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Chair: Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury

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• (1105)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Fayçal El-Khoury (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 37 of the House of Commons Subcommittee on International Human Rights of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

[Translation]

Today's meeting is taking place in a hybrid format. Members are attending in person in the room and remotely using the Zoom application.

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would like to outline a few rules to follow for witnesses and members.

[English]

Please wait until I recognize you by name before speaking. For those participating by video conference, click on the microphone icon to active your mike, and please mute yourself when you are not speaking.

[Translation]

For those listening to the interpretation on Zoom, you may choose the floor, English or French at the bottom of your screen. For those in the room, you can use the earpiece and select the desired channel.

[English]

For members in the room, if you wish to speak, please raise your hand. For members on Zoom, please use the “raise hand” function. The clerk and I will manage the speaking order as best we can, and we appreciate your patience and understanding in this regard.

[Translation]

In accordance with our routine motion, I wish to inform the subcommittee that all witnesses have completed the required connection test in advance of the meeting.

[English]

Today we are meeting to begin our study on the situation of unlawful transfer of Ukrainian children to Russia.

Mr. Garnett Genuis (Sherwood Park—Fort Saskatchewan, CPC): I have a point of order, Chair.

The Chair: Yes, go ahead.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: In the meeting notice, there is time set aside at the end for a budget discussion. We had informal discussions in advance, and I think there is agreement to deem the budget adopted so that we can use those 15 minutes as additional time to hear from witnesses.

The Chair: Would you like to discuss it now, or take the—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: No. Is there unanimous agreement to do that?

The Chair: Is there consensus?

Yes, go ahead, Ms. Damoff.

Ms. Pam Damoff (Oakville North—Burlington, Lib.): I just got a note that there is going to be a new budget circulated, Garnett.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Okay.

The Chair: It was just circulated.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I think we can maybe do it quickly.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Yes, that's fine.

The Chair: Is that agreed to? Is everything about this idea okay?

(Motion agreed to)

Mr. Garnett Genuis: That leaves them with a full two hours, then. Thank you.

The Chair: Our meeting begins with our study of the situation of the unlawful transfer of Ukrainian children to Russia. It is my pleasure to welcome the witnesses who have joined us this morning.

From the International Center for Ukrainian Victory, we have by video conference Ms. Olga Alvazovska, board member, and Mr. Andrii Mikheiev, international law expert.

Unfortunately, Ms. Kateryna Lytvynenko from Save the Children is not able to join the meeting.

From the Yale School of Public Health Humanitarian Research Lab, we have Mr. Nathaniel Raymond, executive director.

[Translation]

You will have up to five minutes for your remarks, after which we will proceed to questions from subcommittee members.

I will let you know when you have one minute left.

[English]

Thank you for agreeing to appear today.

We will start with the International Center for Ukrainian Victory and Ms. Olga Alvezovska.

Madam, you have up to five minutes for opening remarks. The floor is yours.

Ms. Olga Aivazovska (Board Member, International Center for Ukrainian Victory): Thank you to everyone. I hope I will have more time during the question-and-answer session with my colleague Andrii. We will share as much information with you as possible.

Dear members of the subcommittee and dear participants, since February 24, 2022, when Russia started its full-scale invasion, numerous violations of fundamental human rights and devastating crimes have been committed by the Russian army and politicians against the civilian population of Ukraine.

The most fearful impact of such offences is related to the most vulnerable group of the Ukrainian population—children. Ukrainian children are suffering from all kinds of crimes, which were identified by UN Security Council resolutions as grave and indefensible offences against children during the international armed conflict.

More than 510 children are officially reported as killed and more than 1,141 as wounded as a result of Russian attacks. However, the real numbers are suggested to be much higher, considering that those killed and injured are in currently occupied territories, where it is impossible to obtain exact information.

Numerous children have suffered different forms of sexual violence from Russian soldiers, with grave psychological and physical consequences. It is reported that 19,546 children have been forcibly transferred to the territory of the Russian Federation and the occupied territories of Ukraine and forcibly integrated into a Russian environment through adoption, placement into an educational institution, and the automatic obtaining of citizenship without any realistic chance of returning to Ukraine and being reunited with their families. After 20 months of Russian aggression, Ukrainian authorities have brought back to Ukraine only 300 of such children.

Indiscriminate air strikes by the Russian Federation resulted in almost 4,000 facilities and institutions for children being damaged or completely destroyed. These actions by the Russian Federation culminated in the forced deportation of Ukrainian children, their illegal adoption by Russian citizens and their forced participation in re-education, including military patriotic education.

According to the genocide convention, the forcible transfer of children from one human group to another is genocide. As well, direct incitement for such action is a crime in itself. One key international humanitarian law principle underlines that the occupying power should refrain from bringing in irreversible changes that would fundamentally alter the status of characters of occupied territories.

There are reported instances of children being taken by occupying authorities to camps in Crimea, allegedly for safety reasons and allegedly for recreation activities, but they were never returned to the homes of parents here. In the institutions where children were held, they were forced into so-called integration programs aimed at

forcing on them the Russian view of what is happening in Ukraine and in the world and also in culture and society.

The Russian Federation began setting the stage for these crimes years before the full-scale aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. This process dates back to at least 2008 and had been marked by increasingly hostile language, laying the groundwork for the rejection of Ukraine's existence as a state, a nation group and a culture. Multiple international bodies, including the UN commission of inquiry on Ukraine, found continued systematic and widespread use of torture and indiscriminate attacks harming civilians, including children.

Among the devastating consequences for children, the commission has committed to investigating the illegal transfer of unaccompanied minors by Russian authorities to the Russian Federation. The commission also highlighted that some of the rhetoric transmitted in Russian state media and other media may constitute incitement to genocide.

• (1110)

These types of public statements also include denials of the existence of the Ukrainian state and of Ukrainians as a separate nation group. There are also statements that promulgate hatred and glorify terrorism against Ukrainians and that represent direct and public incitement to eliminate Ukrainians. This falls under the definition of a criminal act prohibited by the convention, namely incitement to genocide in the form of complete or partial destruction of the Ukrainian nation group.

That's why we want to highlight that transferring Ukrainian children to Russia involves other activities, such as the re-education of these children and the breaking of their identity as Ukrainians. These activities have a direct connection with genocide.

Thank you for your attention.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond, executive director, you have the floor for five minutes.

• (1115)

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond (Executive Director, Yale School of Public Health Humanitarian Research Lab): I want to thank the members of the Subcommittee on International Human Rights for inviting me here today to speak on the urgent issue of Russia's systematic campaign of transfer, deportation, re-education and adoption of Ukrainian children.

As my colleague mentioned, the UN Security Council has identified six grave breaches against children that occur during war. These are the killing and maiming of children, recruitment or use of children in armed forces and armed groups, attacks on schools or hospitals, raping or other grave sexual violence, abduction of children, and denial of humanitarian access for children. All six of those appear to have been perpetrated by Russia against the children of Ukraine.

Before I proceed, I want us to remember all the other millions of children around the world, from Gaza to Israel to Sudan, who are also suffering these grave breaches now.

I want to briefly summarize today the public findings of the research that our team at the humanitarian research lab at the Yale School of Public Health has undertaken on the issue of Ukraine's children specifically. This work is undertaken as a member of the U.S. State Department's Conflict Observatory program, which uses high-resolution satellite imagery and open-source data to document alleged war crimes in Ukraine.

The HRL team has been studying the forced deportation and transfer of Ukrainian children since the summer of last year. We published our first report on the subject, "Russia's Systematic Program for the Re-Education and Adoption of Ukraine's Children", in February 2023. We expect to have more reports coming out this fall in the coming weeks. We will provide those to the subcommittee and prepare a briefing if requested.

What I want to start with is that we have concluded as of February that at least 6,000 Ukrainian children have been taken to at least 43 facilities inside occupied Crimea and Russia to be subjected to so-called "patriotic re-education"; military training in the cases of at least two facilities, including one in Chechnya; and in some cases, forced fostering and adoption. These facilities stretch over 3,500 miles from the Black Sea to the eastern Pacific coast at Magadan, including one location in Siberia.

Many of the children have returned from the camps, but an unknown number—at least approximately 600 as of February 2023—remain in the facilities. The number of adopted children is unknown, but we at the humanitarian research lab and Conflict Observatory are working to answer that question literally as we speak.

It is important to understand that the children range in age from six months at the time of capture to eighteen years of age.

Here is some quick background on the origins of the program.

The program really began in 2014, with so-called "patriotic re-education" occurring at summer camps in Crimea and also in the occupied areas of Donbas. Since the full-scale invasion of 2022, President Vladimir Putin has significantly ramped up this operation to an almost industrial scale, through multiple means and measures. In early 2022 he removed laws that once prevented the adoption of Ukrainian's children. The facilities available for re-education purposes have been rapidly expanded in number and capacity. We think there are an additional 40 facilities besides those we identified in our report in February.

I want to really make clear in the limited time I have left that there are four groups of kids. There are the kids at the camps. There are the kids who were captured on the battlefield, whom we know the least about. A third group, called "the evacuees", are children taken from facilities that were Ukrainian state facilities in places like Kherson, Zaporizhzhia and Kharkiv in the early phase of the invasion. They likely make up the majority of the children being adopted. The fourth group, which we call the "filtration kids", were likely separated from their parents in filtration camps set up in Donetsk after the fall of Mariupol.

To close, there are four concrete steps that the Canadian government can take to help get these kids home.

• (1120)

First, the Prime Minister should designate a high-level focal point on issues related to unlawful deportation and transfer of Ukraine's children within the foreign ministry to coordinate Canada's activities on this matter, particularly with Ukraine, the United States and other allies.

Second, the RCMP, CSIS and other agencies in Canada's law enforcement and national security community have a critical role to play in proactively coordinating with the Ukrainian government on information sharing and the development of common data systems to support individual child identification and return.

Third, CIDA should work with its Ukrainian partners to identify and financially support the massive capacity needs around identification, reintegration and psychosocial support.

Last, fourth, Canada should leverage all of its diplomatic might to persuade other countries, particularly the Global South and all other allies that have not yet condemned these alleged war crimes—which were indicted by the International Criminal Court a month after our report's release—to denounce these activities and call for these kids to come home.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Raymond.

[*Translation*]

I thank the witnesses for their comments.

We will now go to the first round of questions from members of the subcommittee.

Mr. Garnett Genuis, you have the floor for seven minutes.

[*English*]

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you, Chair.

Ms. Pam Damoff: I have a point of order, Chair.

Do we not have another witness to hear from?

The Chair: No, she is absent.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Okay. I'm sorry.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to the witnesses.

Thank you to my colleagues in all parties. I know that there is a great deal of interest in this study from all quarters.

I was very keen to see this study happen, although I will say that I found reading the information and hearing about it profoundly chilling and difficult as a parent. I think we have an obligation to push this information out there and expose to Canadians and to all others watching what is happening here, because it's so dark and so evil.

I'd like to hear from the witnesses about how systematic these efforts are. What level of central planning and coordination is involved, and how high up the chain is this going? How far back does it go in terms of preparation for these kinds of activities?

Maybe we'll start with you, Mr. Raymond, and then we'll go to the witness from the International Center for Ukrainian Victory.

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: We have very detailed information about the chain of command. It starts with Vladimir Putin and his direct action deputy. Overseeing both the adoption and camp aspect of the program is Maria Lvova-Belova, the ironically titled children's rights commissioner.

The critical middle management of this program consists of at least four regional governors plus the ministry of education, and there's sort of a sick sister cities program whereby specific communities, including at the mayoral level, are sponsoring the transfer of specific children from specific communities.

There is also a constellation of civil society groups and non-state actors, which we are documenting right now, who also help facilitate the full pipeline of the program, which is identification, targeting, logistics for transport, and housing. In some cases, there are activities related to judicial obfuscation of the children's identities in the adoption system. It is a whole-of-government and a whole-of-society program. Command and responsibility lie with Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova, but it goes all the way to the municipal level.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you.

Vladimir Putin and Maria Lvova-Belova are already subject to ICC warrants.

I think that this committee will likely want to recommend further severe sanctions against other entities and individuals involved in this, so we would appreciate follow-up in writing as that documentation process proceeds with identifying individuals and organizations that could be subject to Canadian sanctions.

I'll go to our witnesses online now in terms of the information you have on advance planning and coordination and the specific individuals and entities responsible.

• (1125)

Mr. Andrii Mikheiev (International Law Expert, International Center for Ukrainian Victory): I would like to say first, on behalf of the ICUV.... My name is Andrii Mikheiev, and I'm the international law expert.

I would like to thank Nathaniel very much for the detailed explanation of the chain of command and of all of the organizations and individuals responsible for the adoption of children and their further integration into the Russian cultural environment. We don't have a lot of information to add about these specific people, but we would like to add the activities that take place regarding such children.

We have established the fact that Russian families are currently materially and spiritually encouraged to adopt Ukrainian children—Ukrainian orphans and children deprived of parental care—as soon as possible. Also, the central local legislation in Russia has been simplified and facilitated to make these procedures faster and sim-

pler, despite the level of protection that should be applied to ensure all of the children's human rights in the process of adoption.

We have also established that currently the occupational authorities in the occupied territories of Ukraine are threatening those parents who don't want to let their children enter pro-Russian schools—new Russian schools established with pro-Russian programs—or the teenaged children who themselves don't want to enter such assignments. They're threatening to deprive such parents of their parental authorities and put their children on the adoption list.

This is part of the reintegration policy of the Russian occupational authorities, both in Russia and in the occupied territories of Ukraine.

Thank you very much for your attention.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Mr. Mikheiev, I have one minute left.

You said “spiritually encouraged”. I wonder if you can clarify whether the implication is that there's involvement of the Russian Orthodox Church in aspects of this program.

Mr. Andrii Mikheiev: I'm sorry. We don't have any facts about the participation of the Russian Orthodox Church in these procedures.

However, during the local events and during the interviews with people from such families, the people are encouraged to adopt Ukrainian children. They say they're doing a good job for the state and they're doing a good job for such children. Also, everything possible is done to complete this process as quickly as possible, despite everything.

That's what I meant by “spiritually”.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Okay. Thank you. I didn't mean to put words in your mouth, but thank you for that clarification.

I think I'm out of time, but I'll have more.... I have 10 seconds. Okay. I'll save them for later.

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: May I respond to the question on the Orthodox Church?

Very quickly, there are a number of potential locations that implicate the Russian Orthodox Church that are under investigation now and that we have not come to a confident finding on. However, it's important to note that Maria Lvova-Belova's husband is a member of the Russian Orthodox Church as a priest, and those connections have been present in other previous programs.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now I invite Mr. Yvan Baker to take the floor for seven minutes, please.

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

I want to start by thanking my colleagues for inviting me to join you today. It's a real privilege to be part of this study. Thank you for studying this situation.

To our guests from Ukraine, *Slava Ukraini*.

Thank you very much, Mr. Raymond, for being here as well.

To our friends from Ukraine, why is Russia deporting children?

• (1130)

Ms. Olga Aivazovska: This is a very easy question if we look at some parallels from history. I usually share my personal story that my son is the first generation in my family to suffer from Russia, from Moscow. It was the tradition in the USSR stage of development of this empire that the first priority for Moscow was to have the children under the power of the authoritarian type of ideology.

Many people in Ukraine who had a connection with different protest groups, even during the USSR period, spent years and years in prison, separated from their children, many of whom were hosted by a very proactive Communist group, which took the children into their families and tried to re-educate them.

It's not something new for us, for Ukrainians. That's why I'm usually trying to share a parallel. This is genocide, an ongoing war for our nation, for the identity of Ukrainians, which wasn't started in 2014. The tools that Moscow is using now are the same as they were before. The separation of children from their families and the re-education for those who were in occupied territories for many years—from 2014—are forming the potential tool for the continuation of this war of Ukrainians against Ukrainians. Try to just imagine a boy who was only 10 years of age when Donetsk was occupied and who suffered under the Russian propaganda for 10 years, and now this boy has taken up arms and is fighting against Ukrainian soldiers. This is the best human capital for the Russian army, because Russia is willing to continue this war for years.

It's truly a long war, but when we are speaking about tools and methods, Moscow is using the same ones as before. It's nothing new for us, but we are calling for this practice to stop and we are sharing our opinion about the unacceptable use of children against the Ukrainian nation, and how it is unacceptable to change their identity. This is because we have to survive, not only physically as a state, but as a society with a new generation of Ukrainians, which we will do, all of this country, after the end of the war.

Mr. Yvan Baker: Thank you.

What I hear you saying is that this is something that Russia has done in the past. I'm hearing that this is something that is designed to erase the Ukrainian nation, and that some of these children will be engaged in actually fighting Ukraine to help further erase the Ukrainian nation.

Is that a fair summary?

Ms. Olga Aivazovska: Yes, indeed.

Mr. Yvan Baker: What happens to the children while they're in captivity?

Mr. Andrii Mikheiev: If I may please take the floor, if we are talking about the orphans and children deprived of parental care, they are being put in specialized facilities for orphans and similar categories of children. However, there were also cases of children who actually had families being deported away from their parents after their filtration process and then put into orphanages and other kinds of facilities.

After they are placed there, they are put through the Russian education programs and they are also put on the list to be adopted by Russian families.

There is one more important aspect. According to the latest amendments to the Russian legislation at this central level—amendments to the laws, amendments by presidential decree in the Russian Federation—the process of obtaining Russian citizenship by minors was facilitated. Currently children get Russian citizenship automatically or through application by the guardians or the care institutions.

Moreover, it's very important to say that according to the law, the new Russian citizens may not withdraw from their Russian citizenship until they fulfill their obligations to the Russian Federation in full, which means that, for instance, male Ukrainian children, who will now get Russian citizenship, theoretically may not withdraw from Russian citizenship in the future until they serve their military service.

• (1135)

Mr. Yvan Baker: Thank you very much for that.

Mr. Andrii Mikheiev: That's generally what's happening.

Thank you.

Mr. Yvan Baker: *Dyakuyu*. Thank you. that's very helpful.

I think I have only about 30 or 45 seconds left.

Mr. Raymond, could you fill in the picture for those watching at home? What happens to these children?

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: Well, let me tell you what we know and let me tell you what we don't know.

In the case of those in the re-education camps, they are not allowed to speak Ukrainian. If they had a phone, the phone was taken. In many cases, for those boys over the age of 13, we were seeing evidence of military training. In the case of one camp in Chechnya called Mountain Key, children were learning how to use firearms and operate military vehicles.

For the younger children, there is exposure to Russian folk songs, military history and visits to major battlefields. Among the children who have returned, the 300 mentioned earlier, there has been some allegation of physical abuse that forensically, from our perspective, has not been confirmed yet, but that's under investigation.

For children who are in fostering and adoption—and this was alluded to, I believe, by one of the other speakers—there is a cash incentive for these children to be adopted. It's \$200 per month to up to \$600, including bonuses for children with severe disabilities, so you're looking at an economic aspect—

The Chair: Can you wrap it up, please? You have exceeded one minute.

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: That's important to put it in context.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Raymond.

[Translation]

Mr. Trudel, you now have the floor for seven minutes.

Mr. Denis Trudel: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to ask a question that is more or less related to today's topic, but that has been bothering me for a while now.

A year ago, at the beginning of the war in Ukraine, the subcommittee received a visit from Mr. Grandi, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Mr. Grandi came to tell us that, in his opinion, the war in Ukraine was having a major impact on all refugee crises around the world. He said that all the governments and media outlets were concentrating solely on Ukraine, and that this had repercussions on other crises and other needs that might exist around the world.

My question is for Ms. Aivazovska and Mr. Mikheiev. Are the events in Israel and Palestine over the past three weeks having an impact on your conflict, because the world lens is less focused on Ukraine right now and is turned towards Palestine? Does this have an impact on the ground and on the involvement of governments in the war, in one way or another? Can any of you answer that question?

[English]

Mr. Andrii Mikheiev: I'm sorry, but could you please repeat the last part of the question?

[Translation]

Mr. Denis Trudel: The current conflict between Israel and Palestine is attracting global media attention, as well as the attention of governments in Europe, America and around the world, much like at the beginning of the war in Ukraine.

I would like to know if the attention paid to this new conflict is being felt on the ground, on the battles underway on Ukrainian territory. Is the fact that the entire world is no longer watching the conflict having an impact on the ground at this time?

[English]

Ms. Olga Aivazovska: I can answer, because it's a little bit of a political question rather than a legal one.

I believe that pain is the same everywhere. That's why we have sympathy for those civilians and children who are suffering because of other wars. At the same time, I strongly believe this is very dangerous for Ukraine and Ukrainian society, because without military aid and without financial aid, Ukraine will not have the capability to continue to defend itself and its own society.

You may know how many people are fighting now—we have an army with one million soldiers—but without military aid, this army will not have tools and equipment for not just counterattacks and campaigning but for protecting what we have already liberated, because Russia is in the stage of starting their bigger counterattack. Without fighter jets, without equipment that will be helpful for protecting those territories that are already liberated and for continuing counteroffensive attacks on the southern part of Ukraine, first of all, Ukraine will not save itself and its own society.

When the Ukrainian army liberated the territories not only in Kyiv but also in Kharkiv and in the southern part of Ukraine, we saw how many victims we had there without any access to the information on the ground.

• (1140)

That story about mass graves and tortured people who had any type of connection with the Ukrainian government or were related to the pro-Ukrainian position.... They were in danger. That's why military and financial aid is the main topic for us. It's about how to save and protect the people, how to stop this full-scale invasion on the ground and how to protect what we have already liberated.

I hope Canada will continue to support us. I just got back from D.C. a few days ago, where we had an advocacy mission. We tried to make people aware of why it's so important. We believe that Israel, Palestine and Ukraine do not have to be on the same page with regard to attention, but our sustainable and capable partners have to focus on both conflicts if they wish to support a world without war.

I'm sorry for this political statement, but it's about the suffering of civilians and protecting the children and people in need, for now. Please continue to support Ukraine. Please don't refocus from one topic to another, because all people are important, for sure. Ukraine is not just about news; Ukraine is about the ongoing war, and this war will end. The battle will end.

[Translation]

Mr. Denis Trudel: Thank you very much.

Mr. Raymond, if I understood correctly, some Ukrainian children have a different status. Children who have guardians, who have relatives, are stuck in Ukraine and sent to Russia.

How is consent given? Should we be talking about parental consent or kidnapping? In the case of orphaned Ukrainian children, would you use the term “abduction” to refer to what Russia is doing to those children?

[English]

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: Thank you. That's a critical question.

There are three baskets of consent scenarios.

The first is outright abduction. An example of those children is Anna. She was used as propaganda, along with about 11 or 12 other children, in a Defender of the Fatherland Day rally in Moscow. Those children were taken directly from the battlefield after Anna's mother was killed by an artillery shell. It was what can only be described as a straight-up abduction.

In the second basket, there has been consent or a theatre of consent. We have seen some of the power of attorney forms that parents who have “willingly” signed their children over were forced to sign. In one of the power of attorney consent forms we found, the party issuing that form was left blank, meaning those forms cannot be considered meaningful in any way.

In the third consent basket, as was alluded to before, there is direct pressure or duress put on the parents. In some cases—

• (1145)

The Chair: Can you wrap it up, please?

We exceeded the time. I gave you several seconds.

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Trudel.

[*English*]

Now I would like to invite Ms. McPherson to take the floor for seven minutes.

Ms. Heather McPherson (Edmonton Strathcona, NDP): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I would like to thank all the witnesses for being here today and sharing this testimony. It is harrowing to hear, but I think it is very important to have this study undertaken.

Mr. Chair, I certainly hope there is an opportunity for us to hear from Save the Children at a later date. I understand the witness was ill today and wasn't able to join us. Knowing that Save the Children has repatriated close to half of the children who have been reportedly repatriated, I think it would be important for us to hear from them.

I have a couple of questions.

First of all, one thing I heard in the testimony that I'd like to dig into a bit is the use of Ukrainian children as potential soldiers against Ukraine. I think the testimony we heard from the International Center for Ukrainian Victory was probably the most clear on that.

Perhaps you could talk to me a bit about what we know of the use of these children as child soldiers, or even the potential of them being used as child soldiers.

Ms. Olga Aivazovska: Thank you for your question.

If I might, I have a few sentences.

Let's separate the 10 years of ongoing war from the last 20 months. I testified for the committee last year, when Russia organized fake elections in the occupied territories. You may know that I had one very important message: After this process, Russia would mobilize Ukrainian civilians—men—for their army. This process is ongoing, but we are speaking about adult men in occupied territory that is now formally, according to the Russian understanding of their constitution, under their jurisdiction. They are doing what they want with Ukrainian civilians in occupied territories.

However, the war was started in 2014. That's why many of the children who were under the occupation from that stage were re-educated to be so-called Russians. They truly believe they are serving the DNR and LNR as civilians from those territories. Russia used their opportunity to re-educate children to be pro-Russian soldiers. Now they are using them as meat, because Russia doesn't care how many men with Ukrainian passports are killed on the battlefield.

We're speaking about that period from 2014 to 2022. Russia used young people and children for re-education, and now they are serving publicly. We have many interviews from the occupied territories from before that tell us that these territories are almost empty of men. Those men are used for battle without any problems, so they are killing Ukrainian men from both sides through these tools. Now we've had, for 20 months or so, this new stage of the war after the full-scale invasion. We've already had six cases of teenagers who were used for the Russian army. One of them was killed on the battlefield. We have testimony about this young person.

We have to cover all the years—nine years of ongoing war—and understand that this is a mass problem. It was started when these young men were children, when Russia occupied the Donetsk and Luhansk.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Obviously, the use of child soldiers has been clearly identified as part of a genocide. It is a precursor. It is something that happens when a genocide is being perpetrated, which we know is happening.

Mr. Mikheiev, do you have anything to add to that? You brought up the idea of forced military service that could be ongoing because these children are becoming Russian nationals without wanting to be.

Could you talk a bit about that as well for me, please, sir?

• (1150)

Mr. Andrii Mikheiev: Yes.

Except for the one official, established case of a minor voluntarily joining the Russian forces and being killed in combat—he was 16 years old—there are a lot of established cases of teenagers who are, happily, still alive, but they are trained in military programs.

Using children directly as soldiers is not the only way Russia is using children for war purposes. There are also known cases of Russian authorities using children from the occupied territory for intelligence purposes to gather information. They also make teenagers patrol the territory and bring information on people who have links or connections with the Ukrainian armed forces or the Ukrainian law enforcement authorities.

We also know of cases, officially established, in which Ukrainian children unknowingly provided data by locating objects through a mobile game developed and launched by a pro-Russian IT company that is controlled by the Russian special services. The children didn't know that by playing this game and by getting virtual awards and virtual money for uploading the photos of the objects, they were providing data for future missile attacks.

The range of Russia's methods of using children for military purposes is very broad. It's not only the direct use of them as soldiers.

Ms. Heather McPherson: That's absolutely disgusting.

Thank you very much.

Mr. Chair, I'll pass the floor back to you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. McPherson.

Now we'll go to round two.

I invite Mr. Ehsassi to take the floor for seven minutes.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi (Willowdale, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all of the witnesses for this very helpful testimony on an incredibly harrowing development that we should all be concerned about.

I will start off with Mr. Raymond.

Thank you so much for the work that you're doing. If you don't mind, I first want to ask about the conflict observatory program that you prefaced in your introductory remarks. Could you tell us more about that program? All of us are concerned about the need to leverage technology to do a better job when war crimes or crimes against humanity are being committed.

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: Thank you.

The conflict observatory program is a project of the Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations at the State Department. It is really the first effort, at scale, to support independent researchers, such as the humanitarian research lab at Yale, in having access to particularly the commercial satellite data needed at scale to monitor events in non-permissive environments, such as Ukraine. We also operate in Sudan and have been focused on attacks on villages in Darfur, and in bomb assessment and human security assessment in Khartoum and Omdurman.

In the case of Ukraine, the children's work is just one part of what we do. Our initial work was supporting the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe on doing bomb damage assessments of hospitals and schools in the first phase of the war. Then we did an assessment, with the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee, of damage to crop storage infrastructure, using algorithmic machine vision to be able to count damaged silos.

We've additionally done open-source reporting on the filtration camps, on the issue of torture in Kherson and on passportization, which was mentioned earlier.

What's critical in the case of Ukraine is that there is an extremely large amount of open-source data. What broke the case open through the conflict observatory with regard to the kids' issues is the fact that the local officials were taking selfies. It was from this that we were able to identify the latitude and longitude of the locations and begin satellite surveillance. Without this program, we would not have had these assets to do this reporting publicly.

• (1155)

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you very much for that.

You referenced the OSCE. As you know, towards the end of last year, the OSCE did a report on this issue of the missing children. Its finding was that the Russian authorities have lost track of a lot of these children. In your opinion, is that deliberate, or is it simply incompetence by the Russian authorities?

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: What we are seeing is tactical intent in terms of the concealment of children. That is clear, and I can give multiple examples.

There are other cases in which it is not clear that there was any initial accounting system, depending on which cohort of kids we're talking about. Each cohort has sort of a different level of accounting that is either happening or not happening. The critical point here is that under the Geneva Conventions, Russia should have registered these children immediately, within days, through a system called Restoring Family Links.

The challenge now is that we have to attempt to do that registration act without Russia's co-operation. We are basically reverse-engineering the identities through open-source data, which is extremely impossible. We're making progress, but it's like when you go to a fair and there's a jar of jelly beans. We're having to guess how many jelly beans are in the jar, and we don't even know how big the jar is.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: If I could go to your recommendations, one of your recommendations was that Global Affairs Canada have a point person to deal with this issue. Could you explain to us whether there is currently a working group among various countries and whether other countries have endorsed such an approach?

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: What I'm about to say does not necessarily represent the views of the United States government. It's my own personal opinion.

I was in Rome at the Holy See at the end of September, and what I saw was an immense need for coordination among allies on this issue. There is not the type of central coordination across nations that we need to have.

I say all the time that it's like a car accident. Trauma surgeons have a golden hour after the car accident. We're still in the golden hour, but the golden hour is slipping away on these kids. They will never be easier to find and never easier to return.

I have done child identification work related to Guatemala that took decades. It took DNA, and many of the parents were dead by the time we found them. I don't want to see that happen here, but right now, in the absence of international coordination that's proactive and extremely expansive in terms of the four missions here: There's a hostage rescue mission, a law enforcement mission, a psychosocial support mission and an ID-missing-persons mission.

Each of those is extremely hard. Our minimum number is 10 times the size of 9/11 in terms of identifying missing persons.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: I certainly hope that various countries will come forward and endorse this approach you have in mind, but have any other countries done so as of yet?

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: To my knowledge, there's no central coordination at present.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Could you explain to us the consent process that is involved? I suspect a lot of the consents that the Russians have received were obtained under duress. Could you speak to that specific issue as well?

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: The consent issue is for the camps. It would happen under duress and often happened with these power of attorney forms that were not appropriately executed.

In the case of the battlefield kids and the filtration kids, there was no consent whatsoever.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Ehsassi.

Now I would like to invite Mr. Genuis to take the floor for seven minutes, please.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you, Chair.

For our witnesses with the International Center for Ukrainian Victory, could you describe further the mechanism of coercion of parents? In some cases I read about, they were told that it was a week-long camp, and then the kids were not returned. In other cases, they were coerced in various other ways.

What are the mechanisms whereby parents are coerced?

• (1200)

Mr. Andrii Mikheiev: I'm sorry. You mean they were coerced by the Russian occupants, right?

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Exactly. They were coerced into allowing their children to go maybe for something they thought was temporary, and then they were unable to see their children after that.

Mr. Andrii Mikheiev: When the children, together with their parents, were first deported to the territory of the Russian Federation, they were coerced by the argumentation that there was no other way. It's very important to understand that despite the fact that international organizations, including UN authorities, offered alternative corridors for Ukrainian children and their parents to pass, Russian-occupying authorities refused to let them go through these corridors and insisted that the only way for them to emigrate from the zone of military action was through the Russian territories, that it was the only way of saving them and their children from the war and from death. Of course, it was very hard for these parents not to agree with these arguments to save their children's lives.

After they were deported to the Russian territories, all of them passed through the obligatory procedural filtration, and often filtration did not go well for the parents and parents were arrested. In these cases, the children were deported from their parents. Also, there were cases of children being forced to remain in the Russian territories while their parents were allowed to leave, and there were no possibilities for those parents to immediately reunite with their children.

As for the evacuation and the conditions that took place during the evacuation, we must note that according to its obligations under the Geneva Convention and under the additional protocol 1, the occupying state should not evacuate the civilian population unless there is no other way. In these cases, a lot of alternative ways to evacuate children with parents and orphans and children deprived of parental care to the territory controlled by Ukraine existed; therefore, Russia directly violated its obligations—

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you.

Mr. Andrii Mikheiev: —and this is not a legitimate evacuation.

Thank you.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you.

To really understand the anatomy of this, there are cases of children being taken without any pretense of parental consent from the battlefield or from orphanages, and then there is the case of extreme coercion, in which Russia invades Ukraine, engages in indiscriminate bombardment of civilians, denies humanitarian corridors and then tells parents that the only option for the safety of the children is effectively to give us your children or we're going to kill them, and then they're taken to Russia. It's in these kinds of ways that Russia undertakes this policy. Is that a fair summary of what's unfolding?

Ms. Olga Aivazovska: Yes, and I'll add a few other options, because the policy of Russia doesn't have one face.

Many people are suffering in occupied territories because adults and families know that if they don't give their children a chance to enrol in Russia's very aggressive education system and involve their children in it... We already have testimony that the Russian administration was sharing information that without that enrolment, their children would be adopted by others. Those parents who are still with their children in occupied territories under Russian government control will be separated from their families if they do not attend the Russian schools with pro-Russian education full of Russian propaganda, so this is—

• (1205)

Mr. Garnett Genuis: The threat of abduction is explicitly being used as a tool to intimidate people and to push them to comply with what the occupiers want.

Ms. Olga Aivazovska: Yes, as sanctions. Separation of the family is a sanction against parents who will not give their children to the Russian education system.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I may have to come back to this, because I have only one minute left, but I want to probe the Russian narrative and propaganda involved here. I've seen that the architect of this policy, Ms. Lvova-Belova, has herself adopted 18 children. You mentioned people taking selfies.

What is the story they are trying to tell through what they're doing here?

Mr. Andrii Mikheiev: If I may, I would also like to note, regarding your previous statement, that I wouldn't say that Russian authorities threaten to kill children if their parents don't give them. It would not be fair. They just say that there is a high risk that they will die because of the war, because of missiles, if they are not relocated through the corridors.

As for your next question, if we are talking about Maria Lvova-Belova and their policy, they all try to create a picture in which they are saving Ukrainian children from the war. They are saving Ukrainian children from this—

The Chair: Can you wrap it up, please?

Mr. Andrii Mikheiev: I'm sorry?

The Chair: The time is over. I will give you several seconds if you want to wrap it up, please.

Mr. Andrii Mikheiev: Yes, thanks.

They are trying to say that they are saving Ukrainian children and that their delegation is legitimate according to international law.

The Chair: Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel will now take the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Denis Trudel: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Mr. Raymond, earlier you talked about children abducted from the battlefield. I imagine that no trace of these children is ever found.

On the one hand, do we know where they are and in what conditions they are being held? Also, are there children who are forcibly abducted? Based on the various techniques we hear about, there is the threat of adoption in Russia and the forcible signing of consent forms. Are there cases of children returning to their parents? What do we know about the psychological state of these children?

[*English*]

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: It is very important to state clearly that the children who have been returned to date, the 300, due in part to the incredible efforts of Save Ukraine, are almost entirely children from the camp kids population.

As it relates to those who were in the Ukrainian state institutions, there has not been any return, to our knowledge, of those kids or the kids from filtration or the battlefield. At this point it's almost entirely kids who were in the camp system.

This is important because it means that for groups three and four, the battlefield and filtration kids, we don't even have a denominator in terms of comparing how many exist in that population. The difficulty, the absolute complexity of trying to figure out which kids in the battlefield scenarios are missing because they're dead or missing because they're in Russian custody is almost impossible in the current conditions.

We believe the kids in those groups that we know the least about are in the Russian national adoption system, and we are working quickly to confirm that and to report publicly on it.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel: You talked about camps. Can you tell us what those camps are and in what conditions the children are being held?

• (1210)

[*English*]

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: As was alluded to by our colleagues, the camp system actually goes back to the Stalin era and the Soviet Union's pioneer camps.

In the case of Crimea, one facility, Artek, was built by Stalin. In the case of other facilities such as those in Moscow, they're often referred to as family centres. There are some that are thematic in nature. One is a music camp. There is a computer science camp. They differ based on age groups, and the conditions differ as well.

The fact is that we have only 300 kids back and that gives us a very minimal base of evidence right now to understand the condi-

tions inside the camps. All we have as the primary base of evidence on conditions in the camps are the statements of the Russians themselves and the photos and videos they release on websites. We need to have access for the International Committee of the Red Cross and UN access to be able to figure out exactly how these kids are being held. We don't know.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel: I have a question for all three of you.

Do you consider everything you are telling us about today to be war crimes? Would you even go so far as to say that the fact that Russia is abducting children across Ukraine to convert them, without anyone being able to verify their wellbeing, is a crime against humanity?

[*English*]

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: Yes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel: Ms. Aivazovska, what do you think?

[*English*]

Ms. Olga Aivazovska: Yes. I totally agree. This is a crime against humanity, but we need to develop our case on genocide, I believe.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel: Mr. Mikheiev, what do you think?

[*English*]

Mr. Andrii Mikheiev: I'm sorry. I was just logged out. Could you please repeat the question?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel: My question was about everything we have heard this morning and about the 6,000 children who were kidnapped, in one way or another, by Russia on the battlefields of the war in Ukraine.

Do you consider that a crime against humanity?

[*English*]

Mr. Andrii Mikheiev: Well, actually, we are not here as prosecutors and judges to establish that these are the particular crimes, but for me, these are obviously war crimes as established by article 8 of the Rome Statute. To be determined as crimes against humanity, the widespread and systematic nature of such actions should be established by the law enforcement authority and by the court.

As for me, the deportation of Ukrainian children looks more like the crime of genocide as it is defined by the 1948 genocide convention and also by article 6 of the Rome Statute. Despite the fact that these children were not physically or biologically destroyed or killed, the forcible deportation of children from one group to another group is considered genocide, as it deprives such a group of the chance for survival and their subsequent existence. By the courts—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Mikheiev. I'm sorry, but I did give you one minute extra.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel: Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: I would like to invite Ms. McPherson to take the floor for five minutes, please.

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

Again, thank you to the witnesses for being here and sharing this testimony with us.

I'm going to ask about some of the solutions that we know may work and that we know worked for the 300.

I understand what you said, Mr. Raymond, with regard to those being the children who were in camps and not the children who were part of the adoption piece. From my understanding, working with the CSOs, or civil society organizations, that are working on the repatriation, including CSOs based in the Russian Federation, is one of the best ways to make sure that this is happening. Could you talk about that? What is the best way for us to be supporting this? Is it funding for these CSOs and helping with these relationships?

• (1215)

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: It is important to state that unfortunately the pipeline of children returning seems to be significantly decreasing to stopping. In recent weeks, we have not seen children returning from the camps or other locations.

I think there needs to be two main lines of effort. One, yes, is supporting CSOs, but the second line of effort should be the main effort, which is direct pressure on President Putin and on Russia to have a policy of registration and a policy of return consistent with the Geneva Conventions. As the Vatican has stated and Maria Lvova-Belova has stated, there has been contact between the Vatican and Russia on negotiating returns of children. That process needs to be organized, with the full community of nations, including Canada, supporting it.

Ms. Heather McPherson: I struggle with that, though, because it doesn't seem that Putin is responding very well to direct pressure. In fact, we have heard from Save Ukraine that the Russification of Ukrainian children has increased since the ICC put forward the arrest warrants. I'm worried that Canada doesn't have the capacity to apply that direct pressure or that the Russian Federation is in fact not listening to that direct pressure. I'd love some further comment on that.

You talked about working with CSOs. Is working with Russian Federation CSOs a reasonable approach, or should that not be happening?

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: At this point, the CSO route seems to have gone as far as it can. In terms of working with Russian CSOs, to be very clear, you're working with the Russian government, regardless of whether it is branded as a CSO.

I think it's important that we realize that there is no silver bullet here. We are in a situation where our options are limited, but concerted unity amongst the international community is essential. I wish I had something better to tell you.

Ms. Heather McPherson: I see that our other witnesses would like to intervene. Please go ahead.

Ms. Olga Aivazovska: Thank you very much for this practical question. I don't have an ideal answer for you, but it's about a complex of measures.

First of all, Canada can continue to help develop the capacity for central preliminary documentation and investigation of crimes of aggression. In a future perspective, we will battle children when Russia is punished, and high-level politicians in Russia will know that it's politically and legally tracked for the future. Canada can use more intelligence resources for this tracking, and it will be very helpful.

Then our focus should not be on Russian CSOs. I totally agree with the position that none of the CSOs in Russia are independent, because they are under the legislation about foreign agents and all of them are under monitoring, so I can't trust Russian CSOs, for sure.

Those eyewitnesses who fled from Russia went through the border with Estonia. As I know, there is only one investigator in Estonia who is working on a daily basis on war crimes. They are interviewing people who can be eyewitnesses for all of us, but they are scared that they have already become collaborators or that they will be shamed because if they stayed in Russia for a temporary period, they will have this image of being pro-Russia.

We have to understand that we need support for these territories that are close to Russian borders. We need to cover all eyewitnesses and those who have already left Russian territories and get the testimonies from this audience. We will need to develop trust between these witnesses and law enforcement bodies from territories close to Russia.

The third point is that aside from the tribunal on acts of aggression, which has already started its work, and eyewitnesses, we need to use intelligence. OSINT and other tools are very well developed and you can find people in Russian territories too. Many of them still use mobile phones and cards. If they use them even from time to time, we can find them.

Many of them can potentially testify to Ukrainian authorities, but first of all to our foreign partners, because sometimes they are scared, as I mentioned already, of being collaborators according to Ukrainian legislation. We have to be aware that they are victims too. They need to testify in order to have justice and truth at the end.

• (1220)

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you so much.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. McPherson.

Now I invite Ms. Damoff to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you, Chair.

Thank you to all our witnesses for being here today. I find this testimony absolutely heartbreaking and really difficult to hear.

Do you think Canadians are aware of what's happening to these children? If not, how can we raise awareness amongst Canadians about what's happening, other than our hearing today?

Maybe I'll start with Mr. Raymond.

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: I think back to the incredible public communication effort of the Canadian government during the Ottawa process leading to the anti-personnel land mine ban. I spoke at Dalhousie University many years ago, and I was impressed by the immense amount of literacy and engagement of students and adults on that issue because of the work of Global Affairs Canada and others.

I think a similar public campaign is needed here, and I wish we were doing it in the United States as well as I think Canada could probably do it here. What's really important to communicate to the public is that this issue is about the special protected status of children in war. If we fail on the Ukraine issue in terms of getting these kids back, or if we get them back the wrong way, in basically a hostage trade, we are degrading the power of that special protected status forever.

That's what's at stake here. It's not just Ukraine's kids; it's all kids in war. We could do this wrong and end up with a precedent of using kids as chips in a dangerous poker game. The public needs to understand that, and it can't be allowed to happen.

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you.

I'd like to put my next question to both sets of witnesses.

I've read about child soldiers in the work General Roméo Dallaire has done, and reintegrating these children is not always easy. They have literally been indoctrinated into a different way of life and a different way of thinking.

I'm just wondering. I know that only 300 kids have been returned from camps thus far, but should there be some thought about some kind of financial support and programs in place to support these kids when they first come back?

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: The psychosocial challenge here is going to take years and decades. I defer to my Ukrainian colleagues, who are more expert in what's involved than I am.

We have an identification challenge and a reintegration and psychosocial support challenge. Coordinating donorship from the international community now is going to ensure long-term success. I've seen this go wrong in multiple other conflicts.

You're right that we need to get coordination and problematization on the reintegration and psychosocial aspects now. However, I defer to my colleague.

Ms. Olga Aivazovska: I totally and generally agree with the first speaker, and I need to highlight that we don't have much time, but we can start, because we already have case studies from those who

have gone back to Ukraine but who stayed in Russia for a very short period.

At the same time, there is nothing new about awareness, psychological support and mental recovery, which have to be developed as a big program for Ukrainians, because we have to understand that those children who were kidnapped or relocated to Russia will return when they are more or less adults. We need to develop this program for everyone in Ukraine, but focus on those who are already back in Ukraine, because we have access to those who were, practically speaking, victims, and were part of this case at this stage of the history.

From my perspective, we need to focus on the program that will be developed for all Ukrainians, because the reintegration process will be very difficult. I already mentioned those who were children in 2014. They were reintegrated into a Russian cultural and educational landscape, and we need to understand that it's already about generations and not just about children who spent half a year in Russia or Russia-controlled territories.

• (1225)

Ms. Pam Damoff: Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now I invite Mr. Genuis to take the floor for five minutes.

Go ahead, please.

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

I have a couple of questions specifically for the Center for Ukrainian Victory.

First of all, Mr. Raymond provided us with some very specific recommendations in terms of what he wanted to see from the Government of Canada and from the international community. Do you have similar recommendations that you'd like to share with us?

Mr. Andrii Mikheiev: I would like to take the floor on this question.

Despite the push to facilitate the process of the return of children and the reuniting of families, I think it's very important to contribute to establish liability and bring all the perpetrators to justice.

First of all, as my colleague Olga has already provided, it's essential for Canada and all other states to collect all these statements of crime from the victims who succeeded in fleeing from Ukraine and who appear, for instance, in Canada, and then transfer this information to Ukrainian law enforcement authorities.

It's also very important to help collect evidence about these crimes and to make stronger arguments about deportation of children as a war crime and as a crime of genocide.

It's also very important to advocate the rapid establishment of a specialized tribunal on aggression, because Russian military aggression is the main source of all the other subsequent international crimes that are happening now, including the crime of deportation of children.

These are further recommendations and our further wishes that we are expecting from the Canadian government.

Thank you.

Ms. Olga Aivazovska: May I...?

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Yes, please.

Ms. Olga Aivazovska: One small recommendation is about journalist investigators, who are very useful. We know they have done a lot in the past about different crises and in cases in Ukraine and in Russia.

Let's support them instead of CSOs in Russia. They have already given us access to very important information about Russian aggression and the war against Ukraine.

One more very small comment is that the joint investigation team, which is working on the investigation of war crimes under the different jurisdictions, needs to be more open for civil society and needs to take what civil society has already collected as the data, as preliminary interviewing, and put this information into an official text, because we live in a parallel world, and this is not useful for future justice.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you.

If you have additional information, additional recommendations, as well as names of individuals who should be subject to sanctions in terms of holding people accountable, I know the committee would welcome that in writing.

I should mention for stakeholders, or others watching, that the committee does have a portal on its website for receiving written briefs as well, so other organizations that are aware of individuals or that have specific recommendations can provide those.

As well, I have just a comment for you, and then I will invite your response.

I hear sometimes from people here in Canada who suggest that they think Ukraine should accept a loss of territory in order to have a temporary ceasefire or to try to have peace. Your testimony underlines for me how important Ukrainian victory is, because this isn't only a question of where the border is; it's also a question of what horrific crimes people will be subject to if they remain under occupation.

Hearing this testimony further underlines and explains for me the intense resolve that Ukrainians have for restoring their territorial integrity so that Ukrainian families don't have to continue to be subject to this kind of horrific violence against children and against the family.

I wonder if you have any comments on how this contributes to the Ukrainian resolve for victory.

• (1230)

The Chair: Please answer quickly, because time is running out.

Ms. Olga Aivazovska: We have special analytical materials about the endgame scenario for the Russian war against Ukraine. According to this scenario, there isn't a possibility to have a sustainable peace through diplomatic or political tracks. Russia had 50 wars during 200 years, and sometimes the results of the wars had only one outcome, which was about when the next war would start.

According to our surveys, which we did in Ukraine during the summer period, there are three topics that are not negotiable for Ukrainians. First of all, it's about reintegration. The second one is about NATO integration. The third one is about territories.

For Ukrainian people, territories don't mean land. It's about people who are staying in occupied territories without any potential defendant of their own rights, without Ukraine on these territories and its own power in these territories.

That's why territories will not solve any problems. I participated for two years in a means process as a negotiator from the Ukrainian side because of my electoral capacity and expertise on this topic. Please trust me that if some territories are given to Russia, it will not solve any problem, because these territories will be used as a military base for further activity and aggression against another part of Ukraine or against neighbours in the future. For sure, this decision looks like a solution, but it's always failed. We have already spent the lives of hundreds of thousands Ukrainian soldiers in liberating those territories that were occupied by Russia on February 24—

The Chair: Thank you; your time is up. You had more than one minute on that. Thank you.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Trudel, you have the floor for five minutes.

Mr. Denis Trudel: Mr. Raymond, let's talk about accountability.

Several dozen Russian officials at the federal, regional and local levels are directly involved in the physical and political operation of the children's camp program. I think that's mentioned in your report.

It also states that at least 12 of these officials were not on any U.S. or international sanctions list as of at the beginning of this year, as of February 2023, to be precise.

I will put three questions to you now, since I won't have enough time to ask them one by one.

In the children's camps program, how big is the role played by the public servants who are not sanctioned? Would sanctions actually have an effect?

To what extent do the existing sanctions affect the operation of the program? Are international sanctions targeting certain officials having an impact on the program?

Finally, how many officials identified and involved in the children's camps program are currently subject to Canadian sanctions? Could Canada do more in this regard? Could these sanctions have an impact on the program?

[*English*]

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: I'm going to go quickly on three, two, one.

Three, on your last question, I don't know who Canada has sanctioned, but we will provide to the committee the full package that we gave to the Department of Commerce and the Department of the Treasury on the U.S. side. We will work with you to make sure that we have sanctions coherence on our side in terms of the information we provided to the U.S. government.

Second, it is critical to hit the middle management. Let's talk sanctions and also indictments. Right now the top of the food chain has been indicted, but is critical to put pain on the middle level of the operation. I think what needs to be shown to those who are running the program at the local level is that they are going to suffer consequences internationally. They are the least insulated from the effect of sanctions and indictments. I think that it is essential that we move down the food chain and put sanctions on the lower level.

• (1235)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel: What steps could Canada take to have a positive effect? In your opinion, officials at the local level should be made aware of the sanctions that could be imposed on them. How can we, as a country, intervene? Targeting officials at the local level seems difficult to me internationally, but is it possible? Can Canada use its influence in some way?

[*English*]

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: We translated a conversation that Maria Lvova-Belova was having with local officials on a video in which she said, “Don't worry about the sanctions. They don't even know how to spell your name.”

I'm telling this story because she was having to communicate with those further down the food chain to basically assuage their concerns that they would face legal or international consequences. It is important that we show those who were looking for comfort from Maria Lvova-Belova that we know who they are, that they will not be able to send their kids abroad to school, that they will not be able to open a bank account, that they will not get a visa, at the very least, and that in some cases they'll be indicted.

Let's say it doesn't work. Well, we need to try.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel: Do you have any examples of countries that are more proactive than Canada when it comes to sanctions targeting this program? Can you give us some examples of countries that could serve as a model, that are putting pressure on Russia and its officials and that are having a direct impact on the program?

[*English*]

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: I can't evaluate Canada's sanctions regime on this topic. The United States and the European Union have similar sanctions regimes on similar individuals. They moved quite rapidly after our report came out in going down the list of those on our chain of command chart.

I think it's why international coordination is so important. It's for examples like this that there needs to be a common sanctions regime. Right now there isn't. There are overlaps, but overlaps are not a strategy.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Trudel.

[*English*]

Now I invite Ms. McPherson to take the floor for five minutes, please.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

The sanctions conversation is very interesting to me. I would say that Canada is not very effective at actually enforcing our sanctions. We're quite good at putting people on the list, but we're not very good at enforcing the sanctions. We also have a portion that the government has introduced with regard to the seizing of assets, which may be useful if it were to get off the ground, for those middle-level folks you were speaking about, Mr. Raymond.

I'm also going to ask about one other thing with regard to your testimony. You spoke about indictments, so what you would like to see is the ICC issuing further arrest warrants for some of those middle-level people. Is that what you're asking for?

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: The President of the United States has allowed the sharing of information now with the ICC on these matters. We are actively engaged in sharing right now all of the underlying data from our public investigations and our forthcoming reports. We are doing that to be able to facilitate further investigation and, yes, potential indictment by the ICC of other officials.

It is extremely important for the law to be applied across the chain of command. Command responsibility rests at the top. As we've seen, going back to the Nuremberg tribunals, where the first case brought at Nuremberg was on the abduction of Polish children by the Nazis—from which we get the term “crimes against humanity”—it is important that the full chain of command be subjected to accountability. That's what we're supporting.

• (1240)

Ms. Heather McPherson: I certainly would like to be able to get that list from you, because I think that you're accurate when you say that it is more effective when more countries are imposing the same sanctions.

I'm very supportive of the ICC doing this work. Of course, it is that balance that you've raised. The ICC is a slow mechanism. It takes a long time for justice to come through the ICC. We need to use our diplomatic might and the other tools that we have at our disposal because, as you also mentioned, the very short window of time to make sure that these children are returned to their families is rapidly closing.

I do have some questions for our other witnesses, for our online witnesses.

You've spoken a lot about what is happening with these children and how they're being taken from their families and orphanages. Do we have any indication, or have you received any indication, of whether or not any of these children are leaving Russia and going to third countries? Is human trafficking with these children happening, outside of just going back to Russia? Are they going to other regions? Could you share any information you might have on that as well?

Mr. Andrii Mikheiev: We may state now that the majority of children who were deported to the territory of the Russian Federation still remain in the territory of Russia and in the occupied territories of Ukraine within facilities where they were put. Of course, in some cases some children were returned, children who actually had parents and families and whose families put in their best efforts, addressed the authorities, addressed specialized NGOs and were lucky to establish contact and get their children back, but compared to the number of children who still remain there, this amount is just peanuts. It's only several hundred of them. The majority are still there.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Of course. Ultimately, that's where the Canadian government can also offer support. Clearly there's the diplomatic piece, the pushing for increased sanctions and using our voice to raise this issue and providing funding for mental support for those children who have been returned, but there's also funding for organizations that are doing the work of trying to reunify these families. That is another key role we could play. Is that accurate?

Mr. Andrii Mikheiev: Yes, exactly, but we also must understand that we should not focus only on the return of each particular child. It's essential to work out the general approach, the general international legal mechanism to demand from the perpetrator that they return the children. It is very important to do all these in combination.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Absolutely. Thank you very much.

The Chair: Thank you. Thank you, Ms. McPherson.

I believe we still have some extra time. We have the choice to do another round of questions for two minutes for each party or to allow the witnesses to give us more thoughts and more explanation. It's up to you to decide.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: We could do both. We have 16 minutes left, so we could do two minutes each and then have eight minutes back.

Ms. Anita Vandenbeld (Ottawa West—Nepean, Lib.): Mr. Chair, could I have two minutes at the end on another issue?

The Chair: Yes.

I would like to invite Mr. Ehsassi to take the floor for two minutes.

Mr. Ali Ehsassi: Thank you, Mr. Chair. That's very kind and generous.

I think it would only be fair to look to the witnesses' expertise and ask them if they have any concluding thoughts they would like to share with the members. I have to say, speaking on behalf of I am certain everyone here, that we have found their testimony to be very useful, but it could very well be that things were not addressed because we didn't ask the right questions.

Why don't we go to Mr. Raymond first?

• (1245)

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: Thank you. That's very generous.

I want to take a moment to talk about the technical issues that are involved in identifying missing children, regardless of where you are identifying them, because this committee will face funding requests that it will have to evaluate on the technical aspects of this complex issue.

First, in Bosnia with the Srebrenica massacre, something called an ante-mortem database was developed, which I think is a best practice that could be supported here. It would require a large amount of ground activity, but I think it's the only way to do it and to do it safely. In the ante-mortem database, family members and community members were interviewed about the missing and deceased individuals before their deaths. Having that database that could then be later combined with DNA and dental records was essential in the successful identification of thousands of the missing.

A similar type of database must be created here. It requires four types of information: investigative case files, DNA, non-DNA forensics, and basically the ability to match against both relational and object databases in terms of facial recognition and open-source data—

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Raymond and Mr. Ehsassi.

I'm sorry. I have to be exact with the time.

Mr. Genuis, you have two minutes. Please take the floor.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Thank you.

Just jumping back to my last round, the point about territorial integrity was so important for me and I think for all of us to reflect on.

You made the comment that territorial integrity is not just about land; territorial integrity is about people. It's about the people who are stolen when territory is taken. Russia is not just stealing land; it's also stealing people. That should put into sharp focus the critical importance of Ukrainian victory and the urgency of supporting Ukraine and doing everything we can to support Ukraine.

We haven't talked about the Belarusian role in this. There is an article in Foreign Policy detailing involvement of the Belarusian government and the routing of children through Belarus. I wonder if either of our witnesses can speak to that.

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: We will be releasing a report on this subject imminently. That's all I can say for now. Stand by.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Okay. Please refer that directly to the committee.

Do our folks online want to share at all about the Belarusian involvement in this situation?

Mr. Andrii Mikheiev: Yes. We would like to say that it's very important to investigate and talk publicly about the impact and the role of Belarusian authorities. There is not much information that is publicly available, or not much information that can be obtained about their role, but we know for sure that they used the territory of Belarus as a transport corridor and that some Ukrainian children were put into camps in the Belarusian territory.

That's why the actions of the Belarusian officials are no less criminal in this regard than the acts of the Russian authorities. They should be cited properly and the perpetrators should also be liable.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Mikheiev.

[*Translation*]

I now invite Mr. Trudel to take the floor for two minutes.

Mr. Denis Trudel: I am intrigued. You published a detailed report on a complex situation. After all, this is a country that is at war. Ukraine and Russia are at war right now. I am impressed by the amount of information you have managed to garner, even though the situation on the ground is very difficult.

Firstly, how do you go about getting that information? Secondly, are the international organizations that could come and support this process able to safely go into the field? Are things working well?

Is access to Russia's territory facilitated by international organizations that could better document what we are talking about today?

• (1250)

[*English*]

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: It is important to know that we have no secret information. It comes through the large-scale analysis of open-source information that comes primarily from, in this case, social media parents looking for their kids, combined with the data being released through bad tradecraft by the Russians, combined with the fact that they are not hiding it.

This is primarily a propaganda operation. They are attempting to rebrand a failing invasion. In so doing, they are providing us with the ability to extract a map from their social media, which allows us to use things like satellites to then monitor patterns of life, including logistical patterns.

What we have here is the fusion, the mosaic effect, of multiple streams together.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Denis Trudel: Am I to understand that the Russian state is bragging on social media about kidnapping Ukrainian children?

[*English*]

Mr. Nathaniel Raymond: Our number one source of information, 100%, is the Russian government. When online, I am attacked by information operations that say, "How do we know?" Well, we know because the perpetrator told us.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Raymond.

[*Translation*]

Thank you, Mr. Trudel.

[*English*]

I invite Ms. McPherson to take the floor for two minutes, please.

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

I will give my two minutes to the International Center for Ukrainian Victory guests so that they can tell us what they would like to see this committee do.

Please go ahead.

Mr. Andrii Mikheiev: I would like to add to Mr. Raymond's statement about the character of the deportationists' propaganda operation.

They are boasting about the adoption of children. The number they are providing on children deported to the Russian territories is much bigger. The Ukrainian authorities have established there were 20,000 children deported. The Russian mass media tells of more than 700,000 Ukrainian children officially deported and placed. We think this number is exaggerated, and we don't know how it's accounted for. Anyway, they are not hiding anything.

Unfortunately, a lot of information is still not available to either NGOs or the law enforcement authorities of Ukraine. We will find a lot more cases, unfortunately, after the occupied territories are released, some of them only after the war is finished.

Thank you very much.

The Chair: You still have 20 seconds, if someone wants to express something.

Thank you.

Now I would like to invite Ms. Vandenberg to take the floor for two minutes.

Ms. Anita Vandenberg: Thank you, Mr. Chair and the committee, for giving me these two minutes on another very important issue.

Every year, as we all know, this subcommittee recognizes human rights defenders around the world, whom we choose unanimously as a committee. One of the recipients of that recognition in 2021 was Nasrin Sotoudeh, who is a prominent human rights lawyer in Iran. We learned yesterday through Parliamentarians for Global Action that Nasrin Sotoudeh was beaten and arrested in Iran yesterday. She was attending the funeral of a 16-year-old girl, Armita Gera-vand, who died as a result of her injuries after an incident with the so-called morality police because she wasn't wearing a head covering on public transit. We have word now, through her husband and other sources, that others at that funeral were also beaten and arrested.

I know that as a committee, we all call unanimously for the immediate and unconditional release of Nasrin Sotoudeh and the others arrested alongside her. I seek unanimity. I know I speak for committee members. We condemn this arrest and others like it, and we want to see Nasrin Sotoudeh released.

Thank you.

• (1255)

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Vandebeld. This news is heart-breaking. I believe that the entire committee shares your opinion and asks for her release immediately, without any conditions.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Mr. Chair, I have my hand up. I wonder whether I could have the floor.

The Chair: Yes, please go ahead.

Ms. Heather McPherson: I'm wondering whether or not it would be appropriate for the committee to report this to the House in a statement, or simply report it to the House.

Ms. Anita Vandebeld: Mr. Chair, I'm happy to make that a formal motion.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you.

Go ahead, Mr. Genuis.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I want to strongly agree with the comments made by Ms. Vandebeld.

This subcommittee does important work in bringing light to these issues and profiling people who are heroes fighting for human rights around the world. It's important that we continue to follow up and advocate for them and for all the people in Iran who have faced horrific treatment by the regime.

I'm supportive as well of the proposal by Ms. MacPherson to report that call for release through the foreign affairs committee. That is the process we have to follow.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Genuis.

Ms. Vandebeld, please go ahead.

Ms. Anita Vandebeld: I would propose, then, that the text of the motion be, "The Subcommittee on International Human Rights unanimously condemns the arrest of Nasrin Sotoudeh and calls for her immediate and unconditional release."

The Chair: Thank you. Excellent.

Do you all agree?

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I think the text of the motion should include that the committee reports the motion to the House, but yes, I agree.

(Motion agreed to)

The Chair: Thank you.

[Translation]

Witnesses, thank you for your testimony and for participating in this study on the unlawful transfer of Ukrainian children to Russia. If you have anything further to submit to the subcommittee, please do so through the clerk.

Colleagues, I would like to inform you that some of the witnesses appearing next week are under the age of 18 and may have experienced traumatic events related to the subject of this study. Mental health support will be available to members, staff and witnesses.

[English]

If members would like to receive a briefing about engaging with vulnerable witnesses or receiving difficult testimony, the clerk will help organize a special session. However, it may have an impact on the timeline for this study. If you have questions about the supports available, please advise the clerk as soon as possible.

[Translation]

Because of the sensitive nature of this study and the young age of these witnesses, I will also be more flexible in terms of speaking time, so as not to interrupt the flow of emotional testimony.

[English]

I would also like to remind members that requests to travel for the period of January to March 2024 are due by November 10.

Do members wish to travel during this period? In particular, I think it might be helpful for the committee to visit with representatives of the United Nations in New York. I would like to have your thoughts and whether you approve of it or not.

Go ahead, Mr. Genuis.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: Is there time for us to have some off-line conversations about that? We're a little bit up against the time here, and sometimes it's better if these conversations can happen more informally and/or in camera.

In order to work back from a November 10 proposal, how quickly do we have to give general direction for the development of such a proposal? We have two more regularly scheduled meetings.

• (1300)

The Chair: Member, they could prepare and send their recommendations to me, and then we'll take care of it from there.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: That sounds great. We can send ideas to you to be circulated among the members, and hopefully some consensus will develop by email.

The Chair: Absolutely.

We need them by the end of the week, please. Thank you.

That will conclude our meeting for today—

Ms. Heather McPherson: Mr. Chair, my hand is up.

The Chair: Oh, I'm sorry. Go ahead, Ms. McPherson.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

I have a couple of very quick things.

First of all, in terms of the protection of our witnesses, does the committee have any interest in either allowing the witnesses to be anonymous or allowing them to give their testimony in camera? Would that be reasonable?

I'd like to have a discussion, because this committee has run into problems before when people who have provided testimony to us have been put in danger as a result. I am conscious of that and I wonder whether there are other ways that we can protect their safety.

On the travel potential, I'm very open to that. I think it's important for parliamentarians to do that work, but I would just double-check, before we undertake any work, whether or not the whips from all parties will allow that to happen. I know our whip is supportive, but I also know that we've been told from other whips that it will not be supported. I don't want the clerk to go through the work if it's not going to be possible.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. McPherson.

Go ahead, Mr. Genuis.

Mr. Garnett Genuis: I just have a comment on the witnesses appearing.

Of course, this is very traumatic information and testimony. These witnesses, though, want to be able to tell their story in public. They want to be heard. That's why they want to do this.

I appreciate the precedents in the past of people who are currently at risk, but these aren't people who are currently at risk. The families that have been invited are ones who have been able to get their children out and are now in a safe place to tell their story after the fact.

I appreciate the sensitivities around times and things like that. It is important to underline that these folks, in spite of the pain, are convinced about the importance of our hearing their stories and of the Canadian people hearing their stories so that we can act in response.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Genuis.

On behalf of all the members of the committee, I would like to thank all the witnesses for their presence, ideas, recommendations and thoughts. If you believe some other recommendations may be useful to the committee, please send them in writing.

Thank you very much.

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

An hon. member: Yes.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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