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• (1630)

[English]

The Chair (Hon. John McKay (Scarborough—Guildwood, Lib.)): It's 4:30, and I see quorum.

We have Minister Sajjan for one hour.

Minister Sajjan, welcome back to the committee. I know you're familiar with this committee, so we don't need to do introductions all over again.

With that, I look forward to your five-minute opening statement. Please go ahead.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of Emergency Preparedness): Thank you, Mr. Chair and colleagues. I've been invited here to speak about the inaccurate information published in *The Globe and Mail*. I can understand why committee members have questions. I would like to set the record straight here.

Let me take a minute to first say how proud I am of the work done by the Canadian Armed Forces and the public service, and of their professionalism and their courage during the evacuation of Afghanistan. I also want to say that I am a proud Sikh, but when I look in the mirror, I am also a Canadian; that is exactly what I see. I hope my record of military and public service makes it clear that my loyalty is to Canada and my fellow Canadians.

Back in June, as I was walking into the chamber, *The Globe and Mail* asked me a very specific question: "Back in August 2021, when Kabul was falling, why did you ask the Canadian special forces to go and try to rescue about 200 Sikhs around a temple there?" The fact is that I did not order the Canadian Special Operations Forces to mount a rescue mission at a gurdwara in Kabul, or anywhere else in Kabul.

The Canadian Armed Forces were not directed to prioritize the evacuation of Afghan Sikhs over Canadians, interpreters or others who aided Canada. As you know, tactical decisions are left to the chain of command on the ground. Also, to be clear, Afghan Sikhs and Hindus were part of Canada's policy to protect vulnerable communities. The policy included women MPs, activists, journalists, members of the LGBTQIA+ community and persecuted religious minorities.

You will remember that, starting in the spring of 2018, there was an increase in targeted violence against religious minorities in Afghanistan. These troubling events spurred members of Parliament and civil society to call for a special program to help persecuted religious minorities, and Sikhs and Hindus in particular. Twenty-

five Canadian members of Parliament signed a letter to the then Minister of Immigration, calling for a special program for Afghan Sikh and Hindu refugees so that they could be brought safely into Canada. It was signed by members of the Conservative Party of Canada, the New Democratic Party of Canada and the Green Party of Canada. The letter referred to—and I'll just summarize a bit—the murder of 25 Sikhs, including a four-year-old child, during a terror attack on a Kabul gurdwara; the assassination of 19 leaders of the Afghan Sikh community; and the kidnapping of a 13-year-old girl whose father had previously been murdered by terrorists.

I also would like to quote from that letter, which read, "In light of the immediate threat faced by these communities, we urge you to create"—speaking to the then Minister of Immigration—"a special program for Afghan Sikh and Hindu refugees...so that they can be brought to safety in Canada."

I can assure you, Mr. Chair, the government was already at work. We announced special immigration measures to offer a pathway to citizenship for Afghans at risk due to their association with Canada. We deployed troops to Afghanistan and then began evacuation from Kabul. Later, we expanded efforts to bring members of vulnerable communities to Canada through a humanitarian evacuation. This included women leaders, human rights defenders, journalists, LGBTQIA+ individuals and persecuted religious minorities, which included Sikhs and Hindus.

This government policy was discussed over the months leading up to the fall of Kabul. It was broadly supported and included Sikhs and Hindus. One organization of Canadians working in partnership with our government was the Manmeet Singh Bhullar Foundation. This Canadian NGO was founded in honour of Manmeet Singh Bhullar, a former Conservative Alberta government minister and MLA who was tragically stuck and killed by a truck on a highway as he was helping a stranded motorist. In 2020, the foundation became an official partner of our government.

The foundation worked to identify vulnerable Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan to provide their names to IRCC to facilitate their immigration to Canada. As the situation in Afghanistan worsened, officials at IRCC and the NGO shifted their work from facilitating the immigration of these persecuted minorities to facilitating their evacuation from Kabul.

Toward the end of August, the NGO contacted me about a group of more than 200 Afghan Sikhs and Hindus who had been approved by IRCC for evacuation to Canada. The group was struggling to link up with Canadian soldiers and officials on the ground in Kabul. The NGO provided me with information about the location and status of the group. When I received this information from the NGO, I passed it on to the chain of command. I had a responsibility to do so.

The government and military officials on the ground contacted the group, who were already outside the gates of the airport, which is important to note. The group were instructed to make their way to a specific location near the airport to link up with the Canadian soldiers. Unfortunately, the link-up never happened.

To conclude, I want to emphasize that I did not order a rescue mission. I passed along information from a Canadian NGO partner about a group of vulnerable people who were cleared for humanitarian evacuation to Canada. I followed and executed government policy.

For the record, I would like to submit as evidence my initial statement to the Globe, the letter from the opposition MPs and the news release from when we expanded the resettlement program to bring more Afghans to safety, for this committee to refer to. I have them right here.

I would be happy to take your questions as well.

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

I believe two of the three items are unilingual, so we can't distribute them to the members. Once they get translated, we can distribute them.

With that, we'll go to our six-minute round.

Mr. Bezan, you have six minutes.

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

Minister, welcome back to the committee.

Minister, what date exactly did the Canadian Armed Forces operation take place to escort Afghans to the airport in Kabul?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan:

What time are you referring to?

Mr. James Bezan:

The specific dates of the operation, when everything was all falling apart.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan:

On the actual evacuation when the Canadian Armed Forces were requested.... We had a request for assistance from Global Affairs on July 27. On July 30 we had approval to deploy to Afghanistan.

Mr. James Bezan:

When was the last day of operations in Afghanistan?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan:

Are you asking about the last day of operations for the evacuation, or the last day of operations?

Mr. James Bezan:

I'm asking about the evacuation.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan:

It was August 27.

Mr. James Bezan:

Okay.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan:

I would say that the last Canadian Armed Forces left at that time. I don't remember the exact date when the actual flight with the last people left, but the official date was the 27th.

Mr. James Bezan:

Okay.

You were quoted as saying in the Globe story you were talking about that you "provided direction to the Canadian Armed Forces, through the appropriate chain of command". You've said that again in your testimony today.

Who at the Canadian Armed Forces did you give direction to?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan:

Are you talking about the Globe article or my statement?

Mr. James Bezan:

I'm talking about your statement.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan:

You're talking about my current statement.

Mr. James Bezan: Yes.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Through the chain of command, it's the chief of the defence staff.

Mr. James Bezan:

Is it only to the chief of the defence staff, or do you talk to others as well?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan:

No, when it comes to.... As you know, the chief of the defence staff is the person the Minister of Defence works through, but there are always staff who are always there.

Mr. James Bezan:

Okay. Was he the very first person you talked to in the Canadian Armed Forces?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan:

To be honest, there are people in the room. When it comes to the information, it's within a large group, as you know. As a former parliamentary secretary, you know the number of people who are there.

Mr. James Bezan:

Did you inform the Prime Minister's Office before you gave this direction to the Canadian Armed Forces?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan:

No. I was working directly with the evacuation at that time.

Mr. James Bezan: Okay.

Do you see that there is any difference between giving a ministerial direction versus giving a command?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan:

What are you referring to here?

Mr. James Bezan: Okay.

Do you think the Canadian Armed Forces interpreted it that you said, "This is what's going to happen," and that it was more of a command, or was it just you saying, "I think we should do this"?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan:

First, that's—

Mr. James Bezan:

I mean in your conversations with the chain of command.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan:

Let's talk about what in particular you're talking about here when it comes to direction and command; it's of what...?

Mr. James Bezan:

The command for the evacuation of Canadians, Afghans and other minority groups within Afghanistan.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan:

If you mean the overall evacuation, yes, that was the direction that was given.

Mr. James Bezan:

Okay, and that would have been interpreted as a command from the Minister of National Defence.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan:

Of the.... Yes, the direction obviously gives the authority for the Canadian Armed Forces to work.

Mr. James Bezan: Okay.

Did your former chief of staff, George Young, participate in these meetings and also help in making sure the directive was carried out?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan:

I had a staff, and yes, the chief of staff of my staff was always there to work. Yes.

Mr. James Bezan:

Would George Young have been your chief of staff at that time?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Yes, he was.

Mr. James Bezan: Are you aware that today the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration issued a letter to the Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship, asking him to further investigate the role that Mr. Young played in the fraudulent use of documents and templates from Global Affairs Canada in the evacuation of Kabul?

• (1635)

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: First of all, I just heard that the report came out. I haven't read it. I'm here to answer questions regarding the motion that all of you approved here.

Mr. James Bezan: On what exact date, then, was your chief of the defence staff, who was General Eyre at the time, made aware of this decision—the exact, firm date?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Which decision are you talking about?

Mr. James Bezan: I'm talking about the decision to move ahead with the evacuation of Kabul and—

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: As I stated here, we had received a request for assistance on July 27, and on July 30 the direction and authority were given for CAF to deploy to Afghanistan to support.

Mr. James Bezan: Is that when the direction was given as to the priority list of Canadians and other Afghans who were to be taken out?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Yes, to support the evacuation mission.

Mr. James Bezan: When were CANSOFCOM special operation forces...? Were they in the room on that very day, when you gave that direction?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Mr. Bezan, you know how that works, having worked in defence. It's not that CANSOFCOM is actually there. You work through the chief of the defence staff and the chain of command.

Mr. James Bezan: Did you have a personal conversation at all with the commanders at CANSOFCOM at that time?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I did not have a direct conversation with the commander of CANSOFCOM, no.

Mr. James Bezan: What about at any time between the time that the order came down on July 30, and August 27?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: No, I did not speak to the commander of CANSOFCOM.

Mr. James Bezan: Can you give us the exact specifics? Is there a written directive, or was it just a verbal directive that you gave?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Once we received the request for assistance.... I don't have the exact letter of the direction of authority that I gave to the Canadian Armed Forces at that time.

Mr. James Bezan: Do you know, then, at what point in time special operations forces and JTF 2 were given the command that they were to leave the Kabul airport, go outside the wire and take on that extra risk?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Again, what are you referring to? Is it to the evacuation itself?

Mr. James Bezan: I'm referring to the evacuation.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: It's the overall evacuation.

Mr. James Bezan: Specifically, in those final hours, when things were going sideways, we know that there were Canadians, Afghan interpreters and others who were trying to get through the wire to get into the airport and were being denied, and special operations forces and JTF 2 had to leave the airport.

Are you aware—

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: They had to leave the airport.... I think it's important for you to clarify—

Mr. James Bezan: They had to get to a rendezvous point, didn't they?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I think you're trying to say something without specifics. If you could ask me very directly, then I can answer the question more clearly.

When you talk about a rendezvous point, it seems to me that you're referring to the Globe and Mail article.

The Chair: Somebody else is going to have to ask that question, because Mr. Bezan is out of time.

Ms. Lambropoulos, you have six minutes, please.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos (Saint-Laurent, Lib.): Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Minister, for being here with us today to answer some questions.

You spoke about a letter that had been signed by several members of different parties. Just to clarify, was this a letter from a parliamentary friendship group, or was it just a letter from MPs?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: This was a letter that we have a copy of here, signed by 25 members of Parliament from three different parties.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: It was asking for the immigration department to create a specific pathway program to offer humanitarian assistance to six...in Afghanistan, as well as other minority communities. Is that correct?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: It's in this letter here. If I could read it out, then I could tell you exactly who they were referring to. It was referring to the Sikhs and Hindus.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Thank you very much.

I'm wondering what the process was, at that point. I know that the Government of Canada had other minorities to include on that list. Can you include the full list of minorities who were to be evacuated if accepted by Canada? Once you have read that list, can you tell us what the process was for those people to get out?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Absolutely. First of all, it was the then minister of immigration who actually announced the program. On July 23, the special immigration measures pathway was announced.

On August 13, it was expanded by the minister of immigration to include vulnerable groups, such as women leaders, human rights defenders, journalists, persecuted religious minorities, LGBTQI individuals, and family members of previously settled interpreters.

• (1650)

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Okay, so if somebody had been given permission to come, what would the process have been at that point?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Obviously, the immigration department would have been handling the process. All of the names had to be approved. I remember that we had to vet all of the interpreters' names and who actually worked with us. Everything was sent to the immigration department so they could be added to the official list.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: How were they helped out, if they were on that official list?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: First, before we could do the full evacuation....

They had the official list. Global Affairs Canada was working with Immigration to charter flights. They requested our support. I didn't get the details of that. The exact process would obviously have to be discussed with them. What I know is that they had the approved list. Anybody who was on that list was cleared to come to Canada, which included Afghan Sikhs and Hindus.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Okay. Thank you very much.

Could you describe the role you played during the evacuation a little more, so we can understand what role you played versus the role of the people on the ground?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: As the minister, I was given the authority, through government policy, to support the evacuation. That was received from Global Affairs Canada on July 27. I then gave direction to the Canadian Armed Forces to support the airlift. At that time, I wasn't that involved.

However, once we had to evacuate all of our Canadian embassy personnel and pull out completely, because the Taliban had taken all of Kabul.... The work intensified on August 19, when we had to reinsert with the U.K. The U.S. came up with a plan to safely continue the evacuation.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: Okay.

Regarding all the efforts on the ground, can you remind us who was in charge of getting the orders carried out and who was the one giving the orders on the ground?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: That was a volatile situation.

In normal circumstances, once direction is given to the chief of the defence staff, orders are given to the chain of command, and they decide who is going to execute those orders.

In this case, the same process was followed, but we all had to be directly and closely involved right from the beginning, because we had to work with our allies. I was on calls with my counterparts, getting the mission sorted out and confirming which nations would be involved. The first nations were Canada, the U.K. and the U.S.

At the same time, the military was working on how to secure everything safely with their allied partners. We moved additional support into Kuwait at that time, in anticipation. Once we decided we could do it safely, direction was given to go back and secure the airport with our allies. Once we were on the ground.... At that time, we obviously left the actual operations to Canadian Armed Forces personnel.

We had to monitor the other situation very closely. For example, intelligence on threats was coming in. At the same time, we had to plan the evacuation, because the airport could be shut down at any time. We had to immediately start planning what that was going to look like.

Ms. Emmanuella Lambropoulos: I have 20 seconds left, so there are no more questions.

Thank you very much for being here.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Lambropoulos.

Madame Normandin, you have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin (Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here.

How did you receive information about the location of the Sikh community's 225 members regarding the evacuation?

Was it by email, by text, by phone? How was the non-governmental organization communicating with you?

[*English*]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Somebody called me directly.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Okay.

Did you receive communications from other groups? I am thinking in particular of groups that were in the green zone. Off the top of my head, I believe it was the interpreters who were identified as being at risk.

Did you receive information about other groups?

[*English*]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I don't understand the "green zone" question.

In terms of different groups, I did, absolutely. Anybody who had my number was calling me at that time. Again, I had the responsibility to forward any information that was provided to me. I will also note that my staff was heavily engaged, so my military email at that time was extensively used. Part of it was public.

I believe I was receiving thousands of emails at that time, and Global Affairs actually received close to a million emails at that time as well. There was a whole team triaging information and feeding it into the entire system, so that the Canadian Armed Forces could have as much accurate information as possible.

• (1655)

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: From what I understand, you received information from the non-governmental organization Aman Lara informing you that interpreters were available about five kilometres from the airport. They were identified as priority evacuations.

Is that correct?

[*English*]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Any information I received was always forwarded.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: How was the information sent to JTF2, in terms of the location of the meeting point?

Was General Eyre contacted by text, email or phone call?

[*English*]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I should clarify how we conducted the operation.

With a sensitive operation like this, I was speaking in secure communication during our briefings. That's when we would have daily briefings, and we would be able to pass along information.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: So the information about the meeting point was conveyed at an official meeting with General Eyre.

Is that correct?

[*English*]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Which rendezvous point are you referring to?

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: The organization that informed you of the presence of members of the Sikh community and gave you their names also informed you of the location where they were to meet with members of JTF2.

How did you let JTF2 know where these people were?

[*English*]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: There was no direct communication from me, informing.... I want to make that very clear. The information that was received was about 200 people who were already at the airport. The communication that took place was actually.... How they communicated among each other...that was done on the ground.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Christine Normandin: In terms of the evacuation, do you know if other people had received information related to meeting points?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: This wasn't the rendezvous point that everybody keeps referring to. The Canadian Armed Forces had a plan for how to meet people. Regardless of which group and how they communicated, they were communicating with people about where to meet them, and that's what was communicated through them to the various groups; that's how that was being conducted. That did not go from me directly to the Canadian Armed Forces personnel on the ground.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Did you follow up on how the information was conveyed?

What we understand is that other groups could have been informed. However, only 225 people made it to a meeting point.

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Let me make it clear, first of all, that the question at hand is.... Originally, I thought this was about whether I inappropriately used assets to bring people, but in this case, I want to make it very clear, because I believe it was your motion, that these people, first of all, were actually part of the government policy in place.

I just want to make sure that we are clear on that.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: The first time the policy was released was on August 13. So it was done after operations started, and it was a relocation policy.

Are you telling me that resettling and evacuating refugees is the same thing and that IRCC dictates, on the ground, how to evacuate and prioritize who will be evacuated?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: You would have to talk to IRCC about that. It was their policy that was announced. My job was the evacuation, and then my job was to execute that government policy.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: I repeat my question.

In your opinion, are resettlement and evacuation under the same policy?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Again, I think a lot of the questions you have are more for Immigration. I'm happy to discuss the motion you have here at hand. A lot of the questions you have are on the immigration side. You'll have to talk to them for the details on that.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: If I am not mistaken, you used the resettlement policy to justify the fact that several groups had to be evacuated based on a set order. What I understand is that, in your view, resettlement and evacuation are the same policy.

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Absolutely not. I actually completely disagree with that assertion. There was a government policy that in-

cluded Afghan Sikhs, and we executed that government policy. I transferred information that was given to me to the Canadian Armed Forces, like I did for so many other folks who were contacting me at that time. The Canadian Armed Forces were triaging.

I also want to explain that in an intense situation like this, when we're dealing with daily threats and making sure we have the safety of our folks, we don't have time to be micromanaging folks on the ground. We're discussing things. We feed that information in.

If I had information given to me that could potentially save somebody's life, regardless of which group it was, I wanted to make sure it got to the right people, so they could triage that information and do what they needed to do with it.

• (1700)

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Normandin.

Next, we have Ms. Mathyssen, for six minutes, please.

Ms. Lindsay Mathyssen (London—Fanshawe, NDP): Thank you, Minister, for appearing today.

This motion has come forward because of the meeting over the summer. I really appreciate your coming forward today to set the record straight.

One thing is really clear in terms of much that has happened. Many people feel that Canada didn't do enough during the evacuation of Afghanistan. The special committee in Parliament studied it. We know that many difficult decisions were made by folks

Canadians knew that the threat of the Taliban taking over was a possibility. We knew that interpreters and others who supported Canada's mission were at risk. We knew about the marginalized communities you referenced and that were referenced by the policies set forward, including the fact that Sikhs were at risk when the Taliban took over.

Minister, I'm sure you're aware of the crucial work of the civilian language and cultural advisers to our mission in Afghanistan. These were civilian Canadians with Afghan heritage. They stepped up to serve, but they weren't warned they would be put in uniforms. They weren't warned they would go out on patrols outside the wire and face long deployments that were beyond the standard cycle for troops. They had drastically different work conditions from what they expected, and they came back with no supports. Their fixed-term contracts were ended. They were left on their own. They experienced so much, and it feels like they were left without any supports from the federal government.

Can you tell the committee when you were first made aware of the difficulties of the situation and the plight of those language and cultural advisers?

The Chair: Before you answer that question, Minister, it does seem a bit beyond the remit for which you've been asked to this committee. You're welcome to answer the member's question, but it does strike me as a bit beyond.

I failed to stop the clock. I should have stopped the clock earlier, so I'll give you another 25 seconds.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I value the language and cultural advisers who worked for us. I served with many of them. This is obviously a question for the current Minister of National Defence.

I want to make sure I answer the questions appropriately for the motion at hand here. It's very important, because from inaccurate information, it can swirl out in different ways. I want to make sure Canadians are aware that the decisions I made were as a result of our government policy. Having the same religion wasn't a reason I made certain decisions.

I really want to stay focused on that. Obviously, you raised an important issue. I'm sure you will have the opportunity to talk to the current Minister of National Defence about that.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: The ombudsman at the time, Gregory Lick, raised this while you were the minister of national defence, and you chose not to act.

Can you explain some of that reasoning there?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I think it's important that the current Minister of National Defence answers those questions now.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Okay.

One thing we know is that a letter was received by all members of the committee today. It was a letter from the Manmeet Singh Bhullar Foundation, Khalsa Aid Canada and the World Sikh Organization of Canada. They raised their concerns about this motion, stating:

At a time of increased anti-immigrant sentiment and the targeting of Sikh Canadians, we are concerned that the influences of politicization and partisanship will have a long-lasting impact on Canada's past and future efforts to answer the call for humanitarian assistance when the world is in need.

For those of us who engaged with the Minister at that time, we know it is a blatant misrepresentation of the facts to suggest that his motivation to assist the Sikh and Hindu population to leave Afghanistan during the summer of 2021 was due to his sharing the same faith as these vulnerable people.

Can you comment on this letter sent by these three quite significant organizations, and your concerns, when they talk about the "time of increased anti-immigrant sentiment"?

• (1705)

The Chair: Again, I would just caution, Minister, that this is a bit beyond the scope of the motion, but—

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: This is what he referred to himself, so....

The Chair: He's welcome to answer the question as he sees fit.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I think, just to answer the question there, that there are many organizations of folks who actually do follow things very closely.

There is a significant concern right now, given that we're dealing with foreign interference from many different countries and especially, currently, from India. When it creates an anti-immigrant sen-

timent, it can mean that any future governments would not want, potentially, to support vulnerable people around the world.

That's what I conclude from that, but like I said, I would like to stay on the motion at hand.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: During the evacuation, there were many NGOs, as you spoke about, reaching out to the government to protect a lot of those marginalized communities. They spoke, obviously, about the challenges facing feminist activists and 2SLGBTQIA+ community members. Sikhs were included in that. Hindus were included in that. Why was it that the NGOs were raising this at the time before the government acted?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: You would have to talk to the Minister of Immigration about that, or Global Affairs.

One thing I can tell you as a member of Parliament is that I had my own advocacy work that was taking place, but one thing I can assure you of is that once I had the authority, we put in every effort possible to evacuate as many people as possible, and—I want to say this—safely as well. That was a very key concern: to make sure that we did it in a safe manner.

I wish we could have gotten out all of the vulnerable populations we needed to get out, who were on our list, but we can also say that many people who are here today... I and, hopefully, some of you have met some of those folks and their families who have made it here safely because of those efforts. Again, I want to thank the Canadian Armed Forces for putting themselves at extreme risk to pull off a very important mission.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Mathysen.

Madam Gallant, you have five minutes.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant (Renfrew—Nipissing—Pembroke, CPC): Minister, did you get all the Canadians out of Afghanistan? Are they all out? Did you get them all out?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I can't answer that question for you. You'll have to talk to Global Affairs Canada. They hold the information regarding that.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Would you consider the evacuation to be a success, despite leaving 1,300 Canadians and interpreters who are forced to fend for themselves against the Taliban?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I wish we could we have gotten more. However, given the circumstances and the security threat that we were dealing with, I'm extremely proud of what the Canadian Armed Forces pulled off with our closest allies.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Can you give us an exact estimate of how many of those are left behind today?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Again, we don't track...and I'm not the minister in charge. Global Affairs normally holds that database and that information.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: What actions have you undertaken to take responsibility for the 1,300 Canadians and interpreters you left stranded back in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I answered a few of your questions, but what I would say is that I thought the questions were regarding the motion at hand, regarding the Afghan Sikhs: whether I actually inappropriately and used Canadian Armed Forces members to get vulnerable people out. I just want to again make it clear, so you are fully aware: Those folks were actually part of the government policy and I was executing government policy at that time.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Yes, and I'm talking about the mission as a whole.

Why was it that the Prime Minister called the election on the same day that the Taliban overtook Kabul?

The Chair: Madam Gallant, we are wandering way far from the motion here.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: All right.

The Chair: Maybe you should direct that question to Mr. Trudeau.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: What kit and equipment were provided to the soldiers to undertake the direction provided to the CAF by the minister during Operation Aegis?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'm sorry. Can you repeat that? Which operation?

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: What kinds of vehicles were provided for Operation Aegis?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Do you mean the evacuation mission?

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Yes.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: First of all, when it comes to the list of the equipment, this is where we don't get into details. Once the direction is given, you leave it for the Canadian Armed Forces to decide what is actually necessary. Whatever is needed, they figure that out, and they did.

Our job is to make sure that they had the authority to do their work.

• (1710)

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: You didn't ensure that the CAF had everything it needed to carry out the mission—to carry out the evacuation of Canadians.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: That is the responsibility of the chain of command and the chief of defence staff all the way through.

One thing I can assure you of is that many times we asked the question of whether there was anything else that was needed. I can assure you that we were monitoring things very closely. The Canadian Armed Forces, from what I saw, were moving resources in anticipation. They did absolutely amazing work in extreme circumstances.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Were you aware of whether or not they had any armoured vehicles or any artillery?

After all, they had to go in and evacuate our Canadian citizens and interpreters.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: The safety part was extremely important.

As ministers, secretaries or equivalent, we looked at getting advice from our chiefs of defence staff on whether we could relaunch the mission after the evacuation. The advice we were given was that yes, we could.

In terms of all the resources that were needed—not just from us, but working together as allies.... I remember that my first call was with the U.K., and then we both spoke with the U.S. Secretary of Defense and at that time decided that we could.... Then we had our military folks work collaboratively to put the operation together.

We don't get into details of what equipment is actually going to be needed. That's for them to decide.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: How many of our Canadian Forces were injured during the evacuation?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: None. None were reported to me.

I just want to make sure, going back to the motion here, that you fully understand that the Afghan Sikhs and Hindus were part of the government policy, because that's what we're here to discuss.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: I believe we're here to discuss the operation as a whole—

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: No.

Mr. Chair, can you clarify that?

The Chair: That's not correct. We're here to discuss whether the minister at the time inappropriately used his authority to give preference to a particular group. That's what we're here for.

You have about 30 seconds left.

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: What specific types of undertakings did you convey to ensure that everyone who was supposed to get out of Afghanistan was taken out of Afghanistan?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: My job was to manage the evacuation overall. That was making sure we have the proper authorities—not only enough resources, but the authorities—needed for them to be able to do their job, and then the chief of the defence staff goes in—

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: Okay. Mr. Chair—

The Chair: Are you trying to make a point?

Mrs. Cheryl Gallant: The point was that you just read out what this discussion was supposed to be about today and he replied in the generality, as opposed to the specifics that he wanted to address.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'm trying to be kind.

The Chair: If I were him, I wouldn't have answered your question, but that's another issue. That's just me.

Madam Lapointe, you have five minutes, please.

Ms. Viviane Lapointe (Sudbury, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The logistical complexities of evacuation missions must seem insurmountable—at least they do to me—yet our Canadian Armed Forces seem to do the impossible, so I want to take this opportunity to thank them for their service to our country.

I want to make sure I understand the overall approach to the mission.

Can you give us a sense of the who, the how and the when of the timelines involved in getting the people out of Afghanistan?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'm happy to discuss that.

As I mentioned earlier, first and foremost, we had a request from Global Affairs early on to look at the security of our Canadian embassy personnel, which we normally get. Then, on July 27, we received a request from Global Affairs to support the IRCC evacuation of the remainder of the Canadian personnel and the permanent residents.

On July 30, we gave approval to the Canadian Armed Forces to deploy to Afghanistan to support that evacuation.

The chartered flights, working with Global Affairs, started on August 4. On August 13, the additional measures were announced by the minister of immigration at the time to include additional groups, as I had mentioned—vulnerable groups such as women leaders, humanitarian, defence, journalists, and persecuted and religious minorities, which included the Afghan Sikhs.

On August 15, because of the safety of the Canadian embassy personnel—the Taliban had entered Kabul—we had to evacuate everybody and had to cease operations. A lot of work happened in between. On August 19, we were able to determine that we could reinsert our folks, with our allies, back into the Kabul airport to resume the evacuation.

Then, in managing that, there was a whole lot of stuff that happened in between that resulted in us completing everything by the 27th. We had no choice after that but to completely depart.

● (1715)

Ms. Viviane Lapointe: There were many vulnerable populations, and some of them you've highlighted for us. How do we identify these groups, and how were they triaged?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Originally, it was through Global Affairs, and especially through IRCC. They had a list. Then, based on our government's policy that the then minister of immigration had announced, that's how they were triaged.

When we had to reinsert into the Kabul airport and re-establish security, you can imagine the chaos taking place at that time. Once we gave them the guidance and the direction and were feeding them information, then we had to rely on the folks on the ground to be able to triage. From what I understand, the security system was set up so they would meet folks as well. They had created their own RV point outside the airport, where the Afghan Sikhs were also at that time.

For anybody who was on a list, they were able to get them inside. That included interpreters, their families, the vulnerable groups and many others, including fixers for journalists. I remember those types of conversations taking place, and many others.

Just imagine this. They were trying to move as many people as possible to the RV point, and if they were on the list, they were trying to get them in as quickly as possible.

Ms. Viviane Lapointe: There must have been so much chaos on the ground. What would have been the process for someone who wanted to get out of Afghanistan?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: A lot of work was done beforehand. Actually, I want to thank the members of Parliament who were involved with that, whether it was supporting the interpreters or the vulnerable populations, by forwarding that information to IRCC at that time.

I knew, when I was minister of national defence, that the Canadian Armed Forces had provided a list of people who actually worked for us. We provided that to the IRCC. Other NGOs, like the Bhullar foundation, were also providing information.

Everything worked off an approved list. Even through that chaos, we had to be very mindful that.... Imagine, with the tens of thousands of people who were there.... We all saw the images and know how heartbreaking it was, and it was heartbreaking for anybody who served there.

Through all that hardship, I want to also mention, just to the Canadian Armed Forces who were on the ground at that time.... They were accused of not helping as much. They saved so many people's lives. I got to meet some of the interpreters and their families who are here. It's because of that effort. They did it in extreme circumstances.

Sadly, I also want to say, let's not forget that 11 U.S. soldiers lost their lives at a location that we and the U.K. were manning. That was our location. We followed the intelligence very closely. We made the decision to stop at that time, but, sadly, U.S. personnel were killed at that time. We did that as safely as possible, but even after helping all those people, I know all of us feel a level of guilt, because people we worked with were left behind. I know those efforts did not stop. I know of people who—

The Chair: Unfortunately, we're going to have to leave the answer there. We're way past time.

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

[Translation]

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

Minister, you told us earlier that you shared the information you received on vulnerable persons with the chief of the defence staff during secure briefings.

You also said that the logistics on the ground for determining evacuation meeting points were organized between groups on the ground and the military.

You said you were not involved in that part of the operation.

That being said, an article in the Globe and Mail on June 27 states:

[English]

Mr. Sajjan confirmed in a statement Wednesday—

That would be Wednesday, June 26, 2024.

—that he texted the Canadian military about what was happening on the ground based on his conversations with Calgary-based Manmeet Singh Bhullar Foundation, which had arranged to privately sponsor the Afghan Sikhs.

• (1720)

[Translation]

Which of the two versions is the correct one, the one today, or the one on June 27?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: What are you referring to? Is it the Globe article there?

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: It quotes your statement of June 26. It says:

[English]

“confirmed in a statement Wednesday that he texted the Canadian military about what was happening on the ground based on his conversations”—

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: What are you referring to there? Is it the Globe article?

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: Yes, it is a Globe and Mail article.

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: It's the Globe article.

What I'm trying to tell you is that how it is portrayed is inaccurate. It's clearly stated that any information I received during that time, whether it was from them or any other group, was relayed through the chain of command. Then they had that information.

Just imagine, again, if I had received information and not pushed it forward.

Then, the triaging of the information was done by the Canadian Armed Forces.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: So you are saying that the statement in the article is not yours.

Is that correct?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'm telling you that the Globe and Mail article is inaccurate. I said that very clearly in my statement.

I'm saying that, yes, I did receive information from the Bhullar foundation, but that article made it seem like this group was not part of a government policy. I want to make it clear that it was part of a government policy, and that the information I received was passed on. That's as I did with many other groups that called me at that time. Information was provided, and then the Canadian Armed Forces did what they could with that information.

My clear point here is that the Globe article insinuated that I gave special treatment to Sikhs because they look like me. I want to make it very clear here that it was actually government policy that I was executing. It is just a coincidence that the Minister of National Defence at that time—me—happened to look like them and share a similar religion.

[Translation]

Ms. Christine Normandin: I just want to make sure. The statement the article refers to never existed.

Is that correct?

[English]

The Chair: Thank you, Madame Normandin.

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

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: A lot of the questions that I have are mainly about what we lack now and what the Office of the Ombudsman for National Defence is trying to do to help on where we go from here. There are a lot of lessons that need to be learned from those extremely difficult situations, so that we continue on in the best light possible.

I think you've been very clear. Again, I want to say thank you for being very specific. I completely understand the statements that you're making.

I think one of the things that we need to look to now is what was raised in the letter. What are your comments on where we need to go, going forward, to ensure that we don't continue to repeat the same mistakes and don't place labels on people—again, simply, as you said, because of the coincidences that you wear a turban or that you are a Sikh?

The Chair: Okay. Again, you are here for a specific purpose.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Well, this is what he said.

The Chair: The specific purpose—

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Mr. Chair, I'm building from what he has said.

The Chair: Hang on. Can I finish what I have to say?

He is here for a specific purpose. He is not here to do a “go forward” or anything of that nature.

He is accused of improper use of his authority while he was the Minister of National Defence to favour a particular group.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: I'm not doing that.

The Chair: The questions are limited to that. If he wishes to comment...

You're welcome to do so, Minister.

I just want to focus members' minds on the reason the minister is here.

Ms. Lindsay Mathysen: Well, I would suggest that I provide him with the opportunity, considering he clearly has not—

The Chair: We're not taking opportunities today. We are simply dealing with the motion.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I would like to stay on the motion at hand, but I will say that I think it would have been very easy to see some of the facts that I raised. They could have easily been seen by the people who actually wrote the article or by anybody else. It wasn't just the government policy timeline. Members of Parliament wrote letters for this group. I can't believe.... I think we found dozens of petitions that were also put forward.

I'm here to clarify your questions, of course, but at the same time, I see that a lot of this information that I'm talking about could have been found publicly as well.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Allison, you have five minutes.

Mr. Dean Allison (Niagara West, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you, Minister, for being here today.

Are you saying unequivocally that the Globe and Mail article was wrong?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'm saying that it was inaccurate, yes.

Mr. Dean Allison: Okay. You're saying that any military sources they had were also incorrect in their assessment?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'm not here to judge the level of their sources. I'm here to tell you that what was written in the article was inaccurate.

Mr. Dean Allison: Okay. I guess when we talk about operational priorities, the question I would have is about Canadian military interpreters who were left behind because they didn't have the resources to evacuate people. Would that be accurate?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: First of all, since I'm answering your questions for the first time, I want to make sure you're also clear that the motion at hand has been outlined for you; the Afghan Sikhs and Hindus were part of the government policy, and that government policy was executed. I think we can agree on that.

Mr. Dean Allison: Yes. I'm asking about the part of the motion that says that it was basically to the detriment of the evacuation of Canadians and allied Afghans.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: As you can see here, that was the operation we were conducting, because they were part of the same group. It's not whether it was a detriment. It was the operation being conducted for all the folks in the policy.

The Chair: Mr. Stewart, you have the floor.

Mr. Don Stewart (Toronto—St. Paul's, CPC): Thanks, Mr. Chair.

Thanks, Minister Sajjan.

I want to ask you about the prioritization of the groups. After this Government of Canada press release on August 13, was there any kind of change in the prioritization of the various groups that were in Afghanistan and the vulnerable groups outside of the priority group?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Which time are you referring to?

Mr. Don Stewart: This press release on August 13. Prior to that, we had prioritization on Canadian citizens, permanent residents,

Afghan interpreters and fixers, and subsequent to that, adding vulnerable Afghans was a change.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: That's a great question.

What you were referring to was the August 13 press release. That was what the then immigration minister.... I mentioned the letter that, hopefully, you will see afterwards, which was signed by 25 members of Parliament, including Conservative members of Parliament. I have to admit that the work of the foundation that you're talking about was with the Conservative Party. That's where it started first.

Yes, it was added on August 13 for the vulnerable groups.

Mr. Don Stewart: Okay, but did it change the prioritization away from Canadians per se—and permanent residents, interpreters and fixers—to prioritize other groups?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: As it clearly states in the press release, they were added to the special immigration status.

Mr. Don Stewart: Okay. Was that as vulnerable classes?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Yes.

Mr. Don Stewart: Was JTF 2 sent outside the wire to collect any of these other groups or even Canadians and PRs that might have been in Afghanistan?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'm not going to discuss JTF 2 operations, but I can tell you that they had all the authorities necessary to carry out the work that they deemed necessary on the ground. They also knew the vulnerabilities.

What I'm emphasizing here is that interpreters and their families also made it out. I had the pleasure of meeting some of them.

The Chair: Mr. Bezan.

Mr. James Bezan: Minister, did the Canadian Armed Forces at any point in time express any concern about the change in direction after August 13?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: First of all, it was added to; it was not a change in direction. This was a government policy that was created at the behest of members of Parliament, and, to be honest, mostly from your party.

They were added on. The Canadian Armed Forces, as you know, do their work. They had a list, and they executed that policy.

One thing I can assure you is that when it comes to the people they work with, they did absolutely 110% to make sure they supported everyone in the evacuation.

● (1725)

Mr. James Bezan: How well were you briefed, and what further direction did you provide after the evacuation started, and after the news release came on August 13? Between August 13 and August 27, when the evacuations ended, how involved were you in that?

• (1730)

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: When it comes to the list and the immigration measures, that's done through IRCC, but I'm—

Mr. James Bezan: I'm talking about the military operations.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Of course. I'm trying to get to that.

Our job was to conduct the evacuation safely. That's what we were focused on. A lot of the questions about prioritization are things for IRCC to discuss. What we were doing was creating the environment for a safe evacuation.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Bezan.

For the final five minutes, we have Mr. Collins.

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

Minister, welcome to the committee.

Earlier, you offered to read the letter you received from the MPs of multiple parties.

Can you read that for us? I think it's important to get it on the record and hear what those members had to say at the time.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Absolutely. Thank you.

It's about a page and a half long. I will mention a key portion that I did want to discuss.

Twenty-five members of Parliament wrote:

On March 25, 2020, ISIS-K terrorists attacked Gurdwara Sri Guru Har Rai Sahib in Kabul and murdered 25 Sikhs, including four-year-old Tania Kaur. At the funeral for the victims of this attack, a second attack was initiated involving the detonation of an explosive device. Earlier, in July 2018, the senior leadership of the Sikh Afghan communities was assassinated in a suicide bombing that took 19 lives in Jalalabad. In June 2020, an Afghan Sikh, Nidan Singh Sachdeva, was abducted from a gurdwara and tortured for weeks. That was followed on July 17 by the abduction of 13-year-old Salmeet Kaur who was kidnapped from a Kabul gurdwara where she was living with her blind mother and younger brother. Salmeet's father was killed in the March attack. ISIS-K has sworn to exterminate all Afghan Sikhs and Hindus if they do not leave Afghanistan.

I'll jump down a bit, to where it states:

Without internal flight options, international resettlement has become the only viable solution for Afghan Sikhs and Hindus. In light of the immediate threat faced by these communities, we urge you to create a special program for Afghan Sikh and Hindu refugees under 25.2 of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, so that they can be brought to safety in Canada.

It goes on a bit and is signed by members of Parliament, the majority from the Conservative Party of Canada. It also includes members from the NDP and the Green Party. I will also note that the former minister of defence, Peter MacKay, signed it as well. What they're getting at here is that this was going....

The date of this letter was a year prior. Advocacy work had been taking place for some time by all parties here. The then minister of immigration added this, because members of Parliament wanted this added. Once it was added, it was my job to execute the government policy. That's exactly what I did.

I used to answer these questions about who I am 20 years ago. It was disturbing at that time. However, one thing I reflected on was

that, when there are questions like this, address them. That's why I appreciate this opportunity to clarify what actually took place. Sometimes we forget that, in all of our advocacy. There is work happening among different groups.

I'll be honest with you. I didn't even realize that the 25 MPs.... I was focused on other work, but there were MPs working with NGOs all over, creating a policy within government. It shows that the work of members of Parliament actually has an impact.

Mr. Chad Collins: Does it surprise you that no members of the Bloc asked you for the same?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: It's disappointing, but I will also say, in fairness, that, when I was the minister of international development, they supported vulnerable groups in many other places.

I was more disappointed that.... The information about the government policy is for all members of Parliament to see. The statement I provided earlier had the information clearly stated. This was government policy, and I was executing government policy at that time.

Mr. Chad Collins: It's a bit of a coincidence that the motion that brought you here to the committee today is from the party that didn't sign the letter.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I think that's something that could be talked about.

Mr. Chad Collins: For sure.

For the benefit of the committee, can you read the names of the people who signed?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Excuse my pronunciation of some of the names.

They are Ziad Aboultaif, Kenny Chiu, Todd Doherty, the Honourable Kerry-Lynne Findlay, Garnett Genuis, Tracy Gray, Jasraj Singh Hallan, Tamara Jansen, Erin O'Toole, Brad Redekopp, Jag Sahota, the Honourable Tim Uppal, Karen Vecchio, Arnold Viersen, Brad Vis, Cathay Wagantall, the Honourable Peter MacKay, Matt Green, Leah Gazan, Jack Harris, Lindsay Mathysen, Brian Masse, Peter Julian, Elizabeth May, Paul Manly and Jenica Atwin, when she was part of the group.

Mr. Chad Collins: Thanks, Minister.

The Chair: Thank you.

That brings our session to a close.

I want to thank the minister for his appearance here today and for offering his clarification of the story.

Colleagues, we're going to suspend for a moment while the minister leaves, and then we will go in camera. We will then resume our deliberations.

With that, we are suspended.

[Proceedings continue in camera]

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