2021. In fact, from January to the end of March, we made over 156,000 final decisions on permanent residence applications, which puts us on a pace where our ambitious goal this year is well within reach.

To respond to the pressures resulting from the pandemic, to support Canada's economic recovery and to help us address our labour shortage, we're investing an additional \$85 million to help reduce application inventories that were accumulated during the pandemic and to increase staff across the department.

[Translation]

This includes applications from international students, workers and visitors, as well as applications for permanent resident card renewals and citizenship ceremonies.

[English]

On April 22, I announced that, at the beginning of mid-June, Canada will extend post-graduate work permits for recent international graduates. Those whose permits have already expired or will expire this year will be eligible for an additional open work permit of 18 months. As well, in July of this year, we'll be ending the temporary pause on express-entry draws, and we will resume inviting qualified candidates to apply for permanent residence.

Across Canada, processing is going to continue for all of our programs with 100% of IRCC offices and service providers open. Capacity limits continue to require the majority of staff to work remotely, but it's not stopping processing or our ability to address the inventory of cases that have built up.

Of our missions overseas, 98% are open. As well, 97% of our visa application centres are open and offering biometrics collection, and 98% of our panel physicians' clinics are open and offering immigration medical exams.

[Translation]

But clearly, there is a lot more work to do. Addressing a backlog of applications is not simply a numbers or a resources challenge—it is a human challenge.

[English]

Every application represents a person whose life is in some way on hold or has been impacted. I know that. Our department is also very aware of the real-life impact that the challenges that our immigration system faces can have on individuals and families.

My view is that we have a duty to resolve these challenges, to do right by those who have hopes of making a new life in Canada and to help to continue to recover from the pandemic. We're committed to helping to resolve these challenges by making the necessary investments to address these challenges that are serious, but are the result of a temporary and exogenous shock to the immigration system.

[Translation]

Thank you for your time.

[English]

With that, I'll be pleased to answer the committee's questions with the final comment that we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that the output of our immigration system remains extraordinary.

The user experience can be very challenging. By making the kinds of investments that I've described and some that I'm sure we'll get into in the question and answer period, I do believe we can return to pre-pandemic standards and have our immigration system on track to support the people who'd like to come to Canada, and as importantly, support the communities that they will call home after they arrive.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

• (1210)

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

We will now proceed to our rounds of questioning. We will begin the first round with Mr. Genuis for six minutes.

Mr. Genuis, the floor is yours.

**Mr. Garnett Genuis:** Thank you, Minister.

It's important to acknowledge that we do have a very serious problem with backlogs right now. I infer from your remarks that acknowledgement of the problem, which is an important first step.

Part of solving the problem is not just to say that you're working on it, but to establish specific goals in terms of what is an acceptable wait time for people for specific categories and to establish timelines in which you intend to realize those goals. For instance, you would say that the current wait times in many categories are clearly unacceptable and create significant hardship for people, and then say what acceptable wait times are and that you will seek to have our system working within those wait times within a certain period of time.

Is it your intention to identify those goals and timelines and work toward them?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Yes. In fact, it is to go one step further. The service standards for the different lines of business are what we identify as acceptable wait times. That will range based on what stream you're talking about. My goal is to get back to service standards. I think we'll be able to do it on a majority of lines of business potentially this calendar year. Where we can't do it, we should be broadcasting those timelines.

On the announcement I made on January 31 about some of the investments we're making, we did broadcast some of those timelines. The step further that I wanted to share with you is that we also made the decision to broadcast where we're actually at and not just where the service standards are. Some people may say it's weird for the government to be publishing that they are beyond service standards, but I don't think there's a problem with acknowledging that.

We have posted publicly the actual processing times, so that people can see where we are at and where we should be. I expect you want to get to your questions, but if you'd like more details, Dan Mills from our department would probably be able to tell you the anticipated timelines to get back to service standard for each line of business.

**Mr. Garnett Genuis:** Thank you. I would appreciate that information in writing, if we can receive it at the committee, to know

what the goals are in terms of timelines for coming back to those service standards.

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Are there specific lines of business you're most interested in?

**Mr. Garnett Genuis:** I would like to see all of them. Personally, I'm particularly interested in the processing times around refugee sponsorship, but I think we would be interested in seeing all of them.

I have another question for you, Minister. In a context where, as you've identified, a majority of staff involved in processing are working remotely, how many people involved in immigration processing are on unpaid leave as a result of their personal vaccination status?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** I don't have that number. I'm not sure if any of our officials have that number in front of them.

**Ms. Caroline Xavier:** I don't have the exact number, but from my recollection, I don't believe it's more than about 200 people out of close to 11,000 employees who are not currently working with us due to the choice they've made on vaccination status, but I can get that number more accurately. I'm just guessing.

**Mr. Garnett Genuis:** I think we would appreciate it. Our view, as a party, is, again, especially in a context where most of those folks are working from home, that it would be an easy win, Minister—and obviously you have to consult with some of your cabinet colleagues—for the government to say, “Let's let these folks get back to work so that we can get people who are experienced working in processing back on the issue of processing.”

Respond to that point if you want to, but could you maybe also address another issue?

Your department now limits the number of inquiries you will respond to from MPs' offices, and our offices, our staff, are working very hard, in many cases well over time, to respond to the concerns people have. It is a major source of frustration that we're limited in the kinds of responses and level of responses we get from the department. We're on the front lines of serving people often, so what's the rationale behind that limitation? Is there any willingness to revisit it?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** I'm desperate to revisit it, but we need to make sure we have the resources in place to allow the system to work. It's one of the things I've struggled with, because I still run an MP's office, too, and my staff run into the same challenges that other constituency staff raise to me through their members of Parliament—

**Mr. Garnett Genuis:** They have easier access to the minister, though.

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Do you know what, though? We try very hard to make sure we run our ship the same way that everybody else does.

You hit on a really important point. One of the biggest challenges I have, to be completely frank with committee members, is realizing that it takes time to hire and train people and get them up to speed. We've received a lot of very serious investments that will help us reach these goals over time.



In the short term, every person I have do one thing is not doing another thing. The explosion of inquiries we've seen from MPs' offices over the last couple of years—and maybe one of our staff could give the accurate numbers if they have them—has really hampered our ability to get back to people in an acceptable way in many instances. We're trying to make decisions that will allow them to say, “Send us the biggest priority cases, and we'll do what we can to get to you as quickly as possible.”

If we didn't have a limit of five cases per day that MPs can send—let's say it was 20—you can expect, unless other very serious changes are made—

• (1215)

**Mr. Garnett Genuis:** I'm sorry, Minister. I understand.

In the time I have left, I want to comment that this explosion is a function of another problem.

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Yes, I agree.

**Mr. Garnett Genuis:** In an ideal world, members of Parliament's offices wouldn't need to be contacted because things would be handled in a satisfactory way. We're not the problem. We're a symptom of another problem, but insofar as that problem exists, people need to go to their members of Parliament and seek their support and advocacy. Shutting off that channel as well compounds the problem and limits people's opportunity to receive additional advocacy when they experience problems. It's very hard for us to identify what are and are not priority cases, to choose whose marriage is more important or whose funeral.

**The Chair:** I'm sorry for interrupting, Mr. Genuis. The time is up.

We will now proceed—

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** I will want to revisit this, because this is important. I'll build it into a subsequent answer so that I don't jeopardize other members' time.

**The Chair:** We will now proceed to Mr. Dhaliwal.

Mr. Dhaliwal, you will have six minutes. Please begin.

**Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

A common and frequent concern I'm hearing is in regard to the processing of permanent resident travel documents. For example, in India, the current processing times are upwards of four months. Many without valid PR cards who have to travel abroad on a moment's notice or for an emergency situation are then stuck outside Canada for a minimum of four months before having the opportunity to return home. This can be particularly difficult for individuals when families are separated, young families particularly, or those having to return to their respective employment duties.

Could the minister touch on whether this is a matter that is on IRCC's radar and something that the department hopes to address?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Thank you to the member.

I view this issue to be related to the question we received earlier. I agree with the prior member that it is not a problem in and of itself that MPs want to reach out to the minister's office. That is normal and that's a necessary part of our system.

It is a function of another problem caused by the closure of the border to protect the public from the spread of COVID-19, which caused us to pivot our strategy to resettle more people who were already in Canada, rather than people who were in third countries. That built up the number of cases of people who wanted to come. At the same time, local offices around the world were sometimes shut down as a result of local public health measures. We've also seen Canada become the world's destination of choice and the number of applications increased. All of this has put pressure on the system, including on the issues of PR cards, because we have a finite number of resources at a given point in time to allocate in certain places.

Now, to your question on the the economic and fiscal update, the \$85 million I referred to in my opening remarks specifically includes funding that's going to go to reduce the inventories for PR card wait times.

Mr. Mills is on the line with us.

Dan, if you have the timelines that we expect to get back to a better service standard, would you be willing to share that with the committee?

[Translation]

**Mr. Daniel Mills (Senior Assistant Deputy Minister, Operations, Department of Citizenship and Immigration):** The processing time for renewing permanent resident cards was about 120 days in December. I'm very happy to say that it's about 65 days today.

So we've made a lot of progress, and we're continuing to reduce the backlog as much as possible to reach our target of less than 60 days.

[English]

**Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal:** Madam Chair, this is not what I asked of the minister.

This is about the PRTD, which is the travel document that people require. With six months wait on the PR cards.... Families have to travel overseas. Particularly when it comes to India, I have seen families separated for four months just to get the PRTD, which we used to get within two weeks, prior to the COVID situation.

Even during the COVID situation, I can tell you that the IRCC staff in India were very helpful, particularly the woman who is back in Vancouver now.

Nowadays, four months is not acceptable to get that travel document. I want to see what steps IRCC is taking to deal with that.

• (1220)

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** I apologize if we didn't nail your question on the head. I think they're inextricably linked. To the extent that we can sort out PR card processing times, the need for the travel document won't be there.

I feel badly that we've taken up more of your questioning time, so I'll offer to give you an answer in writing. If you would like to continue with your questioning in the time you have, I'd be happy to allow that.

**Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal:** Minister, I also chair the Special Committee on Afghanistan. We've heard heart-wrenching testimony over the past many months regarding the plight of Afghans trying to leave the country and hoping to begin a new life here in Canada. In recent weeks, we have seen an increase in Afghan refugees arriving in Canada. It's my understanding that there are about 12,000 individuals who have put their feet on Canadian soil.

Could the minister please touch on the work the department has done recently to ramp up the efforts to bring Afghans to Canada, and also touch on some of the difficulties in processing Afghan refugees compared with refugees coming from other parts of the globe?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Thank you very much, Mr. Dhaliwal.

During my recent appearance at the Afghan committee, we went over some of those challenges in great detail. They primarily relate to safe passage through and outside of Afghanistan for onward travel to Canada.

One of the things that is really encouraging to me is the uptick in the pace of arrivals we've seen very recently. In April, we had approximately 2,500 Afghan refugees land in Canada in that one month. Yesterday we saw just shy of 300 privately sponsored refugees arrive on a flight from Tajikistan. Tomorrow we will have another flight with 330 SIM arrivals, which are those who have come through special immigration measures because of their service to Canada. They will be arriving on a flight from Pakistan.

It's really encouraging to see this uptick in the pace of arrivals. It gives me faith that we're going to be able to more quickly meet our goal to resettle the total of 40,000 we've committed to.

There are still immense challenges on the ground. You can imagine the logistical concerns when you're dealing with a territory that has been seized by the Taliban, where you do not have access. By working with international partners, we are continuing to identify people, have them enter our program and process them. It's really a special thing when you have the opportunity to meet some of these now nearly 13,000 people who call Canada home.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Minister.

The time is up for Mr. Dhaliwal.

We will now proceed to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, the floor is yours for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

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

I'm going to go back to the last answer that was just given about the objective of welcoming 40,000 Afghans by the end of the year.

The minister said that was his goal, and he also said that to the Special Committee on Afghanistan, on which I have the privilege of sitting as well.

Madam Chair, I would like the minister to provide the committee with a detailed plan of the steps he plans to take to reach his goal by the end of 2022. It could be as simple as a table, but I would like to know the pace that the minister intends to follow to reach his target.

I have asked the same of the Special Committee on Afghanistan, but I have not received a reply to date, as far as I know.

The minister assures us that he will achieve his goal, and I hope he is right, but he should show us his plan. Is that possible, Madam Chair?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Madam Chair, I would like to clarify that the target is to take in 40,000 Afghan refugees over the next two years, so in 2022 and 2023.

[*English*]

There are certain folks whom we'll have a bit more predictability with, particularly when they are people who are approved in a third country. There are still some uncertainties for the people, whom we will not go back on our commitment to, who are still in Afghanistan.

I don't want to sugar-coat things. It is really challenging to move people through Afghanistan. The stories are the most heartbreaking things that I've ever had to work with or live through. The challenges are enormous, and if we can solve these safe passage concerns, we will have more predictability in the schedule by which we expect people to arrive. There are certain groups for whom we have not yet unlocked the pathway to get them out of Afghanistan, which may not be as predictable.

I can't give you exactly to a person month by month by month. I can give you trends. I can give you what's happened already. I can give upcoming expected flights. There will be certain challenges for people who are in Afghanistan for whom there is not yet a pathway to leave Afghanistan.

• (1225)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** In fact, my point is this.

If the government tells us it has a goal that it has promised to achieve, as it has said several times, then logically it must have a plan. A goal of this magnitude is not easy to achieve.

The minister explained very well the difficulty of getting people out of Afghanistan. There must therefore be a plan to support such a goal. However, the committee has not been given any explanation of this plan. No information has been provided on this.

All we would like, in order to be able to do our job properly, is to know the government's plan to reach its goal. As I understand it, it is not even a goal, but a promise. A promise necessarily comes with a plan.

Is it possible to get that plan?

[English]

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** You know, it's an interesting thing because we don't develop these plans in the abstract. We deal with the uncertainties of conflict. When we're not in control of the facts on the ground, I hesitate to promise certainty on the exact date by which people for whom there is not yet a pathway to leave Afghanistan... I believe we will be able to achieve our goal, and at the current pace of arrivals—

[Translation]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** That's different, then. The message we have been hearing since the beginning has just changed completely. We were promised—and the prime minister himself has said it several times—that this goal would be achieved within the planned timeframe.

But what I've just heard is that you feel—you believe—that you might be able to do it. That is very different from what you said earlier. One must be clear with the words, Minister.

Are you sure you can do it? Is it a promise?

It does not matter if the promise is broken, Minister. You just have to be clear with the Afghans. If the promise is broken, I'm not the one who will suffer the consequences, but the Afghan people who are waiting to come to Canada.

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** I understand your point, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, but the message is no different. The commitment is the same today as it was during the 2021 election campaign.

[English]

It's really important that I'm honest with people though. Our goal remains to resettle 40,000 Afghan refugees at least by next year. I think we can still do that. I am confident we can still do that, but I don't want to breeze over the fact that the territories are controlled by the Taliban. We are working to move people with partners on the ground. I believe that, with those partnerships, we will meet our goal, and I have not wavered one iota from the very beginning of this story to today in my commitment to be successful in that goal.

[Translation]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Minister, I thank you for your honesty.

You should look at the statements made by Mr. Trudeau during the election campaign. You would see that they differ from what you've just told us.

You announced a two-week turnaround time for processing the Canada-Ukraine authorization for emergency travel. You said that, once the plan was in place, processing times would be two weeks.

Currently, processing times are four to five weeks, which is two or even two and a half times longer than what was planned. This is

what is being said on the ground, and this is the data we have at present.

Do you have the same data as I do?

[English]

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** No. That's not the same story that I've heard.

Again, not to put you, Mr. Mills, on the spot, but would you like to give an update on ordinary processing times? There may be some unique exceptions, but in the majority of cases....

Dan, if you could provide clarity, that would be helpful.

[Translation]

**Mr. Daniel Mills:** According to our data, the 14-day processing times are met for 90% of our clients. We have to make sure that the file is complete before we start processing, and that includes biometrics. It is important to note this.

In some cases, applicants have applied, but have not yet provided their biometrics. It is impossible for us to process or complete the application as long as the biometrics have not been obtained on site. That is why we have increased the number of applications—

• (1230)

[English]

**The Chair:** I'm sorry for interrupting, Mr. Mills. The time is up for Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

You will maybe get an opportunity to come back to it in the second round.

We will proceed to Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan, you will have six minutes. Please begin.

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

Can the minister advise if the high commission in Pakistan is still processing Afghan applications?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** On country-specific items, I'll point to my departments, because there are quite a few presences around the world.

Do we have that information?

**Ms. Caroline Xavier:** For clarity, I want to make sure that one understands that, when we're processing applications, we process them across the globe. Even though a person may have submitted an application in Pakistan, it may not be that it is being processed at the high commission in Pakistan.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** I'm sorry to interrupt. I just need a clear answer. Is the high commission in Pakistan processing Afghan applications?

**Ms. Caroline Xavier:** I'm going to ask Mr. Mills to answer the question more directly.

[Translation]

**Mr. Daniel Mills:** Thank you for the question.

In Pakistan, we do process applications from the cohort in Afghanistan.

[English]

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** Are they being processed there?

I assume the answer is yes. If it's incorrect, please submit an answer to the committee for clarification.

[Translation]

**Mr. Daniel Mills:** The information is correct.

[English]

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** Is the minister still exercising his authority to bring in special procedures secretly for Afghans?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** I'm not sure what special secret procedures you're speaking about.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** Actually, I have an undertaking with respect to that.

I asked that question in the previous committee meeting, and the response was that the minister will engage in the practice to which he engages to which he cannot disclose.

Therefore, can the minister advise if he's still engaging in special procedures within the department that are not for public consumption?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** There are some policies that I believe have not been published. For more specific policies, I would be interested in more specificity as to what you're looking for.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** Maybe I can follow up with the minister with respect to that in another meeting, if the minister cannot—

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Sure. To be clear, the kinds of things we're talking about are typically to protect people's safety and security, not for some ulterior purpose.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** Let's hope so.

The minister said on the public record that, on the issue of security checks, it's not up to him. The Department of National Defence told members of the Afghanistan committee that no one has asked them to work with allied countries to help bring Afghans to safety or to help with the collection of biometrics in third countries.

Why hasn't the minister asked for assistance from other department officials in this regard, and most particularly with the military?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** That is because Global Affairs Canada is responsible for our diplomatic relations with other countries, and we work closely with them for the very thing you've described.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** Has the minister asked Global Affairs to ask the Department of National Defence for assistance?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Do you mean, asked them for assistance in asking third countries for help with biometrics processing? I'm unclear what the question is.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** To help work with allied countries to bring Afghans to safety and to help with the collection of biometrics.

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** I don't know if Global Affairs has asked the Department of National Defence, but—

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** I'm sorry. My question was whether the minister asked Global Affairs to make that request to the Department of National Defence.

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** We don't need the Department of National Defence to be a part of that. We deal with third countries all the time for the purpose of things like biometric collection and other matters, and those conversations are happening with different countries around the world. It may just be that the Department of National Defence is not the appropriate department to be having those conversations.

However, access to biometrics in third countries is not a bottleneck right now. Safe passage through Afghanistan to get to those third countries is very much a challenge.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** I can tell the minister that there are a lot of Afghan families who could not get their biometrics done, and as a result they cannot get through to the next steps in the processing of their applications. The issue for a lot of those Afghans is about biometrics.

The Department of National Defence has previously engaged in similar missions—I'm sure the minister is aware of this—in different regions, in helping with a whole-of-government approach to bring people to safety, including addressing the issues of security and biometrics. I would urge the minister to consider that and to ask GAC to approach the Department of National Defence for assistance. They have the capacity and the capability to do that work.

I'd like to—

• (1235)

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** There's a lot that we agree on. On this point, I think there's a breakdown. Maybe I'm not being very articulate.

When we collect biometrics information from a person, we can use the Department of National Defence's database. We don't need to send a mission to the third countries we're dealing with to meet the volumes of people for whom we can process biometrics once they get to a third country.

If we're talking about extracting people from Afghanistan, that is a different issue altogether. Biometrics in the country, in Afghanistan, are a real challenge. However, biometrics in third countries, for people who've made it out, are not something we need to engage the Department of National Defence in to successfully process people in those third countries.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** Maybe the minister should think about, then, the option of engaging the military and asking them for help to bring people out of Afghanistan as well. I would think that both measures are critically important.

I'd like to ask the minister if he can table for this committee a breakdown of the people who have arrived in Canada and those who were in a third country prior to the fall of Kabul. I think it's important to get that information, to distinguish between the people who were previously in need of getting to safety and the people who are in need of getting to safety as a result of the fall of Kabul in August.

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Sure.

Dan or Jennifer, do either of you have that information with you right now?

**The Chair:** Our time is up for Ms. Kwan.

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Okay. We can follow up on that.

**The Chair:** Yes. If that request can be looked into, we will now proceed to Mr. Redekopp.

Mr. Redekopp, you will have five minutes. You can please begin.

**Mr. Brad Redekopp:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Minister, in your letter that opens the 2022-23 departmental plan, you write about permanent residents, and you talk about the targets of between 360,000 and 445,000 new residents. Then, when you look on page 22, you can see the results from the prior years and they're always below.... In the last year, I think you said that you achieved that 401,000. The backlog that I've seen sits at 2.1 million people, and that I think includes new citizens.

You put some extra money in for that, but my question for you is this. With 400,000 a year and the backlog of two-million plus, that's five years of processing, assuming that no new people come. How do you explain that?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Okay. There are quite a few things going on that I think require highlighting.

Dan, you may want to jump in as well.

The numbers you're talking about, I assume, include all different lines of business, not just permanent residency. One of the other things that's really important is that it includes people who applied yesterday. It's normal for us to have hundreds of thousands of cases in any given year come into our system. In fact, we resettled 405,000 last year, and we plan on resettling 432,000 this year.

If I look at international students, we might have half a million applications in a given year, and that's actually a healthy sign. That demonstrates that people want to come to Canada. Where we run into a challenge is when the number of people who are applying each year is greater than the processing capacity of the department. With the investments that we made, I'm quite confident that the vast majority of our lines of business will be back to about the service standard by the end of the year.

If you want more specific details, I'm sure Mr. Mills would be happy to provide them. If you'd like to move on with your questions, we'd be happy to follow up if you want us to submit something in writing.

**Mr. Brad Redekopp:** Let's move on to Ukrainian backlogs.

You came and touted the program on bringing in Ukrainians fleeing the war zone. I'm going to ask you some questions. If you have the information, great. If not, you can provide it to the committee later.

How many Ukrainians have applied under this program?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** It's a little bit more than 200,000. I haven't seen the update today, but we're in that order of magnitude.

**Mr. Brad Redekopp:** How many have been accepted, rejected or processed?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** It's a little more than 100,000, I believe. Over the last couple of days, we crossed that milestone.

**Mr. Brad Redekopp:** How many have made it to Canada?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** So far under that particular program it's unclear to me—because I just don't have the figure in front of me—but there have been more 25,000 since the beginning of the year. That includes people who may have come under a different stream.

I want to add a bit of detail from the trip where we went to the region with Mr. Hallan last week. One of the things we're seeing is that a lot of people are taking an application out of the program for peace of mind and as an insurance policy. Belgium, in fact, has expected and prepared for 200,000, but only 30,000 have shown up.

The people are, largely speaking, wanting to stay as close to Ukraine as possible, and those who have left are showing a real reticence to even move away from transportation hubs. I don't expect that everyone who becomes entitled to come to Canada will actually come to Canada, so we may continue to see a delta between the number who are here under this program and the number who have been approved.

• (1240)

**Mr. Brad Redekopp:** That's fair enough. Part of the reason I ask these questions is that the backlog has grown substantially. It has increased by I think up to 2.1 million, the same backlog we were speaking of before. I'm curious to know if that's driven by the Ukrainian program. What are the factors that are driving that explosion of 200,000 or 300,000 people in just the last few months?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** I want to be careful because those are your numbers, not mine. I assume that includes all of the people who've just applied to the Canada-Ukraine authorization for emergency travel. We've now seen 200,000 people apply for the program in a matter of a month and a half.

When you have that kind of new program with those kinds of volumes, that adds to the total number of pending applications, which, again, I hesitate to describe as a backlog, because it's normal to have an inventory of cases. My far more important measuring stick is, to me, how long it takes to get through these cases, not how many there are. If we have large numbers of people who want to come to Canada, I think that's a good thing, but the difference between the number of people who want to come and our ability to process them is a very important metric.

**Mr. Brad Redekopp:** Yes. I think the point is that it wasn't going to increase the backlog, but it seems like it has, so that's a concern we have.

I just want to end quickly on SDS for Bangladesh or #SDS for Bangladesh. It has become a hashtag. Last week, I heard that the department is actually working on this. Can you give us an update on the timing and how long it's likely to take for this to get processed?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** I don't have it in front of mind. I think we've actually seen a pretty significant increase in the approval rate from Bangladesh this year—in 2021, compared with 2020. I don't know if our officials have the update that Mr. Redekopp is looking for.

**Ms. Caroline Xavier:** Thank you for the question.

As was shared previously, we have been doing work with the High Commissioner of Bangladesh and we are finalizing the internal evaluation of the SDS. We're expecting and hoping for this to be completed by fall 2022 in order to be able to proceed to having the program live, but we are in the process of finalizing that evaluation as we speak.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Xavier.

We will now proceed to Mr. El-Khoury for five minutes.

Please begin.

[Translation]

**Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you again, Minister, for being with us today. It is always a pleasure to talk with you.

IRCC has more than a dozen projects underway with equity and equality goals—I repeat, “equity and equality.”

Are you able to give us some details about these projects?

[English]

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Sure. There's an awful lot of work going on.

One of the things that's really important for me to reflect on is that we have to be honest in government about what we do well and the areas where we need to improve. I think in every organization the size of our department and across government we need to constantly be pursuing equity and fairness and anti-discrimination initiatives.

It will come as no secret to members of this committee that we conducted a survey in the wake of the murder of George Floyd to understand what kinds of discriminatory behaviours exist within our own shop. That sort of inward reflection is really important. The lessons that we learned were not happy stories. We had some real challenges.

I've been pleased with the response of the department. That doesn't mean everything is fixed. There are still some real challenges, and by the way, these challenges interfere with the ability of organizations to meet their full potential. When you don't have a welcoming workspace, in some instances it makes it harder to recruit the best and brightest, who might not see themselves in an organization.

The initiatives focus on the policies that both impact the people we serve and impact the people we work with.

In terms of the people we work with, there are initiatives to bring more people into leadership positions within the department and to increase the representation of different demographic groups through all levels of the organization, making sure people have a safe and private place to raise concerns where there will not be fears of reprisal for sharing examples of unsavoury behaviour on the part of their superiors.

In terms of the policies that have an outward impact, we're constantly looking at differential outcomes. I'm actually very much looking forward to looking at all the recommendations of this committee on that particular study. These are the kinds of things that actually lead us to saying, can we be doing more to support people in regions of Africa, like francophone newcomers? A new office we're looking at in Cameroon is going to help with that kind of initiative. Constantly looking at both the internal and external impacts of our policies is something that's necessary. It's in our interests as a department. It's in the interests of Canadians.

I would be happy to provide more information on the back end of this meeting, if you wanted to nail down more specifically what you think is useful.

● (1245)

**Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury:** Thank you. I appreciate it, Mr. Minister.

[Translation]

Minister, could you elaborate on the full-time working group that was established in July 2020 to provide strategic direction to the department on personnel management, policy and program delivery?

[English]

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** On the specifics of the policy, I think the group that we have responsible for it are with us here today. Perhaps I'll let them take the floor to walk folks through the details.

[Translation]

**Ms. Caroline Xavier:** Thank you for the question.

In 2020, we have indeed set up a full-time working group, which works closely with all sectors of the department. This working group ensures that they set targets that are linked to the strategy. We have set very concrete targets, and we want to make sure that they are met.

The strategy has several components, including personnel management, service delivery, policy, program delivery and data. We want to make sure that we achieve all of these objectives related to the departmental strategy.

We also make sure that all of our managers are aware of the strategy. In that regard, we have even added a paragraph in the job offer letter to ensure that they understand the importance of not only achieving the objectives of this strategy, but also those of the fight against racism that is promoted within the department.

[English]

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Xavier.

The time is up for Mr. El-Khoury.

We will now proceed with Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, for two and a half minutes. We will end this panel with Ms. Kwan. After that, we will end this meeting.

Please proceed, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

[Translation]

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

This is the last time I will be speaking officially to the minister at this meeting, and I want to thank him for coming to see us. I thank him for answering our questions honestly. I am very happy about that.

The minister told us that he did not have the exact figures on the number of people who have arrived in Canada under the Canada-Ukraine authorization for emergency travel.

Can officials tell us if they have those numbers?

**Ms. Caroline Xavier:** Thank you for the question.

As the minister said, over 23,000 people have arrived since January 1 of this year. However, it is difficult to determine whether they have arrived specifically under the new program that the minister announced on March 17. It is this information that we do not have.

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Okay.

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** I can provide clarification. The exact figure exists, and I think the Canada Border Services Agency has that information.

[English]

CBSA, the Canada Border Services Agency, track how people enter and how they come in, so it may just be that we don't have that particular figure. I'm sure we can find that number and deliver it to the committee.

• (1250)

[Translation]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Okay.

Many of the people who arrived in January already had a travel authorization. Over 25,000 Ukrainians are believed to have arrived in the country, but we don't know how many of them arrived under the Canada-Ukraine authorization for emergency travel program. So it would be nice if the committee could have those numbers.

Whenever we do studies in committee, whether it's on foreign students, racism, or processing times, we hear from many witnesses that IRCC's operations are very opaque, that there's a lack of transparency.

Minister, you have been honest with us throughout the meeting. Do you think that these witnesses are mistaken in telling us this?

[English]

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** No. I think we can always improve and be more transparent.

You have a department of 11,000 people who serve more clients than most of the rest of the government put together, and we've been growing at a pace that is extraordinary in the last few years.

With regard to the kinds of things we're trying to do, I mentioned earlier that we're broadcasting actual expected times for processing, rather than just service standard times. The ability for people to access information about their cases is something we've now made possible with trackers, for permanent residency, family reunification and citizenship. We'll keep doing more with that sort of thing.

This numbers issue with CBSA is just a function that we don't have that number here today, but we can get that and we're happy to broadcast it.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

[Translation]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** Will that be applied?

[English]

**The Chair:** I'm sorry for interrupting. The time is up for Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

We will proceed to Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan, you have two and a half minutes. You can, please, begin.

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

I wonder if the minister can provide to the committee this information: a gender analysis of the Afghans who have arrived, so a breakdown of women versus men who have arrived to date. Also, could I get the minister to table for the committee the projected timelines of when the backlog of applications for each of the streams will be processed, and to also identify for how many and where the processing is essentially complete and waiting for the immigration levels numbers to finalize those applications?

Further to that, I'm interested in getting the particular breakdowns for the caregivers component. My understanding is that for the caring for children program, the home child care provider pilot, the home support worker program, the interim pathway, the live-in caregiver program and the high medical needs program, in total, there are 47,087 applications in the backlog. Can the minister advise and table to the committee the information on how long he projects IRCC will take to process all of these applications and how many of those applications are waiting for levels numbers for the application to be finalized?

Finally, on the last piece, because I only have two and a half minutes, so I have to get this in. On the extended family members of former Afghan interpreters, literally at 12:12 today, I got the undertaking that I asked for from officials back on March 3. It indicates that 980 applications are in active processing under this stream, zero have been approved, zero are pending approval and zero have arrived in Canada.

Could the minister advise when the extended family members of the former Afghan interpreters will arrive in Canada and for the applications to be processed? There are 300 former Afghans who have submitted their applications, and 65% of them have not even received a G number. The other ones with a G number have not had their applications processed. This is of great urgency.

The last question for the minister is on the Ukraine extended family application process. When can people get the details of that, and when will it actually come into play and be active in terms of processing?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Madam Chair, how much time do I have?

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

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Okay.

I'll need to review the transcript after the meeting is over, because you had some pretty clear asks.

Just as a word on extended families, this is a group that we made a special pathway for because we want to help. I am starting to see movement on a lot of these files. There have been hundreds of people who have now been approved for eligibility and hundreds more who have been through both eligibility and security. Internally, it looks like there is a lot of movement.

I don't have a specific date, and until I have one, I've told the interpreters who want to bring their extended families here that, when I have a date, I'm going to let them know, and I'll let this committee know when we expect to have those dates when it's nailed down. I don't want to create expectations on a particular date until I know with certainty. Out of fairness to them I'd like to do that.

On Ukraine, I don't expect the details will take us that long, but the overarching point for me—and my priority right now—is to make sure we provide safe haven to people who need it now. People who come under the temporary program will be able to apply for the new family sponsorship when it's set up. Again—

• (1255)

**The Chair:** I'm sorry for interrupting. The time is up for Ms. Kwan.

We will have a quick two and a half minutes for Mr. Benzen and then end with Mr. Ali for two and a half minutes. Then the minister can leave.

Mr. Benzen, please go ahead for two and a half minutes.

**Mr. Bob Benzen (Calgary Heritage, CPC):** Thank you, Chair.

Thank you, Minister.

Thank you to all the witnesses who are here today.

I have two quick things, Minister.

You said in the first hour that we're still basically a paper-based department. If we're going to get these backlogs reduced and increase our processing times, we really need to get into a more highly digital, highly virtual environment. You said that you had a plan. My first question is, simply, can you give us that plan? Can you provide it to us in writing—what your timeline is, what your costs

are and the benchmarks and how it will work—so that we can see how this will improve in the future?

The second part is a quick question. I have some constituents who are applying for their TRVs and waiting for what I think is an excessive amount of time for their security checks. They're waiting seven, eight, nine and 10 months to get their security checks back. I understand that we're outsourcing those, and that may be part of the problem. Can we do these ourselves or be part of that process?

Even if we're outsourcing them, can we reduce that and have a timeline that says we need to get these things back in 90 days or in something that is much shorter than almost a year?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Thank you.

I have a really limited amount of time to answer, so I'll try to cut to the chase. I'm happy to look at the summary of the digitization space. There have been a couple of milestones that have already been implemented, and this is something I'm really excited about. This is an \$827-million investment and progress is chugging along. It will transform immigration in Canada and make an enormous difference, and I'm just thrilled to have the opportunity to be the person implementing this system.

On the security checks, the reason that typically happens is that we can't do it on our own, and we rely on information that's being provided by another country, for example. That is a real big challenge, because we're sometimes at the mercy of the ability of another country to provide information to us. It can vary enormously on a case-by-case basis, and I just hesitate to say, without knowing about the specific cases you're referring to, whether that's something we could improve upon or whether it's actually a third party that we're relying on.

We don't have time to get into it today. I would love to speak more about the digitization should we have the opportunity.

**Mr. Bob Benzen:** Okay. Can you provide us with your outline?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** I'm sorry. What was that?

**Mr. Bob Benzen:** Can you provide us your plan? Can you send us—

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Yes. I can provide a summary of our plan to the committee with as much detail as I have.

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

We will now have Mr. Ali for two and a half minutes, and then we will end the panel.

**Mr. Shafqat Ali:** Thank you, Madam Chair.

Through you to our honourable minister, thank you again for your patience and hard work. I have two questions and then you can answer. I'm going to throw those questions together.



The first one is in regard to citizenship ceremonies. Your department has been very successful in adapting these citizenship processes to the challenges of the pandemic. Applications for citizenship can be done online. An average of 5,000 people a week are invited to take the citizenship test online. As of February 15, 133,000 people have become Canadian citizens through virtual ceremonies. Can you update us on the plans for continuing this progress? This is question one.

Second, could you please update the committee on the current TRV application processing times for the applicants from Pakistan?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Sure. You want to build upon Mr. Benzen's question.

If you want to see the power of digital processes, let's look at the experience with citizenship. It really was pounded in the early days of the pandemic when we couldn't have people gather in large spaces and have hundreds of people swear their oath at one particular time. Through the combination of a digital application process and virtual ceremonies, we're able to process an extraordinary number of people.

Mr. Mills, correct me if I'm wrong. I believe that in the month of March we had 41,000 new Canadian citizens take their oath of citizenship. This is an extraordinary increase in volume and capacity of the system, made possible with the adoption of technology.

On the TRV issue with respect to Pakistan, I don't have the number in front of me. I could dig it out of this big binder, but I think our team can do it faster than I can.

Dan, do you have that particular number specific to Pakistan?

• (1300)

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Daniel Mills:** Thank you very much for the question.

The average processing rate for temporary resident visas from Pakistan is about 90 days. That includes all processing periods from September 7 onwards.

[*English*]

**Mr. Shafqat Ali:** Thank you.

Thank you, Minister.

Again, I understand that your department processed more than 100,000 work permit applications in the first quarter of 2022. Can you update us on the work permit processing since then?

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** Just to put it in perspective.... Again, just because I won't dig it out, I will point to Mr. Mills. I think we're at about double the pace of last year in terms of our actual production capacity when it comes to work permits.

Dan, do you have the updates since the end of March?

**The Chair:** I'm sorry for interrupting, but the time is up. If possible, maybe you can—

**Hon. Sean Fraser:** We can happily provide it after the meeting.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

With that, this panel comes to an end.

I need five minutes from the members after the minister leaves to have some direction on the calendar for next week, but I want to take this opportunity, on behalf of all the members of this committee, to thank the minister and his officials for appearing before the committee and for all of the work you're doing. It's a very difficult file, and with everything that's going on around the world, your job becomes even more challenging, so a big thank you to you, minister, and to all of the officials who are working long hours to make sure that we can clear those backlogs created during COVID.

Thank you, Minister.

We will allow the minister to leave and then we'll have a quick five minutes with the members.

I need some direction in regard to the calendar for next week.

For Tuesday, we must complete the consideration of the recruitment report. If we can schedule Mr. Seeback to appear on Bill C-242 for the first half, then we can move into the report consideration so that we can finalize that report and table it. Also, then, I need some time on Tuesday, once we complete the draft report, to go through committee business to discuss the letter that was requested by the members at the last meeting in regard to the legal opinion from the law clerk. That, the members should have by Monday, if everything goes well and translation can happen, so we can discuss that on Tuesday.

In regard to Bill C-242, we need some deadlines in regard to the amendments. Mr. Seeback can appear on Tuesday for one hour, and then we can have the second hour for consideration of the draft report. Then we will be able to go into the meetings for C-242: four panels with the witnesses and one panel with the officials. That will be three meetings in total, including Mr. Seeback, and then we have one for clause-by-clause. For the clause-by-clause, we need a deadline for the amendments.

Does the committee agree that the deadline for the amendments be set for May 26 at noon? It will be a break week. The clerk will give a deadline to all of the members to submit their amendments by May 26, before we go clause-by-clause.

Go ahead, Ms. Kwan.

• (1305)

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** I just want to ask a couple of questions. I think I caught four hours for Mr. Seeback's bill.

**The Chair:** No. I'm sorry to correct you. It's one hour with Mr. Seeback to present his bill to the members, one hour with the officials and then four hours with the witnesses. We will go through 12 witnesses, and the breakdown, based on each party, will be Liberals, six; Conservatives, four; Bloc, one; and NDP, one.

It will be two meetings.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** That's four panels for two hours...?

**The Chair:** It's four panels and four hours. One panel will be for an hour.

It will be four panels for one hour each, and we will go through 12 witnesses.

**Ms. Jenny Kwan:** Okay. It is a lot, Madam Chair.

I talked to Mr. Seeback previously, and he was okay with the idea of appearing for his hour along with officials. That will then save us one hour. If that could be accommodated, he said he was fine with this.

With respect to witnesses, four hours is two full meetings. I wonder whether there's a way for us to work collaboratively to see if we can reduce that time. We may well have a duplication of witnesses. I'm saying this, because I'm really worried about us running out of time. We're still trying to finish the first report. We have finished the witnesses, and we're waiting to do the other report on differential treatment. Then we've started our study on delays in processing.

Madam Chair, I would really like for us to get through these three studies, if we can. We have other items that need to come before the committee as well.

If we can try to find a way to save some time, that's what I'm trying to achieve.

**The Chair:** Thank you, Ms. Kwan, for your input.

We have Mr. Ali and then Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe next. We can have some more discussion on Tuesday on this, because we have a hard stop at 1:10

I just want to clarify for all members that a PMB—any legislation—is always a priority. I want to proceed so that we can finish this clause-by-clause before we rise for the summer break. I am very hopeful that we can finalize the report on the acceptance rates on Tuesday and be able to table that. I don't think we will be able to complete the study on processing times before we rise in June. We have put in a proposal for a visit in regard to this study. We will continue that when we come back in September.

In regard to tabling the report for the differential outcomes, we will see how quickly we go once we have the draft report. That's up to the members as to whether or not we can finish it before we rise for the summer break.

Quickly, we have Mr. Ali, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe and Mr. Hallan, and then we have a hard stop.

**Mr. Shafqat Ali:** I won't take too long.

Regarding MP Randeep Sarai's motion, which was supported unanimously, I want to move a motion that his motion be studied in CIMM. Thank you.

**The Chair:** Mr. Ali, are you giving a notice? Are you moving it, or are you just giving a notice?

• (1310)

**Mr. Shafqat Ali:** I wanted to move a motion.

**The Chair:** You can move a motion if you have given a 48 hours' notice.

**Mr. Shafqat Ali:** Consider it a notice, please.

**The Chair:** Please send it in both official languages to the clerk of the committee. Thank you.

We will have Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe and then Mr. Hallan.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe:** As far as Bill C-242 is concerned, I think that three meetings is a lot. It would mean that we would spend six hours on this bill.

Ms. Kwan said that Mr. Seeback was prepared to give the officials an hour. I would suggest that we invite two panels for up to one hour each. I can tell you right away that the Bloc Québécois will not be calling any witnesses, so there will be a gap. If you want to fill it, great, but if you don't want to, even better, because we'll save time.

In the context of this study, I think it would be perfect to invite two panels for an hour each. That would give us perhaps an extra hour in which we could, behind closed doors, write the report or discuss the drafting guidelines, for example.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** For legislation, hearing from just six witnesses will not give us a good understanding to go into clause-by-clause. My recommendation would be that members have discussions among themselves, and we can finalize that on Tuesday.

If the members agree that Mr. Seeback and the officials can do one hour, I can ask the clerk to work with them to see if we can accommodate both of them for one hour on Tuesday. In committee business, members can have discussions among themselves and then we can come back and make a final decision on Tuesday.

Is that okay? Thank you.

Is it the will of the committee to adjourn the meeting?

**Some hon. members:** Yes.

**The Chair:** The meeting is adjourned.







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