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Chair: Mr. Sven Spengemann



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• (1535)

[English]

The Chair (Mr. Sven Spengemann (Mississauga—Lakeshore, Lib.)): Welcome to meeting number 18 of the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development.

[Translation]

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on October 22, 2020, the committee resumes its study of the vulnerabilities created and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on the pandemic's impact on children in conflict, crisis or displacement.

[English]

To ensure an orderly meeting, I would, as always, encourage participants to please mute their microphones when not speaking and address all comments through the chair.

When you have 30 seconds remaining in your questioning or speaking time, I will signal you with this yellow piece of paper.

Interpretation services are available through the globe icon at the bottom of your screens.

I would now like to welcome our witnesses for the first panel.

We have with us from the United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF, Jaya Murthy, who is the global chief of internal communication; and Pernille Ironside, deputy director, division of data, analytics, planning and monitoring. We also have David Matas, member of the board of directors, Beyond Borders ECPAT Canada; and Shelly Whitman, executive director, Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace and Security.

Ms. Ironside, I understand you will deliver the opening remarks for UNICEF. I will give you the floor for five minutes, please.

Ms. Pernille Ironside (Deputy Director, Division of Data, Analytics, Planning and Monitoring, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)): Thank you, Chair.

Thank you for the committee's invitation for my colleague, Jaya Murthy, and me to contribute to this critical and timely study, and for its focus on children in crisis and conflict.

We are proud Canadians and we've each spent the majority of the past 20 years as international civil servants of the United Nations Children's Fund, serving in conflict-affected countries, including Iraq, Gaza, Yemen, Nigeria, Uganda, Somalia and the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, where we've had the privilege of

being part of efforts to support and protect children and their families.

We've seen first-hand how the violent and protracted nature of today's armed conflict has torn families apart, the brutality inflicted on young minds and bodies, and their extreme vulnerability.

One never forgets holding a trembling six-year-old girl so brutally raped that she is rendered incontinent, or the frail body of a severely malnourished infant barely clinging to life, and the anguish of a child whose family was killed for their eyes. One also never forgets the rays of hope on their faces and the profound resilience when provided with access to services and the reassurance that they are being cared for.

War shatters lives, it shatters countries' health and education systems, it damages or destroys vital infrastructure like water and sanitation, and it spurs the flight of essential workers such as doctors.

COVID-19 has exacerbated this plight, triggering an unprecedented global health, humanitarian, socio-economic and human rights crisis with significant interruption in basic services, including essential nutrition services, vaccine-preventable disease campaigns and schooling for learners.

With over 100 million COVID-19 cases and 2.1 million deaths in virtually every country and territory, this pandemic is the biggest challenge of our time, and has had a unique disequalizing effect—more than any other crisis—on nations, states, communities, households and individuals.

It's clear that COVID-19 and all its harmful consequences has made this a global child rights crisis.

For UNICEF, the pandemic has fundamentally altered our responses, adding a new layer of complexity in some of the most difficult and dangerous operating environments. We now need to reach the same populations that are routinely missed with basic services in a context of restricted movement and lockdowns. We are redoubling our efforts with our multitude of partners, local and national authorities, humanitarian and development organizations, civil society, the private sector, local respondents and thousands of community volunteers to support country readiness for COVID-19 vaccines, including strategies to reach all people, especially those in hard-to-reach locations.

• (1540)

It also is for us to enable schools to reopen safely, particularly in poor areas, and reimagine education systems with remote learning that will include children who previously did not have access to a TV, let alone the Internet; to address the growing mental health challenges and risks of violence, exploitation and abuse [*Technical difficulty—Editor*]; and to reduce discrimination and inequality that are particularly acute for girls and women, as well as people with disabilities.

This is a crisis where we need the international community to come together, from local to global, to support an inclusive response through recovery that prioritizes investments in the world's children. Without increased investments and collaboration, recovery from the impact of this pandemic will be that much harder and slower.

Esteemed committee members, 75 years ago UNICEF was born out of the ashes of World War II, and once again the world is engulfed in crisis, the consequences of which threaten to undermine every measure of progress set out in the global sustainable development goals. This anniversary year, UNICEF is again being called upon to help the world's children, their families and the systems upon which they rely to emerge from crisis.

With crisis comes opportunity—the unique opportunity for Canadian leadership. As proud Canadians who have dedicated our lives to serving vulnerable conflict-affected children and their families around the world, there is nothing we would like to see more and nothing that would make us more proud than if the young rape survivor I held in eastern DRC and countless others whose lots in life have become that much harder due to COVID-19 could benefit from the integrated support they so need and deserve to transform their outcomes in life.

Thank you for this opportunity to address you.

The Chair: Thank you so much for your opening remarks, Ms. Ironside.

We will now turn to Mr. Matas.

The floor is yours for five minutes, please.

Mr. David Matas (Member of the Board of Directors, Beyond Borders ECPAT Canada): Thank you for inviting me and for inviting us to participate in this study.

Beyond Borders ECPAT Canada is the Canadian affiliate of ECPAT, headquartered in Bangkok, Thailand. ECPAT is the worldwide network of organizations working to end the sexual exploitation of children. ECPAT is an acronym for the phrase “end child prostitution, pornography and trafficking”.

Within the general topic of the study, we wish to address the vulnerabilities of children to sexual exploitation created and exacerbated by the COVID pandemic. In general, the vulnerabilities of children to sexual exploitation have been both created and exacerbated by the pandemic.

Protective parents have died from COVID, rendering children vulnerable. Funds directed to protecting vulnerable children from sexual exploitation have been diverted to combatting COVID. Pro-

grams combatting child sexual exploitation have been impacted by the overall shutdown in reaction to COVID. School closures to protect against COVID have meant that child sexual abuse at home is not reported at schools. Children in sexually abusive home situations have, because of the COVID-related shutdowns, been trapped in these situations.

For those with access to the Internet, the increased time children spend on the Internet stuck at home because of COVID increases their vulnerability to sexual grooming and cyber-bullying by child predators. Children in detention suffer from decreased monitoring by the International Committee for the Red Cross, decreased as a COVID-prevention measure, leaving them open to increased abuse, including sexual abuse, from detention staff.

COVID prevention measures have impacted adversely on the delivery of humanitarian aid generally, including aid for the protection of children from sexual abuse. The shutdown of economies to protect against COVID has led to increased poverty, prompting some parents to sell their children into underage marriages or the sex trade.

ECPAT in April 2020 posted a publication titled “Why children are at risk of sexual exploitation during COVID-19” and wrote:

When entertainment venues that traffickers frequently use to seek customers and exploit child victims are shut down, there is a likelihood that child trafficking patterns will adapt... Child marriages are...likely to increase as teenagers from rural areas are highly affected by the worsening economic situation, being forced to migrate to urban areas and to live on the streets.

The variety of problems that COVID presents that create and exacerbate the vulnerability of children to sexual abuse require a variety of solutions. Because of limited time, I only want to address one component, the increase in child marriages.

Global Affairs already had a strong policy updated on its website on August 20, 2020 against child, early and forced marriages.

The trouble with that policy is that, in a Canadian context, it rings hollow in light of the widespread availability and practice of child marriages in Canada itself. The Constitution of Canada gives Parliament exclusive jurisdiction to regulate the legal capacity to enter into marriage. The provinces have exclusive competence over the formalities of marriage.

Parliament, in the exercise of its powers over the legal capacity to enter into marriage, allows for child marriages. The federal Civil Marriage Act allows for marriages of children aged 16 and 17, and the power has been widely used.

A study of child marriages in Canada published in January this year concluded:

Demographic patterns of child marriage in Canada are similar to those observed in many low- and middle-income countries. Girls were far more likely to be married as children than boys and typically wed much older spouses.

The study pointed to a discrepancy between Canada's domestic law and its foreign policy. The global COVID-related problems relating to child sexual abuse would be difficult for Canada to resolve on our own. Changing Canadian law to prevent child marriages is something entirely within the power of the Parliament of Canada. We should be doing this to prevent the sexual exploitation of children at home. By doing so, we would make our efforts to prevent the sexual exploitation of children through child marriage abroad more credible.

• (1545)

Thank you very much.

The Chair: Mr. Matas, thank you very much for your opening comments.

Our final round of opening remarks we'll go to Ms. Whitman.

Please, the floor is yours, for five minutes.

Dr. Shelly Whitman (Executive Director, Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace and Security): Thank you very much to the committee for this opportunity to speak with all of you today.

My name is Dr. Shelly Whitman. I am the executive director of the Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace and Security. I also wish to bring you greetings from our founder, Lieutenant-General (Retired) Roméo Dallaire.

It's a great opportunity for me to be here and it's lovely to see some of my former friends and colleagues like Pernille Ironside. The last time we met was in Nigeria.

I wish to begin by stating that the world needs to focus on building a global peace and security agenda that prioritizes the protection of children. Our collective failure to see the world through the eyes of children prevents us from effective and innovative approaches to address some of the world's most pressing issues of our time and will be felt for generations that have yet to come.

At the Dallaire Institute, we have been conducting work in places such as Juba, South Sudan; Kigali, Rwanda; DRC; Somalia; into Sierra Leone; Nigeria; and hopefully soon into other places such as Cameroon.

Today we are here to discuss the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children who are exposed to armed conflict.

Despite calls by the UN Secretary-General, armed conflict has not stopped during the pandemic. Health care systems and educational services already under immense strain by conflict have been placed under even more stress due to COVID-19. Yet, worryingly, the world's attention has been diverted from many of the conflicts that have continued or emerged. As a result, we are also not bearing close witness to the results on the concerns of children.

The UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict has also expressed deep concern on the heightened risk of grave violations against children due to COVID-19. The UN special representative summarized the annual report to the Human Rights Council and stated that, "the response to the outbreak often had an unintended adverse impact on children's fulfilment of their rights to education and health, as well as their access to justice, social services, and humanitarian aid." The

report indicates that the pandemic has exacerbated children's vulnerability to grave violations in situations of armed conflict. "School closures made children even more vulnerable to other grave violations, in particular recruitment and use, and children in camps for internally displaced people and those deprived of their liberty have been particularly exposed to further protection risks."

It is estimated that 99% of children globally reside in one of the 186 countries that have enacted some level of restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. And for children living in conflict and fragile environments, the pressures of COVID-19 are even more complex.

I would like to remind this committee that UN Security Council Resolution 1612 highlights six grave violations against children in armed conflict. Those are the killing and maiming of children, the recruitment and use of children as soldiers, sexual violence against children, attacks against schools or hospitals, abduction of children and the denial of humanitarian access for children. These six grave violations have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In particular, an example that I would like to highlight for you is that when it comes to measures to combat COVID-19 many children have been confined to dangerous home settings, increasing their risk of exposure to violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation, including sexual and gender-based violence, while limiting their access to protection services and social networks.

UNICEF estimates that 1.8 billion children live in 104 countries where violence prevention and response services have been disrupted due to COVID-19. And the UN Population Fund estimates that the pandemic will result in an additional 13 million child marriages between 2020 and 2030.

In addition, when it comes to the recruitment and use of children as soldiers, we know that we have seen instances in places such as Colombia where the armed groups are exploiting the global pandemic to recruit children into their ranks. Almost as many children are estimated to have joined armed groups in Colombia in the first half of 2020 as in the whole of 2019.

In addition, we have also seen increased insecurity because of the present pandemic, which has created conditions that have led to an increase in child trafficking in places such as Mali, and the cases of child recruitment have doubled there over the previous year.

• (1550)

School closures and disruptions have also created immense impact on the 1.6 billion students in 190 countries, and the risk of military occupation of closed schools remains a real concern. Prior to the pandemic, education around the world was already in crisis. It is estimated that over 10 million children will not return to school after the pandemic, as families continue to be impacted by growing poverty and unemployment rates. Schools continue to be attacked in places such as Central African Republic, Cameroon, Nigeria and Yemen. As recently as this week, we have seen horrific attacks on more schools in northeast Nigeria.

The denial of humanitarian access for children in active conflict zones and pre-existing challenges with nutrition have been exacerbated during the pandemic. Border closures in response to the pandemic have also adversely impacted the delivery of humanitarian aid to populations in need of additional support. For those living in IDP camps, access to sanitation is also further limited, and this is happening in a context of record child displacement occurring in 2019.

There is also increasing concern for children who are being detained due to suspicions of their involvement in terrorism or security offences, and the deplorable conditions that many of those children continue to be held in.

When we look at this issue, it is important for this committee and the Government of Canada to recognize that child protection is already a gravely underfunded field, constituting just 0.6% of official development aid. It is expected that the pandemic and the response will continue to reduce this funding.

I want to remind those here that in November 2017 the Canadian government, in partnership with the Dallaire Institute, co-created the Vancouver principles on peacekeeping and the prevention of the recruitment and use of child soldiers around the world. Today I would like to reiterate the need for Canada to continue to demonstrate leadership amongst the 100 endorsing nations that have endorsed since 2017, and also amongst the many that have yet to endorse.

It should not—

• (1555)

The Chair: Ms. Whitman, I'm sorry, but we're running a bit short on time. Could I just ask you to wrap it up in the next 30 seconds or so?

Dr. Shelly Whitman: Yes. I'm on my last sentence.

It should not be forgotten, in our global efforts to fight this pandemic, that the achievement of a global children, peace and security agenda should be at the top of our list of priorities within the Government of Canada.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you so much for your opening remarks. We'll get into the details with you in questions.

Colleagues, we will now go into round one. These are six-minute segments.

Mr. Diotte will lead us off.

Go ahead, sir. The floor is yours.

Mr. Kerry Diotte (Edmonton Griesbach, CPC): Ms. Whitman, this is really fascinating stuff. It seems like such a terrible problem. I know you probably have more to say about it, so I just want to give you an opportunity to maybe explain this situation. The issue of schools being closed seems to be very multifaceted. Are there two or three enormously big problems that can be attacked so that more children are not being drawn into being child soldiers?

Dr. Shelly Whitman: It's a great question. I think that definitely there are a few things we could focus on.

One, of course, is thinking through the detention issue. As I mentioned, I think that is a major issue for us to look at in terms of how countries are handling children who are detained as a result of the suspicion that they are involved in armed violence or in terrorist groups.

Another area that is huge for us to focus on is aspects related to education. Again, I want to also stress that it's not just access to education; it's the quality of education. One concern we have, certainly, is our ability to ensure that children have access to education that focuses on things such as critical thinking and peace education. Thinking through those elements is really important.

There is one last point I would like to raise. I was talking at the end about the Vancouver principles, and it's really important that Canada also step up to ensure that the Vancouver principles are implemented. There is implementation guidance that accompanies the Vancouver principles. While it's noble to have many endorsers, we have to see that nations and their security forces are also better prepared to interact and help prevent the recruitment and use of children around the globe.

Mr. Kerry Diotte: Are there any countries, specifically in Africa, in which it is the major problem? You talk about terrorism and so forth. Are there any countries that are having the biggest problems?

Dr. Shelly Whitman: I think it's really hard for me to say that this one is the biggest; however, I could certainly point to several countries. I want to be clear that it's not just an African problem. This is a major issue in Latin America, in the Middle East, in Asia. Many of the biggest conflicts you are witnessing right now, whether they be Myanmar, countries in the Middle East that Canada has worked in, countries like Ukraine.... There are many areas where this is a major concern. I could list them off for you but I think it's important for you to recognize that every time we have conflict, this is a major concern for us to look at.

Mr. Kerry Diotte: Thank you.

This question is for the two officials from UNICEF. I know that UNICEF has called for developed countries to share vaccines through COVAX. We know that our government has announced that they plan on also using COVAX for Canadian vaccinations after failing to properly get a Canadian supply from other sources. I'm wondering how Canada's use of the COVAX vaccine meshes with the broader goal as stated by UNICEF of saving COVAX for the developing countries.

• (1600)

Mr. Jaya Murthy (Global Chief of Internal Communication, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)): You're absolutely right. Our main argument right now is advocating for vaccine equity, and to ensure that all countries and all populations, especially vulnerable populations, have access to the vaccine as soon as possible, recognizing that we can't really address the pandemic if we're not taking an equitable approach around the world.

In relation to Canada and COVAX, we're not in a specific position to comment on that, but we would certainly encourage the Government of Canada to adopt an equity-focused strategy when it comes to providing vaccines around the world to families affected by COVID.

Mr. Kerry Diotte: Thanks for that.

A major focus over the last several years is ensuring that girls have access to education. I've been to Africa and I've seen first-hand the great work Canadian and international organizations are doing to promote educational opportunities for girls. I'm wondering how COVID has affected education specifically for girls. Would anyone like to take a shot at that one?

Ms. Pernille Ironside: Girls, as you know, are already particularly vulnerable to being excluded from education systems for various reasons, but often driven by poverty, domestic expectations and gender inequalities. Now, with COVID, that is being exacerbated even further, where girls are even more expected to perform domestic duties, caring for younger children—siblings, for example—and having few opportunities to access existing education, and being more vulnerable to both domestic and external exploitation and abuse as well.

Mr. Kerry Diotte: Thank you.

The Chair: There may be a chance to circle back in the second round. If we're all disciplined we should be able to get at least partway into a second round.

We will now go to Dr. Fry for six minutes, please.

Hon. Hedy Fry (Vancouver Centre, Lib.): Thank you very much, Chair. I just wanted to welcome David Matas. He and I have crossed paths many times in the past and I have a lot of respect for him. I'm glad to see that he is in fact on ECPAT, because it hasn't been given a lot of priority by a lot of countries.

I just wanted to ask a couple of questions. The first one is, you were talking about the Vancouver principles earlier on. Do you feel that the Vancouver principles are being implemented as they should? If not, what are barriers to implementing them? I'm sure that Professor Laurence said that there were challenges in the implementation of principle 6, because of a lack of data. What are we doing about getting data on children in armed conflicts?

Who will take that?

Then I have two other people I want to direct questions to.

Dr. Shelly Whitman: I'll answer on the question on the Vancouver principles, and I'll turn it over to my colleagues from UNICEF, if they'd like to provide answers on data.

In terms of the Vancouver principles, I think that one of the greatest challenges in terms of implementation is that there's been a lot of focus at Global Affairs Canada on endorsing the principles, but there have to be some resources and horsepower put behind implementation. Currently at the Dallaire Institute, we have been working on implementation in the countries in which we have memorandums of understanding to move that forward. That means that just as Canada has put money and effort into the Elsie initiative, so Canada should be doing that for implementation of the Vancouver principles.

• (1605)

Hon. Hedy Fry: Thank you.

I wanted to ask a question quickly—because I don't have a lot of time—of David Matas. It's about ECPAT. In 1997, I went to the first world conference on the sexual exploitation of children and youth, and it was there that ECPAT started to form its legs. ECPAT is an NGO, as most of you know, and it is doing extremely important work on children who are being trafficked.

We talk about conflict areas. We talk about Africa. We talk about South America. We talk about all those places. No one wants to talk about what's going on in Europe. Children are being trafficked there daily by organized crime, and we don't have data on it. We don't know what happens to them. We can't find them. About 13,000 children right now are missing in Europe, and nobody knows where they've disappeared to. There is an informal kind of refugee camp because these people come through Greece; they come through Italy, and then they get blocked at every border, with the exception of Germany and...Europe. Everyone thinks Europe is wondrous because Europe is a rich continent, but it isn't. There is a lot going on with regard to the safety of children in Europe.

I wanted to know how you feel ECPAT could do something about this. Is ECPAT involved in the European theatre? What is ECPAT doing to flag commercial sexual exploitation of children?

Mr. David Matas: ECPAT is a network of affiliated organizations, and there are country representatives of ECPAT in 102 countries, including the European countries, absolutely. The headquarters have put out a general statement about the problems of COVID and sexual exploitation.

What you're talking about is a continuing problem. It existed pre-COVID, and it continues on with COVID. Of course, what you're dealing with are sexual predators who are targeting children. A lot of the venues where they traditionally have gone to target children, like bars and so on, have been shut down. As a result, they're using new and different ways, and they're adapting to the COVID situation.

Often what we find is that children, because of the increased poverty and the shutdowns that are generated with COVID, become vulnerable in different ways. As a result, the combat against child sexual exploitation in a COVID context has to shift. In reality, there has been a degeneration. Of course, you're absolutely right.

In terms of the European countries, it's not just people, refugees, coming from outside Europe and then being exploited in Europe. It's actual Europeans being exploited within Europe. Hungary has a very big problem, not only in terms of what's happening there but in terms of exporting to the rest of Europe.

Hon. Hedy Fry: Mr. Chair, do I have some time left?

The Chair: You have about 20 seconds, Dr. Fry.

Hon. Hedy Fry: Can somebody talk about the squalid conditions in the detention camps in Syria, and what almost amounts to torture?

The Chair: Please give just a brief answer, and we can always circle back in the form of asking witnesses to submit written testimony to us.

Hon. Hedy Fry: Nobody wants to talk about that?

The Chair: If somebody wants to give a very brief answer on Syria, they can. Otherwise, we'll have to go ahead to the next questioner.

Hon. Hedy Fry: Okay.

The Chair: Let's leave it there, Dr. Fry. Thank you very much.

[Translation]

Mr. Bergeron, you have the floor for six minutes.

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

I'd like to thank the witnesses for being here and for sharing their insightful comments with our committee.

UNICEF has reported that at the height of the pandemic, 90% of students around the world were affected by school closures. Even in countries like ours, we have seen how much of an impact these closures have had on student motivation and academic achievement. We can only assume that things are even worse in countries facing much more difficult conditions with technology that lags behind, and where some students might be tempted to enter the workforce, while others might be recruited for human trafficking and prostitution, or even join the ranks of child soldiers.

UNICEF further reported that according to a world survey released in August, children were being exposed to a growing risk of violence, exploitation and abuse as a result of the pandemic.

We also received a few answers with respect to the sexual exploitation of children.

February 12 is International Day Against the Use of Child Soldiers, also known as Red Hand Day. Its objective is to gain support from governments to put an end to the recruitment of children as soldiers. According to the director of World Vision, the number of child soldiers has increased by 75% over the past 10 years.

Can the pandemic be assumed to have heightened, increased and intensified the recruitment of children as soldiers and for human trafficking networks?

• (1610)

[English]

Dr. Shelly Whitman: Maybe Pernille can begin, and then I can add in.

Ms. Pernille Ironside: Thanks, Shelly. I'm happy to do so.

Mr. Bergeron, you're absolutely right that there is an intensification, but it's not only pandemic-related. It's also due to the nature of warfare, the increasing complexity of warfare that's been happening and the increasing disparities and inequities in the world that are driving the most vulnerable children to seek whatever avenues they may have at this time. I personally have met with many children who have actually felt that it's safer for them to join an armed group, where they can also have access to regular food and shelter and so forth, rather than be in the dire circumstances they have at home.

So to the extent that COVID is exacerbating those circumstances and drivers...noting that those are not voluntary. A child is under duress under such circumstances. It's very concerning for UNICEF that this is happening.

I'll hand it over to my colleague Shelly. I'm sure she will complement that further.

Dr. Shelly Whitman: I think it's important to emphasize what Pernille is saying. The situation will be exacerbated by this pandemic. I think it's important to recognize our deep concern that the foot will be taken off the gas in terms of the positive efforts because money and attention will get diverted to other areas. I think that's important for us to not lose sight of.

The other thing I want to emphasize is there is a variety of reasons, as Pernille mentioned, why children join armed groups. They can be forcibly abducted, but that's only one very small part of it. For many, yes, there's safety, a sense of purpose, a sense of meaning and access to power. All of these dynamics are very important for us to think about in terms of our responses to the pandemic, making sure we are including this perspective of not losing sight of protecting children from exploitation, sexual exploitation, violence, abuse and so on.

Mr. David Matas: If I may just add something about sexual exploitation in particular, which you also asked about, there's a double problem here. One is there's increased vulnerability with the increased poverty, which leads to increased willingness to sell children for money. Also, many parents are killed through COVID, so there's decreased protection.

On the other hand, there's a weakening of the protective systems generally because money's being diverted to other purposes because of COVID. We have this double-barrelled problem.

• (1615)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: According to United Nations data, at least 14 countries around the world use children as soldiers. Ms. Fry referred earlier to the Vancouver principles. There is also the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which addresses the involvement of children in armed conflicts. Seventeen countries have neither signed nor ratified the protocol, and another 10 have signed, but not ratified, it.

With 14 United Nations member countries using children in their own armed forces or militias, is there any room for hope, or is it a lost cause?

The Chair: I'm sorry, Mr. Bergeron, but your speaking time is up. You may be able to get an answer to your question in the second round.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Might there be enough time for just a short answer, Mr. Chair?

The Chair: If you can give a very short answer, please go ahead. Otherwise it will have to wait until the next round.

[*English*]

Dr. Shelly Whitman: We should never lose hope. Everything can always get better.

The Chair: That's a very good answer.

Dr. Shelly Whitman: It's worth it to be hopeful for children.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Whitman.

[*Translation*]

Thank you very much, Mr. Bergeron.

[*English*]

The final six-minute round goes to Ms. McPherson.

Go ahead, please.

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

I want to thank all of our witnesses today. Certainly that last message of hope is one that I think we all need to hear repeatedly, especially when we hear about such horrific attacks on children.

I have a few questions I'd like to ask. I'll start with UNICEF, and then if others would like to add in, that would be great.

You mentioned the need for an integrated approach that breaks down silos in international aid, and prioritizes those facing intersecting vulnerabilities. How can Canada work to ensure that the

most marginalized people on the ground receive the targeted support they need to get them through the pandemic, in a way that responds to their immediate intersecting needs but also aids in a more inclusive recovery?

Mr. Jaya Murthy: It's a very important question. I think what is needed is an integrated approach, or, to put it another way, a holistic approach, in which responses are provided with regard to every aspect of a child's well-being, whether it's health, whether it's nutrition, whether it's education, whether it's protection or even participation, affording them opportunities to participate in decisions that are affecting their lives.

We can't take a siloed approach to children's well-being. As we've just heard, if a protection system erodes, then children are increasingly likely to get married, or to be exploited or abused. If an education system erodes, as with what we're seeing right now with so many children not having access to education, they're increasingly vulnerable. If there is no access to adequate health services—and we're seeing immunization campaigns in many countries in the world actually being stunted as a result of COVID—then that affects children's ability to study in a healthy manner. The only way to address the full well-being of a child is to have a holistic approach in which there are responses in each of those social service areas.

In terms of addressing vulnerable populations, we need to look at the locations of those children in each country and then provide that holistic, integrated approach in those specific communities.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you so much.

Ms. Whitman.

Dr. Shelly Whitman: I'd just echo what UNICEF has said. I would also want to make it clear that I do think it's really important that when Canada is thinking of the areas in the countries, spaces and partners you work with, you look at the areas where children are the most vulnerable already, because armed conflict is also a priority area for us to focus on. Thanks.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thanks.

Mr. Matas, do you have anything to add to that?

Mr. David Matas: You were talking specifically about the most effective way to get aid or help for these people. The problem we're seeing right now is that a lot of services that were previously available are becoming underfunded because of COVID. Because of COVID, one could compensate for this local diversion or withdrawal of funding by perhaps filling in the gaps, so that these services can be maintained despite COVID.

• (1620)

Ms. Heather McPherson: I think Ms. Whitman spoke to the idea of children who were in conflict before the added burden of COVID-19 came upon us. I have the interesting role of being on the international human rights subcommittee as well as being part of the foreign affairs committee. We've been looking at situations in Cameroon and Ethiopia recently, the impacts those conflicts have had on children and how they have escalated during COVID-19.

Now, Canada plays an important role, both in terms of our international development dollars—our humanitarian dollars—but also our influence at a multilateral level.

Perhaps I'll start with you, Ms. Whitman. Do you feel that Canada could have more influence? Are we doing enough? Are we using the tools we have significantly and substantially enough?

Dr. Shelly Whitman: I would like to really emphasize that those two cases, Ethiopia and Cameroon, are great examples of where Canada could be getting in earlier, before we get to a full-out catastrophe on the ground. One of the pieces we're working on is related to early warning: early warning of recruitment and how that's related to early warning of further mass atrocities and genocide prevention.

I would say Canada could play a much stronger role. Cameroon has been looking to Canada to play a role, especially because of the dynamic of the anglophone-francophone similarities. That is a far stronger role we could be playing.

My last point is that this is where peace processes and the role that Canada could play in bringing diverse players together and putting a priority on children's protection are something we should be around the world advocating for.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Mr. Matas or Mr. Murthy, do you want to add anything from your perspectives?

Mr. David Matas: What I would say generally about these issues relating to child sexual exploitation is that when you're dealing with governments, on the whole—well, universally—they're supportive. With some human rights issues you get push-back from governments, but generally not on this type of issue. We should be taking more advantage of the overall global willingness, at least at the level of principle, to deal with the problem, and be more aggressive in putting forward our solutions.

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

We have less than 10 minutes left with our scheduled panel before we go to our second panel. I'd like to propose that we do what we don't ordinarily do, but do under some circumstances, which is to give a member of each party an opportunity to ask one more follow-up question—a quick two and a half to three minutes back and forth—so that everybody can ask at least one supplementary question.

If the committee concurs, then I propose that we go ahead with Mr. Diotte for somewhere between two and a half and three minutes, please.

Mr. Kerry Diotte: I've noticed lately on social media—which maybe should be called anti-social media—but when people are talking about foreign aid and helping others.... I don't know

whether COVID has gotten everyone extra owly, but you often see comments like, "Let's help our people first, in Canada." I've seen a lot of it lately.

This is an open question for whoever wants to jump in on this. How do you convince cynical Canadians that there's a real investment here by helping people during this pandemic, especially children?

Mr. David Matas: Of course there's a connection between what happens abroad and what happens in Canada, and one can see that with our refugee population. The refugee population is not just abroad. A lot of it comes to Canada. We have an interest in going to the root causes of problems that generate refugee outflows, so even if we're just concerned about ourselves, we should be concerned about that.

Mr. Kerry Diotte: Would anyone else like to weigh in on that?

Dr. Shelly Whitman: I would like to. I think it's important for people to see the direct linkages that globalization has on Canadian security as well as the safety of our own children and the future of our own country and economy. We're all interlinked. You have to do a better job educating the Canadian public if they don't understand that. All of you who sit in the seats of power have opportunities to change that voice also.

Lastly, when we don't, we see the impacts of it through things like a global pandemic that will come back to our own country. If we don't sort this out globally then we will have repercussions domestically as well.

• (1625)

Mr. Kerry Diotte: Does anyone else have an opinion? Do I have enough time for one more?

The Chair: We have about 45 seconds, Mr. Diotte. Yes, if somebody else wants to come in with a supplementary thought, they are very welcome.

Mr. Jaya Murthy: I think it's been said very well; the global pandemic has underscored the criticality of multilateralism and really working to support all countries. If one health system is weak, and if an outbreak is happening in that health system, then there's a risk of it spreading to many other countries around the world. We're seeing that with COVID-19. That's exactly why we need to take a global approach.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

Mr. Fonseca.

Mr. Peter Fonseca (Mississauga East—Cooksville, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our guests for your testimonies.

Mr. Matas, how has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the recruitment of child soldiers?

Mr. David Matas: ECPAT is concerned with sexual exploitation, and the impact of COVID-19 on recruitment of children for sex has been adverse because there's been more desperation among the target population; it's become more vulnerable. It's also been adverse because the protective mechanisms have been underfunded and some of them have simply been shut down with COVID precautions, including a lot of the workers who are not going out because of COVID precautions.

So we get an increased problem and a weakened ability to respond to it.

Mr. Peter Fonseca: Mr. Matas and Dr. Whitman, in what ways are children used as strategic and tactical innovation in conflict?

Dr. Shelly Whitman: They are used by many different armed groups as well as seven state armed forces that continue to recruit and use children. They're used in a multitude of ways. They can be used in support functions like porters, messengers or spies, for sexual services, as frontline combatants or human shields and may also be used as recruiters of other children.

They are used in many ways, and it will depend on the place, the armed group, the tactics and the approaches they may be taking. But certainly one of the things that is very important is that those who are using children often very much understand that many of the peacekeeping forces and others who may be facing children see that as a moral dilemma.

Mr. Peter Fonseca: Where is this most prevalent? What countries and what areas?

Dr. Shelly Whitman: As I said, I can name the countries for you. We can certainly look at many of the nations that exist in conflict, whether South Sudan, Democratic Republic of Congo, Somalia, Nigeria is also there and Mali. We have from Iraq to Afghanistan, Myanmar certainly, Colombia.... So it really is a global dynamic for you to understand.

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Fonseca.

[Translation]

Mr. Bergeron, you have three minutes.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Thank you so much, Mr. Chair.

As was noted at the outset, UNICEF is celebrating its 75th anniversary this year. Humanitarian aid has never been more urgent than during the current pandemic.

To vaccinate as many people as possible, some airline companies are going to lend a hand by helping to transport vaccines. Ten companies, including Air France, KLM and Ethiopian Airlines, have agreed to help UNICEF by transporting vaccine doses. Air Canada, Air Transat and WestJet are not among them.

Is there a way of finding out whether they've shown an interest in this? Can any conclusions be drawn from the non-participation of Canadian airline companies in this operation

• (1630)

[English]

Mr. Jaya Murthy: I can't speak to the Canadian airline companies specifically not joining, but what I can speak to are the efforts that are under way with all logistics with the entire logistics industry to support this effort in terms of supplying vaccines and also other critical equipment such as cold chain equipment to countries all around the world.

There are huge efforts under way in terms of striking innovative partnerships with companies that are providing in-kind contributions, whether they are storage facilities, boat transfers or airlines, to contribute to the effort. What we're seeing is, as a few companies are coming on board, more and more companies are coming on board wanting to join the effort.

I know it's our supply division that is co-ordinating this effort for the distribution of supplies and equipment all around the world, and they're working with the entire logistics industry around that. While there are currently agreements with 10 companies, I know they're exploring and having conversations with many others.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: I believe I still have a few seconds left to ask you a related question.

In terms of logistics, can other airline and transportation companies join the operation to meet needs? If so, what do you expect from Canadian companies?

[English]

Mr. Jaya Murthy: I think absolutely there's a need. This is a historic effort. We've never seen a supply effort on this scale before; it's essentially all around the world. When we're providing supplies, often they're to humanitarian emergencies such as those in many of the countries we've mentioned, but here we're in a situation where every country is affected, and we need to provide vaccines and equipment to every single country. It's an effort that not one agency, one company or one actor can undertake. It's going to require a coalition of industries across countries to work together to be able to get the vaccines and the equipment to all of the populations in need.

The Chair: Thank you so much.

We'll have to leave it there.

To bring our discussion to a close this afternoon, Ms. McPherson, you have three minutes.

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

Again, thank you to the witnesses.

I'm just going to follow up on something that Ms. Whitman said. She talked a little bit about the very big risk of dollars and attention being diverted away from this very pressing crisis. I have the benefit, as the member from the fourth party, to ask the last question of everyone.

I would like to go through our three witnesses and just ask them about the call for one per cent. We know that many of the groups in Canada are calling for a 1% commitment to the COVID response.

Could you talk about what that would mean for your organizations, whether you would support it or anything else you would like to say as your last statement? I will start with UNICEF.

Mr. Jaya Murthy: Thanks.

We're in a situation where our humanitarian appeal has never been as large as it was last year and also this year. The biggest contribution that can be provided by all actors, all development partners, the Government of Canada and many other countries and foundations is really essential. Quite simply, we just cannot meet and address the crisis the way it needs to be addressed unless we're getting the critical support from all actors that is required.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

Ms. Whitman.

Dr. Shelly Whitman: Of course I would always emphasize that Canada can do more and emphasize the need for increased spending. For a long time our country has not given the full percentage that it should have given. It's challenging. I understand, because of the many things that we have to take care of at home, but we have a duty as Canadians to help out globally, and maybe there needs to be some effort by the Canadian government from a public-private partnership to increase that commitment.

• (1635)

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

Mr. Matas, please.

Mr. David Matas: What I would say is that, even at the best of times, child sexual exploitation is difficult to mobilize public attention to because, obviously, the children can't speak for themselves, and the crime itself is not a visible crime. Where attention is diverted elsewhere because of COVID or because of poverty and so on, the problems, even though they're more acute, don't get the attention they deserve.

I guess my parting word would be not to forget these children.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you. That's a wonderful parting word to end on.

I want to thank all of you for joining us. This has been a very compelling and interesting panel.

The Chair: Yes, colleagues, on our collective behalf, I'd like to thank our witnesses from UNICEF, Beyond Borders ECPAT Canada, and the Dallaire Institute for Children, Peace and Security for their time this afternoon, for their expertise, but most importantly for their service at the side of the most vulnerable around our planet.

Thank you so much for being with us. That brings us to an end.

I would ask the clerk to suspend so that we can get our second panel sound-checked.

• (1635)

(Pause)

• (1640)

The Chair: Welcome back, colleagues.

For the benefit of our new panel of witnesses in the second panel, and to ensure an orderly meeting, I would encourage everybody to mute their microphones, please, unless they're speaking and to address comments through the chair.

When you have 30 seconds left in your speaking or questioning time I will signal you with this yellow piece of paper, so just keep your eye on the screen periodically, please.

Interpretation is available through the globe icon at the bottom of your screens.

[*Translation*]

I'd now like to welcome the second panel of witnesses.

We have Farida Deif, Director of Human Rights Watch Canada.

We also have, as individuals, lawyer Stéphane Handfield and producer Mathieu Paiement.

Lastly, we have Fionnuala Ní Aoláin, Special Rapporteur at the Special Procedures Branch of the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner.

Ms. Deif, welcome once again to the committee. You have five minutes for your opening remarks.

[*English*]

Ms. Farida Deif (Canada Director, Human Rights Watch Canada): Thank you very much, Mr. Chairperson and honourable members of Parliament, for inviting me to address this committee.

I will focus my remarks on the situation in northeast Syria for three reasons: the scale of the humanitarian needs, compounded by this pandemic; the gravity of the human rights abuses experienced by children; and the opportunities for Canadian leadership to address these enormous challenges.

Roughly two million people live in northeast Syria in areas under the control of the Kurdish-led autonomous administration, the de facto government. Much of the population does not have sufficient access to health care, water, sanitation and shelter, and the region's health care system has been severely damaged or destroyed by nearly 10 years of conflict.

While more than 60% of the population requires humanitarian aid, in January 2020 the UN Security Council ended its authorization that allowed UN aid supplies to enter northeast Syria from Iraq, leaving aid groups that depended heavily on this critical border crossing unable to meet the population's needs. They are now dependent on the Syrian government's approval to deliver critical supplies, but Damascus continues to severely restrict aid reaching Kurdish-held areas and has repeatedly withheld vital food and medicine from political opponents and civilians.

Medical supplies and personnel needed to prevent, contain and treat COVID-19 are also restricted. As of January 9, there were officially over 8,000 COVID cases in northeast Syria, but experts warn that actual numbers are significantly higher. The UN Security Council's failure to maintain a cross-border aid system also means there's no guaranteed channel for vaccine distribution in the future, with potentially catastrophic results.

These appalling conditions also exist in the locked desert camps of al-Hol and Roj that hold the family members of ISIS suspects who were displaced from territory previously held by the group. As elsewhere in northeast Syria, there are severe shortages of food, health care and access to clean water in these camps, home to over 64,000 Syrian, Iraqi and third-country nationals, mostly women and children. The detained foreigners include at least 46 Canadians: eight men, 13 women, and 25 children, most under the age of six.

In August 2020 alone, eight children died in al-Hol camp, primarily from malnutrition and severe dehydration. They are among hundreds, many of them children, who have died of preventable diseases since March 2019.

Rampant illness, unsanitary conditions that include overflowing latrines and insufficient water, and overcrowding have left detainees in the camps especially vulnerable to COVID. These detainees, including the Canadians, have not been charged with any crime and have never even been brought before a judge. The innocent, such as the children who never chose to be born or live under ISIS, have no hope of leaving northeast Syria without this government's intervention. The arbitrary detention of these children solely on the basis of their families' suspected ties to ISIS amounts to guilt by association and collective punishment.

Last June, Human Rights Watch published a report on the plight of these Canadians, and we've actively advocated for this government to repatriate them. Despite our efforts and the Kurdish authorities' calls to repatriate, Canada has only brought home a single orphan, and has not even helped to verify the citizenship of the 20 or more children born in Syria to Canadian parents, leaving them without an officially recognized nationality.

It is astounding that while Canada this week launched a global declaration against arbitrary detention, the government continues to turn a blind eye to the plight of its own nationals in northeast Syria, including children, who are trapped in a war zone amid a deadly global pandemic. The government's inaction stands in stark contrast to both the rapid evacuations in response to COVID of tens of thousands of Canadians and the actions of Canadian allies who managed to bring home their nationals from these same camps.

Describing her frustration with the government's response, one grandmother with three Canadian grandchildren detained in northeast Syria asked Human Rights Watch: "Do they just want them to die? That's what it seems like. ... These children, where are they going to get food, medicine, vitamins? ... You're not helping them survive, and you're not letting me help them."

Thus far, the government has offered only excuses to justify the Prime Minister's unwillingness to spend political capital to bring this specific group of Canadians home. In doing so, Canada is flouting its international obligations to intervene when citizens abroad face serious abuses, including risks to life, torture and inhuman and degrading treatment. These breaches are especially egregious in the case of Canada's obligations towards child citizens, including the obligation to ensure a child's right to acquire a nationality.

• (1645)

In closing, we ask this committee to urge the government to take several concrete steps. Canada should engage with like-minded countries to press the UN Security Council to immediately re-authorize the cross-border mechanism to northeast Syria to enable aid to enter the region regularly.

This government should also increase humanitarian aid to northeast Syria, with the goal of ending dire and often life-threatening conditions and ensuring adequate health care, shelter, clean water, sanitation and education for children.

Finally, Canada should repatriate, as a matter of urgency, all Canadians detained in northeast Syria, giving priority to children, persons requiring medical assistance and other particularly vulnerable detainees. Children should be brought home with mothers or other adult guardians absent compelling evidence that separation is in the child's best interest. Canada should act now to recognize the citizenship of all Canadian detainees in northeast Syria, including by issuing travel documents and coordinating safe passage to Canadian consulates and back to Canada.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Deif, for your opening remarks.

[*Translation*]

I now give the floor to Mr. Handfield and Mr. Paiement.

You have five minutes for your opening remarks. You can decide how to share your speaking time.

Mr. Stéphane Handfield (Lawyer, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Good afternoon, everyone.

What we're going to discuss today is the vulnerability of Canadian children held as prisoners in refugee camps in northeast Syria.

In a June 2020 report, Human Rights Watch listed 26 confirmed cases of Canadian children held in the Al-Hol and Roj camps. Their only crime was to have been born of parents who had served in the armed group of the Islamic State.

In connection with the film being made about this deplorable situation, we sent a team of documentary filmmakers to Rojava, the Kurdish region of Syria. At the Al-Hol camp, the largest in the region, the team found that the authorities in charge had neither the financial nor human resources required to maintain minimal health standards. The camp is overpopulated and the refugees live in tents. They have no clean water, and just enough food to survive, with no access to basic medical care. Added to this are the conflicts that break out every day in this micro-society in distress. Living conditions in the camp are unhealthy and inhuman.

According to the Kurdish Red Crescent, in 2019, the year of our visit to Al-Hol, 517 people died, 371 of whom were children, mostly owing to illnesses. Under these circumstances, it's not surprising to learn that the Kurdish authorities have been encouraging various countries to repatriate their nationals. The process is slow, and Canada has been dragging its feet in dealing with the situation.

Today, we would like to describe how COVID-19 has exacerbated the vulnerability of Canadian children detained in camps in northeast Syria.

When efforts began to combat the coronavirus, governments around the world adopted approximately the same health guidelines: physical distancing, frequent hand washing, and mask wearing, with a view to preventing western health systems from becoming overwhelmed. Al-Hol may well be the place in the world where it would be most unrealistic to apply these measures. How to enforce physical distancing in an overpopulated camp of 65,000 people crammed into an area of only 1.5 square kilometres? How to wash your hands regularly without running water or disinfectant? How to wear a mask when even basic clothing is not available? How not to overburden the health system when only five of the 24 small clinics at the camp are still operational?

While data may be very fragmentary, some of the most accurate numbers we have are for the health staff in the camps affected by COVID-19. They explain why many care centres in Al-Hol had to be closed, and are also indicative of the spread of the disease.

In August 2020, in a context where tests were not being carried out systematically, the Kurdish authorities reported a total of 54 people with COVID-19. At the same time, in a single week, seven children under five years of age died in the camp.

The situation is urgent, and other countries acknowledge it.

I'll turn things over to Mr. Paiement now.

• (1650)

Mr. Mathieu Paiement (Producer, As an Individual): Thank you, Mr. Handfield.

I'd like to thank the committee for the invitation.

The situation is indeed urgent, and other countries acknowledge it.

For example, a motion was signed by the members of four parties in the United Kingdom acknowledging first of all that British nationals are prisoners in camps in northeast Syria. The motion further recognizes that these camps are a—

[*English*]

“particular breeding ground for covid-19”,

[*Translation*]

—including the fact that supporters of Islamic State doctrines have been spreading the idea that only infidels can catch the virus. As we know, people who are already ill are the most vulnerable.

Furthermore, the motion recognizes that refugees living in these camps are suffering from malnutrition. We were able to see it, feel it and film it. They are also suffering from war injuries and untreated illnesses like tuberculosis, jaundice and gastrointestinal diseases. Not only that, but the mortality rate in these camps was already hovering around 10%, and COVID-19 made the situation even worse.

The situation is disastrous even outside the camps, mainly because years of war have destroyed medical infrastructures, as Ms. Deif pointed out. Throughout Rojava, which is in fact Syrian Kurdistan, only two of 11 hospitals were still operational. Not only that, but there are just 40 ventilators available for a population of several million inhabitants. A modest estimate would be that the health system in the region could treat a maximum of 500 cases of COVID-19. To help you understand just how inadequate this is, I can say that in neighbouring Iraqi Kurdistan, which while it gathers more accurate statistics, still does no systematic testing, over 100,000 cases of COVID-19 and more than 3,000 deaths have been recorded.

In this emergency context, Germany and Finland repatriated 23 children just before Christmas, and in early 2021, France went there to retrieve seven children on humanitarian and health grounds. At this rate, all the Canadian children being held as prisoners in camps in northeast Syria could have been repatriated in only a few weeks.

Canadian nationals, including 25 children, have been suffering in these camps for two years now. On the one hand, a unanimous motion in the Quebec National Assembly demanded their repatriation. On the other, a petition was submitted to the House by Mr. Handfield. The petition, signed by more than 900 Canadians, had the support of all the opposition parties.

COVID-19 is now threatening the lives and health of these nationals who have been forgotten in camps in northeast Syria, and the Canadian government, it would appear, is still doing nothing.

It's important to recall today that in the weeks following the announcement of the pandemic, Canada repatriated or facilitated the return of some 40,000 Canadian citizens and permanent residents from 100 countries around the world, including 29 from Syria.

We therefore believe that it is now more urgent than ever to repatriate the children of Canadian citizens being held under inhuman conditions, and now threatened by the COVID-19 epidemic in these camps, as soon as possible.

Thank you for your attention.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Paiement.

[*English*]

Finally, we have Ms. Ní Aoláin for five minutes of opening remarks, please.

Ms. Fionnuala Ní Aoláin (Special Rapporteur, Special Procedures Branch, United Nations, Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner): Good afternoon, Chairperson and honourable members of Parliament.

Before I start my remarks, I will just state the waiver that I'm required to make as a UN official before you. My attendance today before the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development is in my capacity as special rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms while countering terrorism. I'm here to provide an informal, unsworn oral briefing to the committee and nothing in my remarks should be understood as a waiver expressed or implied of the privileges and immunities of the United Nations, its officials or experts on mission, pursuant to the 1946 convention.

During my remarks I will express my personal views and position on the effects of COVID-19 on children, and the use of exceptional and emergency powers, and specifically on the obligations of states, including Canada, with respect to the arbitrary detention of children detained in the al-Hol and Roj camps.

At the very beginning of the pandemic, the mandate I hold issued an early warning with a number of other special procedures colleagues on the misuse of exceptional powers, counterterrorism, security and broader regulations in the context of COVID-19. We were particularly concerned that measures taken would fundamentally affect the rights of men, women, boys and girls. I underscore that any measures taken to respond to the pandemic must be, under international law necessary, proportionate and non-discriminatory, given their potentially negative effect.

In addition to that statement and that work, the mandate I hold, with two leading NGOs, has created a global tracker on the use of exceptional powers around the globe in the context of COVID-19. Here we've been addressing and observing the scope and range of exceptional powers that are being used across the world.

Now we're all on our computers, we're all obviously dealing with the effects of the pandemic, but it remains clear that if we wake up the day after the pandemic and the rule of law and the protections that we have spent decades building for human rights and the rule of law have disintegrated, much more than health will have been lost during this really challenging period.

I want to underscore that what we are seeing with negative effects on children in many places is that emergency powers and exceptional law have been used in many contexts to consolidate government power, securitize government responses and undermine democratic process. Moreover, we're seeing extensive and expansive infringement on individual rights, including children's rights, that undermine society's challenge to affect the underlying conditions that are creating vulnerabilities to COVID.

And more than that, I think we should all be aware that the changes implemented during the pandemic, like emergency and exceptional powers around the world, have a tendency to persist and become permanent.

In particular, I want to highlight the widespread use of data tracking, including the most sensitive data including in relation to children's biometric health data, in some contexts without any protections or sufficient protections on storage, use or transfer.

I'm also particularly concerned that we're seeing extensive use of counterterrorism practice as the means of addressing the pandemic in multiple national contexts. What that does, as other special procedures mandates have highlighted, is exacerbate discriminatory patterns of abuse by security services and agencies that primarily work in this arena that have little or no experience or relevant experience of working in a health context.

As we know, epidemiological evidence across a number of states reveals that COVID-19 is causing disproportionate deaths among racialized minorities and other historically vulnerable groups. Consider then the proposition that the tools of the surveillance state and the use of force capacity by states will be further mobilized against those communities that experience ongoing trust and harm deficits in relation to the security sector.

Let me now turn to the issue of the complex humanitarian situation and the particular challenges of protection in the context of COVID-19 for the most vulnerable in Syria, specifically northeast Syria. Last week my office, with 12 other mandate holders and two working groups of the United Nations Human Rights Council, issued a communication to 57 states, including Canada, urging them to repatriate women and children from the squalid camps in northeast Syria. We expressed serious concerns about the deteriorating humanitarian and security situation in al-Hol and Roj.

I have set out with my fellow special rapporteurs the dire humanitarian conditions in the camp and the need for a collective action response to a collective problem.

● (1655)

This is a list that no state should want to be on, and in that regard I include Canada. Thousands of people, including children, are exposed to violence, exploitation, abuse and deprivation in conditions that, in our view, meet the standard of torture and inhuman and degrading treatment under international law.

Let me also be clear that unless individuals are returned, the need for victims of terrorism to have a clear accountability for the harms they have experienced will not be met as there is absolutely zero prospect of a meaningful, fair trial in that part of the world.

Let me close by saying—and I'm happy to take questions—that the communication issued to the government highlighted a data collection exercise that was undertaken on camp nationals, including Canadian women and children last year. We are deeply concerned about that exercise and the evidence of the information that may have been gathered and its sharing with security services.

There is a solution, and we are seeing many states engage that solution by returning their nationals. Unfortunately Canada is not one of those countries, and I urge the government and this parliamentary committee to focus its immediate attention on the need to ensure that Canada is a leader in this area, not a state that sits on a list of shame in the failure to return its women and children home.

Thank you.

● (1700)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Special Rapporteur Ní Aoláin.

We will now go to round one, a six-minute round, and Mr. Morantz will lead us off, please, for six minutes.

Mr. Marty Morantz (Charleswood—St. James—Assiniboia—Headingley, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I'm blown away by the testimony we've been hearing. It's certainly different from the line of communication we hear coming out of the mouths of government representatives.

Ms. Deif, you talked about the government turning a blind eye. I know Monsieur Handfield and Monsieur Paiement's written submission said that the Liberal government, for over a year and a half, has ignored obligations to Canadian citizens, including young children living in lifelong cruel conditions, but I think the comment that really hit me was when you said that people dealing with and suffering from these problems think we just want them to die. Do I have that right? Is that what you said?

Ms. Farida Deif: Yes.

Mr. Marty Morantz: That's very troubling, and I really do appreciate your testimony here today.

We know that, as you mentioned, 25 Canadian children are trapped in Kurdish-run camps in northeast Syria. Can you elaborate a little on the conditions faced by these children, particularly in the context of the COVID crisis and the effect it's had?

Ms. Farida Deif: Prior to COVID, the situation was dire and life-threatening in these camps. There is lack of access to clean water, food, there's no education for the children, the health care system is very severely damaged, open latrines, unsanitary conditions, overcrowding, and tents that overheat in summer, and collapse with the weight of snow and rain in the winter. These are abysmal conditions that Canadians and others find themselves in al-Hol and Roj camps, and this was prior to COVID.

Now with COVID we're talking about a situation where you have a health care system in Syria that has been eroded over the

past 10 years of conflict with no capacity to provide any kind of treatment for COVID, any type of medication. There's obviously the question and the issues around the aid corridor. Of course, we're talking about 8,000 official cases of COVID in the camps; certainly the number is far greater, but there's no real testing capacity or capability to ascertain the number.

Mr. Marty Morantz: If you had to give the Canadian government a grade on how it was dealing with this problem, what would you give?

Ms. Farida Deif: I would give it a failing grade because there is no sense of urgency on the part of this government to repatriate its nationals. No task force has been established to address this issue. It's unclear whether the Prime Minister or the foreign affairs minister receives regular updates on the health and well-being of these Canadians. If you compare this consular case, including 25 children, to other consular cases like the two Michaels in China, for example, you'll see a huge discrepancy in the response by this government.

When I say it's a failing grade, it's because there's really been no urgency, no effort to even create a direct line of communication with Canadian detainees. In this case, you have the Kurdish authorities who want Canada and others to repatriate. They're not holding these officials outside Canada's will. They want the Canadians to repatriate, but Canada is failing to do so.

● (1705)

Mr. Marty Morantz: Thank you, Ms. Deif.

With my limited time, I want to move on to Ms. Ní Aoláin.

I tried to catch most of what you were saying. Some of it I'm not completely familiar with, but I wonder if you could elaborate on what legal obligations countries like Canada have through the United Nations or tenets of international law that it may or may not be observing.

Ms. Fionnuala Ní Aoláin: We believe that legal obligation lies in a number of respects.

The first is under the counterterrorism resolutions of the Security Council, those two resolutions that address foreign fighter obligations of states, where it is really clear that the only international law-compliant response to the challenges posed by foreign fighters and their families or associated individuals is return. It's the only way that one will get prosecution, which is an obligation for serious crimes under international law if evidence exists to prosecute.

It's the only way in which victims of terrorism will actually see a process that will meet their needs. From the long-term strategic and security perspective, which the mandate regularly engages with security services around the world, there's also a clear sense that this is in the long-term security interest for states like Canada. Leaving these nationals in a place where they will fester, which will create the ideal breeding grounds for further violence, is not in anyone's long-term interest.

Under human rights, I would just say that under the treaty obligations in relation to torture and extrajudicial and arbitrary execution, there's a really clear and compelling positive obligation on Canada to prevent serious harm to its nationals, which it is in a position to prevent.

Mr. Marty Morantz: Thank you.

My time is winding down, so I have the same question for you. What grade would you give the Canadian government in how they're dealing with the situation?

Ms. Fionnuala Ní Aoláin: The mandate doesn't do failing grades, but let me be clear: the 57 states on this list are on a list [*Technical difficulty—Editor*] This is a list no state wants to be on. This is a list that states should be actively seeking to get off. This is a list where states have a human rights-led foreign policy.... You shouldn't be on this list. You should be off this list.

The Chair: Mr. Morantz, thank you very much.

Mr. Marty Morantz: Mr. Chair, I'm sorry, but just on a point of order, Ms. Ní Aoláin's answer was cutting out on me. I don't know if you had that experience as well but I couldn't really hear everything she said.

The Chair: I think we caught most of it, but we can have her restate for the benefit of members.

Ms. Fionnuala Ní Aoláin: I said that special rapporteurs don't do grades, but this is a list that no state wants to be on. This is a list that states should be actively seeking to get off. This is a list that states that define themselves by having a human rights and gender-led foreign policy should be ashamed, frankly, to be on.

Mr. Marty Morantz: Thank you very much.

The Chair: The next six-minute round goes to Madam Sahota, please.

The floor is yours.

Ms. Ruby Sahota (Brampton North, Lib.): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

It's nice to see that the Conservative members on this committee are all of a sudden feeling sympathetic to this issue, because it's not what I've been hearing in the House for years now about those related to ISIS fighters who have been brought home and how they shouldn't be brought home. The amount of sheer politics that has played with this issue is just shocking to me, so now it's interesting to see that there's been a change of heart. I hope that change of heart lasts and that we can work together on perhaps moving forward on this issue.

I am really interested in more explanation from you, Ms. Ní Aoláin. You talked about the counterterrorism measures that are being taken in some countries and how they're basically taking advantage of this pandemic in order to take on those counterterrorism measures. Can you elaborate on that and give more specifics as to what countries you've identified as engaging in this type of behaviour and what exactly they've been doing?

Ms. Fionnuala Ní Aoláin: I think there are three buckets of action I would stress for this committee.

The first is actually the passage of it, the rush to pass counterterrorism legislation during COVID, when Parliaments are limited and

unable to meet, and when the kind of parliamentary scrutiny you need on that kind of legislation doesn't happen. I will offer two examples. Both of them are our friends, but the mandate is both in France and in the United Kingdom. We've also seen extensive counterterrorism legislation in Peru and in Turkey. We'd be happy to share the list of countries that have been passing such legislation.

The second is a more challenging problem, which is the use of counterterrorism legislation to regulate COVID, meaning that instead of using health provisions if needed, or health law, we are using the security apparatus of the state to do COVID-19 work. I'm going to use the example of Sri Lanka in that regard. The use of the Prevention of Terrorism Act in Sri Lanka is of deep concern. Again, we recognize that measures will need to be taken, but counterterrorism measures are not fit for purpose for a health pandemic, and we ought to be clear about that. What we see is rife opportunism in expanding security measures in states that have highly problematic human rights records, in the context of COVID.

• (1710)

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I'd also like to know from the same witness what role you could play in your position when it comes to opening the passage to northern Syria. We've been hearing that the UN should be playing a role in this and promoting this.

What is it in your role that you can probably do to help effect change so that people in that area can get the supplies and aid that they need?

Ms. Fionnuala Ní Aoláin: Just to be clear, the resolution that has left one remaining open humanitarian path into Syria is up at the Security Council. That resolution will have to be renegotiated in Security Council. Actors, such as human rights actors, can only lobby for that emphasis and the need to keep that humanitarian passage open.

What we need are states like Canada standing up and speaking to their Security Council partners and saying that this matters to us. Humanitarian access into Syria is an issue for Canada. You want to put our political will behind that. As you know, this is a very complex political issue. It involves Russia, it involves Syria, it involves a number....

Just bear in mind that we used to have four humanitarian access points. We're now down to the last one, so, if that goes, the consequent disaster that will be seen in Syria will be in many ways unmanageable. Here we need a collective political will. We need the Security Council to understand that this issue matters for all states, particularly states that are committed to doing humanitarian action in Syria and ensuring the integrity and independence of that work.

This has to be an issue for the Canadian government. Special rapporteurs have much less capacity to influence than governments who make this a really key issue for themselves.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Absolutely. I think there's a large role for Canada to play when it comes to these humanitarian issues.

In terms of the conversations that the countries have been having that are on the Security Council, what have you been hearing as the response to this issue?

Ms. Fionnuala Ní Aoláin: I would say that one of the difficulties is that this resolution.... On the Security Council, everyone is busy all the time, and a resolution that is a couple of months out often looks less urgent than the situation in Myanmar today or whatever else happens tomorrow. My urgent message would be: Don't wait until five minutes to midnight on that resolution, meaning this is not the key issue on the council right now. This is going to be a very complex and challenging issue to negotiate.

States that have an interest in it need to start their work now and not wait until we're at five minutes to midnight. What I am hearing is that mostly we're waiting for five minutes to midnight to hit before we start getting to work on the really difficult political negotiation and strategizing that will be needed to ensure that access point is kept open.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you. I appreciate your testimony. I appreciate your honesty as well.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. Sahota.

[Translation]

Mr. Bergeron, you now have the floor for six minutes.

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

Once again, I'd like to thank the witnesses for sharing their relevant and insightful comments with our committee.

Mr. Paiement said that allowing Canadian nationals to remain in the northeast Syrian camps would have an impact on their health and their lives.

Ms. Ní Aoláin argued that the repercussions could be even more serious and possibly extend beyond issues pertaining to people's lives and health.

Jeffrey DeLaurentis, the acting Deputy Ambassador of the United States, told the United Nations Security Council that citizens should be repatriated because the threat from the Islamic State armed group was going to increase. He added that an estimated 90% of children in camps were under 12 years of age and 50% under five years old. This is certainly the case for most children detained in Syria.

The Canadian Press reported that: "... Human Rights Watch Canada say[s] the Trudeau government isn't living up to its new international campaign against arbitrary detention because it is abandoning 25 Canadian children trapped in northern Syria."

When we asked the former Minister of Foreign Affairs about it, he said that the lack of a presence there was making things more complicated. Surprisingly, many countries in the exact same situation as Canada's, meaning that they don't have a presence there, have managed to repatriate their young nationals.

What action were these countries able to take, and why haven't we done so yet?

• (1715)

[English]

Ms. Fionnuala Ní Aoláin: Is that question to me or to the other witnesses?

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: It is to anybody who wants to answer it.

Ms. Fionnuala Ní Aoláin: I am happy to start, because the mandate has been...and I am deeply involved with many of these returns. I was in Kazakhstan last year when they repatriated over 500 women and children. I have seen first-hand what states do in order to extract their nationals.

There are a couple of things to be clear about.

One, when Canada and other countries say they have an absence of representation, that does not mean they do not have the capacity to engage with these de facto authorities. I want to be clear that we are aware that many third-country national governments are in de facto conversation with the de facto authorities, whether that is publicly acknowledged or not, as are their security services.

Two, the SDF—as my colleague from Human Rights Watch indicated—have indicated their absolute willingness to co-operate to ensure all of the things that need to be done, whether it's DNA testing, identifying the individuals, whether it's making the practical preparations for their departure....

Three, there are countries that are prepared to help. The United States, for example, has been instrumental in many of the exits by enabling passage and transport.

There is no deficit here in terms of means to extract your nationals. Countries are doing that. Kazakhstan did it last week: seven nationals. The week before that, we had Finland extracting its nationals. This is not impossible. It is more challenging under COVID, but it is not impossible. It is political will that is missing here, not the means to extract these individuals.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Would you like to add anything, Mr. Handfield?

Mr. Stéphane Handfield: And it wasn't only governments who had access to the camps. The film crew for the documentary *Les poussières de Daech* Had access in 2019. Civilians were given access to Canadian women and children held in the camps. They also had access to Kurdish authorities, who have publicly said that if the Canadian authorities wanted to repatriate Canadian children, they would be welcomed with open arms.

After two years now, why has the Liberal government still not done anything to send a delegation to bring the Canadian children home?

Mr. Mathieu Paiement: If I may, I'd like to add that we sent a film crew there and went back again in 2020.

In fact, the policy of the Kurdish authorities is to work to repatriate people who are detained in the Al-Hol and Roj camps. They've complained that they have very little contact with Canadian authorities, though they are in contact with other countries. Indeed, as can be seen from their Twitter account, they have been announcing repatriations every week.

The Kurdish authorities have been complaining that communications have been cut off between the Canadian authorities and the autonomous Kurdish administration in northeast Syria.

• (1720)

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: I see that the chair is signalling that I only have 30 seconds left.

The federal government thought that it could make a big deal of repatriating only one person. Couldn't it have been possible to repatriate more than one?

Mr. Mathieu Paiement: Absolutely. There were in fact 25 children there. The government waited for evidence that the child was an orphan. The government actually repatriated only one orphan girl, as if only she, because she had no parental support, deserved to be repatriated. And yet, the situation in the camps is so serious that all the other children should have been repatriated at the same time.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Bergeron.

[English]

The final six-minute round in this turn goes to Ms. McPherson.

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

I want to thank all of our presenters today.

This is very disturbing testimony, of course. I am a new parliamentarian—probably the newest on this call—hearing this testimony. I have no skin in the game; I have not yet been part of any administration that has been in government. However, from what I am understanding, it is vital that we take action. It is possible that there are people who are eager to assist and to help with this action being taken—other countries are doing it—and that fundamentally Canada is falling down on its obligations.

This could be the last opportunity I have to speak to you.

To all three of the panellists, I would like to hear how you were able to move Canada on the one instance where we were able to repatriate one of our citizens. What were the steps that worked with that?

How are you able to move other governments? What can we do right now to ensure that Canada recognizes its obligations and that this government acts on them?

I could start perhaps with Human Rights Watch.

Ms. Farida Deif: The case of the five-year-old orphan who was repatriated in October was really a group effort. There was the special rapporteur, who's with us today, and there were different mandate holders who had written about her case and called for the government to repatriate. Human Rights Watch released a report shaming Canada for not returning even one of its nationals from north-east Syria and really being an outlier on this case. There was the advocacy of her family and a lawyer who represents her, who has also put forward a case against the government.

It was really a group effort, but unfortunately what we heard following that repatriation—from both the Prime Minister and the former minister of foreign affairs—was, “That's it. We have no plan to repatriate any other national. The file is closed.” That was deeply disturbing and disheartening for us to hear.

The hope now—through committee studies like this and through members of Parliament who are willing to take this case forward—is that we will see some action on the part of the government to

repatriate the children, ensuring family unity without separating the children from their loved ones. It's a very difficult advocacy list. It's not easy, clearly. This is a complicated issue made even more complicated by COVID, but fundamentally it's a failure of political will by this government and a failure of this government to be willing to spend political capital to repatriate this specific group of Canadians, because of their suspected ties to ISIS. We need to remove the stigma from this file and recognize that these are children who are in life-threatening conditions, trapped in a war zone amid a deadly pandemic. These are Canadian kids who need to be home.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you very much.

Perhaps I could ask Monsieur Handfield to intervene next.

[Translation]

Mr. Stéphane Handfield: What can we do? We managed to accomplish a number of things. And of course, there is public pressure. A petition was posted online and submitted to the house. Over 900 Canadian citizens signed the petition demanding that the liberal government immediately repatriate Canadian children. The Quebec National Assembly unanimously adopted a motion to that effect.

We're not talking about 1,000 children. According to the latest news, there are 24 of them, because a young Canadian girl was repatriated by the British. Half of these 24 children are six years of age or under. They're really just babies. I can't understand why Canada is doing nothing. And yet, the whole world seems to think that Canada is a haven, a welcoming land that advocates immigration and human rights. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms is the supreme law of Canada, but the government is not complying with its own charter by leaving Canadians abroad under conditions that are clearly inhuman.

• (1725)

Mr. Mathieu Paiement: If you don't mind, I'd like to add something to Mr. Handfield's comments.

Given the context, we have to work from a legal standpoint with Mr. Handfield, and also produce content. As Ms. Deif explained when she was talking about Amira's repatriation, it was really the efforts of journalists and humanitarian workers that forced the government to take action.

So we've been shooting documentary footage showing that Canadians who have been attempting to repatriate members of their family, their nieces for example, detained in camps in Syria, are being denied government assistance. The documentary footage we've been producing is a form of pressure on the government, even though we ought not to be required to do so in a country like Canada.

[English]

Ms. Fionnuala Ní Aoláin: Can I add that I think we have to make the case for children? We see a process of unchilding, where a group of children are made “unchild” and put outside the category of protection of law. That's not just about these children; it's actually an assault on the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It's an assault on children's rights when you start to carve out one group of children who don't get the protection of all children.

The second thing is you have to make a positive case, and that leadership has to come from the government. You have to talk about these children as children. Bring their grandmothers into the conversation. Show these families that there's a child-focused response to this.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

We're well inside of 10 minutes of our scheduled time of one hour with this group of witnesses. I suggest that we do what we did in the last panel, which is a very rapid set of four questions, one from each party, with no more than two minutes for a question and answer if there is a follow-up issue. If not, in the interest of time, feel free to pass it to the next colleague. We do have some other business to attend to afterwards.

Ms. Gladu, you have two minutes, please.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu (Sarnia—Lambton, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to all the witnesses.

I'm outraged to hear that the government repatriated one child and left 24 behind. I think that's outrageous.

This question is for Human Rights Watch. Am I understanding that currently, with the border that is open and the mechanisms and other people that are in place, if the government had the political will, it would be able to get those other 24 children home?

Ms. Farida Deif: Yes. It very much would have. As some colleagues said earlier, several governments repatriated in December and then again in January, so it is possible. There are, whether it's the U.S. government and the Kurdish authorities or... Others are willing to facilitate that activity.

We have seen, as well, that Canadian consular officials have had engagement. The Canadian ambassador in Erbil, Iraq, has had engagement with the Syrian authorities. Certainly, when the repatriation of the five-year-old orphan happened, there could have been efforts made to repatriate the others, but, unfortunately, we haven't even heard that the government even checked on the well-being of the other Canadian detainees while it was there repatriating the five-year-old orphan because it really had no intention of moving forward on this file.

The Chair: Ms. Gladu, thank you very much.

Dr. Fry.

Hon. Hedy Fry: I just want to ask a question about this repatriation process. We are talking about concerns here from the government with regard to children who may have been incorporated within ISIS. I think that this cannot just be taken as lack of political will. There have been a lot of concerns from the former government

about repatriating people who had ties to ISIS, and we see that this is a question that is constantly asked by other governments, especially the opposition parties.

How do we square that, and how do we know when we bring those children back that there will be an ability to ensure that we are going to have all of us working in the same direction as a Parliament to say that this is the thing to do and not play political games with it? I think political games are what we are at.

I agree with you that these children should come back, but then again, if we all agree that this should happen, there should be a way of ensuring that when these kids come back, they get incorporated into our society and don't have that stigma of wandering around with people calling them terrorists, etc. I have seen that happen in our country in recent years.

Can somebody tell me how we do that without that happening? It's not simply that no one wants to bring the kids back. It's how you do it without having the kids stigmatized when they get back by various other political parties.

• (1730)

Ms. Fionnuala Ní Aoláin: I'll briefly say that Canada has one of the most experienced and sophisticated child care systems in the world. You have the best resources and the greatest expertise to deal with this problem. You have many children who are in need of full support and families who need support.

What we need here is a reintegration program. There are a lot of countries doing it and doing it well. There isn't a deficit of examples out there. Canada is exactly the best-placed country to show how this can be done.

That both augments Canada's leadership role and makes the case for security, for how you manage to ensure and show others how reintegration and rehabilitation can be done using all of the resources that are available in your child care, health and education systems.

I believe that to be entirely within the grasp of Canada.

Hon. Hedy Fry: I agree that we know how to do it, but I'm suggesting that we had one young man who came back who had been pilloried for many years and had to go to court to be able to be seen as a valid Canadian. We saw what happened there. I think we are concerned for the children when they get back that there are no political games played with these children.

The Chair: Dr. Fry, thank you very much.

[Translation]

Mr. Bergeron, you have the floor for two minutes.

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Mr. Chair, what I find fascinating in the exchange we've just had is that Canada would seem to be the only country experiencing problems of this kind. Many other countries, including a number of industrialized countries, have succeeded not only in clarifying citizenship issues, but also in repatriating their young people.

I'm finding it hard to understand why other countries facing the same constraints as Canada have managed to repatriate their nationals while Canada claims to be unable to do so, even though it succeeded in repatriating a Canadian national. According to Mr. Paiement, the only reason she was repatriated was the fact that she was an orphan. Perhaps the Canadian government, unlike others, is afraid of being required to also repatriate the parents of these children. Maybe it's afraid of repatriating potential terrorists.

Isn't that the sort of thing our security services could look into?

[English]

Ms. Farida Deif: I think the real obstacle here is that the government is not keen to repatriate the adults. By repatriating an orphan, it doesn't have to repatriate any adults with them. The fear of course is a political backlash from members of various parties in Canada to repatriating any adult members with suspected ISIS ties.

Clearly, Canada has a robust judicial system that's able to prosecute here in Canada individuals who may have committed crimes. As the special rapporteur said, there is clearly no meaningful way to do this in northeast Syria presently. We're calling for all of the Canadians to be repatriated, not just the children. We're calling for the children to certainly not be separated from their parents or guardian unless that's in the best interests of the child, for all of those people to be repatriated to Canada, reintegrated, rehabilitated and for anyone who may have committed crimes to be prosecuted. That's really kind of what we're looking for.

The reason other countries have done this and Canada hasn't is simply because there was the political will to do so.

• (1735)

The Chair: Thank you very much.

The final round goes to Ms. McPherson for two minutes.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you again to all our witnesses. This testimony just gets worse and worse, frankly.

I have one very short question. I recognize we've kept you all far too long and we are out of time.

Ms. Ní Aoláin, I'm assuming the letter you sent to the 57 countries was sent to the Government of Canada. Have you received a response? If so, what was that?

Ms. Fionnuala Ní Aoláin: We haven't received a response. The government has 60 days to respond to the letter. The list of the countries is public and the press statement is also public.

I really would say to Canada that it has 60 days, so use those days well. Use them to action and to figure out what it can do in this circumstance.

As we clearly laid out, there are a number of instant measures, including checking on the status, health and the situation of those in the camps and verifying nationality. We've seen how these things can be done, including COVID.

These 60 days are really a test case for the government. What can you do in 60 days to respond to the Human Rights Council's special procedures mechanism and the attention of being on a list of

57 countries, which demonstrates the collective action problem that has to be addressed?

Use those 60 days wisely. Show us that you can actually respond meaningfully to address your international and human rights obligations in terms of women and children in the camps.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

I assume that letter could be submitted to the committee following the response after that 60 days. It would certainly be worthwhile for this committee to be able to see a copy of that letter.

Ms. Fionnuala Ní Aoláin: We can make that available when it's public after 60 days.

Ms. Heather McPherson: Thank you.

The Chair: On our collective behalf, I'd like to thank our witnesses on the second panel for their expertise, their time today and their service. We will give you a moment to disembark with our thanks, then we will continue with a piece of business afterward.

[Translation]

Thank you very much.

[English]

Colleagues, I would like to give the floor to Ms. McPherson to bring a motion.

Ms. McPherson, you have the floor.

Ms. Heather McPherson: The motion I would like to bring forward and that I would like to table is the following:

That the committee recognizes that, due to failures by the government to ensure adequate supply of vaccines for Canadians through national manufacturing and international procurement, Canada is the only G7 country accessing vaccines through COVAX, an initiative intended to provide vaccines to high risk individuals in low and middle income countries. The committee further recognizes that this failure by the government to secure domestic supply makes Canadians more vulnerable to dangerous variants and extends the detrimental global economic impacts of COVID-19 by delaying vaccinations to high-risk people in poor countries. Finally, that the committee report this motion to the House.

I bring this motion forward because I'm deeply concerned about the fact that Canada is the only G7 country that has accessed the COVAX vaccination. We know, regardless of the rule of law, that this vaccination program, this program of COVAX that was put in place in 2020, was put in place to help low- and middle-income countries, of which Canada is not one. Because we are taking those vaccinations away from other countries, or potentially taking those vaccinations away from other countries, there are important things that could result. One of them is that we could have up to 30% higher morbidity around the world, 30% more people could die because we do not have an equitable way to share our vaccines. The second thing is Canadians are at risk. If variants are developed because we are aren't able to address the needs of the most vulnerable around the world, variants will develop that we may not be able to be protected from by the vaccines we've already received.

Finally, we live in a global economy, and Canada's economy cannot recover while our global economy is being hampered by COVID-19. It is bad public health practice. It is extremely unethical, and it is also very bad for our global economy. This is why I would table this motion for your consideration.

• (1740)

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

Ms. Sahota.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Thank you.

I just want to say that although I understand the sentiments of Ms. McPherson on this, I do have some remarks to add to some of the language of the motion. I think some of the language puts undue or unfair criticism on only this government.

It says that “due to failures by the government to ensure adequate supply of vaccines”. I don't think that the situation the government is finding itself in right now is due to a failure of the government to secure supplies.

We have secured five times the amount needed for our population in supplies. There has been a decrease in production or a temporary delay in production, and due to that we find ourselves in this situation. I think it's a global circumstance. Right now it's one that is impacting not only Canada but also many countries in the world. I don't believe that if any other party were in government right now the situation would be all that different.

I think we've all had discussions about the fact that we wish there were domestic capacity right now to manufacture vaccines, but we have done our level best to try to create that capacity once again, and that's well under way. That situation is not due to this government. That is due to many consecutive governments and it was under a Conservative government in which we lost our capacity to begin with.

I won't say that I would go all the way back just to blame that Conservative government or anything either; it's no one government. This is just the situation we find ourselves in. Canadians expect us to take responsible measures in order to make sure that Canada and the world can face this pandemic together.

Back in the fall we invested quite a lot into three different facilities in Canada. There was \$173 million through the strategic inno-

vation fund that was invested into Medicago to support Canada's response to COVID-19 and future preparedness. We're seeing the results of those investments right now. We invested \$18.2 million in the Vancouver-based biotechnology company Precision NanoSystems, and we also invested \$24.27 million in a project to help advance the development of a COVID-19 vaccine candidate through pre-clinical studies as well.

This is in addition to the \$220 million that we have become leaders in investing into COVAX. We did that so that there would be a global supply. We've invested far more, of course, to make sure that those low-to-middle-income countries that Ms. McPherson has mentioned do have supply.

In fact, even in the agreement, or even in the statement when you look at it—and I think we had this discussion in one of our meetings previously as well—the intention was always there that Canada would have first access to these vaccines. It is stated that a core objective of the WHO global allocation framework is to promote fair and equitable access to all, and, in the first phase of vaccine availability, that the vaccines will be offered to all participating economies at the same rate to allow them to vaccinate the same percentage of their population.

This was stipulated in the agreement to begin with. Yes, I understand that you are pointing to the G7 factor, but Canada is not the only developed country going down this path. Around the world we're hearing that New Zealand's response to this pandemic has been exceptional, and I wouldn't argue with that, but New Zealand is also relying on the COVAX vaccine supply. So is South Korea. So is Singapore and so is Indonesia.

I just feel that some of the language could be amended.

• (1745)

My first comment would be that we remove the word “failure” and we put in “due to global circumstances”. “That the committee recognize that due to global circumstances, the government has had delays in the supply of vaccines for Canadians”. I think that would be more appropriate.

My second comment is that a lot of important work is happening in the House itself right now and a lot of legislation that is equally important to serving Canadians and this pandemic. I think that at the end of this, although there are some other comments I'd like to make, I don't want to reword the whole thing by any means, but I do think in the last sentence, where it says, “Finally, that the committee report this motion to the House”, I would request that be removed from the motion as well and that we deal with this issue at committee.

There are other ways that perhaps we can have that discussion here and look into investigating why we're having to use COVAX. I'll throw out that we should maybe invite the minister to talk about this issue in a public hearing, where we can ask the important questions as to why this decision has been made by the government, but I don't think it's in any Canadians' interest that we take up valuable House resources. Reporting this back to the House could possibly take a whole day when we could be debating something else. At a minimum, it would take at least four hours of House time. I know the NDP is looking forward to debating legislation and seeing it passed in the House as well.

Those would be my two big points, that this circumstance is one we find ourselves in, but it's not due to any fault of one particular government and then, second, that we remove the reporting to the House.

Thank you.

The Chair: Ms. Sahota, thank you very much. Are you formally moving those as amendments?

Ms. Ruby Sahota: Yes.

The Chair: Could you forward the language of your amendments to what I believe is sentence one, the first passage you referred to, to the clerk, so she has that in front of her?

Ms. Ruby Sahota: I don't have formal language drafted, but I think it's just two changes, striking out the final sentence and replacing some words in the first sentence so it states, "That the committee recognizes that, due to global circumstances, the government has faced delays in the supply of vaccines for Canadians through national manufacturing", and the rest of it can be the same.

Was the clerk able to follow?

The Chair: I'm getting a thumbs up. Thank you, Ms. Sahota.

Procedurally, Madam Clerk, we're now on a discussion on the amendment, but I see a number of colleagues who raised their hands previously. I would think they could probably redirect their comments to address the amendment you've put forward.

Mr. Morantz.

• (1750)

Mr. Marty Morantz: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I believe I speak for myself and my Conservative colleagues on the committee that we support this motion in its present form. In any event, I'll wait to see how the amendments look, and I look forward to Ms. McPherson's response as well.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Morantz.

Dr. Fry.

Hon. Hedy Fry: Thank you, Chair.

We are now speaking to Ms. Sahota's amendments, so I will stick to Ms. Sahota's amendments. However, in my instance, the whole motion is a misinterpretation of things that I would have liked to discuss. I'll discuss that when we discuss the amended motion.

Now, to the amendments, from what I know, the issue of vaccines is this: Normally, a vaccine takes 10 to 24 years to develop.

When it is developed it goes through the in vitro trials and it goes into clinical trials, and it takes a heck of a long time to get accepted by countries to be used. We saw how long it took when Salk brought in the polio vaccine. This is an extraordinary feat, for vaccines to be available and having to undergo clinical trials in only six months.

One of the things it also created was this need for everybody to jump on it and say, "Oh my gosh, let's all agree with these vaccines; let's all get moving on them", only to find the global demand did not allow the vaccine manufacturers and producers to be able to produce the amount of vaccines to meet that demand. They had to pause and expand their facilities and their capability to be able to churn out the billions of vaccines they needed. That is not any one government's fault; that is a reality. That's a fact. This is the truth. They can't do it.

We're seeing that everybody is moving forward and working quickly. In terms of global circumstances, we should talk of not one government's fault, but instead about the fact that global circumstances and global capacity for vaccines have led to this issue. We now also see that it is not a government's fault that some countries are not using these vaccines because they do not act against the variants that we see coming up. Even South Africa is turning down the use of certain vaccines because they not able to protect against variants.

Again, clinical trials do not happen in two days. You don't suddenly find out how people react to something and what the downsides of it are. This is medicine. This is about people's needs and the ability to be effective and to be safe. Those are two important things in vaccines.

This is a real thing. We have a pandemic. This is not about Canada being the only country that doesn't have supply, so I want to speak to that. I want to speak also to the second part of the amendment, which is that the committee report this motion to the House.

If we are going to begin on standing committees to report to the House every single motion that should be debated by the committee and agreed on or disagreed on by the committee, we will begin a procedure or a set of procedures that will not allow Parliament to even be able to function. Therefore, I think we have to ask ourselves why we want to do this, unless it's just something that we feel would score political points or be partisan.

I also want to remind everyone of one thing: Canadians and people around the world are scared. We have seen a first wave. We have seen a second wave. We are now talking about a third wave. People are frightened, and if we feel that it is responsible of us to increase that anxiety and fear amongst our own citizens by discussing where governments have risen and governments have failed, without actually speaking to the facts of the issue, we are actually doing a disservice Canadians. I think it's mischievous, but I don't believe it's meant to be mischievous. I think it's in good faith that this is brought up. However, let us remember that we need to look at reality; we need to look at facts; we need to look at this as more than just a government. We need to assure Canadians that we, all of us, every single political party in the House of Commons, have their backs and are prepared to do whatever we need to do to be able, within practical circumstances, to deliver for them in the way we do.

Later on, if we come back to the actual motion, I would like to speak to certain elements of the motion that I also think are not based in fact.

Thank you.

• (1755)

The Chair: Dr. Fry, thank you very much.

Next in sequence I have Ms. Gladu.

Ms. Marilyn Gladu: Thank you, Chair.

I'd like to talk a bit about the facts, because I do think that if you look at the facts, the government did not have a plan on vaccines until the Conservatives started calling for one. Then there was a scramble to get enough vaccines for a photo shoot. Consistently, we've seen that we need to get two million a week. We've been battling zero nearly all month. As well, the domestic production that other places such as the U.K. put plans in place to establish wasn't done until the opposition started calling for it.

I think the government has failed in terms of not having a plan and not being able to execute the plan, and people will die. Thousands of Canadians will die as a result of that, so I don't mind the language on failure.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Gladu.

Mr. Bergeron.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Stéphane Bergeron: Mr. Chair, I'd like to begin by pointing out that, like other colleagues, I have to attend another committee meeting at 6:30 p.m. For my meeting, I have to go to another building. I'd like details like this to be taken into consideration, particularly when last-minute decisions are made to call another meeting in the same time slot. It's very important for us to be able to sort out logistic issues like this.

As for the amendment itself, or even the motion, I generally agree with Ms. Gladu: when all is said and done, I don't really care about the wording. But I think it's important for us to say something. Why is it important for us to say something? Not to frighten people, as Ms. Fry mentioned in her intervention, but simply to recognize that we could have done better.

Nor is it to blame anyone in any way, because there is no point in crying over spilt milk. It won't change anything about the fact that for weeks now we haven't been receiving the number of vaccines to which we're entitled, and that in the meantime, people are still being infected, variants are still spreading and people are still dying. That's what concerns me the most. While pharmaceutical companies and governments are playing politics, people are dying. In each of our ridings, our fellow citizens are dying and I find that completely unacceptable.

I'd like us to be able to acknowledge, one way or another, that we could have done better. It's not a matter of blaming anyone. No one is saying my dad is stronger than your dad and it's not like we're having a pissing contest. It's nothing like that. The goal is simply to say that we could have done better. Contrary to what Ms. Fry said, it's not simply a factual matter. If it were just a question of fact, the government would quickly tell us about whatever negotiations were held with the pharmaceutical companies. But it's not telling us.

All that we've been told is that there is an unbelievable number of vaccine doses that Canada will be obtaining at the end of a long process. As for vaccinating the population, we've dropped from the top of the list in December to the bottom today. How did we go from being among the best in December to being among the worst today? It's extremely worrisome. How did a country like Israel, whose population of seven or eight million is comparable to Quebec's, do so well in vaccinating so many of its citizens, rather than only the most vulnerable and the health workers. What was Israel able to do that we've been unable to do? What led to our being in this situation?

The aim, or at least my aim, is not to blame anyone at all, but simply to acknowledge that something didn't work very well. If we've been reduced to getting vaccines from India and COVAX, it's because something didn't work properly.

Meanwhile, as I've said before, people are still being infected, variants are still spreading and people are still dying. While it's true that we are concerned about our fellow citizens, it's not enough to simply say that the situation is how it is because that's the way it is around the world. We need to simply look at what's happening in other industrialized countries to realize that it isn't. Canada has clearly lost ground and is falling behind.

I haven't forgotten that the Prime Minister had blamed the provincial premiers for not vaccinating their populations quickly enough. The provinces are ready. They are simply waiting for the vaccines so that they can vaccinate their citizens. What are we waiting for? What happened in terms of supply that has led to our being in this situation?

For God's sake, let's agree on wording for a resolution on this state of affairs.

• (1800)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Bergeron.

[English]

I want to draw my colleagues' attention to the fact raised by Mr. Bergeron that some members have other engagements. We had initially foreseen a period until six o'clock to discuss this, but I wanted to get a full airing of views and I have the sense there is further need for a discussion, particularly in light of the fact that we have an amendment.

Ms. McPherson.

Ms. Heather McPherson: To start I want to say that this motion was not brought forward because I was wearing a partisan hat. This motion was brought forward because I was not wearing a partisan hat. I was wearing my international development human rights hat, and I am so appalled by what's happening around the world with regard to this.

I'm more than happy to get this moving forward, to get it passed. I'm more than happy to accept the wording of the first sentence, "That, due to global circumstances, the government has been unable to ensure an adequate supply of vaccinations for Canadians."

That said, I am not willing to accept the committee not reporting this to the House. This is not just a foreign affairs issue. This is an issue that affects Canada's response and we need to talk about it. That is the job of the government and the opposition, so I would like to put this to a vote. We can talk in circles for another three hours. Goodness knows this committee has the capacity to do that.

I would think at this point that we have compromised. We have changed the wording of the first sentence to make it clear this is not something that was done just by the government but by 10 administrations and six prime ministers. Can we just accept this motion? Then Mr. Bergeron can get to his meeting and we can have this important, vital debate about vaccine procurement and manufacturing and international vaccines in the House of Commons.

The Chair: Thank you, Ms. McPherson.

Mr. Fonseca.

Mr. Peter Fonseca: Mr. Chair, we've had a great discussion here. I think more needs to be done.

I move to adjourn this meeting at this time. It's past 6 p.m.

Ms. Heather McPherson: On a point of order, I already asked for the vote to be put. You didn't respond to that, Mr. Chair. You'll have to respond to that before you can respond to the other members.

The Chair: Thank you very much for the point of order, Ms. McPherson.

Ms. Ruby Sahota: There are hands still up.

The Chair: Let me ask the clerk for advice on whether you can move to adjourn or move to call the vote, and which of these two statements, either yours, Ms. McPherson, or Mr. Fonseca's, is in order.

The Clerk of the Committee (Ms. Erica Pereira): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

A move for the previous question, to put the vote in committee, is not admissible as per page 1068 of *House of Commons Procedure and Practice*.

The motion to adjourn debate is admissible.

The Chair: Madam Clerk, is it dilatory?

The Clerk: Yes, Mr. Chair, it is dilatory. There is no debate or amendment.

The Chair: I'm assuming it's probably best to proceed with the recorded division on this.

Just to make sure we're clear, the motion in front of the committee is that we now adjourn the debate.

(Motion agreed to: yeas 6; nays 5)

• (1805)

The Chair: Madam Clerk, does that also mean that the meeting is adjourned or is it simply debate on the motion?

The Clerk: Debate on the motion and the amendment is adjourned.

The Chair: Colleagues, this is what I would suggest. Clearly, there is more that is required. That seems to be the will of the committee, as expressed tonight, in light of the fact that we have time constraints. If we can work collaboratively to put this on the agenda for Tuesday—to resume the discussion—I think that would probably meet, as best as possible, the collective interests of the members. Is that something members would agree with?

Hon. Hedy Fry: Yes.

The Chair: If so, we would place it into the hands of the clerk to figure out if it's better placed in front of the witness panel that is scheduled for Tuesday or immediately afterwards.

Hon. Hedy Fry: Chair, may I just ask a question, please?

The Chair: Please go ahead.

Hon. Hedy Fry: Chair, perhaps when we are thinking of expanding or lengthening meetings, there could be a straw poll taken of everybody to make sure that we don't put people like Mr. Bergeron in a position in which he has to run. Some of us have other meetings, so if we can get an okay that we can expand, then everyone knows how to set their agenda accordingly.

The Chair: That's an excellent point, Dr. Fry.

I think tonight the understanding was that we would go until six, and we're slightly past that. I am very mindful of other commitments by colleagues, and we will do our utmost to meet people's schedules as we are able.

Colleagues, thank you.

With that, we are adjourned until Tuesday.

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