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—
Chair

Mr. Norman Doyle

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• (1530)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Norman Doyle (St. John's East, CPC)): We are now at about 25 minutes before four o'clock, so I think we will begin our meeting.

On behalf of our committee, the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration, I want to welcome a group here today, the German-Canadian Parliamentary Friendship Group of the German Bundestag.

Welcome to Canada, ladies and gentlemen. It's a real pleasure to have you here. We sincerely hope your stay here in Canada will be very productive and very enjoyable indeed.

I haven't had the pleasure of visiting Germany. I haven't been at your Parliament, but I do believe we have some people on our committee who have visited your Parliament. I think Mr. Telegdi has been there, and Mr. Wilson has been in Germany. It would be very interesting to have our committee visit Germany to see how you deal with immigration matters as well. Maybe today you might be able to let us know what the immigration challenges are in Germany. We have challenges of our own.

We recently finished a cross-Canada tour and talked about the Iraqi refugee problems that we have, and we're going to have the UNHCR here shortly after you leave. We heard 52 panels of people right across Canada, dealing with temporary foreign workers, dealing with the Iraqi refugee problems, and dealing as well with the immigration consultants.

Over the next four days we will initiate a study on Bill C-50, which is a bit of a controversial bill in our Parliament. It involves changes to the Immigration Act. There's some controversy among opposition members about that particular bill, so we'll be studying Bill C-50 for a few days. We also had the issue of lost Canadians, which we did a report on and submitted to Parliament.

We're a very busy committee. I think committee members would agree that we are very busy.

Perhaps I'll just go to you. I wouldn't even attempt to try to pronounce the names because I know I wouldn't be accurate. Perhaps I'll leave it to your leader, the head of the delegation, Mr. Klaus-Peter Flosbach, to introduce your members.

Thank you.

• (1535)

Mr. Klaus-Peter Flosbach (Member, Head of Delegation, German-Canadian Parliamentary Friendship Group of the

German Bundestag): Mr. Chairman, we are pleased to be here, and I thank you on behalf of the German-Canadian Parliamentary Friendship Group.

We are a group of about 50 members of the German parliament, representing all five parties. We have a delegation here of six members—only five at the moment—from four different parties. We've had a wonderful three days in Ottawa with a lot of appointments and meetings.

We've met Minister Finley, Minister Baird, and Minister Bernier. We've talked about Afghanistan, about climate change, about a lot of other things, and we've talked about immigration and citizenship.

I think this is an important appointment, and it's the last appointment of our stay here in Ottawa. We will go to Montreal tomorrow morning.

Let me continue in my mother tongue.

The Chair: Any time you're ready, please feel free.

Mr. Klaus-Peter Flosbach (Interpretation): We are the German-Canadian parliamentary group, and our main topic is really to study the relationship between Germany and Canada. As individuals we are not experts in citizenship or immigration. We come from different parties and different committees. But something we also have come to realize during our stay here is that we are really close friends of Canada, though on some topics we may be of a different opinion.

Integration and immigration are important in Germany, but in a way that is different from how they are important in Canada. We do have a lot of immigrants who come to Germany through the open borders that we have had over the past 20-some years, ever since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the lowering of the Iron Curtain. They come to Germany from the east, from the former U.S.S.R.. There are former German citizens, and people who are bringing their families back together. We also have lots of immigrants from Turkey; and we must not forget the great movement of population coming in through the open borders of the European Union, which now has 27 member states.

• (1540)

We are most interested in learning from your experience on integration and immigration, as you have a very organized system of immigration with, as we heard, 250,000 immigrants per year. You also have some controversies on this issue, and we would really like to hear your different and sometimes opposed opinions on this issue.

Now I would like to have the members of my delegation introduce themselves.

Mr. Norman Doyle: Thank you.

Mr. Klaus-Peter Flosbach: My name is Mr. Klaus-Peter Flosbach. I am a member of the Christian Democratic Union. I am interested in finance issues and I am a member of the finance committee. For five years I have been a member of the Deutscher Bundestag.

Mr. Jörg Rohde (Member, German-Canadian Parliamentary Friendship Group of the German Bundestag): My name is Jörg Rohde. I have been a member for two and a half years. I am with the Liberal Party and I'm dealing with social affairs in Berlin. I am the speaker for my party for handicapped people.

Mr. Volker Schneider (Member, German-Canadian Parliamentary Friendship Group of the German Bundestag) (Interpretation): I prefer to speak German.

My name is Volker Schneider. I am a member of the new left party. I am a member of the committee for education, research, and lifelong learning. One of my topics of interest is to study the way people from different countries with different qualifications can be integrated smoothly into the job market of another country. I am also a member of the committee on pensions and the committee on social affairs and also a member of the Council of Elders.

• (1545)

Mr. Gero Storjohann (Member, German-Canadian Parliamentary Friendship Group of the German Bundestag): My name is Gero Storjohann. I have been a member of Parliament since 2002. My party is the Christian Democratic Union. I am a member of the committee on traffic and town development and I am vice-chairman of the committee for petitions.

Mr. Engelbert Wistuba (Member, German-Canadian Parliamentary Friendship Group of the German Bundestag): My name is Engelbert Wistuba. I have been a member of the German Bundestag since 1998. My home state is Saxony-Anhalt. I am a member of the Social Democratic Party and I work in the committee on economics and technology and the committee on tourism.

The Chair: Thank you.

Our committee has representatives, as I'm sure you're aware, from all political parties. On my right is the Conservative Party, which is the governing party. On my left are four members of the Liberal Party. Next to the Liberal members we have the Bloc members from Quebec. Normally we would have one member of the New Democratic Party, but they couldn't make it today.

We will go first to Mr. Telegdi.

As you speak, maybe you can introduce yourselves briefly and make any comments you wish to make. Seven minutes is fine for each speaker.

Go ahead.

Hon. Andrew Telegdi (Kitchener—Waterloo, Lib.): Welcome. I'm really pleased you are here. I have had opportunities to visit Germany on a number of occasions. I came here as a Hungarian refugee in 1957 and we stayed in a refugee camp in Austria. The first word of German I learned was *nicht verstehen*. That's what

everybody kept telling me when I tried to talk to them in Hungarian. I was very pleased to see that when the reunification of Germany happened, it happened through Hungary, when people from East Germany went through Hungary and got to the west and broke down the Berlin Wall. That truly led to the destruction of the Iron Curtain.

I live in Kitchener—Waterloo. Kitchener used to be known as Berlin. We have a high proportion of people who came from Germany. As you probably know, we have the second largest Oktoberfest outside of Munich, and if the people here cannot get to Germany, they can certainly come to Kitchener—Waterloo during Oktoberfest. So I invite my colleagues to do that. When the previous parliamentary committee did the tour, we had a reception at the Concordia Club.

Anyway, that's all nice and great.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr (Jeanne-Le Ber, BQ): We should give some time for translation.

The Chair: We'll need a little bit of translation here, so maybe halfway through, Andrew, you could stop.

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: So they understand my Hungarian accent. That's good.

The Chair: You might be able to stop at some point and come back again.

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: I have a question for you, because you have had experience with guest workers. It seems that our immigration policy in Canada is becoming more under the economic class; it's becoming pretty elitist. You have to have a university degree and you have to speak the language pretty well to come in as an economic class immigrant.

I'll give you an example—and this was done by the CBC. John A. Macdonald, our first Prime Minister, is an example of someone who would not get into Canada under today's system. Tommy Douglas would not get into our country today under this system. Adrienne Clarkson, who was our Governor General, would not have got into Canada. And probably the most popular person, Wayne Gretzky, would never have got here under this system. Some of the people from Germany—for example, Klaus Werner, the founder of ATS—would not get in today under our system; neither would Frank Stronach, who came here, nor Frank Hasenfratz, nor Mike Lazaridis, who is the inventor of the Blackberry.

• (1550)

Hon. Jim Karygiannis (Scarborough—Agincourt, Lib.): He's a Greek too.

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: That's right, he's Greek. He came from Istanbul, Turkey.

You have had experience with foreign or temporary workers or guest workers. My concern is that we have jobs that need to be done in Canada, and even if it's a labourer, should that person be a Canadian or should they be a temporary foreign worker? That's the question I would like to ask you, based on your experience with guest workers.

Does society in this country have a place for someone like a labourer to become a citizen?

Mr. Jörg Rohde: I will try to give an answer in the English language.

First of all, you have to define how to do the work, which is done on your own. So normally I would say Germany was less experienced than Canada in this area. We had a lot of guest workers, beginning in the sixties and seventies, and then Germany made a lot of mistakes, which we now have to cure in the current environment. So it's more on us to ask you how to integrate these people.

We have experience with unskilled workers and skilled workers. We have no legislation for coming into Germany at the moment, as you have for Canada, so I would say you have to give the answer on your own. That is very diplomatic, I hope. So we are keen on getting knowledge about how to integrate.

We have, as Klaus-Peter Flosbach mentioned, a lot of immigrants from former Russia who have less German skills. So they began to build their own villages within Germany and they do not integrate. We see this and we have to react somehow. We have looked at your school system and others. You spend about \$1 billion for English skills and other courses to help your people who come here integrate. So if you only say, "Hey, there's work, and it has to be done," then the person might go back.

This will somehow work, I'm sure. But normally you have a person who will come to Canada, and then the person says, "Hey, I have a nice wife or some kids and they have to come too. We feel comfortable here, we would like to stay." And you have to give an answer later. So it's not easy to handle this.

My party in Germany—which is not in power at the moment—would ask for a rule to establish a process for people coming to Germany, so that the way to Germany is clear and transparent for everyone outside Germany. This is not clear, even for me, in Germany, but we have to deal with it. So we come to learn from you on this issue.

• (1555)

Mr. Klaus-Peter Flosbach (Interpretation): You have to consider that the European market is a market of 500 million people, and Europe has open borders, so people can travel wherever they want to. But social policy is still made on a national level, so this has a very big impact.

We have lots of people with low skills who are unemployed. Also, because of the new member countries in the east, a lot of the production capacity has moved to the eastern countries, where the wages are lower. So what we really need, and what we're trying to get, is a highly skilled, qualified workforce. But that's a lot more difficult to achieve.

Our first concern was not so much integration; it was really the job market. We invited people to come to Germany to work as guest workers. At that time we never thought, really, about integrating them. Germany didn't really consider itself a country for immigration at that time. So what happened was that a parallel society and parallel cities and towns came into existence because of these guest workers getting together.

Now integration is one of our main concerns. The reason we are here in Canada is to try to learn from you. Very soon we are also

going to have a meeting with our state integration minister, who we are going, actually, to invite to come to Canada to talk to you and learn from you as well.

The Chair: Thank you.

Does anyone in the Bloc have any questions?

Go ahead, Mr. St-Cyr.

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: I'll speak in French, so you'll have the translation in English and then back into German.

• (1600)

[Translation]

My name is Thierry St-Cyr and I am a member of the Bloc Québécois, like Mr. Robert Carrier. Since your arrival on Parliament Hill, you have probably heard talk about the Bloc Québécois, a party that runs candidates only in Quebec and that believes Quebec should be an independent country. In the meantime, we work with our colleagues here in Canada, in order to move things forward.

I am very pleased that you are here today. I must tell you that I like Germany very much, having been there several times, including to Berlin, Hamburg, Baden-Baden and, of course to Munich, which is rather my favourite. I must admit to you that I had the opportunity to go to the real *Oktoberfest*, in Munich, and that I really enjoyed it.

I wanted to talk a bit with you about models of integration that coexist and, in certain cases, one might say, are in opposition to each other in Canada. In fact, if you are going to be in Montreal tomorrow, you should speak to representatives of the ministère de l'Immigration et des Communautés culturelles du Québec. It might be interesting to see how the Quebecois model is different and go back home with two models in mind. You could certainly take what appears to be most interesting from them.

As far as integration is concerned, once we have chosen our immigrants—because Quebec chooses in own immigrants under an agreement it has with the Canadian government—how do we integrate those people into society? You spoke of this earlier.

Since the 1970s in Canada, there has been a model of Canadian multiculturalism that is enshrined in the Constitution, according to which several cultures coexist but do not necessarily mix with each other. People come here, and Canada is made up of all these cultures. For example, when we are gathering statistics and people are asked what their origin is, there is a very small majority of people who say they are of Canadian descent. Most say they are of Hungarian, Greek or Brazilian descent, among others.

In Quebec, we have a model we call interculturalism, that is to say we believe that there is a common culture into which each immigrant must integrate, that he must contribute to, but from which he must also adopt common values, traditions and a way of living. This is often a source of disagreement between Quebec and the rest of Canada, because we have two very different ways of seeing integration. Multiculturalism is several cultures coexisting in Canada, and interculturalism is a common culture in Quebec with contributions coming from citizens of various origins.

Have you heard about these different visions between the governments, and in Germany, which one would you be closest to?

• (1605)

[English]

Mr. Volker Schneider: [*Witness speaks in German*]

The Chair: Okay, thank you.

Mr. Robert Carrier (Alfred-Pellan, BQ): What about the translation?

The Chair: Oh, I'm sorry. Our German is not as good as yours.

[Translation]

Mr. Volker Schneider (Interpretation): I am sorry to say that unfortunately, we do not have any model that is in anyway similar to yours. In fact, what happened during the 1960s and 1970s is that we brought "guest workers" over to Germany. We consider that they are guests. They come, they work, and they leave. However, that is not how things happened. They stayed and they took the opportunity to bring their families over. The problem is we do not see ourselves as a country of immigrants. Therefore, we now must solve the problem. We are still at the very beginnings of this process of adjustment. We still have problems that may seem hard for you to imagine.

For example, the problem of dual citizenship was a big one sometime ago. Now, dual citizenship is possible in Germany, but as I was saying, we are at the very beginning of a long learning process.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Komarnicki, do you have any comments?

Mr. Komarnicki is the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, Ms. Finley, whom I do believe you've met with already.

• (1610)

Mr. Ed Komarnicki (Souris—Moose Mountain, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Certainly I'd like to welcome all of you from the delegation here to Canada. I hope you enjoy your stay and visit. I know it's tiring, for sure. You've done a lot in a few days. I know what that can be like.

As the chair said, you've met with the minister, so if I say anything contrary to what she said, accept that as the fact and we'll work from there.

In our immigration system, as we now have it, we have a number of pillars. We have the economic class, the family reunification class, the refugee protection class, temporary foreign workers, and foreign students, who come into our country. And those are there as we work with....

But I can tell you that our backlog has now grown to 900,000-plus, so I'm not sure you want to learn that part of our system. We are looking at making modifications, improvements, and reform to that system, and that's the subject of a fair amount of debate.

We find that if newcomers can have a job, a roof over their head, and a family who can reunite with them who are also able to work, that will go a long way toward settlement and integration.

As a government, we have committed \$1.4 billion, over five years, to help with settlement and integration, primarily in helping those coming to our country for the first time to understand a bit about the culture, how society works, and to help them with the English or French language. We have certain classes that are offered to them. There are over 400 different organizations that work with us in providing those services, and those are funded across the country. One of the issues that come up, of course, is national standards, because we obviously have differences between provinces.

We have found that with some who have come here without a specific job but who have a qualification, there are some concerns about whether their credentials will be recognized. We've taken some steps to have a Foreign Credentials Referral Office that helps to refer these individuals to the appropriate agency—and there are over 400 of them as well—to have their credentials assessed.

We've introduced a program called the provincial nominee program, which allows the provinces to nominate the people they need for their economy. We allow them to nominate these people, and we simply look at the security and health aspect. We find that when the province brings them in, they're likely to integrate into the community and to stay there.

We've also found that the temporary foreign workers, or the guest workers as you call them, have looked for a pathway to become permanent residents. We have said that makes some sense from the point of view that they're already here, they have experienced some of our culture, and they have integrated in one fashion or another. We're looking at pathways to make them permanent residents.

We have something called the Canadian experience class that we're experimenting with. We're saying that for certain skilled workers and foreign students, we'll provide a pathway for them to become permanent residents from within Canada.

• (1615)

I'll just finish with a brief note. I was wondering if you had any comments about finding a pathway for temporary foreign workers, and if you had any questions.

I can say that a lot of people express concerns about our system being complex, that it may be difficult for newcomers to comprehend fully, and that the wait time to get in is far too long, which has been a general complaint. We are trying to address that.

The Chair: Thank you.

If you want to make a comment, you go right ahead.

Mr. Klaus-Peter Flosbach (Interpretation): I have just a few words.

We have five representatives from four different political parties, and tonight we're very likely going to have a beer or a glass of wine together. Nevertheless, we have many different opinions. I would be interested to hear whether there are any big differences of opinion among Canadian parties on the issue of immigration.

Some hon. members: Oh, oh!

Mr. Klaus-Peter Flosbach (Interpretation): I read newspaper articles on Canadian immigration policy, some critical articles as well, talking about the situation in Vancouver, for example. So obviously not everything is running completely smoothly.

You are all members of Parliament, so could you tell me in just a few words what the major differences are on the issue of immigration between the different political parties?

• (1620)

The Chair: I think we could talk for hours about the differences between our political parties on some of these very, very important issues.

You can see there are hands going up everywhere. People want to speak about this issue, but I think I'm going to have to stay with the list of people I have here. I only have about eight minutes left and will have to go to our UNHCR witnesses next.

I have Mr. Karygiannis on my list right now, and then we will have a comment from Mr. Carrier and Ms. Chow. So perhaps I could work them in within eight minutes. It's going to be difficult, but I'm going to be very, very strict on the timing.

Go ahead, Mr. Karygiannis.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Thank you for the next five minutes, Chair.

The Chair: No, it's not for the next five minutes. You go right ahead, though.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: As an individual in the late fifties and early sixties, I did go to Munich. My father was there on an *Arbeitsvisum*. You had difficulties at that time in Germany, and there were a lot of difficulties towards young people and older people. A lot of work has been done since then.

I would recommend that if you really want to know how we're successful in Canada, there's the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which has been translated in over 35 languages. It's available in German. I'm sure that if you leave your addresses with the chair, we can make sure you get copies of that. It could probably be a start for you...if we had a success or did not have a success.

As far as the differences between us on the system of immigration are concerned, or our thoughts on immigration, they go from right to left. From the right, the governing party is for non-inclusion; to the left, everybody is welcomed in.

Thank you very much for coming to see us.

The Chair: Thank you.

All parties except the NDP have been given a chance to speak. So do you have any comments you want to make, Ms. Chow?

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Chair, I still have a couple of seconds left.

One of the things I think we're all interested in is the Iraqi refugees, which we're studying at the moment. Maybe the delegation can elaborate on this at the end and tell us how they're facing the problem in Germany. Maybe they can take a couple of minutes at the end to tell us what they're doing.

The Chair: Maybe we'll have some wrap-up comments, if anyone wishes to do that.

I'll go to Ms. Chow for the last four minutes.

Ms. Olivia Chow (Trinity—Spadina, NDP): I'll only take two minutes, so Mr. Carrier can have two minutes.

I note that there's a debate in Germany about the point system. A point system is rational and clear. The key thing it has to do is to balance the categories of highly skilled and manual labour. In Canada in the last five to eight years, it has not been that balanced; it's been mostly for high-skill, not low-skill labour.

The debate in front of Parliament right now is whether to put aside the point system or allow the minister under the point system to take categories of people and bring them up and down in terms of the wait list. The Social Democratic Party, like the NDP, the New Democratic Party of Canada, prefers just using the point system, so that it is logical and systematic. If the points are wrong, then you change the point system in a way that allows in more types of skills; you do not let the government bypass the point system. That's the centre of debate right now.

That's all I need to say.

• (1625)

The Chair: Thank you.

Ms. Olivia Chow: I just want to say welcome, and thank you for being here.

The Chair: Mr. Carrier.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Robert Carrier: Thank you.

I am also very happy to meet you. I am with my colleague from the Bloc Québécois, Thierry St-Cyr, and we are members from Quebec, which has a very particular approach. We do not have a great deal of time to discuss it, and I am sorry for that. We could learn a lot from each other.

In the current debate on the bill concerning immigration, we do not agree that the minister should be able to use discretionary powers in order to choose immigrants. We want it to be based on a well-defined point system.

I'm going to ask you a question that will be of mutual benefit. I read in the briefing notes that you are currently experiencing a decline in population that was compensated for with a lot of immigration. However, you do not want to turn to immigration in order to settle your problems. On the other hand, you have been part of an agreement with Canadian employers that would see them recruiting temporary workers from Germany.

During our three weeks of travel, we realized that foreign temporary workers cause a great deal of problems. These are people who also want to remain in the country. We have a great deal of thinking to do about that.

I see that you are cooperating to make it possible for Canada to go to you for temporary workers. I would like to know how you see that aspect, given that you are experiencing a decline in population.

•(1630)

Mr. Klaus-Peter Flosbach (Interpretation): I can give you a very brief answer. Our problem is of a different nature. We are looking for skilled workers, but of those who come, none are skilled. The problem is that they are immigrants who are above all looking for a social system. Even if they have no work, they have a right to approximately \$1,000 Canadian paid out by the state. We must find an immigration system that will allow us to solve that problem.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you. For one of your final comments, some of the members want to know about Iraqi refugees. I guess you have a number of Iraqi refugees in Germany as well.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: I think it is only fitting for us to let them know that this committee is currently doing a study on Iraqi refugees.

The Chair: I was about to do that.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Okay. That's what I wanted to ask you to do.

The Chair: So if you want to make a comment about Iraqi refugees and how you're dealing with that problem, it would be beneficial for some members.

Coming up next today we have witnesses from the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. They will be witnesses on the Iraqi refugee study we're presently undertaking. You're free to stay for it, if you want to.

Maybe you can give us a thumbnail sketch, because we're running out of time rapidly. Are you having problems with Iraqi refugees and the settlement of Iraqi refugees in Germany?

Mr. Volker Schneider (Interpretation): In Germany we are having a discussion right now on the way to accept Iraqi refugees in a non-bureaucratic manner. First and foremost, we are concerned about Christians from Iraq, but when we start with Christians we ask ourselves, and then who else? Then we end up with a much more complicated and bureaucratic process than we intended at the outset.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Unfortunately, I can't go to any more questions.

Ms. Raymonde Folco (Laval—Les Îles, Lib.): It's not a question.

The Chair: Okay, is it an observation?

Ms. Raymonde Folco: It's an observation and a question.

The Chair: You told me no questions.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: Trust me, it'll be okay.

The Chair: Be very brief.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: Since there will be a policy and the policy is being worked out, I wonder if one of you gentlemen would send to our chairman the policy, once it is worked out, regarding the Iraqi refugees, and particularly regarding the question of who within the Iraqi refugees you will accept—Christians or everyone.

•(1635)

Mr. Klaus-Peter Flosbach: Okay.

The Chair: Okay, we have no more comments.

Thank you. Unfortunately, we are out of time. Hopefully in our meeting today we provided some information that may be useful for you in tackling some of the challenges you have in Germany with the refugee problem, and immigration problems generally. Hopefully your meetings with the minister have proven to be productive as well. We have a lot to share, and obviously one hour is not enough. So maybe some day we can meet again, hopefully in Germany, to do it all over again.

Thank you very much for coming.

Mr. Klaus-Peter Flosbach: Thank you very much for the most interesting information and discussion. In the last two years there have been 15 delegations from our parliament to Ottawa, and we hope that one of the next delegations will be from our immigration committee. Thank you very much, on behalf of my delegation.

The symbol for Berlin is the bear of Berlin, *l'ours de Berlin*. I have one bear for every member of the committee. *Merci beaucoup. Vielen Dank.* Thank you very much.

[Applause]

The Chair: Thank you. We'll suspend for a few minutes.

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(Pause)

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•(1640)

The Chair: We'll try to get our meeting back to order.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order.

I'd like to know why it is that in some committee meetings we have mineral water and in some committee meetings we do not have mineral water. I would like to ask that henceforth bottles of mineral water be set up along with the coffee and fruit juices at one end of the room.

Thank you so much, Mr. Chair, for your understanding.

The Chair: Thank you. I'm sure the clerk has taken note of that and will act accordingly.

I want to welcome, on behalf of the committee, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Mr. Abraham Abraham, the representative in Canada; Hy Shelow, senior protection officer; and Michael Casasola, resettlement officer.

Welcome, gentlemen.

I think I have a second point of order before I turn it over to you.

•(1645)

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Mr. Chair, I have a point of order or a point of discussion. In having this hearing, I think the committee has overlooked inviting the Iraqi ambassador to Canada to hear his perspective and to hear the country of Iraq's official perspective. I would therefore ask if I may make a motion, or if we can unanimously accept that we should invite him. I have given the coordinates to the Clerk of the House. I spoke to a couple of members and I don't think there should be any difficulty in our allotting him 45 minutes or an hour and we should invite him.

The Chair: Well, I think we will have some time to do that when we get into committee business, which will be the fifth report of the subcommittee. We can include that particular request at that time. We can discuss it at that time, on the subcommittee agenda report, which we'll be presenting in about an hour from now.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Okay.

The Chair: Gentlemen, welcome to our committee. As you know, we've been holding hearings right across the country, and Iraqi refugees have been one of the three items that we've been discussing between Vancouver right on back to St. John's. We met in nine provinces in 12 days and we had quite a bit of discussion on this and other items.

I will turn it over to you to make some opening statements and then we will go to our committee members, who might want to make some comments as well.

Thank you.

Mr. Abraham Abraham (Representative in Canada, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees): Mr. Chair and committee members, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on UNHCR's efforts to address the humanitarian needs of Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons. For some of you who are not familiar with UNHCR's work, I will start with a few words about who we are and what we do.

UNHCR is mandated to lead and coordinate international action to protect refugees and find solutions to refugee problems worldwide. The 1951 refugee convention and its 1967 protocol relating to the status of refugees are the foundation of our work to help and protect the world's refugees.

While our primary purpose is to safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees, UNHCR's work has expanded to include vulnerable groups such as the internally displaced and stateless people. We are working in 117 countries and help an estimated 32.9 million persons, with an annual budget of more than \$1 billion.

I now turn to the situation in Iraq. UNHCR estimates that more than 4.7 million Iraqis have left their homes, and many remain in dire need of humanitarian care. Of these, more than 2.7 million Iraqis are displaced internally, do not have access to social services, and are barely surviving in makeshift camps that are inaccessible to aid workers for security reasons.

More than two million Iraqis have fled to neighbouring states, particularly Syria and Jordan. Some were displaced prior to 2003, but the largest number has fled since that time. Syria hosts 1.5 million Iraqi refugees, which represents 10% of the total population of Syria. In Jordan, we estimate the number of Iraqi refugees to be more than 500,000, of whom half are believed to be school-aged children.

Today, Iraqi nationals continue to leave their country. Restrictions on admission imposed by neighbouring countries limit the movement of those wishing to seek asylum. UNHCR's provisional asylum statistics for the year 2007 show that for the second year running, Iraqis top the list of asylum seekers in the world's industrialized countries. The number of Iraqis applying for asylum almost doubled in one year, from 22,900 in 2006 to 45,200 in 2007.

Iraqi asylum seekers in industrialized countries represent only 1% of the estimated 4.7 million Iraqis uprooted by the conflict. Canada has so far not experienced comparable surges in the number of Iraqi asylum seekers. For example, statistics from CIC show that during 2007, 293 Iraqis claimed asylum in Canada; there were 190 Iraqis in 2006.

Inside Iraq, UNHCR and its partners are trying to do as much as possible to help the displaced, even though security conditions make this difficult. We are providing emergency assistance to the neediest, visiting the accessible displacement sites or makeshift camps and providing non-food items and emergency shelter. In the region, UNHCR is focusing on preserving asylum space. The states surrounding Iraq face significant challenges due to the sheer volume of the displaced population.

I would like to call attention to the generosity of Syria and Jordan, who host the largest number of Iraqi refugees. This is placing a substantial strain on the economy and the societal infrastructure of Syria and Jordan.

● (1650)

UNHCR continues to appeal for more bilateral support, including from Canada, to Syria and Jordan, whose schools, hospitals, public services, and infrastructure are seriously overstretched. We are making every effort to ensure that Iraqi refugees in the region are protected, notably against detention and deportation. We also ensure that the basic humanitarian needs of the most vulnerable Iraqi refugees, including urgent medical cases, single-female-headed households, children, torture victims, and others are addressed, in cooperation with the government authorities and other partners. Registration has been an important step in identifying the most vulnerable.

In 2008, a UNHCR-commissioned survey of nearly 1,000 Iraqis currently staying in Syria has shown that 95% had fled their homeland because of direct threats or general insecurity and that only 4% currently had plans to return to Iraq. A total of 95% stated they had fled Iraq in recent years due to either direct threats, 65%, or general insecurity, 30%. The survey revealed that out of all those interviewed, only 39 out of 994 people, or 4%, are planning to return to Iraq. Of the 39 people, 31% plan to return within the next 12 months and the remainder have not set a date.

The following reasons were given by those not wishing to return: 61% stated that they are under direct threat in Iraq; 29% do not want to return because of the general insecurity in Iraq; 8% responded that their homes in Iraq had been destroyed or are currently occupied by others; 1% said they had no jobs in Iraq; and 1% said that they had no more relatives left at home.

UNHCR has greatly expanded its resettlement activities to respond to the Iraqi humanitarian situation and is seeking from states an increase in resettlement numbers. Last year more than 21,000 Iraqi resettlement cases were submitted by UNHCR to 16 governments for consideration, mainly to the United States, 15,477; Australia, 1,876; Canada, 1,515; Sweden, 938; and New Zealand, 266. The UNHCR target for 2008 is to submit an additional 25,000 cases for resettlement.

Despite our increased referral capacity, we are extremely concerned about the low rate of departures to date. In 2007, only a total of 4,826 Iraqis referred for resettlement actually left for resettlement countries. UNHCR continues to encourage resettlement countries to expedite their processing to enable the most vulnerable Iraqis to depart for resettlement as soon as possible, taking into account that there are still more than 80,000 to 90,000 extremely vulnerable Iraqi refugees in the Middle East in need of resettlement. More resettlement places are required.

•(1655)

Mr. Chair, committee members, regarding funding and pledges, in 2007 UNHCR issued three appeals aimed at helping countries in the region to cope with the humanitarian crisis.

The first appeal for \$123 million U.S., issued in January, committed \$41 million U.S. to Syria for humanitarian assistance.

The second appeal for \$129 million U.S., jointly issued by the United Nations Children's Fund and UNHCR in July 2007, committed over \$63 million U.S. to support the education sector.

A third appeal for \$84,833,647 U.S., jointly issued by the United Nations Population Fund, UNHCR, the United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations World Food Programme, and the World Health Organization in September 2007, aimed to address the urgent health needs of displaced Iraqis living in Jordan, Syria, and Egypt.

In January 2008, UNHCR appealed for \$261 million U.S. for our work on behalf of Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons. A total of \$40 million U.S. will be for Iraqis displaced inside the country. So far, we have received just under half that amount, which is not enough to keep our programs going during the second half of 2008.

Mr. Chair, committee members, in April 2007 UNHCR convened an international conference on Iraq. The main aims of the international conference were to sensitize the international community to the humanitarian impact of the violence and conflict in Iraq, to seek commitments to address the immediate and foreseeable needs, and to identify targeted responses to specific problems. Following this conference, Canada announced that it would accept another 500 Iraqi referrals in addition to the 900 persons it had already committed to accepting in 2007.

Canada has provided a contribution of \$2.5 million Canadian in response to our first Iraq appeal issued in January 2007.

In 2008, Canada's response to the Iraqi crisis was twofold. On March 19, 2008, the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration announced that Canada would receive between 1,800 and 2,000 Iraqi refugees in 2008. In terms of contributions, Canada has so far agreed to provide contributions amounting to \$1.5 million Canadian towards our appeal for Iraq.

Mr. Chair, committee members, before I conclude, I would like to comment briefly on the plight of Palestinian refugees in Iraq. UNHCR remains very concerned about an estimated 15,000 Palestinians in Iraq who are under its mandate. Some 2,700 of them have been stranded for the past year in two camps at the Iraq-Syria border. Palestinians are under constant threat in Baghdad, while

those in the makeshift border sites have recently reported increasing physical attacks and harassment.

In view of their dire condition and the difficulty they have leaving Iraq, UNHCR feels that humanitarian relocation to places of safety is their best option. Thus far, only Brazil, Chile, Canada, and the U.S. A. have indicated a willingness to provide solutions. UNHCR hopes for a greater response from other countries.

Let me now conclude these remarks by saying that UNHCR acknowledges all contributions that have been made so far to address the humanitarian situation faced by Iraqi refugees and IDPs. However, given the magnitude of the needs, we continue to appeal for increased and sustained financial contributions. We also urge the international community to provide bilateral assistance, including financial, technical, and in-kind aid, to host countries, including Jordan and Syria, to support basic services to Iraqi refugees.

•(1700)

UNHCR urges countries to help resettle those vulnerable refugees for whom this is the only solution. Canada is a strategic partner to UNHCR, and we remain deeply grateful to the government and people of Canada for their continuing support of UNHCR's humanitarian interventions worldwide. We all hope that the situation of displaced Iraqis will improve and that Canada will play its due role in alleviating their plight.

Mr. Chair, committee members, I thank you for having me here today.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Abraham. It's been a very heart-wrenching report that you've given us.

I will now go to committee members, who I'm sure will have some comments to make.

Is it Ms. Beaumier or Mr. Karygiannis?

Ms. Colleen Beaumier (Brampton West, Lib.): I was first.

This is a very frustrating situation for a lot of us. There are many of us who were adamantly opposed to this invasion of Iraq, because that is what has caused the instability. I'm not saying that Iraq was always a beautiful place to live, but it certainly had stability.

I want to know what the U.S. provides internally for displaced Iraqis. I want to know who is involved in helping. And if we're talking about financial aid—and of course for everything you need money—are we giving this money to the governments of Syria and Jordan, or are we giving it to NGOs who are taking on the responsibility for these Iraqis?

I guess you can start with that. I'll probably have more to add. Are you wanting us to take more refugees into Canada, or is it basically more money to stabilize the refugees in that part of the world?

Mr. Abraham Abraham: Thank you for these questions, which are very important, of course, in trying to understand the situation in Iraq.

I must say that the U.S. is UNHCR's major donor, and when UNHCR appeals for funds we are referring to funds being given for humanitarian programs. More than 2.7 million Iraqis are displaced within their own country, so clearly there's a very compelling need to support and provide assistance within the country. We do have programs, together with the NGOs, to respond to needs within the country, and of course the response is always to the extent that the funds are available and made available to us.

Outside, we have programs where, again, appeals are made. In this case you'll see that joint appeals are also taking place with other UN sister agencies within the framework of an overall UN response to the situation in Iraq.

• (1705)

Ms. Colleen Beaumier: You've said that 31% of these refugees outside Iraq plan on returning within the next eight to twelve months. Is that because they feel the situation within Iraq is becoming more stable and safer for them?

Mr. Michael Casasola (Resettlement Officer, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees): I'm sorry, I think you might have misunderstood the statistic. It was only 4% of the 1,000 people Ipsos surveyed who said they were looking at returning, and within that 4%, 36% were looking at it within the next 12-month period.

Ms. Colleen Beaumier: Are we looking at an additional problem for the Assyrians? I've had Assyrians approach me, and they're talking about the impending danger of extinction for them. What are your comments on the Assyrians in particular?

Mr. Abraham Abraham: Well, actually there are several groups of refugees in that part of the world, and as far as we are concerned, all the refugees who are in that situation are actually vulnerable. The vulnerable refugees are the ones we are trying to resettle. Among those, you have very special cases of vulnerable refugees whom we'd like to resettle. Those numbers are not much in comparison to the much larger population both within the country and outside the country.

And we would not wish to look at one particular group of either Christians or one particular group of Muslims. We would like to look at them together and see who among them are the most vulnerable and how we could remove them from that situation, and possibly see whether resettlement could be a solution for them.

Ms. Colleen Beaumier: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Beaumier.

Who's next, Mr. Clerk?

The Clerk of the Committee (Mr. Andrew Chaplin): Mr. St-Cyr.

The Chair: Mr. St-Cyr.

From now on, I want you to get the eye of the clerk to get on the speaking list, because I seem to be having some problems. People are telling me that I'm not going to them when I should be going to them.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: I have a point of order, Mr. Chair. When we look at the clerk, the clerk points to you. So will you—

The Chair: I'm authorizing the clerk to take your names from now on.

Mr. St-Cyr.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I thank you for being here.

There are two major requests. First of all we are being asked to make financial contributions on the ground in order to help internally displaced people in Irak. On the other hand, Canada is being asked to consider the possibility of welcoming more refugees. It seems to me—and I clearly want to know what your opinion is, even as I develop my own—that in terms of scale, the difference is enormous. There are 4.7 million displaced Iraqis, and this year, the number of refugees has gone from 500 to 1,400 people. That represents only 0.03%, even less. We will not settle the problem by bringing those 4.7 million people somewhere else. From my perspective, Canada's contribution would certainly be more effective and would help more people if it were to contribute financially in a significant way in order to allow people to live decent lives in their own country, rather than bringing a very tiny number over here so they could survive.

Do you agree with that analysis?

• (1710)

[*English*]

Mr. Abraham Abraham: If you would allow me, I'll respond in English.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: There is no problem.

[*English*]

Mr. Abraham Abraham: I understood your question and I think it's a very valid question. I think the issue here is that the intention is not to resettle the kinds of numbers I've just exposed in terms of the Iraqis who are displaced both within their country and outside the country. In terms of resettlement, we always like to seek more places because of the sheer magnitude of the problem. The numbers of those who are resettled annually is quite small in comparison to the very large millions of people who are displaced and who find themselves outside their country. Our interest is to try to see who among them may be the most vulnerable, and who may be in need of resettlement because the situation where they find themselves is such that this could pose a danger to their lives.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Therefore, if I understand correctly...

[*English*]

Mr. Abraham Abraham: If I might come back to your question, yes, it is, of course, an excellent way to deal with the current situation of such large millions of refugees, to be able to give them assistance there. But again, we are not fully funded; I don't think everyone is fully funded. We do have difficulties in funding. And this is why we continue to appeal for funds, both as UNHCR, as the UN system, and also in terms of asking that funds be made available bilaterally to these countries, with the hope that their conditions could be improved.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: If I understand correctly, you are emphasizing the importance of making a much more significant financial contribution in order to be better able to help the most people there. I may be mistaken, but I want to make sure that that is what you are thinking. That is what would allow us to help the greatest number of people. Having said that, there will always be cases that are rather extreme and quite difficult. It is probably best to plan for a solution that would allow these people to resettle in other countries and begin new lives.

Is that indeed what you are thinking, is that a fair interpretation?

[English]

Mr. Abraham Abraham: UNHCR will continue to seek increased contributions and we will also continue to seek more resettlement places, but clearly increased contributions are primarily intended to look after them where they are.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: The second question deals with financial contributions. In your speech, you spoke of conferences that have been held on the issue and on commitments that have been made. As if often the case when it comes to international development and emergency assistance, the amounts pledged are always much greater than what arrives on the front lines.

Has Canada always met its commitments in terms of financial contributions until now?

[English]

Mr. Abraham Abraham: As I said, Canada is a major strategic partner in UNHCR. Canada has always respected many refugee situations worldwide and is always aware of what is the most difficult refugee situation as well. Today we find the situation of Iraqis in the Middle East, of refugees in the Middle East as a whole, to be one of the biggest challenges facing us.

I don't think Canada in any way is sitting or standing behind in trying to help us deal with the situation. This is why we are grateful to the Government of Canada for coming forward and making new announcements in terms of the numbers of refugees to be resettled as well as its continued contribution to and support of our work.

[Translation]

Mr. Thierry St-Cyr: Thank you very much.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Madam Chow.

Ms. Olivia Chow: You said that there are 80,000 extremely vulnerable people, and 15,000 Palestinians. Of the 25,000 you've submitted this year, what percentage are Palestinian?

•(1715)

Mr. Michael Casasola: I can only speculate, unfortunately, but I think we're looking at probably less than 1%, given the reasons already cited. One, it's been very difficult for us to resettle people outside of Iraq, because many governments can't travel inside Iraq for safety reasons. Second, we've had difficulty, as noted in our

presentation, in terms of just accessing some of these refugees in border camps.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Right.

I know that during the period of the Vietnamese boat people, Canada established a special program and brought in more than 200,000. Is that the kind of program that you eventually would be looking to Canada to establish? Both private and government sponsorship would be fast-tracked, and those with relatives or families here would of course be fast-tracked. Is this something that you are looking for from us, aside from the financial support?

Mr. Abraham Abraham: The orderly departure program was basically something that came out also from the international conference. There was an agreement that all countries involved or that wished to come forward and take the Vietnamese boat people would commit to certain numbers. There was a big intake by most of the resettlement countries. Canada was perhaps, if I recall correctly, the second largest at that time.

That was a very special situation, I think. People who had fled by boat were found on the high seas in very precarious conditions. Many of them who had reached the Southeast Asian countries were living in camps for years and years together.

So that was a concerted international effort that helped to resolve the situation of the Vietnamese boat people. I think we have again, in this context, a situation where we're talking about very large numbers and where, yes, there should be a concerted effort on the part of all the major donor and industrialized countries to help in this situation in view of, as I said, the very poor infrastructure and the charged capacity of the countries in that region.

Ms. Olivia Chow: So in the best case scenario, that's the kind of leadership role you would be hoping for from Canada.

Mr. Abraham Abraham: As I said, I don't think there's even one major refugee situation where Canada has not played an important role. And we dialogue, we discuss directly, with Canada. We also deal with Canada within the framework of UNHCR's executive committee, where Canada has put forward a good number of views and suggestions to try to help. I think many of these have been taken forward. Today we are in a situation where there is a need for stepped-up support in view of the fact that we cannot leave so many millions of people without any immediate hope for improving on their lives.

Ms. Olivia Chow: The number that Canada is accepting is under 10%—5% or 6% of what's being submitted—whereas at that time certainly Canada took on a much bigger percentage than what we have today. So Canada probably has the capacity to take a higher percentage than 5% or 6%. That's up to us to debate, of course.

But do you expect that next year you are going to submit more than 25,000, that you would be increasing the number of people you'll be submitting?

Mr. Abraham Abraham: We'll be submitting this to all the countries that we consider major resettlement countries. It's something like 16 countries.

• (1720)

Mr. Michael Casasola: When we give these estimates, they're done annually. In fact, we're already trying to do our projections for 2009, so it might be a bit early. But our objective for this year is 25,000 referrals, which is in keeping with what we did last year, which was around 21,000. In resettlement terms, those are very large numbers, because globally last year, among all refugees of all nationalities, UNHCR referred 97,000 in total to various countries. So one in four of those we were referring was an Iraqi.

Ms. Olivia Chow: So in 2009 you expect it to be probably higher than 25,000. Looking at it, you submitted 21,000 and then 25,000. It will probably go up.

Mr. Michael Casasola: We're still...

Ms. Olivia Chow: Sorting that out?

Mr. Michael Casasola: Exactly. I don't want to make any projections. It's not my place.

Ms. Olivia Chow: Thank you.

The Chair: So 25,000 would be for 16 countries?

Mr. Michael Casasola: Just to clarify, 25,000 would be referred to 16 different countries that we're working with right now. If other countries wanted to assist, we would certainly welcome that as well.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Komarnicki.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Following up from that, the total number last year, you said, was 21,000, in the proportions you've indicated amongst the countries. You want to raise that number to 25,000 for 2008. Is that correct?

Mr. Abraham Abraham: No, we will be submitting an additional 25,000 this year.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: So that's 21,000 plus 25,000?

Mr. Abraham Abraham: Yes.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: I see. Okay. That's a bit different.

If I look at the 21,000 you referred last year, Canada took about 7% or 8%, and from what I hear from you, you're saying it's doing its share, and perhaps more than its share proportionally. Would that be fair?

Mr. Abraham Abraham: No. We have to be realistic in that the numbers of Iraqi refugees abroad in the Middle East are very high, and at the same time, we need to recognize that there are very few large resettlement countries. Canada is one of them. So we are appealing to the countries to try to take more.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: So if last year Canada took, say, 7% or 8% of the 21,000, whatever number that is—900, I think, is what you mentioned—you're suggesting that this year we take about 7% or 8% of the 25,000 additional refugees, which would be about 1,700 to 2,000 extra refugees?

Mr. Abraham Abraham: The question of resettlement numbers are always discussed at the annual tripartite consultations in Geneva, where all the settlement countries are present, where the numbers are hashed out and discussed.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: But if we used the same percentages and each country took its proportional share, that would translate to

about, according to my calculations, 1,700 to 2,000 of the 25,000 refugees.

Mr. Abraham Abraham: I don't think we are trying to nail any numbers on any countries. The whole idea is that we would like to seek more resettlement places because of the—

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Okay, but if we did proportionally the same as last year, those would be the numbers.

But even as you suggest, compared to the sheer volume, it's still a minuscule amount, and following up with what Mr. St-Cyr said, if you were going to use an additional amount of funds to have a significant number transported over through to another country compared to offering assistance there, you're probably getting more for your dollar if you were able to put those dollars to work in Syria, Jordan, or even inside Iraq. Would you agree?

Mr. Abraham Abraham: Yes, absolutely. This is what we feel, that there is a need for extra funding to come in response to the appeals as well as bilateral funds that could help to sustain the situation in the region.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: So when you're talking about an actual movement of people from where they are to countries like Canada or the United States, you realize there is a fairly significant cost, but you're basing that on the fact that there's a certain segment of people who are most vulnerable that you'd like to move. Is that correct?

Mr. Abraham Abraham: That's correct.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: And then you'd like to see funding for the literally thousands and into the millions who are requiring funds, either in the countries they've been displaced to nearby or within the country itself.

Mr. Abraham Abraham: That's correct, because we must recognize that resettlement is not something that works automatically. It is something we very, very carefully screen. We look at the criteria for resettlement. They must respond to important issues such as their vulnerability and a compelling need for them to be removed from the environment in which they live, because if they continue to live there their lives could be put in danger. These are basically the kinds of cases that we refer for resettlement under the Canadian program and to the other resettlement countries.

• (1725)

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: I take it, because you're looking at a set of people who are most vulnerable, that you don't want to break it up into the Christian group, or the Mandaean group, or the other groups; you want to look at it in a global way. Is that correct?

Mr. Abraham Abraham: No, we will not be looking at any particular groups. I think the basic approach would be to look at the vulnerability of the individual.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: It seems to me, from our travels, there was one group—and I could be mistaken—and I thought it was the Mandaean group that were presently not in Iraq but were being displaced and would like to be able to resettle inside the country of Iraq. Have you made any provision for that group—and I'm not sure if I have the right one—or groups like that?

Mr. Hy Shelow (Senior Protection Officer, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees): When we talk about voluntary repatriation, UNHCR generally won't assist with that until it's safe for an individual to do so. While we won't impede return, we won't assist people to go back to a place where they're unsafe or where we can't access them.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: There seemed to be a group, and I can't quite remember which group it was—

Ms. Penny Becklumb (Committee Researcher): The Chaldean and Assyrians.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: The Chaldeans and Assyrians, who felt they could go back to the northern part of Iraq quite safely and were prepared to do that, but needed some assistance and funding there. They felt that without a whole lot of funding they would be prepared to go back. Do you know about that situation or have any comments about it?

Mr. Hy Shelow: At the moment we are not advocating for voluntary repatriation, because the situation in Iraq remains unstable.

Mr. Ed Komarnicki: Those are all the questions I have.

The Chair: Thank you. That completes our seven-minute round.

For the five-minute round, Mr. Karygiannis.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Thank you.

Indeed, the work you're doing needs to be commended, and I know how difficult it is for you to even come up with those figures.

You said you're looking at 25,000 refugees to be settled in 16 countries. Is this the number you have chosen, or is this the number you are working with because you know those countries will only take those numbers?

Mr. Michael Casasola: Actually, you're correct, it's an element of both. It reflects both our capacity to identify, as in our statement... We estimate, and estimated resettlement needs could be as high as 80,000 to 90,000. But we're referring 25,000 to various resettlement countries based on both our capacity and some sense of what the willingness is of resettlement countries.

I think, in fact, we're probably outpacing the willingness of resettlement countries.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: So would it be your recommendation that the number be tripled—you've indicated 80,000 and 25,000 times three is 75,000—because the need is there? And if the need is there and these people do not get settled elsewhere, they could face difficulties.

Mr. Abraham Abraham: This is why we are appealing for resettlement of larger numbers, because we feel there is a need for greater numbers to be removed from that environment.

We must also remember that giving resettlement also helps, for some numbers of people, to preserve the asylum space in this region. Otherwise, you could have a situation where there might not be any recognition.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Mr. Abraham, by signalling only 25,000 are you not giving the incorrect figure? Some countries could use that. For example, Canada, the U.S., Australia can use the numbers and say, "Look, UNHCR says 25,000 between the 16 countries, and

we're taking 27,000. We're okay. We're doing fine." Are we addressing the problem seriously by saying the need is 80,000 and we're only taking 25,000 because there are 16 countries? We need only to say that. The government of the day will say we went from 1,000 to 2,000. We're taking 10%, and we're doing the biggest part there is, because UNHCR says the need is only for 25,000.

What I hear from you, sir, is that there are 80,000. So really, for the work we're doing here, we have to look at 80,000. Am I correct?

Mr. Abraham Abraham: I think in terms of resettlement numbers, yes, that's basically what we are saying at the moment, that there are 80,000 to 90,000 people currently in need of resettlement.

But of course the prerogative to resettle these people is that of the states. We can only look to the states and ask them.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: When you say states, are you talking about the United States or the states?

• (1730)

Mr. Abraham Abraham: I mean the states, the resettlement countries. We can only look to them and say these are the numbers, and of course 25,000—

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Did you put it clearly to our government that 80,000 is the number you are aiming for, or are you stating publicly 25,000?

Mr. Abraham Abraham: I think we have publicly said that 80,000 to 90,000 people are in need of resettlement, but we also take into account the capacity for processing, and given past practice, we feel that we could present in addition 25,000.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: When Kosovo happened, Canada took in 5,000. Should Canada do the same thing at the present moment? Should Canada ask the stakeholders like churches and groups like the Syrians, the Chaldeans, and everybody else if they can be master builders and take people in?

Mr. Abraham Abraham: I think we would like that to happen.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: You think you would like, or are you urging Canada to do this, sir?

Mr. Abraham Abraham: We would like Canada to do this, but we are looking at—

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Sir, you'd like Canada to do that, or are you urging Canada to do this?

Mr. Abraham Abraham: I'm urging Canada to take more.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Thank you. I have no further questions, and I really appreciate your candor, sir.

The Chair: I believe we have Mr. Carrier next.

Mr. Michael Casasola: May I add a small dimension? We are talking about UNHCR's referrals. Our challenge has been departures, so I think we're debating very much the front end of the referral process, very much the issue the high commissioner mentioned when he was in the Middle East in February. He was concerned about actual people, Iraqis departing the region.

The Chair: Okay. You've got 15 seconds.

Hon. Jim Karygiannis: Can you explain departures? Are these departures inside Iraq to neighbouring countries or from neighbouring countries to the destination country?

Mr. Michael Casasola: To resettlement countries. From countries in the region, Syria and Jordan, to resettlement countries. I am talking of all resettlement countries.

The Chair: Mr. Carrier, please.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Carrier: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Thank you for being here today; we very much appreciate your contribution.

The committee will be making recommendations in order to help Iraqi refugees. There are two ways that Canada can contribute: we can provide financial resources or we can provide human resources.

According to your brief, last January you issued an appeal for \$260 million but you received barely half that amount. Did Canada do its share in responding to that appeal?

[English]

Mr. Abraham Abraham: As I was saying, Canada has always responded to calls from UNHCR. In this case, again, we're talking about specific appeals that are made, to which Canada has positively responded.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Carrier: Could Canada do more?

[English]

Mr. Abraham Abraham: Our needs are actually very, very big, I must say, and our needs are never fully met. So if we get more contributions, we'd be able to put them to use. As I said earlier, if we can help to sustain the situation in the region, then this will be best for the security of everyone concerned.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Carrier: With respect to taking in refugees, some witnesses spoke of delays and of the fact that the security screenings and interviews undertaken by Canada were in addition to the ones that you carry out.

I would like to hear what you have to say about that. Surely Canada is not the only country to conduct security screenings before agreeing to take in a refugee. There must be other countries that perform this additional screening.

[English]

Mr. Abraham Abraham: No, I think security is of concern when it comes to any refugee situation. I think it is the prerogative of the states to undertake the necessary security measures in the processing and selection of the resettlement cases.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Carrier: In your opinion, does Canada, through the Department of Citizenship and Immigration, provide enough on-site resources to meet the needs of the refugees? Does the lack of resources delay the processing of refugee applications?

• (1735)

[English]

Mr. Abraham Abraham: I think we need more money. We need to be better funded.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Carrier: I am referring to human resources, to employees who are on site to conduct the screening.

[English]

Mr. Abraham Abraham: Oh yes. As I was saying, we are calling upon states to expedite the processing so that people could also move faster and therefore could also be resettling in higher numbers. That would lead to the call for additional human resources to process this speed.

[Translation]

Mr. Robert Carrier: Very well. Thank you.

[English]

The Chair: Thank you.

Madame Folco is next.

[Translation]

Ms. Raymonde Folco: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Mr. Abraham, does the Canadian government visit refugee camps in Jordan, Syria, and perhaps also in Egypt in order to select Iraqi refugees?

[English]

Mr. Abraham Abraham: Actually, I must say that in my years of experience I have always seen the Canadian officers—

Ms. Raymonde Folco: I'm talking about this particular Iraqi situation.

Mr. Abraham Abraham: Yes, in the case of selection to Canada, you actually have interviews that are conducted by the Canadian immigration officers.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: I'm not asking on the principle of it; I'm asking whether the Canadian government has, in the last three or four years, gone into Iraqi refugee centres in Jordan, in Syria, in the Kurdish area, in Turkey, and so on to choose and select refugees to come to Canada.

Mr. Michael Casasola: This is primarily an urban population, so many of them can travel to the Canadian embassy for the interviews that take place, and that's where a lot of that processing takes place.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: There are two kinds of processing. There are the refugees who come to the Canadian government and ask to become refugees, and there are cases in which the Canadian government goes into the camp—call it a camp, call it a high-density area if you wish—and chooses within the total number of refugees the number they are going to pick out here. What I'm asking is whether Canada is doing this as concerns the Iraqi refugees in the areas surrounding Iraq.

Mr. Michael Casasola: The way the Iraqis are actually referred is that they first go to UNHCR and they're registered with UNHCR. During the registration period UNHCR would identify those refugees we think may be in need of resettlement; we do an intense registration and we try to identify who is most vulnerable and who has particular protection needs. From those, we would then identify those who need resettlement and we refer them to various resettlement countries.

That's the sort of referral process that goes on. The Canadians don't necessarily operate on their own outside of that—

Ms. Raymonde Folco: Excuse me for interrupting, but the time is so short. Let me give you an example, because I'm not really getting a straight answer and I'm not sure we're on the same wavelength.

In Thailand, Canadian civil servants go to Thai refugee camps and choose a number of refugees who are then brought to Canada. Is this being done in the greater Iraqi situation? That's the question.

Mr. Michael Casasola: Thank you for the clarification.

UNHCR in Canada worked on what we call group processing of refugees, and that's what you're referring to. It was a process whereby we referred a large number in a particular refugee camp. In the case of Thailand, they were from Mae La Oon and Mae Ra Ma Luang camps. In this we're using the model of individually referring cases, so it isn't the same sort of model. That's simply a different processing model. The Canadians aren't going—

Ms. Raymonde Folco: Processing models are very important, I agree, but really in the end, what I'm trying to figure out is just how much Canada is doing, because in my opinion and in the opinion of some of my confrères sitting around this table, Canada is not doing all that much in spite of the very complimentary words we've heard from you this afternoon. What I'm trying to figure out is just how much more Canada should do, because we feel Canada should be doing much more.

I have a large Chaldean population from Iraq in my riding. They are very keen on helping their relatives and non-relatives, both Chaldeans and non-Christians, to come to Canada. The churches are with them. The churches have written to Mr. Harper. The Catholic churches of Canada have written to Mr. Harper to ask for Mr. Harper's help. This was last January. We've not seen very much coming out of this.

You're saying we're having difficulty getting people out. My people tell me it's absolutely impossible for a Christian in Baghdad or in Basra or anywhere else to go to any kind of official place, because he won't get there. He'll be murdered before he goes there.

How much more should we be doing? I look to concrete suggestions on your part as to what Canada should and could do to get this process to work a heck of a lot faster, because if you wait to study who is the more vulnerable—as far as I'm concerned, Iraq right now is Germany in 1935 or 1936, if not 1939.

● (1740)

The Chair: Let's offer the committee members time for a response, please.

Ms. Raymonde Folco: Yes. I think I've made my point.

The Chair: Yes.

Do you have a response?

Mr. Abraham Abraham: Canada has two resettlement programs—three, basically, but I just limit myself to the two. One is where people privately sponsor individual citizens from here, and then you've got UNHCR's program, which comes under the government-assisted programs.

There the Canadian officers do go out. We do the pre-selection, we do the screening, we submit all the basic data, everything, and this is submitted to the Canadian immigration officers, who then come physically to carry out the interview.

The Chair: We'll have to go Mr. Wilson, who is the last person on the list. We have three minutes.

Mr. Wilson.

Mr. Blair Wilson (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, Ind.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

And thank you, gentlemen, for being here. I'll be brief and leave some more time, if there is any, for anybody else.

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: That isn't right. I had my hand up.

The Chair: Order, please.

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: You recognized it and you saw it. Don't tell me you looked to the clerk. You nodded.

The Chair: The clerk is the one taking the names.

Hon. Andrew Telegdi: Look, Mr. Chair, I made contact. I wanted to speak on this.

The Chair: Order, please. Mr. Wilson is next. That's who I have here, and if the clerk wishes to correct me on that, that you're next, then I will go to you.

Mr. Clerk.

The Clerk: I never got that indication from you.

The Chair: You never got that, so it's Mr. Wilson.

Mr. Blair Wilson: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I just wanted to go over some of your numbers briefly. It says here that in 2007 your organization submitted 1,515 resettlement cases to the Government of Canada for consideration. Of these 1,500-odd cases, the Government of Canada accepted and processed 293 Iraqi refugees. Is that figure correct?

Mr. Michael Casasola: We did refer 1,515 persons to Canada last year. Are you asking how many people have actually left among that 1,515?

Mr. Blair Wilson: You say in your document and you said in your testimony here on page 2 that statistics from CIC show that during 2007, 293 Iraqis claimed asylum in Canada.

Mr. Hy Shelow: The 293 number is individuals who have arrived at the borders of Canada or an airport and claimed asylum in Canada.

Mr. Blair Wilson: So roughly 1,500 cases were recommended to the Government of Canada of the 25,000 or 21,000 you were trying to process, and the government processed 293?

Mr. Hy Shelow: No, sir. Coming on their own, 293 people spontaneously arrived at your airports or borders. The other numbers relate to resettlement numbers.

Mr. Blair Wilson: Of those who were referred, how many of them actually landed in Canada? That is the question I am trying to ascertain.

Mr. Michael Casasola: We're not sure actually. We get our numbers from IOM. The numbers, we've been told by IOM, are in some preliminary information from Citizenship and Immigration. An official suggests that about 800 to 1,000 Iraqis came to Canada in 2007, but we don't know yet.

You can keep in mind that some of those persons were referred later in 2007 so they may still be in process. We submitted 1,515 on January 1, 2007. How many get there by the end? That was throughout 2007, so it's a difficult comparison.

Mr. Blair Wilson: Either way, on the number that you recommend to the 16 member states that are taking refugees, you're not getting 100 out of 100. You're getting a relatively low number of uptake from the refugees you submit. Is that correct?

Mr. Michael Casasola: I'm unsure of what our acceptance rate is right now in terms of countries. Certainly some of the countries don't necessarily accept every case that we refer to them for a variety of reasons, but I can't say at this point in time. I don't want to make an estimate one way or the other. I don't want to mislead you one way or the other, sir.

• (1745)

Mr. Blair Wilson: But in any event, the way the numbers pan out is relatively low. The number that Canada is taking in, based on 2.7 million displaced internal Iraqis, is incredibly low—what we are doing vis-à-vis what you're asking us to do.

The question I am trying to get to is this. What recommendations or suggestions can you give us to increase the capacity to process the

refugees? Is it a processing capacity problem in Canada or is it just that our numbers are so low?

Mr. Abraham Abraham: I think we should separate the two. What we would like is more contributions to come in order to be able to attend to the welfare of these people in the region.

The second thing we would like to do is to have more people being resettled because of the sheer numbers I spoke about. So clearly, yes, we would like to see Canada taking more. We would like to see all other countries taking more so that we can alleviate a bit of the burden that rests at the moment in the region of people who are in dire need of resettlement.

The Chair: Thank you.

Mr. Hy Shelow: I'd like to follow up on that briefly, sir.

There's been a lot of discussion around the table and a lot of very pointed questions about what should Canada do and how much should we give, either economically or in terms of numbers. In both those cases in terms of our financing, we're a voluntary agency. We receive donations based on the goodwill of countries, and in terms of resettlement, that's also a voluntary act of states. You have no international obligation to accept a set number of people. So when we speak to you about asking for more, we have no legal basis to demand a specific percentage.

There was a comment on whether we're taking our fair share. Some countries choose to take none.

The Chair: Okay. May I interrupt there? That's the full hour for the committee.

I want to thank you for coming here today. As you know, we're writing a report on Iraqi refugees, and I'm sure your comments will be taken into consideration as well. Thank you for being here.

We'll break for a moment for folks to get a sandwich, if they want, and then we'll go in camera to discuss our fifth report of the subcommittee on agenda and procedures.

[*Proceedings continue in camera*]

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