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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

It's my privilege to welcome to this hearing the Honourable Bill Blair, Minister of National Defence, former minister of emergency preparedness and former public safety minister, who is, I think, uniquely qualified to talk about the issue before the committee, along with Deputy Bill Matthews and Chief of the Defence Staff Wayne Eyre.

Minister, you know the drill. We look forward to the first five minutes and then our colleagues' erudite questions.

Hon. Bill Blair (Minister of National Defence): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Once again, I'm actually very pleased and honoured to have the opportunity to come before your committee to speak to this very important topic, one with which I have, unfortunately, rather close experience. I'm happy to share my reflections on that.

If I may begin, last week I had the privilege of co-hosting allies and partners from around the world at the Halifax International Security Forum. I was very pleased, and I want to acknowledge, that we had the largest delegation of Canadian parliamentarians ever to attend HISF. Many of the members of this committee were present, and I was very pleased that you were able to be present. It was an important opportunity for all of us to learn together and to have, I think, very important and frank discussions about the state of the world and global security.

At that security forum, I had the opportunity to discuss with colleagues from around the world how the security situation continues to change rapidly. We reiterated and reinforced our shared commitment to democracy and to the rules-based international order.

I also had the opportunity to reiterate my commitment to ensuring the Canadian Armed Forces have the resources and capabilities they need to meet our aspirations and do the difficult jobs that we ask of them. It's why our government has made some major defence investments already, including the fighter jets for the air force, new ships for the navy, new combat support vehicles for the army and more, including nearly \$40 billion in NORAD modernization. It's why we continue to make sure we're spending money on the right things in a way that is fiscally responsible for Canadians.

As I said in Halifax, Canada has a responsibility to its allies in NATO, NORAD, the Indo-Pacific and elsewhere, and, quite relevant to our discussion today, we also have a responsibility to Canadians. As the Minister of National Defence, I want to assure this committee that I take this responsibility very seriously. I look forward to coming back before this committee to discuss supplementary estimates at a later time.

Whether it's an unprecedented wildfire season, as we've experienced this past summer right across Canada, the atmospheric river event that occurred in B.C. last year, or the impact of hurricane Fiona, Canadians are learning about the devastating effects of climate change first-hand.

I am very grateful to the men and women of uniform, of the Canadian Armed Forces, who rushed to danger when Canadians needed them most: to Operation Lentus, in which roughly 2,100 members of the Canadian Armed Forces spent more than 130 consecutive days battling fires across six provinces and territories. Soldiers provided firefighting support and stepped up with search and rescue. They helped over 800 people evacuate safely from very difficult circumstances. Bases even housed and fed families who had to leave in a hurry. Our military answered the call to service, just like they always do. In my previous role as minister of emergency preparedness, I saw first-hand how important our armed forces are in keeping Canadians safe when disaster strikes.

As climate change continues to make these events more frequent and severe, we expect that the demand for CAF assistance will only continue to increase. For example, between 2010 and 2016, there was an average of just two requests for assistance per year from provinces and territories that required the military's help to deal with natural disasters. So far this year, in 2023, there have been eight. This support doesn't come without a cost, and I'm joined today by the chief of the defence staff and by the deputy minister of national defence, who will be able to provide you with some information and insight on what those costs are. These domestic operation deployments can have a real impact on the Canadian Forces, and they do.

When I was here in September, I was joined by the chief of the defence staff, who talked about the increased stress these deployments can put on force readiness, on our people and on our equipment. I want to assure you all that I hear that very clearly; I see that impact and I'm committed to helping. That's why the armed forces are working with our provincial and territorial partners to find ways to get them the help they need while being mindful of the costs that come with that help.

As I said at the outset of my remarks, it's why we're working hard to increase the capabilities of our armed forces. I know and want to acknowledge to you all that there is more work to do and we are taking the right steps forward. Supporting our men and women in uniform is my top priority, and as the demands of our military grow at home and abroad, we will continue to do everything that is necessary to support them.

Thank you very much. I'm happy to submit myself to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, for those economical remarks.

Colleagues, before we go to our six-minute round, I would just note that the minister will be appearing shortly on supplementary estimates. I generally provide a fairly free-ranging conversation on supplementary estimates. I encourage members to focus on the motion at hand, because this is a rare privilege that we have to study this.

With that, we have Mr. Bezan for six minutes.

Mr. James Bezan (Selkirk—Interlake—Eastman, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, welcome back to committee. I appreciate your appearing on this topic.

General Eyre, please pass on to all the troops our gratitude from the Conservatives and indeed from all Canadians for the work our soldiers do on Operation Lentus. Probably the biggest interaction Canadians ever have with our men and women serving in uniform is when they're out there sandbagging and fighting fires and dealing with natural disasters across this country. We all appreciate having that support and that type of commitment from the Canadian Armed Forces.

Minister Blair, you said in your final comments there that you want to make sure you continue to support our troops, yet, last time you appeared at this committee, you announced a \$1-billion cut to the Canadian Armed Forces. How will it impact the operations to support Operation Lentus and other deployments of the Canadian Armed Forces when you don't have the money to actually carry it out?

Hon. Bill Blair: Thank you very much, Mr. Bezan. It's an important question.

I'm absolutely committed that it's not going to impact those men and women. The instructions we've received from Treasury Board and that I passed on to both the CDS and the deputy minister are that we are looking at ways in which we can eliminate unnecessary costs, but none of those reductions are to impact the capability of the Canadian Armed Forces or the supports that we provide to the men and women of the Canadian Armed Forces.

For example, we have been looking very carefully at a number of other expenditures that do not directly impact those members on such things as consultant reports, some professional services and some issues around travel. We believe there are savings to be had in those areas.

We have a responsibility, as I know you would acknowledge, Mr. Bezan, in that we're spending Canadian taxpayer dollars. We want to make sure we're spending them carefully. I see the expenditure of every dollar for national defence as an investment in the men and women and our capabilities. Where those dollars are not producing real impact on those capabilities or supporting the men and women, we are also prepared to do what's necessary to save that money.

• (1540)

Mr. James Bezan: Let's talk about the capabilities, as well as the overall troop strength that we currently have, the force strength. As we know, the last time General Eyre was at committee he said that we were over 16,000 members short in the Canadian Armed Forces. In addition to that, we had a further 10,000 plus who were undertrained and undeployable.

With that in mind, we know we had a terrible forest fire season this past year. In Manitoba we have had the Canadian Armed Forces out many times, in my riding, to fight floods. Having that low a number of deployable troops and having the commitments that we have today to our operations in both the Indo-Pacific and within NATO, and with Operation Reassurance and Latvia through the enhanced forward presence group, how are we going to have enough troops around to fight forest fires or other natural disasters here in Canada?

Hon. Bill Blair: There are a couple of things in that.

First of all, let me take the opportunity, Mr. Chair, to say that last time I was before committee, General Eyre and I were discussing the challenges of the Canadian Armed Forces in recruitment and retention. We articulated that over a three-year period, we actually had more people leaving the armed forces than we were able to recruit.

We believed, and the General shared with us, that we'd reached the bottom of that and were turning the page and starting to move forward. Unfortunately, I want to report to this committee, because it's important that we be candid, that this continues to persist as a challenge for us. I met earlier today with the chief, the deputy minister and his staff, and General Bourgon with respect to recruitment and all the efforts we are doing to expedite those processes. We need good people in the Canadian Armed Forces and we need to retain the great people that we have. I just wanted to be really clear on that.

At the same time, we're very fortunate in this country. We already have an extraordinary group of Canadians who fight wildfires. They're volunteer firefighters, professional firefighters and municipal firefighters right across the country, almost 130,000 of them. They do an extraordinary job, for which we should all be very grateful. At the same time, we've seen that on occasion, particularly with how bad the fires were in the past year in Nova Scotia, in Quebec, across the prairie provinces, and in Alberta, British Columbia and the Northwest Territories, we needed to provide them with additional supports. When they came asking, we tried to be very careful about how we deployed those resources, not to replace those firefighters but to provide the support and services they cannot provide.

For example, the Canadian Armed Forces were there when communities needed to be evacuated. When people needed to be evacuated from Yellowknife, one of the largest municipal evacuations in the history of this country, they were there to help with that. They were the only ones who could.

Mr. James Bezan: We were also talking about having capabilities and potential training of our reserves as well as our regular force on emergency responses and fighting wildfires.

Does the \$1-billion cut in the budget or any of the \$10 billion in lapsed spending over the last eight years impact the ability to invest in the equipment we need to go out there and support our civil authorities when we are providing that type of support in a natural disaster?

Hon. Bill Blair: Let me acknowledge to you that I am asking a lot of questions about this, too.

The Chair: Unfortunately, he has left you have 15 seconds.

Hon. Bill Blair: On our ability to get the budget spent, there are two things that we need to talk about, the budget of the Canadian Armed Forces and their actual expenditures. There is a gap, a not insignificant gap.

Our ability to get that money spent on recruitment and retention, on wages for those men and women, on the infrastructure, the equipment and the kit they need, and on housing and child care—all the things that make it possible for them to serve and to make sure they are available and capable of delivering those services when we ask it of them—remains a bit of a challenge, a significant challenge for us. It's part of the work we are all undertaking to do to get the job done and to spend the money that is available. As I have already indicated to this committee, more needs to be done. We need to invest in more of the right things.

• (1545)

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bezan.

Mr. Fisher, you have six minutes, please.

Mr. Darren Fisher (Dartmouth—Cole Harbour, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, to you and your team for being here.

Please pass along to the incredible women and men of the Canadian Armed Forces our thanks on behalf of this committee for all they've done. My goodness, there were hurricanes, fires and floods, and I am just speaking about Atlantic Canada right now. It's absolutely incredible how much they were able to help Canadians just this summer alone.

Minister, we've heard testimony advocating for greater investment in civilian emergency response capacity at the provincial and territorial levels, but we've also heard calls for additional resourcing and dedicated capability in the military. That could be the regular forces or the reserve forces.

I'm interested in your thoughts and perhaps even the general's thoughts on the appropriate division of responsibility between the military and civilians when responding to emergencies. What are the advantages and the disadvantages and perhaps the limitations of each?

Hon. Bill Blair: I will begin, Darren, and then I would like to give the CDS an opportunity to opine. This is his profession, and I think we defer to his experience on this.

My experience as the former emergencies minister is that we always try to be very careful in how we deploy and use members of the Canadian Armed Forces, so perhaps I can explain how that works procedurally.

The province would encounter a situation in which their capacity to respond to an emergency may be exceeded, so they would then ask for help. The request would come to the Minister of Emergency Preparedness, and I understand that you're going to be hearing from him later today, but I had that job previously. When we received that, it would be received at the government operations centre. It would be passed over to the government operations centre, which works with the Canadian Armed Forces and other federal departments, and everyone would be able to contribute what they could and could not do.

It did take into careful consideration not only the capability of the armed forces but the appropriateness of their being the response. There were others who are part of that discussion, the Canadian Coast Guard, as an example, and the RCMP. There would be a very important discussion about how we could help the province.

However, it's important to acknowledge that there are some unique capabilities of the Canadian Armed Forces, for example, the ability to airlift out of a certain area. They also have some people who are not necessarily on the front line of firefighting as level 1 firefighters, because most of them are not trained to do that. There is important work that needs to take place behind that front line, and Canadian Armed Forces members are well trained to do that and have been really important in doing that.

We've also had situations in the past year. I recall vividly a day when a number of Canadians were stranded on a highway just outside of Hope, British Columbia, and there was no way to get them off. There were landslides and mudslides occurring all around them. The Canadian Armed Forces swooped in in their helicopters, because they are the only ones who could do it, and they rescued those people and took them to safety.

By the way, that wasn't an RFA. They answered without our having to go through any government process. They came to help because that's what they do.

The process of determining whether or not it's appropriate to use Canadian Armed Forces members, I want to assure this committee, is done very much in consultation with CAF itself.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre (Chief of the Defence Staff, Canadian Armed Forces, Department of National Defence): Mr. Chair, the demand is going up. We've seen a doubling every five years, over the last decade and a half, in requests for assistance in responding to natural disasters. The frequency and intensity of natural disasters, I think you'll all agree, are on the increase. What is missing is capacity. I believe the Canadian Armed Forces will continue to be called upon.

What we need to be, truly, is a force of last resort. What we need is to get intermediate capacity at the municipal and provincial levels drawn upon first. What we provide, for the most part, is a self-contained, self-deploying, self-sustaining and self-disciplining labour force with its own inherent command and control. It's a nice, tidy package that shows up. However, it's expensive. We train for the worst of situations—high-end combat. If that capability is used for much lower and more frequent business, it's not economically viable. Take a look at the world security situation, which is deteriorating around us. The demand signal for those primary tasks we're responsible for is only increasing. However, our readiness to do that is decreasing, due in part to the incessant demand for these types of domestic operations.

We're going to continue to be called upon. Let's do it as a true force of last resort.

• (1550)

The Chair: You have about a minute, Mr. Fisher.

Mr. Darren Fisher: Thank you.

Minister, you touched on the capabilities that might be beyond the capacity of any volunteer-based organization.

Does that also stand for provincial and territorial organizations? Is there a period of time when they're able to cover some of these things off, or is there—as the general said—always a possibility that the CAF will be called in?

Hon. Bill Blair: We talk about these events over the past year, even going back to hurricane Fiona and the atmospheric flood in British Columbia. The overwhelming response was not from the Canadian Armed Forces. They supplemented that response in every case. The provinces, territories and even local jurisdictions.... The policing jurisdictions and volunteer fire departments from small towns right across Nova Scotia, for example, all went into service and worked around the clock. There was a Herculean, heroic effort to save homes and communities, and to keep people safe. It is only when an emergency—we've seen this in the past year, in particular—exceeds the capacity of a local jurisdiction that they ask us to help.

I want to be very clear. The determination as to which help is appropriate and how much help can be provided is made by CAF itself. We don't ask of them what they cannot do. We ask them what they can do. Yes, we ask often.

I may also take the point.... I hear very clearly from premiers and ministers of the provinces and territories. They really value the CAF contribution. It's one of the first things they ask for. On many occasions, we've had to say, "That's not the appropriate response. We'll provide you with other help."

Mr. Darren Fisher: Thank you.

The Chair: Madame Normandin, go ahead for six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Minister Blair.

General Eyre, it's always a pleasure to meet with you.

I'd like to follow up on the previous questions regarding the need to call upon the armed forces as a last resort.

Would you say that, over the past two years, the decision to call upon the Canadian Forces has been a last resort? In some situations, could there have been other solutions?

[*English*]

Hon. Bill Blair: Yes, ma'am. I think it's a very important question.

The best example I can cite for you—where it was the first resort, because we were in a full-blown emergency—is when we deployed the Canadian Armed Forces into long-term care facilities in both Quebec and Ontario. That was a situation in which people were dying. It was a situation in which the people who normally work in those long-term care facilities either weren't able or weren't willing to.... People were significantly at risk. We went to the Canadian Armed Forces and asked for their help. We learned almost immediately that it wasn't necessarily the best use of those very limited and valuable resources.

We went right to work. I hope Minister Sajjan will have the opportunity to speak more at length about this. We started working with a number of different NGOs—the Canadian Red Cross, primarily, but also St. John Ambulance, The Salvation Army, the Search and Rescue Volunteer Association of Canada and others—to create what we called a “humanitarian workforce”. We worked very closely with the provincial authorities, Quebec in particular, to get military members out of the long-term care facilities and to replace them with trained volunteers. They were primarily trained by the Red Cross.

That situation was perhaps characterized as “first resort”, but we were in a full-blown emergency. People were dying. We moved quickly to get the Canadian Armed Forces in there to stabilize the situation, then worked just as quickly to get them out of there and to replace them with the appropriate resources.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you.

I want to hear about the pressure being exerted on the forces, but from a different perspective. We know that military service generally consists of a three-phase cycle. Armed forces members spend a third of their time training, another third deployed and the remaining third off duty.

To what extent does an Operation Lentus deployment exclude a military member from being deployed abroad afterwards?

[English]

Hon. Bill Blair: It could have an impact. Let us be quite clear on that. I think the general is really anxious to jump in here, so why don't I let him.

• (1555)

[Translation]

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: That's an excellent question, Mr. Chair.

Deployments of this nature add stress to the individuals' personal and operational tempo. They spend more time in the field, and less time with their families. This factor increases the stress level for families, given the constant deployments.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Let me make sure that I understand. Does a military member's Operation Lentus deployment fall under the three-phase cycle, or does it, in some cases, exclude the member from being deployed abroad?

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: For example, the battalion currently stationed in Cyprus and ready to evacuate our citizens from Lebanon was deployed this summer in Quebec to fight fires.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you.

We've heard a number of times that domestic deployments can lead to a loss of interest among military members. They say that they don't want to make a career out of hauling sandbags, for example.

Has there been any analysis of how the growing number of climate emergency responses affects the appeal of the forces? Has this been documented?

[English]

Hon. Bill Blair: We have some data that I'm more than happy to share with this committee with respect to those deployments. I think the Canadian Armed Forces members have been absolutely extraordinary, and every time we've asked them to answer the call, they have done so. However, there are a number of reasons men and women join the Canadian Armed Forces. Part of it is because of the excellence of the training, and part of it is the opportunity to serve in a wide variety of deployments.

This year was a particularly challenging year. As the general has shared with us, there were 130 consecutive days of firefighting. That wasn't all done by one group of soldiers, or all by soldiers, and we tried to rotate people through different missions. For example, I remember the discussion during the summer, when we had fires in Nova Scotia, Quebec, Alberta, British Columbia and the Northwest Territories, and I think there was a very sincere effort made to make sure people were rotated through those, because we had to give them a break. We also did not want to take them away from training.

In my conversations, I've gone to the bases and I've thanked them for that service. I think they are proud and they should be proud of the service that they provided, but it isn't entirely consistent with all of the reasons they joined the Canadian Armed Forces. We have to be thoughtful of that, because we want to regroup those people; we want to retain them, and we want their experience in the Canadian Armed Forces to be something they can be proud of. They are certainly proud of the service they brought to Canada. They're proud of supporting Canadians in a dire time of need, but they also want the opportunity to deploy internationally and to be involved in a lot of other important missions.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: I completely agree that the military members deployed on domestic operations are doing an outstanding job. However, we currently have a recruitment and retention problem.

I'll make my question more clear this time. Could the greater number of domestic deployments lead to a loss of interest in joining the armed forces?

[English]

Hon. Bill Blair: The general wants to jump in, but in my conversations with them I think they are truly proud of that service to Canadians, but they are also proud of the other ways in which they can serve. With the gratitude that Canadians express to them when they say thanks for coming and getting us out of this really difficult situation, I would hope that the men and women of the Canadian Armed Forces would be proud of that service and be greatly encouraged in their career to know that they were there for Canadians when they were required, but it is also incumbent upon us to make sure that they have the opportunity to realize their full potential in every other aspect.

The Chair: The general wants to jump in, but the chair wants to jump in more. I've been pretty slack with the first three questioners. Ms. Mathysen is going to benefit from that, but after this we're going to have to run a tighter clock, shall we say.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): I heard “benefit”, so I'm good with that.

There have been many references, of course, to this increase in climate change disasters. You referenced the 133 consecutive days of forest fires, and hurricane Fiona. We started this study back in May 2022, and since then it's been incredible what we've seen, and that's just since the start of the study. Since 2017, as you've also mentioned, the Canadian Forces have deployed every year to assist with climate disasters.

It's like clockwork. Every time we say we're going to be more prepared, we're continuing to work on that, but in 2017, when Strong, Secure, Engaged was released, there wasn't a single new initiative to deal with climate change as part of that policy document. Can you confirm that whenever we see the defence update, whenever that may be, a large part of that will deal with the existential crisis that we are seeing in terms of climate change?

• (1600)

Hon. Bill Blair: Yes ma'am. If I may, I can confirm that.

I think we've all learned a great deal from our experiences, particularly over the last three years, with the last year, of course, being the most intense, extraordinary and unprecedented.

I get tired of using the word “unprecedented”, but there's no comparison for what we've experienced in 2023 to any previous year in this country. The demands that this unprecedented set of circumstances placed upon the Canadian Armed Forces are something we have to learn from.

Now, the government has been making other significant investments—I won't get into those here—in order to be better prepared and to respond to these types of emergencies. They're things around helping communities with infrastructure investments, firefighting equipment, training, etc.

On the demands we have placed upon the Canadian Armed Forces, I would like to say it's a one-off thing, it only happened this year, and we won't have to worry about it again, but that cannot be true. I don't believe that, because what we are seeing over time is an increase and an acceleration of these weather-related disasters, so we ask and will continue to ask the Canadian Armed Forces to be there for Canadians, but other things also need to be done in order to....

With great respect to the Canadian Armed Forces, it's an expensive response. It may not, in all circumstances, be the best response, but for us, it's been the best choice, and they've always answered that call.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Back in the spring, even the chair—and I don't refer to him often—mentioned that the defence update was coming forward very soon. In fact, it was going to be within days. We still have not seen that.

Do you have an update on when we can see that? Is there a timeline, perchance?

Hon. Bill Blair: Yes ma'am.

Those are very important discussions with respect to the defence policy update, because it's not simply a policy document; it requires significant new investments in defence capability, so it's very much tied into our ongoing budgetary discussions in the Government of Canada. We are in a situation that has to recognize the fiscal environment, but at the same time, the urgency of additional investments in defence is also clearly part of those discussions.

It will come when we complete those budget discussions.

It's our job, with your help, to make sure that the requirements for the Canadian Armed Forces and the investments we have to make—both in its people and in its infrastructure and equipment—are well known and prioritized.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Many of the studies we do overlap a great deal. Last year, we heard from Calvin Pedersen—he's a fourth-generation Canadian Ranger—as part of our Arctic study. Of course, rangers are called on quite a lot in terms of climate change and search and rescue.

Calvin is a lead researcher. He's part of that search and rescue project. These organizations are on the front lines. They're helping with disaster relief. We call upon them, as well, to do a great deal, but the reimbursement for equipment usage impacts their work significantly as rangers, as well as their ability to do a lot of other things.

The committee recommended that the equipment usage rate be tied to inflation, but the government hasn't done that yet. The defence ombudsman reported that rangers lack adequate access to the health care, housing and basic infrastructure needed to do their work.

Can we see those supports coming forward sooner rather than later to support what the rangers are doing in dealing with climate change emergencies, dealing with those frontline issues and dealing with search and rescue?

Mr. Bill Matthews (Deputy Minister, Department of National Defence): Can I start, if you're okay with that, Minister?

Hon. Bill Blair: Please. Of course.

Mr. Bill Matthews: Thank you. The chief will want to jump in as well.

There are two issues that I would flag. The member is quite right about the reports. There is an ongoing review of the role of the rangers' equipment and the training, and eventually, that will include the compensation. That work is ongoing. The chief will touch on that.

The other thing I would flag that has come up with rangers—the member didn't raise this, but I think it's related—is delays in reimbursing them for broken equipment or equipment that was damaged while on duty. We have made some changes to improve that process so that it's more timely. We have a good process, if they can get the repair done while on duty. Where we were falling down was if the repair happened after they got back home and they had to submit paperwork. We're working to tighten up that process as well, which is equally important.

Go ahead, Chief.

• (1605)

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, when I was the army commander in 2020, I implemented something called the Canadian Ranger enhancement program, and that work continues. It looks at exactly those types of issues: compensation and benefits for personally owned equipment, reimbursements, etc. That has been put in place, but the work continues, with a comprehensive review of such things as training, equipment, structure, policies and infrastructure.

The model we had for when somebody came in was based on somebody having traditional skills to live off the land. We've noticed that perhaps some of those traditional skills are eroding, so we're revisiting the underlying assumptions for the Canadian Rangers program.

We also need to take a look, as security in the extremities of our nation becomes increasingly challenged, at the role of the rangers. Right now, their primary role is to be our eyes, ears and guides. What else can they do to enhance the national security of our country? That work is ongoing.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: That would mean re-examinations and consultation, I would assume.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Mathysen.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Yes.

The Chair: Ms. Mathysen, don't stretch your benefits.

If we are going to get in a full round, we'll have to be very tight with the time.

Ms. Kramp-Neuman is next.

Mrs. Shelby Kramp-Neuman (Hastings—Lennox and Addington, CPC): Thank you.

Of course, we're in the middle of a perfect storm. The perfect storm is continuing, and the capacity for natural disasters is definitely a concern. The troop strength is relevant to that, in terms of how CAF can help Lentus.

For my first question, section 3.1 of the departmental report states that the “Canadian Armed Forces is growing towards its end state of 101,500 personnel”, yet the results achieved paint a very different picture. In every single performance indicator, percentages have dropped year after year. The force establishment is down 5%; reserve forces are down 5%, and the percentage of occupations with critical shortfalls is up a staggering 20%. Even the footnotes come right out and say that the department, under your leadership, cannot compete with the labour market or attract talent.

Why is this, and why is it that year after year your government has not only failed to reverse the recruitment and retention crisis, but statistically, it's showing even worse?

Hon. Bill Blair: I think there are a number of reasons for that. There's the aftermath of the pandemic and a number of other factors. I will also tell you that in my consultations with defence ministers from across the globe, including in the United States, they're facing similar recruitment and retention challenges. There is important work that needs to take place.

Perhaps I can turn to the chief of the defence staff and have him explain, if you'd like.

Mrs. Shelby Kramp-Neuman: If I may, Minister Blair, objectively and verifiably, the numbers contradict this. For example, the title is “Canadian Armed Forces is growing towards its end state of 101 500 personnel”, but then the numbers in the footnote absolutely disagree with it.

My question to you is, what objective steps have you taken to fix this recruitment and retention crisis? We can't support Operation Lentus, or similar, if we don't have the people.

Hon. Bill Blair: I think the people are the most important part of the Canadian Armed Forces. I share your concern with the challenges that the Canadian Armed Forces and other armed forces around the world have been facing with recruiting the talent they need. I think there are also challenges in retaining that talent, because many of the great men and women of the Canadian Armed Forces are finding it difficult to serve. It does require that we work with them and make investments in housing, child care, health services and all of the important supports that the Canadian Armed Forces members need in order to continue to serve.

Mrs. Shelby Kramp-Neuman: Okay, so speaking more specifically to housing and/or child care, in section 3.2, the percentage of CAF members who feel that the CAF can provide “reasonable quality of life for service members and their families” and the percentage of CAF members “who feel positive about their job” are unavailable. Can you please explain why DND is not including that in the departmental report?

• (1610)

Hon. Bill Blair: Again, if you don't mind, I'll turn to the general. It's his report.

The Chair: Well, we're straying a bit from the subject matter of the committee for today. That's a more appropriate question for the supplementary estimates.

If you can tie your response to how this might affect the ability of CAF to respond to the aid to civil authority—

Mrs. Shelby Kramp-Neuman: I can go on to the next question, perhaps, and allow or encourage him to have those available for the next meeting.

The Chair: Okay. You can launch it that way, and then we can carry on.

Mrs. Shelby Kramp-Neuman: Moving forward, families of CAF members are continually losing confidence in CAF's ability to provide proper services. A six-point drop between surveys is extremely worrying. What are we doing to stop this?

I'm asking these questions because troop strength and the support of their families are relevant to how the CAF is going to be able to support Operation Lentus.

Hon. Bill Blair: It really is tied to investments we have been making through the SSE initiative, beginning in 2017. Although I am encouraged and believe that we are making progress, it also identifies that much work remains to be done.

We all know that in 2014, defence spending plummeted in this country, to below 1% of GDP. It created a situation that was not supportive of the Canadian Armed Forces. Through SSE, we are increasing defence spending by nearly 70% over an eight-year period—

Mrs. Shelby Kramp-Neuman: Okay, so when can—

Hon. Bill Blair: —to try to recover from that incredible deficit that we inherited.

Mrs. Shelby Kramp-Neuman: Minister, when and where can we expect to see the investments that you're talking about when we have billions of dollars of cuts coming forward?

Hon. Bill Blair: I'd invite you, for example, to drop over to the 22 Wing at North Bay, where we just opened a brand new medical care facility for members there. That's one of the investments being made right across the Canadian Armed Forces.

Again, a lot of that infrastructure was allowed to deteriorate significantly, until we began making significant new investment in defence beginning in 2017. We have a lot of work to do to catch up, so—

Mrs. Shelby Kramp-Neuman: We're investing and we're cutting. It's contradictory.

Hon. Bill Blair: No, there's no contradiction. We—

The Chair: Thank you, Mrs. Kramp-Neuman.

Mr. Collins, you have five minutes. I'm sure you'll stay with the subject matter that is in front of us.

Mr. Chad Collins (Hamilton East—Stoney Creek, Lib.): Absolutely. Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Welcome, Minister and guests.

I want to pick up where you left off, Minister, which is on your reference to long-term care homes in the province of Ontario. You highlighted that the CAF was the first call, instead of the last one there. I think that's rightly so, in terms of the situation we were in regarding protecting public safety, protecting lives and helping individuals in that circumstance in the province of Ontario.

For me, that highlights that our partners in this space, from an emergency preparedness perspective, didn't do everything right. They didn't make the proper investments. I would point to several studies that have been made on long-term care facilities in the

province of Ontario and elsewhere that point to a lack of provincial investment. If I use that as the example, it's an instance in which a lack of provincial investment led to your being the first call.

The general talked earlier about municipalities and provinces and their contributions. Who among the group is ensuring that provincial and municipal resources are appropriate and that the emergency preparedness plans are in place to appropriately respond to some of these events?

You've highlighted very clearly today that the budgets have been ramped up in order to respond to Operation Lentus. You've talked about the strain it has on the CAF.

In a perfect world, that call doesn't come. I think it speaks to some of the investments that need to be made at the provincial, territorial and municipal levels to ensure we are the call of last resort, rather than the first call. You referenced a good example there, in terms of when that happened during the pandemic.

I'm not asking you to call anybody out publicly, but who is looking at our provincial and territorial partners, their budgets and their plans to ensure that the appropriate resources are in place so we are the last call made during a time of emergency, specifically related to natural disasters?

Hon. Bill Blair: I think I can provide a certain amount of reassurance here.

First of all, not only did we send the CAF in to save lives, but they also provided us with excellent public reports as to the conditions they encountered when they went in there. I think those public reports were very helpful to our provincial partners in identifying the significant problems that existed there.

As Minister of Public Safety, first of all, and then as the Minister of Emergency Preparedness—now succeeded by my two colleagues, Mr. LeBlanc and Mr. Sajjan—I convened what we call FPT tables, or federal-provincial-territorial tables. I think we've learned a lot of lessons and made sure we bring national indigenous organizations to that table as well. There were a great deal of communications and lessons learned from each of these major national disasters that we have faced.

As an example, in the aftermath of the floods that took place in November 2022 in British Columbia, I convened a table that included all implicated British Columbian ministers, federal government ministers and the national indigenous organizations. We came to the table; we met many times and we worked through all of the different learning of that natural disaster. We talked about how to make proper investments in mitigation and also in infrastructure and building back better, as it were. We talked about the impacts on agriculture, the fishing industry and transportation. It wasn't just limited to fighting fires or floods. It was right across all of government.

There are mechanisms that have proven to be very effective in the aftermath of these events. One thing we hear clearly in all of those discussions is a very sincere concern that we also have to address climate change, because climate change is driving the accelerated pace, frequency and severity of these events. It is a whole-of-government response.

Frankly, my experience in British Columbia gave me great encouragement that we can do this.

• (1615)

Mr. Chad Collins: From a budget perspective, do we turn to provincial auditor reports to ensure they're doing everything they can from a disaster response perspective, or...? I think the greatest service we can do for CAF members in all areas is to ensure they are the last call and that sufficient provincial and territorial resources are in place so there's less strain on an annual basis with our services and our members.

I haven't been able to wrap my head around that. Our budgets are increasing. You've been very clear today. We're providing sufficient support. It's happening more frequently and it's placing a strain on our service both at home and abroad; that's been made very clear to the committee.

I'm just not certain, when it is a shared space among three levels of government, who's holding the other partners to account as the first responders when it comes to these events.

The Chair: We're going to have to leave that as a question with no answer.

Madame Normandin, you have two and a half minutes.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you.

We've been told that one of the only things that military members can count on when they participate in domestic missions is less time to spend with their families.

According to the witnesses who spoke earlier, people who take part in Operation Lentus, for example, don't receive medals. We heard about public gratitude for the military members. However, could the Canadian Armed Forces show greater acknowledgement for the work done by the military members taking part in Operation Lentus?

[English]

Hon. Bill Blair: Madame Normandin, I think you've asked a very important question. I think we need to do a better job of acknowledging and rewarding the members who answer this particular call to service.

As you mentioned, there are service medals and ribbons that members get when they're deployed overseas, but their experience in their domestic deployments can be just as challenging. It accounts for the same amount of time away from family. It can, in some circumstances, be a quite difficult and traumatic experience. It really taxes their ability to respond, and it's quite impactful on them.

It's an issue that we've had some discussion on, and I'm convinced we need to do better in finding ways to recognize that service. We're working on that. I think it's an exceptionally important point.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you.

We know that the reservists would probably like to have long-term contracts, for example, in order to be posted to immediate response units.

What's stopping reservists from receiving specific contracts for this type of work?

[English]

Hon. Bill Blair: I apologize. Could you be more specific in your question? I'm not sure I understood.

The Chair: I'll hold the clock while you repeat the question.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you.

We know that some reservists would probably like to have a six-month contract, for example, in order to be posted to immediate response units. They could lighten the workload of the armed forces.

Why can't reservists be given contracts to serve in the place of the regular forces?

• (1620)

[English]

Hon. Bill Blair: It's not an area where I have a great deal of experience, although I've come to really appreciate the incredible work of the reservists.

If I may, I will turn to the chief of the defence staff, who I think has more experience in this arena than I.

[Translation]

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, each reservist's situation is different.

In Europe, for example, we'll be using more reservists for our mission in Latvia. However, in general, it's difficult to have a large cohesive group of reservists ready for operations.

[English]

What we're finding with our reserve deployments and the effect on readiness is that if they can get only two or three weeks away from their civilian jobs, and that is consumed in a domestic deployment over the summer, they cannot train and get that collective and individual training in the rest of the year.

That is part of the readiness impact that we're having, as well.

The Chair: You have two and a half minutes, Ms. Mathysen.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: I will continue on in terms of speaking about reservists. It is absolutely important to recognize them through service medals and so on, but it's the compensation, of course, that's linked to that. There's the fact that they don't have the same benefits. They don't get the same recognition, but that compensation is key.

The defence ombudsman released his report on the systemic barriers to reservists' receiving mental health supports during and after domestic deployments.

Can you tell us what reforms will be taking place in response to that ombudsman's report to protect CAF members?

Hon. Bill Blair: I found the ombudsman's report very useful. We value that work. We are looking very hard at not just mental health supports, which are not insignificant for reservists who have been on these domestic deployments, but other supports as well. It's something we are examining very carefully.

Let me be very clear: The benefits they receive are important, but also in terms of the ease of acquiring those benefits, it sometimes becomes far too complicated and time-consuming, and there are delays that can add to the difficulty of those deployments for those individuals.

We're working through how to do that more efficiently.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, we continue to look at what else we can do. For example, after the long duration of fighting fires this summer, I asked the team to look at tax-free status, much the same as what we have for overseas deployments.

Of course, there's a whole litany of reasons we can't do it, but maybe this is something your committee can take away.

Hon. Bill Blair: Just so you're also aware, volunteer firefighters and search and rescue personnel receive a \$2,500 tax credit for those deployments. Frankly, that hasn't been raised in a long time, and I might strongly advocate that it be looked at again, but those types of things—

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: We have PMBs on that. That would be great.

Hon. Bill Blair: I've spoken to John many times about it.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: One of the things I'm a bit concerned about, too, is some commentary in terms of what municipalities and provinces haven't done. There's also a great deal.... I actually have a meeting today with the FCM. They're concerned, of course, about all the downloading to them from federal and provincial governments that has happened, and about the resources they do not have.

I would love to hear a commitment from your government to ensure that, through the fact that they are desperately trying to deal with housing, with mental health crises and with health crises, as they are, they will also continue to receive supports in terms of mitigation, so that there isn't a blame placed upon them for calling upon the Canadian Armed Forces because they don't have the capacity to take on one more thing that is a federal responsibility.

Hon. Bill Blair: Just to be really clear, first of all, the city can't directly call upon federal resources. The way in which the process is set up is that it comes through the province. The province has to

submit an RFA, and under no circumstances do we send the municipality a bill.

The Chair: Ms. Mathysen is way beyond her time.

Mr. Kelly, you have five minutes.

Mr. Pat Kelly (Calgary Rocky Ridge, CPC): Thank you.

Minister, your government announced a \$1-billion cut to the defence department. Will that cut result in an increase in the ability of the Canadian Armed Forces to respond to domestic disaster calls?

Hon. Bill Blair: Well, of course, Mr. Kelly, it's not going to result in an increase—

Mr. Pat Kelly: Okay—

Hon. Bill Blair: —but what we are committed to is that it does not in any way diminish the capacity of the Canadian Armed Forces to respond to the missions we send them on.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Okay.

Will this help your government solve the crisis of recruitment and retention in the forces?

Hon. Bill Blair: We are absolutely committed that it won't interfere with that solution.

There are, in every bureaucracy, Mr. Kelly, expenditures. We have a responsibility, and I would expect that you might support that.... We have every responsibility to make sure we're spending money wisely and well.

• (1625)

Mr. Pat Kelly: Is it your contention that there is waste within the bureaucracy, and that there is \$1 billion in fat to be trimmed from the bureaucracy?

Hon. Bill Blair: No. I think what we are acknowledging is that there are monies spent that do not necessarily contribute, most importantly, to the capability of the Canadian Armed Forces or to the support we provide to the members who do that important work.

We're looking very carefully at those expenditures to make sure that if they're not supporting those things, we are going to take the steps necessary to make sure we spend Canadian taxpayer dollars well.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Thank you.

The chief of staff expressed concern about cutting the department without ultimately interfering in our operational capability.

Hon. Bill Blair: I heard his concern very clearly. I share that concern. That's why we're working so hard to make sure that as we respond to Treasury Board's request for the reductions they have sought, they do not in any way interfere with the general's ability to deliver those services or the support we provide to his members.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Are you satisfied, General Eyre, that \$1 billion can be cut from the defence department's budget without interfering with your ability to fulfill your obligations as chief of staff?

The Chair: Could you tie this somehow or another, by some remote means, into the subject matter?

Mr. Pat Kelly: This is readiness for domestic operations.

The Chair: Well, you didn't tie that in. It is a generalized question, so that's why, if the general could be specific, that would be helpful.

Gen Wayne D. Eyre: Mr. Chair, I can't answer that question yet, because we haven't seen what the results would be.

Mr. Pat Kelly: That's fair enough. I don't want to put you in too bad a spot there, next to the minister.

Minister, could you comment, then, on—

Hon. Bill Blair: He's pretty safe sitting next to me.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Yes.

Could you comment? Your departmental reports reveal.... Lapsed spending has become endemic under your government. It is a problem, and it's a problem that continues to get worse, according to your departmental results. The defence team very slightly overspent on the authorities granted and available for use. It exceeded the authority by about \$12 million. That's small. It's a rounding error, but that's the area where you actually spent the money, and then some, on what was authorized.

The areas that were underspent, that were lapsed money, where money that was authorized by Parliament was not spent, include operations, ready forces, future force design, procurement of capabilities, sustainable bases, information technology systems and infrastructure. Every one of those categories had significant lapsed spending. Will these lapsed funding expenditures...are they going to help us in your department's ability to meet domestic operational deployment needs?

Hon. Bill Blair: I'm going to turn to the deputy minister, who might be able to provide you with the information.

Mr. Pat Kelly: I would like to hear your answer. We get officials more frequently.

Hon. Bill Blair: Well, of course, but I'm going to turn to the deputy minister to give you some information. If you would like the facts, he can provide them.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Sure.

Mr. Bill Matthews: Mr. Chair, what I would focus in on is that some degree of lapsing is healthy. You want to be kind of in the 3% range, because it's illegal to overspend the total vote by Parliament, and that money gets re-profiled. I would encourage the committee, when we focus in on lapses, to look at projects. When project money lapses, it means two things. We can always carry that money forward, but it erodes because of inflation. It also means that we use assets longer than intended, and their maintenance bills go up. We had a significant amount of lapsing last year, for instance. It was nothing to do with projects; it was delays in settling a class action lawsuit. That's just the process at work. That's fine.

We have a grant program that we launched this year, for which the take-up has been less than initially expected. That's fine, too.

Projects are the ones that concern the chief and me the most, because that's the project to deliver the capability. Sometimes that's us being delayed in defining requirements; other times it's challenges with industry. There's a myriad of reasons, but I would really encourage the committee to zero in on those lapses related to projects.

Hon. Bill Blair: I suspect that those facts will be helpful.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kelly.

Mr. Fillmore, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Andy Fillmore (Halifax, Lib.): Thanks very much, Mr. Chair, and thanks to the witnesses for being with us.

Moreover, thanks to all three of the gentlemen for joining us at the Halifax International Security Forum for a great weekend. MP Fisher and I were very pleased to welcome you and other members of the committee to our part of the world for some really important dialogue. Thank you very much for that.

The flavour of my inquiry is going to be this: Does the increased operational tempo of Lentus point us to the conclusion that response horsepower other than in the CAF is needed? I want to see your thinking a bit with respect to a couple of things.

CTV recently reported—reporting on your remarks, I believe, Minister—that there used to be “between five and 10 formal requests for [federal] assistance from the provinces and territories each year.” However, between March 2020 and October 2022, “there were more than 200 requests”, 157 of which involved the military. We saw, just in Nova Scotia, 700 members deployed for Fiona. Just in Nova Scotia, we saw 450 deployed for Dorian. It's not just personnel. It's ships like HMCS *Margaret Brooke*. It's fixed-wing aircraft. It's helicopters. It's right down to chainsaws. It's equipment otherwise deployed that's being diverted. It's service members otherwise deployed being diverted. It's that their training may not be exactly what is required, and we saw that there was some retraining required on site.

I guess what I want to ask you is this: What is the specific nature of the challenges that this raises for the CAF and its members, and how do you meet those challenges? How does that tie into what else is needed, if it's something different, like non-profits and so forth?

• (1630)

Hon. Bill Blair: Thanks, Andy.

We need to be very clear that in responding to all of these requests for assistance from the provinces and territories there is a significant cost to the Canadian Armed Forces. There's a price to be paid, and we've been paying that price in our operational readiness for other things. It's been difficult on our members.

We acknowledge that cost, and there are important discussions that need to take place in the country. That includes the provincial, territorial, municipal and indigenous governments, to make sure they have increased capability in order to respond to emergencies, and also to make sure investments are made to mitigate the impacts of some of the emergencies we have encountered. That can be a number of things, including helping communities make better decisions about where they locate in flood plain areas, for example.

As we've indicated, there is a cost associated to having the Canadian Armed Forces do this. I think it's important that we work very closely with provinces and territories in order to ensure that, for example, additional firefighters are trained. It's very clear that we're going to need more of them in the coming years. If the circumstances exceed their capacity, we'll make sure that the Canadian Armed Forces can come in to supplement their capabilities.

I want to be very clear that this should be, in my opinion, a capability that supplements the provincial, territorial and local requirements. We want to continue to encourage them and even support them in building up those requirements so that they have the water bombers, the firefighters and all of the skills that they need in order to respond. Only in critical, emergent situations should we be calling on the Canadian Armed Forces, because we do acknowledge that there's been a cost. There's been a cost to their answering the call. We're very grateful that they've always done it, but it's important to also recognize that it's a very expensive cost that we're incurring. It's a cost to the Canadian Armed Forces. It's also a cost to the Canadian government and the Canadian people. We have to find the most efficient way to respond to emergencies, as well.

Mr. Andy Fillmore: Thank you.

Unless one of the other witnesses wants to add anything, I will carry on.

Minister, it seems you're positioning the provincial and territorial governments as the front line, with CAF as the backup to fill in where required. Let me know if I have that wrong.

Where in that calculus would NGOs like the Red Cross and so forth fit?

Hon. Bill Blair: I hope I was clear. I believe it is primarily the responsibility of the local authorities of jurisdiction. In most cases, those are the provincial and territorial governments. In a large city, it could also be the municipality that has responsibility for first response in emergencies. The only time the Canadian Armed Forces are called in is when we receive a request through a provincial or territorial government for additional assistance, when the circumstances exceed their capacity to respond.

Now, we've just had an extraordinary couple of years. There have been far too many instances when the circumstances exceeded the capacity of the local authority to respond. However, it's their responsibility.

We also recognize—I think it's important, as I used to do this for a living—that NGOs and civil society have a remarkable capacity, which we as government are investing in. That's why we put a lot of money into training and support for the Canadian Red Cross, as an example. It's to create a humanitarian workforce that all provinces and territories can draw upon. They do, by the way. Each

of them has a relationship with the Canadian Red Cross, The Salvation Army, St. John Ambulance and the search and rescue association. I also think Team Rubicon can and should be a very important part of that. I hope this work will continue. We have begun it, but much more needs to be done.

There are all sorts of civil organizations that are very important parts of this, because Canadians are.... The first response to every emergency is the public. Canadians are great at that response.

• (1635)

The Chair: We're going to have to leave it there, Mr. Fillmore.

I was disappointed that we didn't actually.... We have essentially talked about calling on the forces for natural disasters. The tendency seems to be first call, rather than last call. What we haven't talked about is calling on the resources of CAF for things like armouries and training facilities, when civil authorities wish to appropriate those for emergencies.

I would be interested in your thoughts on that—hopefully briefly. I think it's, if you will, an emerging resource. People don't appreciate the significance of that call for the training and upskilling of our own troops.

Hon. Bill Blair: Mr. Chair, quite recently, the City of Toronto asked for the use of our armouries in Toronto as temporary shelters for homeless...primarily refugees. To be very clear, there are 3,100 Canadian Armed Forces members. About 2,900 of them are in uniform. The rest are civilians who work in those armouries. The armouries are not vacant buildings waiting to be exploited for any purpose. They are places where people work. Our regiments and reserves operate from those places. We also run a cadet program out of those places. They are also places where our reservists train and are deployed from.

Quite frankly, I have tried to make this very clear. I had a long conversation with the mayor of the City of Toronto about that. In my very strong opinion, those armouries are not the appropriate place to house the homeless. There are other appropriate places.

As an example, quite recently, the City of Toronto actually closed five different temporary shelters for refugees before they asked us to open up the reserves and have us take them in there. We used those armouries, unfortunately, in 2004 and again in 2019. Homeless advocates said the conditions there were deplorable. I was there and I agree. In 2019, a man died there. It's an unsafe, unsanitary and unhealthy environment. We can do better and need to do better.

I believe the request to use armouries in these circumstances doesn't acknowledge how important those armouries and the reserves who work in them are to our safety and national defence. They are critically important.

We can do better, and we're going to have to do better.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

That is an element of our study that we, frankly, didn't anticipate when we drew up the terms of reference.

With that, I will suspend, but Mr. Bezan has a point of order, I understand.

Mr. James Bezan: Mr. Chair, in his comment, Deputy Minister Matthews said that they were trying to stay within the 3% range and that they're more concerned from the department on the Canadian Armed Forces side about projects. We are unaware of anywhere you can find a list of those projects, so I would ask that he table that information with the committee.

Right now, procurement of capabilities, for example, was 21% short, and that's \$1 billion. Sustainable bases, information technology systems and infrastructure are another \$200 million short, which is also outside of that 3%. If you could submit that project by project to the committee for this study, it would be very worthwhile.

Mr. Bill Matthews: Could I propose an alternative, Mr. Chair?

Number one, the departmental results report is structured to follow the TBS format. That's the format we have, but capability projects are critical for us. Those are great topics for supplementary estimates, which we are coming back to discuss shortly. I would be happy to discuss them then.

If we don't meet the answers there, then I'm happy to submit written information afterwards.

Mr. James Bezan: Bring them.

The Chair: Let's leave it.

The minister, Mr. Matthews and the chief of the defence staff are coming back. If that's still an outstanding issue, we'll deal with it then.

Meanwhile, I want to thank all three of you for your appearance. This is a very difficult topic to deal with, and we appreciate your contributions.

Colleagues, we'll suspend while we bring in the next panel.

• (1635) _____ (Pause) _____

• (1645)

The Chair: We are resuming.

We are blessed with the presence of a very familiar face.

Welcome back to your favourite committee, Minister Sajjan. We look forward to what you have to say for the next five minutes, and then we'll go to questions.

Thank you.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of Emergency Preparedness): Thank you, Mr. Chair. It's great to be back and to see all of you. Thank you for all the work you do.

I want to thank the committee members for inviting me to participate in this study. It's a very important one. I'm happy to provide

any clarification on the different resources available to the federal government during emergencies. I hope to help the committee members better understand the role of the Canadian Armed Forces during domestic deployment.

I know that Minister Blair was already here. He used to do my job before, and I used to do his, so we're working very well together in this regard.

I know that I can speak for all Canadians when I express my sincere gratitude for the tremendous work all our Canadian Armed Forces members have provided over the years. In the last few years alone, the Canadian Armed Forces has helped provincial governments and Canadians from coast to coast to coast when they had to face many significant, climate-related weather events.

The Canadian Armed Forces was also there during the COVID pandemic. In my home province of B.C., they responded after an atmospheric river cut off the province from the rest of the country. They also responded during the ice storm that left millions without power for days, and during the floods that displaced and impacted so many Canadians across the country.

This year alone, fires burned over 18 million hectares of our beautiful country. This has displaced thousands and threatened the homes of over 230,000 Canadians. From May to October, the federal government responded to 18 requests for federal assistance from provinces and territories to help respond to the devastation caused by wildfires. Canada deployed more than 2,000 Canadian Armed Forces members to respond to the worst wildfire season in Canada's recorded history.

Before 2020, the government operations centre would coordinate between five and 12 RFAs per year. From January 2020 to August 2023, it responded to more than 230. These numbers clearly show that we are in a climate crisis. It is here, and it is happening now.

Emergency management organizations across the country are now facing the dire realities of climate change. The science is telling us that climate-related events will only increase in frequency, severity and intensity. We do not anticipate the number of requests for assistance to return to prepandemic levels. Sadly, our estimate is that they will only increase.

To put numbers on the crisis Canadians are living through, the Government of Canada has paid \$7.9 billion in its entire history through the disaster financial assistance arrangement. Most of this—\$5.8 billion—has been spent in the last 10 years alone, when you include the costs of hurricane Fiona and this year's wildfires.

Extreme weather events are not only costly to the government. In 2022 alone, they cost Canadians \$3.1 billion in insured losses as well. Because of the extreme weather events, Canada now routinely exceeds about \$2 billion annually for insured losses. These increased costs show that the impact of climate change is becoming more severe, putting further strain on Canada's emergency management system, as well as on our people, the economy, our first responders and all levels of government.

Mr. Chair, as you know, the National Defence Act allows the Canadian Armed Forces to be authorized to provide assistance in an emergency. That is why a very strict process must be followed before there is deployment. When an RFA is submitted, it must undergo a strict assessment by the government operations centre and its regional offices. The GOC then recommends a solution that could involve the Canadian Armed Forces only when regional, provincial, territorial and even commercial solutions are exhausted.

There must also be a clearly defined and feasible timeline for the CAF deployment. It needs to be time-limited and focused on the response phase rather than the long-term recovery.

Although we are grateful for the tremendous help provided by the Canadian Armed Forces, it should always and only be considered a force of last resort. We have been working with provinces, territories and indigenous partners on the federal plan to respond to emergencies—the FERP—to build a whole-of-society approach to emergencies.

To further help the provinces, we have put in place a humanitarian workforce program that was started by Minister Blair. This program aims to build a scalable civilian workforce that can be rapidly deployed in emergencies.

Since 2020, we have provided more than \$166.9 million to the Canadian Red Cross, St. John Ambulance, The Salvation Army and SARVAC through this program. The funding has allowed these organizations to develop the capacity to mobilize more quickly to respond to extreme weather events and deploy critical, on-the-ground support to local governments.

• (1650)

To ensure that Canada is better equipped to face climate change, we have also put into place a national adaptation strategy. It's a whole-of-society blueprint to guide all orders of government, indigenous partners and the private sector to collaboratively reduce the impacts of extreme weather events.

We need to face the fact that climate change is real and continues to impact a greater number of Canadians every year. Through this strategy, we'll work upstream to mitigate, prepare, respond and expedite recovery for emergencies as we strengthen our resilience. Our government is committed to helping all the provinces and territories strengthen their capacity.

I look forward to your questions.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

Ms. Gallant, go ahead for six minutes, please.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The committee heard testimony about Germany's civilian volunteer corps, THW, which is activated in emergency situations.

Has the minister investigated how a similar civilian volunteer corps comprised of people from all walks of life, including nursing and engineering, could be activated to assist in public emergencies, or is the government trying to transform our military into just aid to civil society, period?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: In fact, as Minister Blair mentioned, the Canadian Armed Forces are used as a last resort. Since more extreme weather events and other emergencies have significantly increased the need, we need to make sure we have the proper capabilities built in at the municipal, provincial and federal levels.

What we want to do is make sure we have the right resources at the right places at the right time. The one you mentioned from Germany is something we are looking at actively. We are looking at other nations as well to see what's going to be suited to our country.

We're going to be going across the country to talk with the provinces and territories, especially at the local levels, with mayors. I was speaking with about five mayors just today and talking about what their needs are, to make sure we can respond to the uniqueness of each province and territory.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: That's great.

Since a denial of service cyber-attack on critical infrastructure can quickly become a public emergency, how is the emergency preparedness department command centre alerted when a cyber-attack has been detected?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: First of all, when it comes to an emergency, those are things that we are looking at. I'm glad that you are looking at emergencies much more broadly, because a lot of the time when we talk about emergencies, it comes down to wildfires and floods. We do need to look across that board.

Not only are we looking at how to respond to cyber, but we'll be working very closely with the cyber centre to make sure there are the proper resources, which the Minister of National Defence obviously controls. This is some of the work that will be ongoing as we look at exercising our emergency management system all across the country, not only on wildfires and floods but on emergencies like cyber-attacks as well.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: In Ontario alone, a number of hospitals have suffered cyber-attacks within the last few months. With the nature of a cyber-attack on hospital systems knocking out communications, electrical and heating systems all at once, does your department have an action plan to provide immediate assistance?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: What I would say is that, with the example that you have provided, there is a system already in place within CSE and the cyber centre to be able to respond to provide support. More importantly, it's not just to respond when there's a cyber-attack; it's on the preventative side, to make sure organizations are cyber safe as well.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: What we're talking about is over and on top of a cyber-attack. It very often leads to a physical problem in a hospital with the absence of heating or electricity, etc. Reinforcements could be called in to help, as you did during COVID with the nursing homes.

Is there a plan in place to immediately respond to that type of emergency, where the initial one is a cyber attack but where there are consequences afterwards that demand assistance from civil authorities?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I would say that, if a scenario were to develop where greater resources were required at a provincial or municipal level that goes beyond, yes, they would be coming to us.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: As the Minister of Emergency Preparedness, have you been briefed on the updated Government of Canada cybersecurity event management plan that came into effect in October?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I haven't had all of the briefings just yet.

Having said that, I was Minister of National Defence when we created our cyber centre. A lot of the work that takes place in how we respond is something I'm extremely proud of. I know the cyber centre has responded to many events.

• (1655)

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Would you please get back to this committee and inform us once you have received that briefing?

In terms of that, for six years our defence minister... You would have learned from the mistakes you made in that role. Since then, you've carried on to your new role. What have you learned and how are you applying what you learned from those errors to your new position here?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I would say there's always stuff that all of us can learn as we move forward.

In my current role as Minister of Emergency Preparedness, looking at when the defence policy was put together to respond, there are a lot more climate-induced disasters now, and we're working on making sure that the response we actually have can work at the local level as quickly as possible.

Those are the things we're looking at in terms of what type of response we have, and that's not just for floods and wildfire.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Getting back to what you mentioned, which was the Canadian Centre for Cyber Security, the CSE fell under your portfolio as Minister of Defence. Is there a direct line of communication if there is an event happening that the CSE has been alerted to, and the cyber security centre as well? How long does it take for the public safety minister's office to know what's going on and be able to start formulating a plan, should Public Safety need to be involved?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I would say that when it comes to any type of security incident, the appropriate people are involved extremely quickly.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: On emergency preparedness, your portfolio with emergency preparedness now has a plan. You monitor and you have access to information about the cyber events that are going on.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: It all depends. It depends on what type of event it is.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: All right, thank you.

The Chair: Let's hope we all learn from our mistakes.

Madam Lambropoulos, you have six minutes, please.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos (Saint-Laurent, Lib.): Thank you, Chair, and I'd like to thank you, Minister Sajjan, for being here with us to answer our questions today.

Minister, as you know, Minister Blair actually sat in the chair you're sitting in before you, on the previous panel, and he mentioned the humanitarian workforce. I was wondering if you could perhaps speak to us a little about the ways in which the federal government is leveraging that, preparing that workforce to eventually be able to do more of the heavy lifting when it comes to natural disasters and when it comes to the needs here at home, so that the armed forces are called on less in the future.

Of course, you did mention that it's a last resort and that they're called on only when absolutely needed, but is there anything being done to ensure that other groups on the ground, such as the humanitarian workforce, are prepared and equipped to be able to take care of these situations?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: The humanitarian workforce that Minister Blair has started is an extremely important program. We know that what we have learned during previous disasters... If you go back to 2017, during the wildfires in British Columbia, the Red Cross and many other non-governmental organizations stepped in to provide support. What this does is it gives the government operations centre a greater ability to look at other organizations to respond, so whether it was the Red Cross or The Salvation Army, or in some cases even the United Way, when it came to the Northwest Territories, what we were doing was actually providing funding to build up their capabilities.

We are now also discussing how we can enhance the coordination in these types of emergencies, and more importantly, be able to exercise, because when it comes to an emergency, there's the actual response to the event itself, but also there are many other things that take place when you look at the evacuation of Canadians.

There's a lot that goes into that, and we want to make sure we have the right organizations as part of this humanitarian workforce that can provide the appropriate assistance.

Trevor, did you want to add anything?

• (1700)

Mr. Trevor Bhupsingh (Assistant Deputy Minister, Emergency Management and Programs Branch, Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness): I think our intention is really to build off our experience with the humanitarian workforce. We started with the Canadian Red Cross and then we added three NGOs, the St. John Ambulance, SARVAC—the Search and Rescue Volunteer Association of Canada—and The Salvation Army.

We're currently reviewing the humanitarian workforce, and our intention is to see if we can add other NGOs. We're looking at it—in terms of the point that was made earlier—to see if there are other elements that we could add to this, including looking at civilian response, so there is ongoing work in terms of evaluating the humanitarian workforce as it stands now, and our intention is to build out that function or provide opportunities to do that with the objective of releasing the pressure that is currently on the Canadian Armed Forces.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Thank you very much.

For my next question, I'm going to ask you to perhaps explain to the committee what the process is when a province needs federal assistance. How are these needs assessed? Then, based on the assessment made, how are decisions made afterwards regarding who to call on for help? What's the line you need to cross in order to get to the armed forces?

Can you please explain what the process is when a province needs help?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: The process itself is set, but I also want to explain how, in reality, it gets done. It can go very quickly, because when a disaster like a flood or wildfire.... What you're trying to do is predict or monitor the situation on the ground, so there are ongoing discussions continuously.

The process itself is this: When a province feels it doesn't have all the tools or the ability, it makes a request to the federal government. That comes to my department. Then the government operations centre assesses the actual need. It's not about looking at what resources are needed. It's about what the actual situation is and what problem needs to be solved. We look at what the best tool needed is. In some cases, it could be the Canadian Armed Forces. In other cases, it could be another organization. The Coast Guard has been deployed a number of times this wildfire season, especially. They then work out the iteration time and what is needed. Then the request comes to me. If the Canadian Armed Forces are needed, it goes to the Minister of National Defence for approval, and they are authorized for deployment.

Trevor, do you want to add anything to that?

Mr. Trevor Bhupsingh: In terms of assessment within the department, when a request comes in from a jurisdiction—a province or territory—the government operations centre will take a look at it and assess it across a bunch of criteria, including whether it's a valid request that we can help with and whether there are available federal resources that could be engaged, including the Canadian Armed Forces. We look at the nature of the situation and the outbreak, how it's happening and what the capabilities and gaps are.

Then we look at the regional circumstances that surround the request itself. By that, I mean we look at the capabilities within the jurisdiction and whether or not they can respond to it. Obviously, there is variability across the federation in terms of the capacity of each jurisdiction.

The Chair: That's pretty much it.

Thank you, Madam Lambropoulos.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Normandin, you have the floor for six minutes.

Ms. Christine Normandin: Minister Sajjan, thank you for being here.

Please keep in mind that my questions seek to shed light on the pressure being exerted on defence, given that this constitutes the main topic of our study.

With the previous panel, we spoke about the responsibility of the different levels of government when the Canadian Armed Forces are called upon to respond. Everyone is involved, at the municipal, provincial and federal levels.

Who is ultimately responsible for not taking proactive steps to avoid having to call upon the Canadian Armed Forces?

Between the Department of National Defence and the Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, are the responsibilities set out? For example, could the Department of National Defence say that the Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness could have done more before calling upon the Canadian Armed Forces?

[*English*]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: That is a very good question. In fact, that's exactly what we're trying to achieve. When it was originally envisioned during the consultations with Canadians, for the defence policy, there was obviously a need for the Canadian Armed Forces to make sure that, as a force of last resort, it would be able to respond. However, as you have seen, it's been so frequent that the Canadian Armed Forces have been called upon. Therefore, it is important for all of us at municipal, provincial and federal levels to assess what types of resources are going to be needed to deal with the increased frequency of responding to emergencies.

This is what is being developed now. We're having federal, provincial and territorial meetings across the country. I am also meeting with mayors to determine, province by province and territory by territory, what resources are going to be needed. We need to make sure, right down to the municipal level, what types of resources are going to be needed, what type of training is going to be required and what types of resources are going to be needed at the provincial level and then at the federal level.

Putting the CAF aside, we want to know the type of resource that needs to be in the right place at the right time, and then look at the CAF only as a last resort. For example, we are looking at options right now for how to have more firefighters. Yes, we need to train more type 1 firefighters, but the Canadian Armed Forces provides type 3 firefighters. We need to look at how we could train type 2, so there are different options being looked at. It's premature to talk about it just yet.

We are analyzing what types of things the Canadian Armed Forces has been asked to do that could have been done by somebody else, and we are looking at the Canadian Armed Forces only for what is absolutely needed. For example, there are certain things that only the Canadian Armed Forces can do, and evacuation is one. When we need to do very quick evacuation and we don't have time to contract aircraft, we want to be able to move our resources in quickly. The Canadian Armed Forces also has the capability to fly at night, and those types of things in remote areas are also very important.

We're going to do that assessment, and more importantly, what we want to do as we look at this is to exercise that area. That way, we're not only using the CAF less, but also looking at how we prevent emergencies that go beyond the capacity of municipal or provincial levels.

• (1705)

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you, Minister Sajjan.

I want to focus on how the Department of National Defence and the Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness interact. Can the Department of National Defence hold the Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness accountable for not investing enough in mitigation or prevention measures, or for not having a proper plan in place to avoid having to call upon the armed forces?

Do the two departments interact at the federal level?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: There are always ongoing discussions in terms of what is needed. I would say, with Minister Blair now as Minister of Defence, having started in this portfolio, he has a very good sense of what is actually needed. We're able to have some very good discussions directly.

Probably what's most important is that the response for disasters has always been at a provincial level. If you looked at previous decades, it was handled at a provincial level. We need to make sure the right mitigation, adaptation and prevention pieces are done at a provincial level. Now, we are analyzing what types of resources are going to be needed.

We don't want to focus just on the response. Yes, the response has to be there, but we need to ask what we need to do to actually prevent disaster. For example, if we had to look at certain wildfires in this last season, where did they start? If a response had been faster in a certain area, could we have prevented greater disasters?

One key thing we're doing now is actually training firefighters on interface fires. It was identified in previous years that there was a

shortage, so right now, more are being trained. There will be more firefighters who are knowledgeable on how to prevent fires from going into structures.

The Chair: Be very brief, please.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: The minister of public safety for one province told us earlier that, if the federal government provided more funding to the provinces, there would be less need to call upon the armed forces.

Do you agree with this statement?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: It's a shared responsibility, from right down at the municipal level and at the provincial level, as to what types of resources are going to be required, and yes, from the federal level.

We have always responded, especially when it comes to the disaster financial assistance arrangements, where, when it comes to recovery, the federal government provides 90% of the eligible expenses. All of us need to be able to look at what resources are going to be needed in providing support. Many different departments are going to be involved in that at the federal level and at the provincial level.

• (1710)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Normandin.

Before I ask Ms. Mathysen for her six minutes, is there a cheap and cheerful way to tell us what the difference is between a firefighter level 1, a level 2 and a level 3, and what is it?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Trevor, do you want to answer that?

I can give you my rudimentary answer, but....

Mr. Trevor Bhupsingh: It's really about the danger and the risk, Chair.

We can provide you with tier 1, tier 2 and tier 3 responsibilities.

Tier 1 is obviously the most risky and dangerous, where people are actually firefighting.

Tier 3 has more supportive functions around firefighting. That could be clearing wood or all sorts of things that are the consequences of fires.

It's a tiered system, where tier 1 firefighters are under the most risk and danger from fires.

The Chair: Okay.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: What it includes, just so you know what the tier 1 is, is that it comes with the right experience and a team that can actually be deployed and is able to manage that. Tier 2s have more experience, and they can go, but they would require the right level of experience to be able to lead them.

Tier 3 is what the Canadian Armed Forces would do. It's on the mop-up side. When the Canadian Armed Forces deploy in these types of situations, it frees up the tier 1 and tier 2 firefighters to go to fight the other fires, and the Canadian Armed Forces come in for the mop-up.

The Chair: Okay. That's helpful. I hope that's helpful to other members, because I didn't know what that was.

You have six minutes, please, Ms. Mathyssen.

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen: Thank you, Minister.

Of course, indigenous people across Canada are on the front lines of climate change very often, and they rely upon the federal government to help them, as do all other communities and so on in terms of the mitigation of natural disasters.

I received some numbers that were shared by my colleague, MP Ashton, on an order paper question. Since the Liberals have come into government, \$388.3 million has been given to first nations communities to help with "natural disaster mitigation and prevention efforts". At the same time, \$788.7 million has been spent to evacuate first nations and respond to emergency events.

Now, one would assume that we should be spending more on prevention than we are in terms of evacuation. Certainly, a lot of indigenous nations, first nations, are looking for that support and are begging, actually, for that help, in order to get to that level of preparedness.

We've had many conversations in this committee about potential cuts that are coming forward. The AFN estimates that it will take \$350 billion for the federal government to meet its promise and responsibility to close by 2030 the infrastructure gap that is being seen by first nations.

The question here is, because of that concern, because of those potential cuts, can we hear from you today that promise and that clear commitment that funding will increase for first nations leaders across the country, and that no funding will be cut from disaster mitigation efforts, especially in northern, rural and remote communities?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I can talk to you, obviously, about the emergency preparedness and response side. Ever since 2017, when the Canadian Armed Forces responded to the wildfires in British Columbia and a lot of towns were under threat, we heard from first nations communities about a lot of their concerns. They felt that their knowledge was not being utilized or that they had resources that were not being utilized.

A lot of work has gone into supporting indigenous-led response to emergencies, but it's not equal across all provinces, from what I see right now. What I can tell you is that funding is going to go through Indigenous Services Canada for this. As part of my consultations, I am also meeting with indigenous leadership across the country. Tk'emlúps First Nation is one good example of this. They're looking not only at coming together as different first nations communities for an evacuation centre, but at what the type of response force would look like and what it would look like when utilizing their knowledge. This is part of the plan. I can't give you

the exact numbers. Those would be coming from Indigenous Services Canada, but we are looking at this across the board.

Just last week, I met with a company that is made up of 13 first nations groups in the Yukon that are actually training type 1 firefighters. We're looking all across the board, not only at how best we can utilize their knowledge, but more importantly at making sure we have the right response plans for their communities as well.

• (1715)

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen: At this point, if it's not \$350 billion, it would be a cut. That's ultimately what they're concerned about.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I can talk about the response plan. In terms of that, I feel it is much better now than it was in previous years. I do have to get more information from other provinces. I haven't visited all of them, but I have met with indigenous leadership all across the country so far. This work will be ongoing.

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen: Just as a note, you mentioned Crown-indigenous affairs and services, but when they go to that department too, they are being shifted back to yours. This game of back-and-forth is particularly difficult for those nations.

You talked about the firefighters and level 1, level 2 and level 3. One concern that has clearly been brought to my attention over and over again is the fact that those firefighters across the board, whatever level they're at, are fitted with gear that is actually toxic. In all of the things they deal with environmentally, whether they are level 1 or level 3 or what have you, they are faced with the fact that they often have to breathe in toxic smoke, and the gear that is meant to protect them is killing them.

I want to know directly from you what is being done specifically in dealing with all of that, to make sure we are doing everything we can to ensure that they don't have gear that, again, is meant to protect them but ends up in fact doing them more harm.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I try to get to every disaster-affected area to be able to talk to some of the firefighters, as I did this year. I haven't heard this concern directly, but if it is a concern, I will definitely look into this and raise it at the provincial-territorial meeting. Each province has its own system in place for firefighting and the type of equipment that is needed.

I would add too that one of the concerns is that the increased wildfires and responses are taking a mental toll on the firefighters. They've been bounced around from one emergency to another. They are getting less time off, and they are away from their families. This is another area that I'll be bringing up as well.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Mathyssen.

I just want to reiterate her concern about the outfits. There's alarming evidence that the outfits are causing serious kinds of cancer in those kinds of people. As the number of fires increases, it's almost inevitable that the number of people exposed will increase. I think her point is well taken.

Mr. Kelly, you have five minutes, please.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Thank you.

Your government has announced a \$1-billion cut to the Department of National Defence. Are you concerned about the ability of the Canadian Armed Forces to lend aid to civilian power, given the cut that your government has announced to the CAF?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I think Minister Blair already addressed this question directly, as it is his portfolio. One thing I can tell you is that every time the Canadian Armed Forces have been called upon, they have been able to respond.

Mr. Pat Kelly: He did, and I'm asking you, as the Minister of Emergency Preparedness, if you think it will affect your ability to fulfill your responsibilities that the defence department will be cut by \$1 billion.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'm confident that if the Canadian Armed Forces are needed, they will be able to respond.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Does your planning presume that there will likely be additional calls and that the number of requests to the CAF will rise in the years ahead?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: It's hard to predict. I would say that the frequency...whether or not it's going to be the Canadian Armed Forces, there will be frequent emergencies. Whether the Canadian Armed Forces will be needed more than they have been before, it's hard to say just yet, but it's easy to assume, given what's taken place in the past, that the Canadian Armed Forces would potentially be called upon to respond.

Mr. Pat Kelly: You talked about some of the ways in which the Canadian Armed Forces assists in emergency disaster relief with aircraft and airlift capability, yet your government is cutting the budget to that department. How will these cuts enable you and your team to better prepare for when there is a need for aid to civilian power?

• (1720)

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I think Minister Blair answered that question quite directly. The savings they are looking at are from consulting, from various studies or from travel expenses. Nothing is being cut from the operational side.

Mr. Pat Kelly: We can get into the operational side and how they're not even spending the money that has been authorized by Parliament, but....

Minister Blair actually gave quite a candid answer to my question. He acknowledged that cutting the Department of National Defence is not going to help achieve any of the responsibilities or goals of the department.

Given all of the competing needs of the CAF, the chief of the defence staff has said we are in the most urgent threat environment since 1939. We have a trend toward increasing domestic deployments. We have a crisis around recruitment and retention.

How will cutting this department's budget by \$1 billion not impact your ability to keep Canadians safe?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: What I can say from the emergency preparedness side is that through the work that is ongoing, one thing we can count on is that if the Canadian Armed Forces are needed, they will have the ability to respond.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Okay. Is it your testimony that the Canadian Armed Forces will continue to make do, and do more with less?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: No. What I'm saying is that if the Canadian Armed Forces are needed, they have the ability to respond, as Minister Blair has clearly identified.

Mr. Pat Kelly: That's notwithstanding a \$1-billion cut to the department's budget.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I tend to disagree with that, because I think Minister Blair answered that question quite directly.

Mr. Pat Kelly: With respect to the retention and recruitment crisis, there is a concern that has been raised that if there is a need for foreign deployment, there may not be sufficient personnel for domestic operations. Are you concerned about the number of troops available if there is a simultaneous need for both foreign and domestic...?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: This is something I think Minister Blair has already addressed. If you have more questions for him—

Mr. Pat Kelly: He didn't address that in our—

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Then I think you would have to ask him those questions.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Okay. You have to plan for emergency preparedness, though.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Yes.

Mr. Pat Kelly: Do you have these conversations with the minister?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Regularly.

Mr. Pat Kelly: He has assured you that they have the personnel.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Yes.

Mr. Pat Kelly: This is despite 16,000 vacancies and despite having 10,000 troops who are not deployable.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: One thing I can say is that if Canadians need support from the Canadian Armed Forces, and there is no other resource that can do what the Canadian Armed Forces can do, the Canadian Armed Forces will be called upon. I have the utmost confidence that they will be able to respond.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Kelly.

Madame Lalonde, you have five minutes.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde (Orléans, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for joining us. It's a real pleasure to see you today. I remember vividly a few years ago, when, in your former role, we had the pleasure of working together to help support some efforts in Ontario.

I want to redirect you a bit. You're in this new role. With the level of experience and expertise that you have developed, what's the main cause of the increased use of our Canadian Armed Forces to respond in domestic operations?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: The main response has been for extreme flooding events and wildfires as a result of climate change.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: As you've noted, we are seeing an increased number of those climate-related disasters. I think we can collectively....

I had the pleasure of meeting some CAF members last week. They disclosed to me.... I think they are always very happy to respond, but they are the last resort, and certainly, this is important.

Is the federal government [*Inaudible—Editor*] to reduce the risk that pauses, for Canadians, the increased number of climate-related disasters?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'm glad you asked that question, because that is the key focus of our department on the preparedness side.

I want to outline that it started with floods in March and went into wildfires at the same time as we were having floods. In some places, like in Northwest Territories, the community was hit with extreme floods and wildfires as well. Let's not forget the hurricane.

During this time, we were focused on the response and recovery. Now we're also looking at analyzing all the different areas where we had extreme disasters, to see what types of things we can do for prevention. There's mitigation. Adaptation's also going to be important. We're talking to the mayors about what type of training will be needed from their municipal perspective, and also what things they need to do differently.

In some cases, like West Kelowna, there's obviously a discussion going on in terms of firebreaks. As homes are being built closer to forests, what types of firebreaks are needed? Municipalities are doing their calculations.

Even in rural communities, there's a greater conversation on infrastructure. Communication lines are a key component, as are roads and railways for supply lines. All that work is currently going on.

We know that climate-induced disasters are potentially going to be worse. How do we look at preventing or reducing the impact so our response doesn't have to be as strong as it is? We're going to have to adjust what we're doing. That's what we're focused on now: What things can we prevent?

In terms of the response side of things, the key thing is putting the right resource in the right place at the right time.

How we manage this is having a situational awareness. For example, imagine a wildfire situation like what was taking place in the Northwest Territories and Yellowknife. At each level, we're already stacking up resources to make sure there is no gap in the response. That will always be there, but what we're doing now is about what could have been done or what we need to do to prevent the impact on a small town or prevent the evacuation. That's going to be the key.

• (1725)

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: Thank you very much for that.

As I mentioned, last week I had the pleasure of having a conversation with some of our CAF members. I'm going to give a plug, because that's important.

As we are asking them to be there as a last resort, sometimes the exit strategy is not always as obvious for our members. I want to recognize and thank them for their hard work.

In that sense, in the recovery phase after a disaster, what sort of help is the federal government providing?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: One is that, absolutely, the Canadian Armed Forces should be there only for the emergency response. When the provincial level of resources can handle it, that is the time they need to exit. I had many conversations before, and now, as the Minister of Emergency Preparedness, I have the same expectation.

When it comes to the recovery, it is important that we work very closely with the province on what type of support will be needed through the disaster financial assistance arrangement, especially for people who have lost their homes or businesses. You can imagine the anxiety that people are feeling.

We have been pushing out resources to help make sure that people know what is needed, sometimes right down to the municipal level, so that they have an understanding. The municipalities have to apply to the province, and once the province makes the application to us, we then provide the appropriate support.

Obviously, we have a bit of a unique relationship within the territories. We want to make sure they have the appropriate support faster, and we're working on that as well.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: Thank you very much.

My last question is, how does the federal government assess the future risk of extreme weather events for Canadians? I think that's very important.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: We have.... What is the actual program called again? Is it NPAS?

The Chair: That's actually the last question and the last answer. I'm sorry about that. Can you work your response into some other question?

Ms. Normandin, go ahead for two and a half minutes, please.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Sajjan, you were minister of national defence from 2015 to 2021.

Were the Canadian Armed Forces already being called upon to deal with climate emergencies back then?

[*English*]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Yes. My first experience with the CAF deploying to disaster was actually to Winnipeg during the floods, when I was serving. I got a first-hand look at what is actually needed, and more importantly, how proud our members feel when they respond.

When I was Minister of Defence, I wanted to make sure that when our Canadian Armed Forces are deployed, they're doing the work that no one else can do. We would sometimes have discussions around that. At the same time, we want to make sure Canadians get the right response. Sometimes, the Canadian Armed Forces isn't the best response, even though it can respond quickly.

We'd have these discussions, and the government operations centre plays a very important role in making sure that's done well.

• (1730)

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Would you have expected certain things from the minister of public safety, who was someone else at the time?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'm sorry. Could you repeat the question?

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: While you were minister of national defence, did you have any expectations of the minister of public safety when it came to requests to call upon the Canadian Armed Forces?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: At that time, the portfolio of Minister of Emergency Preparedness wasn't there. It was actually the Minister of Public Safety, but it was the same thing.

Yes, we would have important discussions about the expectation that..., again, making sure that the work was going to be done, making sure the Canadian Armed Forces were going to be deployed for what they were actually needed for.

A lot of times we had discussions where.... Pulling out was a bit more difficult because we would get additional requests for certain things that a lot of other labour forces could be doing. Therefore, the exit strategy is also extremely important. That way, the Canadian Armed Forces can get back to their training role.

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Mathysen, you have two and a half minutes.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: To pick up where I left off in terms of that toxic gear—cancer-causing agents—for firefighters, I was glad to see that Sherry Romanado's Bill C-224, which you voted for as well, works on this. I want to make sure that we're investing in that properly and that it's part of an overall plan to help people who are, in addition to our men and women in uniform in the CAF, putting their lives on the line—to help them with that toxic gear by supporting this bill that you did vote for.

In addition to that, I'd like to ask this: Your government promised to train 1,000 new community-based firefighters and invest in their equipment. Again, linking this to my previous question, has the federal government directly funded the training of 1,000 new community-based firefighters yet, and how much have you spent on that specific equipment?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Yes, we are investing in training 1,000 firefighters. That's actually done by NRCan; it has the responsibility

for that. I don't have the exact numbers of how many have been trained—

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Can you get us the exact numbers, Minister?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Yes, we can provide that.

One thing I can say is that one key lesson I did learn as I was visiting a lot of the firefighters is that what they actually need is senior-level training. I met some of the folks who were conducting the course. Federally, we funded the course that firefighters would need for the senior roles. That allows for a much better response.

You can have all the firefighters you want, but you need to have the leadership and the people with the right capability to be able to take, for example, 20 or 30 firefighters and send them off to deal with that.

It's a type of training that is going to be very important to put into a system so that you can have the right response.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: That's fine, but the announcement was about the equipment, as well. It was focusing on that toxic gear. Are we ensuring that the funding that has been promised by this government is going into safe gear?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I can say that Minister Wilkinson.... I was there for the announcement of the agreement with British Columbia and a number of other provinces. I'll find out exactly which provinces have signed up for that agreement on additional firefighting equipment.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Mathysen.

Mr. Bezan, you have five minutes.

Mr. James Bezan: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Minister, welcome back. You bring a unique perspective, having been a veteran and having served on domestic operations and in aid to civil power. You've been the Minister of Defence. Now you're here at Public Safety Canada.

When the provinces call in, I'm assuming they call you when they need the Department of National Defence, the Canadian Armed Forces, to step up and help.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Is that a question, sir?

Mr. James Bezan: The provinces call you when they need help.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I have most of my counterparts' phone numbers. We do talk. However, the most important work is making sure that the emergency operations centres communicate. This is something that the government operations centre does extremely well.

Mr. James Bezan: However, the decision of whether or not we deploy and provide that aid to civil power, to the provinces or the municipalities, is made under your direction.

• (1735)

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: The request for assistance, yes, comes under my—

Mr. James Bezan: The big concern that we've always had is that the Canadian Armed Forces are underfunded. When they go out and do sandbagging, fight fires, or help in hurricanes and other natural disasters, who pays for that?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Obviously, that comes out of the regular budget.

Mr. James Bezan: It comes out of the Canadian Armed Forces' budget, not the Public Safety budget.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: That's right.

Mr. James Bezan: Shouldn't it be coming out of the Public Safety budget?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: When it comes to the level of that response, the IRUs that are created are designed for that level of response. If more funding is required, this is something that the Minister of National Defence will be talking about with his counterparts.

Mr. James Bezan: The Department of Public Safety administers and adjudicates the disaster financial assistance arrangements with the provinces after they've gone through and paid for all the damages that were done, and paid municipalities as well as individuals for damage caused by natural disaster. Your department then makes the final decision on how that cheque is cut.

Is there any thought ever given, or does the power exist, to also withhold dollars that were spent on fighting that through the Canadian Armed Forces, rather than passing that on to the province?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: There used to be, but we as a government decided that we weren't going to pass on those costs to the province. We want to make sure that in a time of emergency, we can give confidence to Canadians that we will respond.

That's something we have been doing ever since.

Mr. James Bezan: By removing that requirement and not having the provinces pay for the deployment of the Canadian Armed Forces and their assets into natural disasters and Operation Lentus, by eating that rather than building it in to the DFAA payments, do you think that entices the provinces to call on the federal government to deploy Canadian Armed Forces more quickly, rather than taking the time and the dollars to think carefully about whether or not they actually want Canadian Armed Forces to come or if they would be better off investing in their own disaster capabilities, whether it is through purchasing new equipment or hiring more personnel?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: In the times when an emergency is taking place, I haven't been in a position where the financial side has ever been raised; it has always been about responding. I think it's important to Canadians to make sure that the response is there.

I would say that the provinces and territories have been looking and changing their plans. In fact, I was visiting Alberta, and I'm very impressed with the system they have in place. I know British Columbia has also significantly increased its response as well.

What we need to do is make sure the right types of resources and funding are in place at different levels of government. This is probably the most important piece. When an emergency takes place, the first response is actually at the local level. Then, we want to make

sure that the province has the ability to respond and fill that gap. Then, at the federal level, we need to be ready if the provinces don't have the appropriate support.

Mr. James Bezan: Wouldn't you agree, Minister, that either if we had cost recovery through DFAA to pay for the assets, the time and the resources spent by the Canadian Armed Forces in fighting natural disasters when called under part VI of the National Defence Act, or if we could get it onto a cost-sharing basis, overall it would result in better equipment and better resources for both the provinces and the federal government?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: We can answer that question of better resources and better systems at the provincial levels through the lessons learned. The last thing I would want to do is put a caveat in there, where there's somebody in a province not wanting to make a request to the federal government because of a cost issue.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bezan.

Mr. Collins, you have the final five minutes.

Mr. Chad Collins: Thanks, Mr. Chair. I want to pick up where Mr. Bezan left off.

My question to Minister Blair was about how we ensure that our provincial and municipal partners are coming to the table with the appropriate level of resources.

I've come from the municipal sector. I spent 26 years on Hamilton's city council, and we went through an annual process as it relates to our emergency preparedness plan. We needed to have sufficient resources in order to ensure that when called upon and needed to implement that plan, we were sufficiently prepared.

My question, Minister, would be this: How do you coordinate with the other minister to ensure that our provincial partners are coming to the table with the appropriate level of resources?

The minister was very clear. He used the example of responding to long-term care facilities in Ontario during the pandemic, where we weren't the last call—

• (1740)

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I was the MND at that time. I remember it well.

Mr. Chad Collins: —we were the first call in that instance. We should be the last call.

I think that issue, specifically, speaks to provincial cuts. It speaks to some of the issues that the province, through different political stripes and different governments, has struggled with over the years in terms of long-term care facilities. I think it speaks to the whole issue of not being prepared.

On that issue, can I get your opinion in terms of the role the federal government plays in terms of ensuring—maybe providing some healthy tension with other levels of government—they are sufficiently providing resources to their plans and to the implementation of those plans?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: It is a great question. I would say the reality of those emergencies has sobered, I think, all Canadians, especially at the provincial level.

What I would then say is that they have to have the right resources at the right time. Asking from the federal level, where you have a delayed response, doesn't actually help the people on the ground. The conversation we're having, depending on the type of emergency, is about what resources are needed at what level. That's going to be the driving force for who needs to invest in what.

I think, in our federation, the provinces have responsibility for their emergency response, and they need to have that, because you can't have a standardized response. Canada is unique, province by province, and even within provinces. That's where that conversation needs to go. It's saying if you don't invest in that area, the response will not be there for Canadians.

I would say the pandemic has sobered the leadership across the country.

Mr. Chad Collins: Minister Blair was very clear in providing information about the budgets for the Canadian Armed Forces related to Operation Lentus. Those numbers have increased, based on the number of times we were required to respond.

Can I ask your ministry, in particular, how the budget process has changed internally and what additional resources your ministry has brought to the table, understanding that these occurrences are happening more often and that there's a requirement for more personnel, more equipment and, by extension, more planning?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: There a couple of things to that question. One is that we have been seized with the whole climate disaster for some time. When the Prime Minister created this portfolio, he wanted to put a direct emphasis on putting a minister in charge of ensuring that we have the preparedness. As Minister Blair started this work, it was about having not just the response, but also that preparedness piece that needs to be there.

Looking across the board, we're looking at what the funding needs are for prevention on the mitigation side. If we have the type of disaster, we need to have the response.

As well, when we talk about the response, we're going to exercise it. We're going to stress-test that as well, to make sure it can work, and we're going to stress-test in a way that isn't just looking at one or two types of disasters, but multiple types of scenarios.

What, then, does recovery look like, and how do you take those lessons, learn from them and build that resiliency back in? That's how we're planning our budget requests.

Mr. Chad Collins: Thank you, Minister.

Very quickly, many witnesses who have come to committee have suggested that another service be created. We've seen the European

example. Some have alluded to the U.S. in creating another area to respond to these events.

How does that work with some of the cost issues and financial budget issues we just talked about? I wonder how that works if the federal government creates, manages and oversees it.

How do we avoid paying for everything in a situation whereby, right now, most of the costs should be and are borne by the provinces and territories?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: First of all, I think we need to make sure that we have the right response at all levels. We owe it to Canadians in a time of need to have that response.

One thing I can say is that for every dollar spent in prevention, it's \$7 saved. If we don't, we're going to be paying for it in many other ways. In a disaster financial assistance arrangement, those numbers have been staggering, just over the last 10 years. Each level of government, right down to the municipal level, needs to look at what type of work needs to be done.

I would say that municipalities are coming on board. The provinces have also started to step up. I haven't had any significant push-back on what is actually needed.

What we need to do is make sure—just to say this again—that we have the right resources in the right place at the right time. Creating a federal agency is something. We are looking at various options right now. We're at a very premature level. It would be premature to discuss it any further.

If we have a resource at the federal level and it's too slow to respond, then we're not responding. We need to make sure it is at the right level, so we're going through the discussions now.

• (1745)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, Mr. Collins.

This has been a rich discussion. Mr. Bezan and Mr. Collins raised, if you will, the moral hazard question. It's probably something we haven't thought about a great deal, but if in fact the provinces think they can call on CAF resources and it will be a free ride, then they're going to keep on calling on the CAF resources and thinking it's a free ride. It's unfair to the CAF, because it's their resources that are being put in for the specific benefit of a province. Across government it's also unfair, because those resources are deployed while maybe they should be deployed in other areas.

I thank you for your responses to all the questions, but for the last two questions I thought we were kind of getting into it.

With that, colleagues, we will adjourn.

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