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Chair: Mr. Ali Ehsassi





# Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development

Thursday, October 24, 2024

• (1545)

[English]

**The Chair (Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.)):** I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 122 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development. Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format.

I'd like to remind participants of the following points. Please do wait until I recognize you by name before you speak. Also, members, if you are joining us virtually, you should raise your hand if you wish to speak.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted on Thursday, October 3, 2024, the committee commences a briefing on the current situation in Lebanon.

I'd like to welcome our three witnesses.

We're very grateful to have here, from the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development, Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu, acting assistant deputy minister for emergency management, legal and consular affairs; Mr. Alexandre Lévêque, assistant deputy minister, Europe, Middle East and Arctic branch; and Ms. Teresa Crockett, acting executive director for accountability, human rights and United Nations law.

I understand that only one of you will be making opening remarks.

Mr. Lévêque, you're a pro at this. You have been here many times. You will have five minutes for your opening remarks, after which we will open it to the members for questions.

Mr. Lévêque, thank you for being here. The floor is yours.

**Mr. Alexandre Lévêque (Assistant Deputy Minister, Europe, Middle East and Arctic Branch, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Honourable members of the committee, I want to thank you for inviting us today to speak about the situation in Lebanon.

[Translation]

As you know, Canada and Lebanon have very close ties. The Lebanese community in Canada numbers over 200,000 people, while more than 50,000 Canadians live in Lebanon.

[English]

This year marks 70 years of diplomatic relations between both countries. Since 2023, Canada has celebrated Lebanese Heritage Month in November. This year, however, it will take place against a backdrop of a devastating situation in the country.

The escalating conflict has already had a severe impact. Over 2,500 people have been killed, and 9,000 people have been injured. Over 1.2 million people have been displaced from their homes.

[Translation]

We express our heartfelt condolences to all the families and communities affected by the violence. We are sad to hear of the deaths of Canadian citizens.

[English]

Since the beginning of the conflict, Canada has expressed its concern with the ongoing fighting between Hezbollah and Israel. Not only is it having a disproportionate impact on civilians on both sides of the blue line separating Israel and Lebanon, but it also poses a significant threat to security and stability in the wider region.

[Translation]

Along with our G7 partners, Canada is advocating for a ceasefire to pave the way for a diplomatic solution. We have also reaffirmed our full support for the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, UNIFIL, and the critical role it plays in promoting a settlement that complies with UN Security Council Resolution 1701.

[English]

Canada remains committed to diplomacy as the only suitable path to stabilize the Israel-Lebanon border; to fully restore the sovereignty, territorial integrity and stability of Lebanon; and to return displaced citizens to their homes with safety and security in both Lebanon and Israel.

Canada firmly condemns Hezbollah's continued attacks on Israel. We cannot forget that one of the stated goals of Hezbollah, a listed terrorist entity, is the very destruction of the State of Israel.

Hezbollah's attacks on Israel serve only to further destabilize the region. As such, Canada supports Israel's right to self-defence in accordance with international law. Indeed, all parties to the conflict must uphold their obligations under international law to ensure the safety and security of civilians, as well as the protection of first responders and UNIFIL personnel. Like our G7 partners, Canada was dismayed by the Israel Defense Forces' attacks affecting the UNIFIL positions along the Blue Line.

[Translation]

The humanitarian impact of the conflict in Lebanon is enormous. In 2024, Canada has committed nearly \$50 million in humanitarian assistance to Lebanon. The displaced population includes Syrian refugees, some of whom have started to return to Syria. Canada insists that any return of refugees must be safe, dignified and voluntary, in accordance with international law.

[English]

The humanitarian crisis in Lebanon is unfolding while it already grapples with a severe political and economic domestic crisis. Poverty in Lebanon has more than tripled over the past decade, reaching 44% of the total population. Lebanon has been without a president since October 2022. Canada has been a steady partner in addressing Lebanon's longer-term development challenges while urging it to elect a president, form a new government and enact essential reforms without delay. Since 2016, Canada has allocated over \$136 million in development assistance to Lebanon under the Middle East strategy.

[Translation]

Canada has also funded peace and security programs in Lebanon. In co-operation with the Department of National Defence and the Canadian Armed Forces, we are providing training, equipment and infrastructure to the Lebanese armed forces so that they can counter terrorist and transnational criminal threats while ensuring the integrity and security of Lebanon's borders.

• (1550)

[English]

Finally, Canada remains concerned about the thousands of Canadians currently living in Lebanon. Since October 2023, we have been advising Canadians to avoid all travel to Lebanon or, for those who are there, to leave while commercial options remain available. The department has also improved its contingency planning with other government departments and like-minded partners, including a non-combatant evacuation operation, if required.

As the security situation deteriorated in late September, Global Affairs Canada facilitated options for Canadians, permanent residents and their eligible family members to leave Lebanon. As a result, over 1,500 departures were facilitated, including for 300 internationals. The Government of Canada continues to provide information about departure opportunities on commercial flights out of Lebanon.

[Translation]

I look forward to your questions.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

[English]

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

We'll now turn to the members for questions. First up is MP Chong.

You have five minutes.

**Hon. Michael Chong (Wellington—Halton Hills, CPC):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you for appearing in front of our committee.

You mentioned that you facilitated 1,500 departures from Lebanon. Is that correct?

By “departures”, does that mean...?

Let me ask the question differently: How many flights have you facilitated leaving Lebanon? How many seats have been on those flights? What portion was filled by Canadian citizens and permanent residents? What portion was filled by other foreign nationals? What percentage has been empty?

That's my first question.

**Mr. Alexandre Lévêque:** My colleague Sébastien Beaulieu is the expert and lead official on this, so I will turn to him.

**Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu (Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Emergency Management, Legal and Consular Affairs, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development):** I'm happy to report that, since September 29, over 1,500 people have departed on commercial flights. We block-reserved seats on MEA flights and also chartered aircraft for departures from Beirut to Istanbul. Over 1,200 Canadians, permanent residents and immediate family have departed on what amounts to 16 distinct flights from Beirut. This was an effort to supplement or augment commercial capacity. I'm pleased to report that capacity has now been restored and people can book today for flights out tomorrow to other capitals in the region.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Who paid for the chartered seats, and who paid for the commercial seats?

**Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu:** The block reservations were made by us. Clients were then invited to make their own bookings through MEA on regularly scheduled flights. For the charter flights, there was cost recovery—the equivalent of an MEA flight to Istanbul.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Okay. The charter flights were on a cost-recovery basis.

Were the commercial flights paid for on a cost-recovery basis as well?

**Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu:** They were paid for directly by MEA clients.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** I understand.

Therefore, 1,200 Canadians and permanent residents have been evacuated to date. Is that correct?

**Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu:** They opted to depart on seats that were made available to them.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Okay. Thank you for that.

You referenced this, but what is the state of commercial airline travel to Lebanon right now? Has it been fully or partially restored?

**Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu:** Over the past month, it has varied between 50 and 100 flights a day to various destinations.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Thank you.

I have another question relating to this. What diplomatic assets do you have on the ground in Lebanon? Has that presence been maintained, scaled back or expanded? What is the state of our diplomatic and consular presence there?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** I don't recall the exact number of diplomats we have serving right now in Lebanon. I want to say that about 10 or so days ago, given the security situation in Beirut, we did a partial evacuation of non-essential personnel and their families. About a third of the personnel were relocated to Cyprus, so nearby, with the understanding that as soon as the situation stabilizes, or in the case of a rush of activity and a need to count on these people, they could come back into the country.

• (1555)

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Okay.

With regard to the method of communicating with the some 50,000 Canadian citizens you referenced who live in Lebanon, is that primarily through the operations centre here in Ottawa, via email, text and electronic means, or is that primarily through our presence on the ground in Lebanon?

**Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu:** We have various means of communicating with Canadians abroad. The main one is through ROCA, the registry of Canadians abroad, whereby we invite Canadians who are living or travelling in a particular country to register with us to get the latest information. Currently about 25,000 people are registered on the ROCA system. We use that to send information to the registrants. We've used it many times over the past month to reach out and offer specific departure options and safety information to Canadians, obviously in addition to our travel advice, which is published.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** I'll say this just as a quick comment, and maybe you could comment later in your testimony. The Government of Canada evacuated some 15,000 Canadians from Lebanon in 2006. Obviously, this is not at a scale near that right now. I understand that the Government of Canada has worked with close allies and partners on a much bigger evacuation plan. Maybe you could tell us whether this initial evacuation of some 1,200 citizens is part of that or if that larger plan with allies and partners is a different plan.

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** I think the first distinction I'd like to introduce is the fact that the 1,200 my colleague referred to were not evacuated. This was an assisted departure.

I'll turn to Sébastien to complete the answer to your question, but I also want to say, to your question about how we communicate with Canadians, that it is not a single directional communication. Canadians who want to get in touch with the mission on the ground

absolutely can and often do so. It's not just us pushing out messages. We have a consular team in Beirut ready to take calls and visits from Canadians all the time.

**Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu:** Over the past month, we've received 10,000 interactions and inquiries from Canadians on the situation in Lebanon. To give an order of magnitude of the activity today, there were 60 calls in the past 24 hours. The relative flow of requests for information has waned.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Go ahead, Ms. McPherson.

**Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP):** Chair, you had said these were five-minute rounds. I noticed that round was six minutes.

**The Chair:** Yes, I do apologize. That was my oversight.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Would it be possible for all of us to have six minutes for this first round?

**The Chair:** Sure. That's fine. We can adjust it.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Next we go to Ms. Diab.

Welcome to the committee. You have six minutes.

**Ms. Lena Metlege Diab (Halifax West, Lib.):** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to thank members for allowing me to come in for the hour. I am of Lebanese origin.

First, thank you very much for being here to brief us parliamentarians on something that is so significant and so important to many of us but also on the historical perspective between Canada and Lebanon. I very much appreciate your opening remarks. This year we celebrate 70 years of diplomatic relations between Canada and Lebanon. Furthermore, Lebanese people have been in Canada since the 1880s. It's been 140 years, so these relations are not happening overnight. It's been a long-standing and, I would say, very good relationship.

I want to also give a shout-out here, which people have asked me to do, to Middle East Airlines, the only commercial airline that has continued to stand tall and assist people in either leaving, coming in or bringing food or anything to Lebanon at the airport. Thank you to Middle East Airlines.

I also want to give a shout-out to the assisted departure that Canada has helped in. In fact, it has helped some of my constituents who made it out and did come back to Halifax. Thank you for that.

I want to go to diplomacy, which you hinted at, and to United Nations Security Council Resolution 1701. I'm sure there are many of them. Where do you see Canada? What else can Canada do to bring peace and bring a resolution and help Lebanon get back its independence and sovereignty? I want to give you an opportunity to tell me what else Canada can do.

• (1600)

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** Thank you for the question.

The first thing I would say in answer to that is that Canada's role in Lebanon, or anywhere in the world for that matter, will always be stronger and more effective when we can act with a large number of partners. In the context of multilateral....

You mentioned resolution 1701. These days, resolution 1701 has been violated by just about every party along and on either side of the Blue Line. Our efforts, diplomatically, are about engaging like-minded partners in as wide a coalition as possible to blow some winds in the sails of these resolutions and to give them as many teeth as possible.

However, to be honest, this is not a situation where we're just starting to step up and realize that Lebanon needs assistance. We have been partners for a very long time. I alluded in my opening remarks to the fact that we've been a development partner of Lebanon's for a long time. We've consistently been among the top five donors in Lebanon.

This is for both security programming.... We've been supporting the Lebanese Armed Forces, providing it with equipment and training. We've provided a lot of development assistance by way of economic and social programming. In particular, this year, a lot has been done in the humanitarian field. You will have seen, of course, the latest call just a couple of weeks ago, when we announced a matching fund for two major Canadian humanitarian organizations.

**Ms. Lena Metlege Diab:** Minister Joly is currently in Paris with President Macron, and I understand things are coming out of that. I haven't really had a chance yet to view them.

Again, you mentioned that Canada needs to act with its other partners. Obviously, France is a key one. It's certainly key for Lebanon as well, as are other nations. Can you tell us a bit about that?

What else can we do? I appreciate the humanitarian assistance and I appreciate the matching fund. All of those are important, but I'm looking for what else we can do, which is what my constituents are also asking me.

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** That's an excellent question.

The reference to the Paris ministerial meeting that just wrapped up two or three hours ago is a good hook, because France's desire with that conference was, first of all, to put a spotlight on the situation and, in particular, to rally a number of countries to do more to support the Lebanese Armed Forces.

The fact of the matter is that the southern part of Lebanon is largely occupied by Hezbollah forces. That is obviously the part that Israel is at war with. Israel does not want war with Lebanon. Israel is in a fight with Hezbollah and has gone further and deeper into the country to fight Hezbollah bases and centres of operation.

One of the things that we, as the international community, really want to do is reinforce the role, the training and the capacity of the Lebanese Armed Forces so that it can substitute Hezbollah forces in southern Lebanon. If that substitution were to take place and the Lebanese Armed Forces could be entrusted to guarantee security in

the southern part of the country, Israel would feel much greater security. That could lead to a political process, better diplomacy and eventually negotiations on border demarcation.

**Ms. Lena Metlege Diab:** I appreciate that.

I don't know if I'm out of time—

**The Chair:** Ms. Diab, you're out of time.

**Ms. Lena Metlege Diab:** Okay. That's great.

I wanted to go to a humanitarian question, but thank you very much.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

Next, we go to Mr. Bergeron. You have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron (Montarville, BQ):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you so much to the officials from Global Affairs Canada for being with us today and enlightening us on the situation and Canada's response. I think our objective here is not to try to back anyone into a corner, but to get a clear understanding of the situation.

Earlier, my colleague Michael Chong made a comparison with the figure from 2006, when we evacuated approximately 15,000 people. In the situation before us today, 1,200 people were assisted or evacuated, if I understand correctly.

What was the rationale for evacuating 15,000 people in 2006, and why wouldn't that rationale be just as valid today?

• (1605)

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** The rationales are very similar. Obviously, the security situation is very different. There are significant and fundamental differences between the two crises, but the government is still responsible for its citizens, and the same rationales apply.

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** I'll rephrase my question.

How is it that the government felt in 2006 that the situation was critical enough in Lebanon to proceed with the emergency evacuation of 15,000 people and does not seem to consider the current situation critical enough to organize the evacuation of an equally large, if not larger, number of Canadian nationals?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** I understand your question better.

The answer is essentially that, at the time the evacuation was launched in 2006, there was no way for Canadian nationals to leave Lebanon on commercial transportation. As my colleague Mr. Beaulieu explained, dozens, if not hundreds, of flights a day are leaving Beirut right now.

The port and the airport are operational. Central transportation networks still exist and are operational, so everyone can leave the country by commercial means, which is more economical as well as safer.

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** Thank you. That is very enlightening.

When you appeared before our committee for the study of Canada's sanctions regime, you explained that the ultimate objective of the regime is to effect a change in the behaviour of the offending party, but also to constrict its ability to act financially and economically.

I fear that Canada has a problem when it comes to credibility and consistency. It cited respect for the rule of law, the rules of international law and the sovereignty of states as a reason to stand up for Ukraine when Russia engaged in illegitimate, illegal and unjustified aggression against sovereign Ukrainian territory. However, it is less vocal about Israel's violation of the sovereignty of Lebanon, a member state of the United Nations.

Wouldn't it be appropriate to put sanctions in place to, as you put it, effect a change in the behaviour of the offending party and constrict its ability to act financially and economically?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The two situations the member just mentioned are comparable in some respects, but there are also some limits.

It's also important to keep in mind the concept of self-defence. It is entirely legitimate for a country to defend itself against attacks on its territory.

I'll remind you that Hezbollah, in support of Hamas, launched hundreds of missiles and shells into Israeli territory the very next day, October 8, 2023. A year and a few months later, thousands of shells, missiles and drones have been launched into Israeli territory. That's why I'm saying the two situations are not the same.

The fact that Israel felt the need to attack positions in southern Lebanon, which the Lebanese armed forces do not control, is part of self-defence. Israel was trying to push back Hezbollah, which poses a constant threat and is preventing the return of 60,000 to 80,000 Israelis living close to the border with Lebanon.

Now, what the government has pointed out on a number of occasions is that it has to be done with restraint and always with a view to sparing civilians as much as possible. That is one of the messages you've heard repeatedly from the government and in a number of national and multilateral media releases.

• (1610)

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** I think those clarifications are very appropriate. That said, at the moment, Israel is launching attacks not only on southern Lebanon, but also all the way to the Lebanese capital, and attacks are now spreading to the north of the country—

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Mr. Bergeron, you're out of time. If you could ask a very quick question, we'll receive a quick response.

[*Translation*]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Don't you think there's a danger that Israel wants to create a buffer zone on the sovereign territory of Lebanon, once again violating the rules of international law?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** That is a risk. It's a very fluid situation that changes from day to day. We can assure you that we will study the matter very closely before taking a position.

[*English*]

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We'll now go to MP McPherson, for six minutes.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I want to start by saying that my sympathies are with you, Ms. Diab and Mr. El-Khoury, and all of those Lebanese Canadian and Lebanese people who are suffering right now. I know how worried the community is. I know how worried you are for your loved ones and for the country of Lebanon. I wanted to express that.

I also want to make it very clear that what Hezbollah and Hamas are doing is obviously terrorist. They are obvious terrorist organizations, and they are, obviously, being armed by another terrorist entity, which is the Iranian regime. That said, I have some questions about the behaviour of Israel. The Financial Times has reported that Israel has used the incendiary chemical white phosphorus in attacks on a UN base, which has injured 15 peacekeepers.

Can you confirm these reports?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** We have read the same open source reports.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Have you asked governments whose peacekeepers were injured whether they can confirm whether these attacks on their peacekeepers involved banned weapons?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** To my knowledge, that question has not been put to those governments, but it would typically be done through the UN directly, given that they report to UN command.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Does Canada consider the use of white phosphorus on UN peacekeepers to contravene the chemical weapons convention?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** That is a very complicated question. I'm afraid I cannot answer in full detail. White phosphorus is a weapon that can be legitimate in some circumstances.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** I have so many questions, so I'll ask you, if you wouldn't mind, to provide a written response if it is too complicated to provide a short response.

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** It's complicated, and preliminary, given that the attack happened very recently. Obviously, facts need to be gathered before we can pronounce ourselves on this.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Thank you.

Breaching and entering a UN position is a further flagrant violation of international law and Security Council resolution 1701. Any deliberate attack on peacekeepers is a grave violation of international humanitarian law and resolution 1701.

Has Canada formally notified Israel that it objects to these violations of international law?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** We frequently have discussions with Israel about expressing and demonstrating restraint.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** In this particular example, have you provided any formal notification to Israel?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** No, not the way you described it.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** As you know, forced displacement is illegal under international humanitarian law. We've seen, repeatedly, how Israel warns civilians in Lebanon to leave their homes and then bombs their communities indiscriminately. These are people who have no affiliation to Hezbollah and whose homes are completely destroyed.

Does the Government of Canada consider this to be forced displacement or another violation of international law?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** Again, there's a legal threshold that has to be met for the government to be able to pronounce itself on such a question. I cannot give that legal assessment right now, but at a high level, yes, the government has been critical of the excess of force that has been used in a number of occurrences.

• (1615)

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** The committee would very interested in hearing from you when you do have the ability to provide a more fulsome response to that.

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** Of course.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Has Canada assessed Israel's attacks in Lebanon to be potential violations of Lebanese sovereignty?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** I would provide the same answer. No, that assessment has not been done to date.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** When that assessment is done, again, we would welcome that at this committee.

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** Naturally.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Has Canada assessed any of these attacks to be indiscriminate?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** No, it has not to date.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** International law, including the 1954 Hague convention and the 1972 world heritage convention, clearly outlines the protection of cultural heritage during armed conflict.

This week, we saw Israel bomb the ancient city of Tyre, a UNESCO world heritage site. We also saw this in Gaza, where 60% of the heritage sites assessed by UNESCO have been damaged in the past year. Lebanese people are saying this is not just a war on civilians but also on their history, cultural heritage and very existence.

Why hasn't Canada commented on the destruction of cultural property in Lebanon to date?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** I would give the same answer as I did the previous question on this line of questioning.

You're quoting international law texts that require deeper analysis. Anticipating your next question, yes, we will be happy to provide this to the committee once the assessment is complete.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Thank you.

A report from the United Nations has said that Gaza's economy would take 350 years to return to its preconflict levels. With the escalation of destruction in Lebanon and considering the UNDP has warned of catastrophic socio-economic collapse due to this war, what would you estimate the cost of rebuilding Lebanon to be? How long would you estimate this would take?

How much should donor countries like Canada be expected to contribute to the rebuilding of Gaza, particularly as we have noted that France has recently allocated \$108 million to Lebanon?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** No such monetary assessment has been completed to date for Lebanon. Of course, everything else is just an estimate.

These are astronomical sums, which is why the best thing the international community can do right now is to do everything in its power to put an end to the fighting, so that reconstruction can begin.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** We have been very clear as a country—and I'm very proud of it—that we are here to help Ukraine rebuild after the conflict in Ukraine.

Why are we not as vocal in helping Gaza and Lebanon rebuild in that circumstance?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** I think pronouncements along those lines have been made as well.

The situation is not as clear-cut. It will require a regional bargain, if you will. I think that a number of countries, particularly in the Middle East and in the gulf, will be prepared to come and weigh in and lean in, but only when there is a reasonable guarantee that hostilities can cease and will not start up again. That requires a political and diplomatic solution.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Thank you for answering the questions.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We now go to the second round. We are providing three minutes for the second round.

We start off with Mr. Aboultaif.

You have three minutes, sir.



**Mr. Ziad Aboultaif (Edmonton Manning, CPC):** Thanks to the witnesses who are on the ground today. We can do some real stuff.

One billion dollars U.S. was committed in Paris today.

How much has Canada committed as part of the one billion?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** I can't say whether anything was announced today because the meeting just wrapped up a couple of hours ago.

What I can say is that the humanitarian assistance commitment by Canada to date in 2024 is just short of \$50 million. Like I said, this adds to the security programming and the development assistance that is ongoing as part of Canada's Middle East strategy.

**Mr. Ziad Aboultaif:** There are two figures for displaced people: 1.2 million and 1.4 million.

Can you confirm a number?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** These are always estimates. The figure we have is 1.2 million.

**Mr. Ziad Aboultaif:** Out of those, how many are Syrian refugees who have left to go back to Syria?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** I don't have the exact number. We do know that a number of Syrian refugees, as I said in my opening remarks, have started crossing back to Syria.

**Mr. Ziad Aboultaif:** Besides Lebanese being internally displaced in schools and local communities, do we know how many went to Iraq?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** No, I don't have that figure.

**Mr. Ziad Aboultaif:** You have no idea.

The previous commitment of Canadian aid to Lebanon was going toward helping the Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Now, since some have left to go to Syria, is this going to affect the amount of help and money that Canada commits to help Lebanon?

• (1620)

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** The history of our development assistance and humanitarian assistance in the Middle East in the past—definitely in the past five years—has been guided by the Middle East strategy, which was the government's approach to funding and supporting in response to the ISIS and Daesh crisis of 10 years ago. This was the framework.

As you know, the Middle East strategy is about to sunset, so we are currently developing plans and proposals for what it will be replaced by. It is premature at this point to say what it will be replaced by.

**Mr. Ziad Aboultaif:** To strengthen the UNIFIL, there's a proposal to have a multinational United Nations force to basically help the Lebanese army cope with bringing security to southern Lebanon and to the borders.

Will Canada be able to participate? Is it an option for Canada to participate in those forces?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** If we're talking about deployment of forces, this is a question that would need to be asked of the Department of National Defence. Having said this, so far Canada has

found that the best contribution was to be a financial and monetary contributor to UNIFIL. While other countries have provided troops, I cannot presume or pre-empt what might come up next.

**Mr. Ziad Aboultaif:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Thank you.

We next go to Mr. El-Khoury for two minutes.

**Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair, and welcome to our witnesses.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Lévesque, the population in southern Lebanon from 1988 or 1990 to 2000 was not safe and had miserable living conditions. What role will Canada play? Does it support the presence of UN forces on both sides of the border? That gives the population double assurance and keeps away forces that are not subject to our government.

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** Thank you for your question.

To conduct such an operation on sovereign territory and establish a multinational force there, you obviously have to be invited by the country that controls the territory. To my knowledge, no such proposal has ever been formally made within the United Nations. That said, there is a multinational force, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, which has huge support. That support has gotten stronger recently, including at the UN Security Council.

Given that the security infrastructure in southern Lebanon is weak because the armed forces controlling the territory are Hezbollah armed forces, the international community is determined to strengthen UNIFIL. Canada fully supports that. It has expressed its support both at the United Nations and here in a very public and bilateral way.

**Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury:** A large portion of the Lebanese people do not want any forces other than Lebanese forces in southern Lebanon. However, if Canada could play a role and if UN peacekeeping forces were present on both sides of the border, it would help calm the situation and promote sustainable peace on a global scale. We don't want this war to recur every five, 10 or 15 years.

What can Canada do to get such a proposal or solution and negotiate with both parties, the Lebanese and the Israelis?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** Thank you. The suggestion you are putting on the table is duly noted.

We all have a common goal in the region, which is to eliminate the regional security threat that Hezbollah represents. I totally understand the comparison and the equivalence that you're making with respect to both sides of the border. First and foremost, though, we view the threat to the security of the sub-region as being caused by a terrorist group that, as we all know, is armed by Iran. That is what's causing most, if not all, the insecurity. That's really the priority.

• (1625)

[English]

**The Chair:** I'm afraid we're out of time. You have my apologies, Mr. El-Khoury.

We now go to Mr. Bergeron for a minute and a half.

[Translation]

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** I'll do my best.

Mr. Lévêque, do you consider the attacks on UNIFIL to be a violation of international law?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévêque:** Again, as I said in response to previous questions, matters of international law that carry this much weight and require this much analysis cannot be described lightly as a violation of international law. However, the attacks go beyond acceptable standards, and that is why the government has taken a rather strong stand on the issue.

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** Wouldn't those actions alone justify taking a harder line with Israel?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévêque:** I think the—

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** Could we go as far as imposing sanctions?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévêque:** All the items in our tool box are always considered, and in every situation, we need to look at a variety of tools. Obviously, an analysis would have to be completed before the situation could be deemed a violation of international law.

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** What is the status of the analysis by the department's legal unit?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévêque:** These are events that happened just a few days ago. The situation is being analyzed. This kind of analysis should never be undertaken lightly, in a few days. A serious analysis takes a lot more time.

**Mr. Stéphane Bergeron:** I imagine that you'll keep the committee apprised of any developments related to the analysis—

[English]

**The Chair:** I'm afraid, Mr. Bergeron, that you're out of time.

We next go to Ms. McPherson.

You have a minute and a half.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, again, to the officials for being here today.

I'd like to follow up on the question Mr. Bergeron just asked. Is the Government of Canada considering sanctioning Netanyahu, Ben-Gvir and Smotrich for their crimes and the genocidal language they've been using?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévêque:** Again, I can only say that all tools available to the government are always under consideration.

What the question asks is whether there are things we're considering as part of the advice we would provide to the government. I can't pronounce on whether this is an active consideration or it's about to happen or not. Nothing is ever off the table. We always consider how to best answer any situation.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** Obviously, we've listed Hamas and Hezbollah as terrorist organizations, as they should be. I think there have also been sanctions applied to Hamas, which seem unnecessary, considering it is a listed terrorist entity. Perhaps that's more of a PR position that the minister has taken. That was able to be done quite quickly.

We know that other countries have been able to take some of these steps. They're countries that are democracies and are, in fact, Canada's allies. Why is it taking so long to make some of these assessments and determine that some of those listed should be sanctioned?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévêque:** As a point of clarification, since you mentioned the fact that members of Hamas have been sanctioned in addition to Hamas as an organization, yes, Hamas, as an organization, has been sanctioned. It doesn't mean that every person who's a member of Hamas has a membership card they carry around. In order to trigger—

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** If they are a member of Hamas, they are not sanctioned because it is a listed terrorist entity.

**Mr. Alexandre Lévêque:** Of course they are. What I'm saying is that sometimes, to double down and make sure that the system can catch and trigger—

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** We're extra sanctioning them.

**Mr. Alexandre Lévêque:** If you want to be able to trigger our immigration systems, for example, it's easier to do it with a name and a date of birth than it is with an affiliation that may or may not appear on somebody's passport.

**Ms. Heather McPherson:** That's all I have.

**The Chair:** Next, we go to Mr. Chong for three minutes.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I want to go back to the last question I asked. There have been about 1,200 voluntary departures—that's your term—of Canadian citizens and permanent residents from Lebanon. It's a voluntary coordination process right now.

In the event that the situation deteriorates and we're in a 2006-type emergency, I'd like you to tell the committee a bit more about what I understand to be a much broader plan coordinated among Canada's closest allies to evacuate citizens from Lebanon.

• (1630)

**Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu:** Thank you for the question.

My colleague alluded to what we refer to as a NEO, or a non-combatant evacuation operation, as one of the elements we are looking at, and that is part of our prudent planning. We have been exercising and doing that planning for the past decades since 2006. Many things have gone into the planning.

What's important at this stage is that there are commercial options available, and we urge Canadians to depart.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** On this plan you're talking about, what other countries are involved in the planning?

**Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu:** There are at least 20 countries that have their own plans and come together in an annual exercise in Cyprus each year to test and validate plans, and Canada is part of that group.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** What is the trigger for the plan?

**Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu:** Each country has its own triggers, but in comparison—there was a question earlier today comparing the situation with 2006—one important distinction from 2006 is that, then, the airport was not operable. Today, what we see are regular flights, with more than 50 flights a day.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** I assume this emergency plan you're referring to has contingencies for an event in which the airport is not available.

**Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu:** Indeed.

**Hon. Michael Chong:** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

**The Chair:** You have 42 seconds remaining.

Thank you for that.

We now go to Mr. Zuberi for three minutes.

**Mr. Sameer Zuberi (Pierrefonds—Dollard, Lib.):** Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses for being here. I know that you are representatives from Global Affairs. I'm also aware that you work with other departments.

The question I want to start off with is around evacuations. It relates to who is being evacuated—Canadians, permanent residents and their families.

Are you finding that there are some who are staying back in Lebanon to care for loved ones? They have to make a choice between caring for their loved ones in Lebanon or coming immediately back to Canada. Are you hearing anything around that?

**Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu:** The decision to leave Lebanon is a very difficult one for many, and there are various reasons why people decide to remain there.

Our commitment and top priority are to help Canadians return to Canada. That includes permanent residents and extends to their immediate family under the IRPA definition. That's the standard approach we have been using consistently over the years, in various crises.

Thank you.

**Mr. Sameer Zuberi:** “Immediate family” is defined as spouse and dependent children aged 21 and below. Is that correct?

**Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu:** That's correct.

**Mr. Sameer Zuberi:** Are you finding scenarios in which individuals—Canadians and others who are qualified to take the assisted-departure flights—are choosing not to take those flights because

of family members outside of spouses and dependent children under age 21?

**Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu:** There are a range of decisions. Anecdotally, some people tell us about extended family or friends they do not want to leave.

**Mr. Sameer Zuberi:** It's a yes—a parent, for example, or a sibling.

Is that happening?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** It's one of many reasons.

**Mr. Sameer Zuberi:** What I'm getting at here is this. I understand you're not the Department of Immigration, but when you're in dialogue with immigration officials, is there a plan right now to extend to those who are coming...? Maybe it's a temporary visa to Canada during this conflict, so Canadians can come back here with their loved ones—their parents, for example, or their 25-year-old child.

Is there consideration for this?

**Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu:** I'm at Global Affairs. I can't comment on any special immigration measures.

**Mr. Sameer Zuberi:** Do you think it would help Canadians get out if we did that?

**Mr. Sébastien Beaulieu:** That would best be answered by representatives from IRCC.

**Mr. Sameer Zuberi:** I understand that, given that you're Global Affairs and immigration is elsewhere.

Thank you so much.

• (1635)

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

That concludes the questions from the members. However, I want to ask one last question, if I may.

You have shared with us all of the humanitarian assistance Canada is providing. You also touched on the security assistance we're providing. I want to follow up on the question asked by Ms. Diab.

Given the scale of the devastation, and the concern that is quite palpable around this table and indeed across the country, is there anything more we can do diplomatically? Are there any convening powers that we might have or anything we can do to see a de-escalation and make sure the world is there for them?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** What I can say is that we're not leaving anything on the table. We are deploying whatever efforts Canada can deploy regarding both the assistance you referred to and our convening powers through the alliances we've created. We are an increasingly present and loud voice around tables like the G7, the UN and many other subgroupings.

Really, it's about creating momentum.

**The Chair:** Is anything being contemplated, or are we focused on considering how we can be of more assistance on the diplomatic front?

**Mr. Alexandre Lévesque:** It's nothing that doesn't already exist as part of the tools we're using. That is what I would say.

**The Chair:** Okay.

Thank you very much, Monsieur Beaulieu, Monsieur Lévesque and Madame Crockett.

**Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.):** I have my hand up for after the witnesses have left. It's not to do with this.

**The Chair:** We have to go in camera.

**Hon. Hedy Fry:** Before we go in camera, I would request that we suspend for a few minutes.

**The Chair:** Yes. We are suspending in any event because we're going in camera.

**Hon. Hedy Fry:** All right.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much for your testimony. That was very helpful.

The committee stands suspended for five minutes.

*[Proceedings continue in camera]*

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