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• (1630)

[English]

The Chair (Mrs. Salma Zahid (Scarborough Centre, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order.

Welcome to meeting number 61 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

Pursuant to Standing Order 108(2) and the motion adopted by the committee on Friday, October 7, 2022, today we continue our study of the government's response to the final report of the Special Committee on Afghanistan.

I welcome the Honourable Harjit Sajjan, Minister of International Development, and the officials to the Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration.

Welcome, Minister. Thanks a lot for appearing before the committee.

The Minister is joined by officials from the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development. We have Marie-Louise Hannan, director general, South Asia bureau; Stephen Salewicz, director general, international humanitarian assistance; Christopher Gibbins, executive director, Afghanistan and Pakistan; and Nancy Segal, deputy director, crime and terrorism policy division.

I would like to welcome the minister and the officials to this committee.

Minister, you have five minutes for your opening remarks, and then we will go into a round of questioning. Please begin.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin (Rivière-du-Nord, BQ): Madam Chair, on a point of order.

[English]

The Chair: Yes.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: Were the sound tests done with the people who are online, and were the results satisfactory?

[English]

The Chair: Yes. All the tests were done beforehand, so everything is good to go.

Minister, please begin.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan (Minister of International Development): Madam Chair and members of the committee, I'd like to be-

gin my remarks by restating the Government of Canada's commitment to the Afghan people as they face a dire humanitarian crisis with the reversal of many of the gains made over the last 20 years. Canada has supported and will continue to support the most vulnerable Afghans, particularly the many women and girls who have experienced the removal of their most basic rights and freedoms.

Our government is grateful for the work of the Special Committee on Afghanistan and its report and recommendations to provide support to the Afghan people. We are taking a whole-of-government approach in responding to the committee's report. This has required and will continue to require a coordinated effort across several departments.

Since the Taliban took over as the de facto authority in Afghanistan, Canada has faced significant challenges in providing consular support to assist vulnerable Afghans who want to come to Canada, and in delivering much-needed international assistance. We are witnessing the rapid—

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: Madam Chair, there is no interpretation.

[English]

The Chair: We'll check the interpretation.

[Translation]

Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin: The witness would have to start again from the beginning, because there is no interpretation.

[English]

The Chair: Okay, let us check the interpretation and then we will continue.

Minister, if you can, start from the beginning, please. I'm sorry.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'd like to begin my remarks by restating the Government of Canada's commitment to the Afghan people as they face a dire humanitarian crisis with the reversal of many of the gains made over the last 20 years. Canada has supported and will continue to support the most vulnerable Afghans, particularly the many women and girls who have experienced the removal of their most basic rights and freedoms.

Our government is grateful for the work of the Special Committee on Afghanistan and its report and recommendations to provide further support to the Afghan people. We are taking a whole-of-government approach in responding to the committee's report. This has required and will continue to require a coordinated effort across several departments.

Since the Taliban took over as the de facto authority in Afghanistan, Canada has faced significant challenges in providing consular support to assist vulnerable Afghans who want to come to Canada, and in delivering much-needed international assistance. We are witnessing the rapid deterioration of human rights and freedoms in Afghanistan as a result of the Taliban's highly repressive and indefensible policies towards women and girls.

I'm here today to speak to the progress made on the recommendations from the Special Committee on Afghanistan in its final report. I want to highlight areas where Canada has focused its efforts since the tabling of the government response.

Humanitarian conditions in Afghanistan have significantly deteriorated since the Taliban's takeover in August 2021. We are now seeing over 28 million people—nearly two-thirds of the population—in need of urgent assistance. This is up from 18.4 million at the start of 2021. Afghans are suffering one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, with needs emerging across all sectors, resulting in nearly half the population experiencing acute food insecurity.

Canada has been steadfast in its continued support of the humanitarian needs of the most vulnerable Afghans, including women and girls. We have found ways to deliver assistance in this difficult environment through experienced international humanitarian organizations and ensuring that it reaches those in need.

In 2022, Canada provided over \$143 million to support efforts in delivering much-needed emergency food and nutrition assistance, health services, emergency shelter, and protection services in Afghanistan and in neighbouring countries. As a nation, we continue to offer our support in 2023.

I just want to state that the Taliban's status as a terrorist group has imposed constraints on Canada's charities, non-governmental organizations and government officials wishing to deliver aid in Afghanistan, as any taxes, tariffs or fees paid to the Taliban risk contravening the Criminal Code's counterterrorism financing provisions.

In March, my colleague, Minister Mendicino, tabled Bill C-41, an amendment to the Criminal Code that would facilitate our humanitarian, human rights and safe-passage work in Afghanistan by providing an authorization regime that could shelter Canadian organizations providing needed activities from the risk of criminal liability. With this amendment, we aim to provide more flexibility to our partners to deliver on our humanitarian responsibilities while ensuring that Canada's counterterrorism measures remain strong and effective.

Increasingly, the Taliban is restricting the rights and freedoms of Afghan women and girls, including their freedom of movement and dress, as well as their ability to work in the profession of their choice or to receive an education. We are alarmed by the Taliban's decree of December 2022—which banned female NGO workers from providing assistance and in April was subsequently extended to women working for United Nations agencies—particularly in light of the humanitarian crisis, as well as by the outrageous ban on women attending university. The Government of Canada has repeatedly, at the highest level, strongly condemned the Taliban's attempt to erase girls and women from public life in Afghanistan.

As these restrictions increase, Canada's support for Afghan women and girls has not wavered. Canada continues to advocate strongly for the full realization of Afghan women's and girls' rights at every opportunity, including through outreach by our special representative for Afghanistan and our permanent missions at the United Nations in New York and in Geneva, as well as through our civil society partners and on social media.

Additionally, Canadian officials consult regularly with a broad range of Afghan women leaders and human rights defenders in order to better understand their needs and how we can best support them. The international community, including Canada, is working together in a strong, coordinated effort to fiercely advocate for the rights of Afghan women and girls, and to call on the Taliban to reverse the bans and protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of the Afghan people.

In conclusion, the Government of Canada is committed to doing all it can to address the recommendations made in the special committee's report. We remain committed to the people of Afghanistan and to calling out the Taliban for its unacceptable repression of the rights of women and girls.

Thank you for your time. I'm looking forward to the questions.

• (1635)

The Chair: Thank you, Minister.

We will now proceed with our rounds of questioning. We will begin with Ms. Rempel Garner.

Ms. Rempel Garner, you will have six minutes. Please begin.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner (Calgary Nose Hill, CPC): Thank you, Chair.

Minister, my questions will pertain to a document entitled "Visa Facilitation Letter", which was sent by your former chief of staff, George Young, to Senator McPhedran, who then, in turn, sent it to several hundred Afghan nationals for the purpose of attempting to evacuate them from Afghanistan.

At the time that Mr. Young sent Senator McPhedran the facilitation letter template, were you aware that he had done so?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: To answer that question very directly, I was aware that facilitation letters were used because of the obstacles in the way of getting people to the airport, but, no, I did not authorize, nor was I aware of, how the dissemination of those letters was being done.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Were you aware that Mr. Young had sent the visa facilitation letter to Senator McPhedran?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Again, as to the facilitation letters, I was very focused on the operations and what was taking place on the ground. As you can imagine, it was a very high-risk operation—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you.

I'm asking specifically about the letter that your chief of staff sent to Senator McPhedran. Senator McPhedran claims that you were copied on an email and that you knew. Is that incorrect?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I can tell you straight out that, when it comes to those facilitation letters, I did not authorize, nor did I authorize anyone—

• (1640)

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I'm not asking about authorizing; I'm asking whether or not you knew that your chief of staff had sent that to Senator McPhedran. Those are two separate things. She claimed in testimony here that you knew, that you were copied on an email. Is that correct?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I can tell you that I'm not aware of how the dissemination of the facilitation—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Again, because I want to get to the heart of the matter, did you know that your chief of staff sent the visa facilitation template to Senator McPhedran?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I can tell you that I do not know how the facilitation letters were disseminated, including—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I'll take that as a yes, because she—

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: No—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: So it's a no. You didn't know.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: As I stated, I do not know how the facilitation letters were disseminated.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: How did your chief...? Senator McPhedran said that she sent you the template, or that Mr. Young sent her the template and that you were copied on this email.

She is going to table that communication with the committee. Can we expect, in that communication from Senator McPhedran, to see any of your personal email addresses?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I don't know what's in, for example, the emails. I can tell you—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: You don't know what's in your personal emails.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: —I did not authorize, nor was I authorized on, how the dissemination of the facilitation letters was done.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: You're not answering the question on whether you knew that Mr. Young had sent the template to Senator McPhedran.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I do not know how the facilitation letters were disseminated.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: On what day did you become aware that Mr. Young had sent Senator McPhedran the facilitation letter?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: As I stated, I was so focused on a very intense—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: You know now, right? On what date did you become aware?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I am not aware of any facilitation letters by my chief of staff and how that was done, because I didn't authorize anything.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: After you were approached by a Globe and Mail reporter on February 17, there was article entitled "Sajjan unclear on whether top adviser told him he was sharing Canadian government travel documents with senator". Did you attempt to contact Mr. Young with regard to this matter?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: No.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: When did you become aware that Senator McPhedran had received this facilitation letter from Mr. Young?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I was not aware of that.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Have you never become aware that there was...?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I know that a facilitation letter—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: You do realize that this does not inspire confidence. You're saying as the Minister of Defence that you did not know that your chief of staff was sending template letters to the senator.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: If I can be allowed to put things into context here, the number of days that we were conducting the operations, because I was very focused on the operational side—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Okay.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: It is important to put this into context because of the focus that I had.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I have very little time.

The Chair: If I can interrupt, allow the witness to answer the question.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I know. He's trying to eat up my time here. I'm assuming I'm not going to have more luck on that question than the Globe and Mail reporter did.

Do you personally monitor your personal parliamentary email account, otherwise known as the P9?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Yes, I do.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Did you monitor that account between August and September 2021?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I can tell you that I was not looking at emails during that time.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: You did not monitor your personal email at that time, between August and September 2021.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: If I can answer the whole question, at that time, the situation was so dire that we had to stay focused, and communication at that time was done very quickly. I had no time then to be looking at emails. I was focused on the briefings, which—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you.

Has Mr. Young faced any consequences for sending the facilitation letter? I understand that he left the employ of various ministers' offices at the end of December 2022. Did he face any consequences for sending out the visa facilitation letter to Senator McPhedran?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: These are questions that I can't.... There's no way for me to answer. I can focus on what I did during that time.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: The RCMP said that they did not find a viable case in this situation. I can't remember the exact....

Did the RCMP ever approach you to question you on this matter and on whether or not you were aware?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: No.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Okay.

Mr. Young sent this template to Senator McPhedran, who then sent it to a wide variety of people. This was used, ostensibly, as a way to get to Canadian soldiers and other people at the airport—Canadian staff.

Did Mr. Young face any consequence for forwarding a government letter to a senator who, in turn, with no security vetting of who got it, could have put Canadian soldiers or government personnel in danger?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: There is no way for me to answer the questions being posed, but I can tell you that my department and I, including my team, were focused on conducting the operation—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Just to finish, you don't know if Senator McPhedran—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Ms. Rempel Garner. Your time is up.

We will now proceed to Ms. Kayabaga for six minutes.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga (London West, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

Through you, I'd like to first say hi, Minister, and welcome to our committee.

I'll go back to what my colleague opposite was asking. She didn't give you a lot of time to answer the questions she was asking. Can you give me an idea of how many emails you were receiving per day during that time?

• (1645)

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'll be honest with you. I don't know. We must have been getting a number of emails, but I did not have time to look at emails. We were focused. We had a battle rhythm with our schedule to manage the operation. We were focused on being on the phone quite regularly, getting brief updates. I don't remember looking at my emails that often.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Then it's fair to say that you wouldn't have been able to track that email. I'm only asking that question because it has been asked in this committee multiple times.

Minister, the Taliban have issued over seven decrees systematically targeting women and girls, including banning education for girls and women above grade 6. In April of this year, the Taliban banned Afghan women from working for UN agencies. Afghanistan ranked last out of 146 countries on gender equality in the World Economic Forum's 2020 global gender index.

Could you tell us more about how you feel when you see the situation of the rights of women disintegrating at the national level in Afghanistan? Could you also speak to what the Government of Canada is doing on this issue?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: This has been very alarming. We have seen, over time, the degradation of the rights of women and girls. When we were first fighting for the right of women and girls to go to school and we were trying to deal with that, the other decree came out that the Taliban did not want women to be involved with humanitarian operations.

We have been working with UN partners and have been very closely in touch with Martin Griffiths, who runs UNOCHA, coordinating his trips into the region, coordinating our messages, staying in touch with our special representatives and working closely with our partners on what we can do. Some work is seen, but a lot of work is being done behind the scenes to try to get some movement.

We have seen some progress, from reporting. In certain portions of the province, communities are not accepting the decree and continue the education of girls, which is good news. However, that is such a small portion. We're hoping to continue to keep the pressure on the Taliban regime on this.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: You mentioned in your opening remarks that Canada has allocated \$143 million in humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. Could you elaborate more on what specific kinds of supports have been provided through this funding and what additional steps can be taken with other agencies to develop comprehensive solutions that will address the needs of vulnerable Afghans?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: The needs are great right now. There is a significant concern over food security. Early after the Taliban took over Afghanistan and the winter was setting in, we knew that over the winter things would be dire, so we put in additional funding immediately of \$58 million, and obviously increased it last year to over \$142 million. It has focused on basic necessities of life, and medicine as well.

Stephen, do you want to provide any further details?

Mr. Stephen Salewicz (Director General, International Humanitarian Assistance, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): Sure, I'd be happy to, Minister.

The government has focused on humanitarian assistance and the basic needs of Afghan individuals. The focus has been on providing blanket food assistance. The minister mentioned that 20 million people are facing food insecurity right now, acute food insecurity, but we are also focused on providing ready-to-use therapeutic feeding. These are foods delivered by UNICEF that are specifically targeted at helping children cope with malnutrition and trying to bring them back from that state.

We've also supported health care through the Red Cross movement, particularly focused on supporting women's health care through the system, as well as on providing non-food items like blankets and shelter over the course of the winter.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: We know that delivering humanitarian aid in Afghanistan has been a difficult task due to a range of different challenges, including security risks, constraints, political instability, corruption and coordination issues. This has been a challenging environment for humanitarian aid delivery.

What lessons can you tell us you've learned from this experience in delivering aid? What lessons can be applied to make this process a lot easier in the future?

Mr. Stephen Salewicz: Indeed, it is a massive challenge for delivering humanitarian assistance. Last year alone there were 1,400 incidents of interference by the Taliban in humanitarian deliveries. That includes efforts around diverting assistance or identifying beneficiaries who weren't part of the beneficiary role and so on.

I think what that demonstrates is that the system we had in place and that we support—the international humanitarian system—is effective in monitoring and putting in place accountability mechanisms. The monitoring and reporting they do can assure us that the assistance is getting to the individuals who need it, and indeed that this can be replicated in other contexts.

• (1650)

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Minister, is there anything else you want to add?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I just want to thank [*Inaudible—Editor*].

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Thanks.

The Chair: Thank you.

Now we will move to Monsieur Brunelle-Duceppe.

You have six minutes.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe (Lac-Saint-Jean, BQ): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I've just come from the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights, just in time to speak to my good friend Minister Sajjan.

Welcome to the committee. Thank you for being with us today.

Minister, you may wonder where this question came from, but recently, an article in the *Globe and Mail* told us that Global Affairs Canada asked you to highlight the significant benefits of purchasing light armoured vehicles during your visit to Qatar. I thought the purpose of this visit was to talk about human rights, among other things. Now I hear that you were told that one of the key messages was to tell the Qatari authorities to buy Canadian armoured vehicles.

How does selling arms to Qatar fit with your mandate as Minister of International Development?

[*English*]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'm sorry, but I didn't catch the last bit of the interpretation.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: How does it fit with your mandate as Minister of International Development to go to sell arms to Qatar?

I thought that was a good question.

[*English*]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: The interpretation is not coming through.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I assume this will not be cut from my time, Madam Chair.

[*English*]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: It was working just fine; it just cut off at the last sentence.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: That was the best one.

So, I'm starting over, and you gave me my time back, Madam Chair. That's nice.

[*English*]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Can we just test the interpretation? I'm still not getting anything. Can you hear me?

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You heard all of the preamble, right?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Now it's working.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: How does it fit with your mandate as Minister of International Development to go and sell arms to Qatar?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I think you're referring to my briefing binder.

When I go on trips, I usually have a binder like this for briefing notes. In this case, for my visit to Qatar, this was in my notes. Even with the good work that officials do during my meetings, that advice was ignored and that was not raised.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: In your briefing notes, it says "key messages". That's what we knew. So, as I understand it, as the minister responsible for Canada's diplomatic mission in Qatar, you are not delivering the key messages that you are asked to deliver as a minister.

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: As I said, I have great respect for department colleagues and the work they do, but what is actually raised is ultimately my decision and it was not raised.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Were you alone on this diplomatic mission, Minister, or did others accompany you?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I was the only minister on the trip.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Did any staff participate in meetings in your absence with people responsible for diplomacy in Qatar?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: All of the meetings that were conducted were conducted with me. I can assure you of this.

These points were not raised. I stayed focused on my international development file from that region.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: All right. Thank you.

I understand that when you go on a diplomatic mission and are asked to deliver key messages, you don't deliver them.

• (1655)

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: No. I have to make that clear.

When it comes to the advice and the stuff in there, ultimately we as the ministers decide on the points we want to raise. There's always information in the book. There are various reasons. Sometimes I don't even get a chance to dig into them. Ultimately, when I'm in the meeting, I decide what points I'm willing to raise.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: When you returned, then, you must have written a mission report in which you indicated that you did not deliver the key message regarding the Canadian arms sale to Qatar.

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Fortunately, I don't have to write the reports. I have teams there to fill them, but yes, we have somebody to do that.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Do you think it was in the briefing notes because the diplomatic channels that Canada uses to talk to the Taliban go through the people in Qatar?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'll be honest with you. When this case came before Global Affairs Canada, there were three different ministers—trade, me and foreign affairs—in there. Sometimes there's information that could be for other reasons, but I can assure you that for this one, it was not raised.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: All right, thank you.

We agree that getting humanitarian aid into Afghanistan is critical. I've just come from the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights, which is working on Bill C-41, that we've talked about several times, Minister, and which your government has been far too slow to introduce.

Today, the daily La Presse tells us that Prime Minister Trudeau is going to the Global Citizen NOW summit in New York, which some NGOs are complaining about, given that Canada's humanitarian aid budget was recently cut by 15%. Yet we send a Prime Minister to strut his stuff at this summit in New York alongside some influencers, comedians and musicians.

Don't you find it contradictory that we are sending the Prime Minister to strut his stuff at this summit while we are cutting the international aid budget?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: First of all, to refer to the budget, I think we can fairly say that our government has significantly increased international development funding in the work we have done and with the approach that we take through our feminist international assistance policy.

When it comes to this particular budget, no programs are being cut. At the same time, we have to be mindful that the funding we have in international development is very similar to that in Canada. We had to increase our support during COVID for Canadians, and we had to step up internationally as well for all of the programs in place.

I also want to assure you that the work in international development is not over, and our commitment to increasing funding for international development remains.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Currently, what percentage of GDP does the international development budget represent?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I don't have the exact percentage based on GDP. We can get you the numbers.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Knowing this would be essential for you, Minister. When it comes to international development, the UN asks countries like Canada to contribute 0.7% of their GDP. The last time we checked, this percentage was 0.27%. This is less than what Stephen Harper was providing, which was 0.33%. The average for OECD countries is 0.42%.

To say that the budget for international development is sufficient implies that NGOs are complaining without cause. I don't think that's the case. Rather, I think people in the field are aware of what is going on.

Thank you, Minister.

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting. The time is up for Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

We will now proceed to Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan, you have six minutes. Please begin.

Ms. Jenny Kwan (Vancouver East, NDP): Thanks very much, Madam Chair.

Thank you to the minister and the officials for being at the committee.

I want to get back to some pertinent points related to the evacuation effort and, more particularly, the minister's former chief of staff's engagement in that process.

Senator McPhedran was before this committee. She answered very clearly this question: "Was Minister Sajjan aware you were sending out these facilitation letters?" The answer was yes.

Minister, can you advise the committee on that? Were you aware of these facilitation letters, yes or no?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I was not aware that Senator McPhedran was disseminating facilitation letters.

• (1700)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: She later on was asked a question about written correspondence related to this, and she indicated very clearly in

response to that question that "he was copied on the correspondence back and forth about what we were doing." She was referring to you when she said "he". Are you advising the committee that you have not seen these emails?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: At that time, we were getting a lot of emails. I wasn't reading my emails. I do get a lot of emails and am probably cc'd on them, but as I told members of this committee, I was focused on the operational aspect of Afghanistan at that time.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: That's fair enough. At the time, you were busy. However, it's been some time since that fateful day. Can you advise us whether you have gone back to look at any of your emails?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: No, I have not.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: You have not.

Assuming those emails are still sitting in your inbox, would you be able to table all correspondence you had and that was copied to you from Senator McPhedran related to this matter?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'm sure if there are any emails, she would have already provided them, I'm assuming.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Well, she has submitted documentation to the clerk, which has been submitted to translation, so committee members have not yet received them. I think it would be really important for committee members to also receive them from you. Would you be able to table that correspondence to us for verification? I think it's important to know the truth and to see what really went down.

Would the minister be able to table that correspondence exchange?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'm happy to take a look to see if there are any corresponding emails that are relevant to this, but I can assure you at this time that I get cc'd on emails quite regularly on things, and was even cc'd at that time and afterwards. As you also know, I moved portfolios—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Yes, thank you.

More specifically, I want to get the emails related to this particular issue because I think the heart of the matter is going to be important. Throughout her testimony, the senator indicated that a variety of ministers were aware and were copied on the emails and that at no point was she advised to cease and desist. If, in fact, that is true, I think that's important information for the committee to receive.

The other issue that was indicated by the senator was that there was a small group of people in an email exchange initiated by the then minister Monsef, and your former chief of staff George Young was part of that communication. Minister, could you advise us whether you were copied on that exchange initiated by Minister Monsef?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: As I said, I'm not aware of those emails. I'm sure that if those emails are there, they will be forwarded to you by Senator McPhedran and others.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: May I also ask, then, for you to review the email exchanges in your personal account—because we were advised that this was sent to the minister's personal account—and bring forward correspondence related to this email initiated by Minister Monsef and the communication back and forth related to it?

The senator also indicated that she had copied ministers on a rolling list of names of Afghans who received the revised facilitation letter, so I'll ask this question as well, Minister: Did you, at any point in time, pick up emails with the names of Afghans who, it was indicated, would be receiving or had received these facilitation letters?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I do not know the names.

For context purposes, we were getting contacted, obviously, by many people—anybody who knew you or had contact. All those names.... People were either given a number they could call, or the names were fed through the team into the multidisciplinary—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you, Minister. Yes, I am aware of the process.

What I'm interested in, though, are emails pertaining to the rolling list of names of Afghans the senator might have copied you on. If you can, provide those to the committee as well.

Have you, at any point in time, had discussions with your former chief of staff related to the evacuation effort being made by the senator?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'm Sorry. Can you repeat that question?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Have you, at any point in time, had discussions with your former chief of staff, George Young, related to the senator's effort to try to get Afghans to safety?

• (1705)

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: What time period are you talking about? Do you mean now or during the evacuation period?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: This would have been during the earlier days. It appears that it would have been early in August, right around the time when these facilitation letters were issued. It was in and around that period.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Just like for others who were trying to contact me, this was forwarded either to my chief of staff or directly to the department where they can contact and send that information directly.

What I didn't want to do is get bogged down in the whole situation, as I stated. We were extremely busy with just managing security because of the intelligence—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Okay.

Is the chief of staff you mentioned George Young?

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Ms. Kwan, but your time is up.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Can I just get confirmation that the chief of staff the minister mentioned is George Young?

The Chair: Your time is up.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: He was the former chief of staff, yes.

The Chair: We will now proceed to Mr. Redekopp for five minutes.

Mr. Redekopp, please begin.

Mr. Brad Redekopp (Saskatoon West, CPC): Ms. Rempel Garner will take my turn.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you, Chair.

Minister, did Mr. Young ever tell you that he had sent the facilitation letters to Senator McPhedran?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: No.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: In the tranche of emails that my colleague mentioned are sitting in translation right now, can members of the committee expect to see your personal email addresses copied on emails related to the facilitation letters that Senator McPhedran was sending out?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I could very well have been cc'd on them.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: You could have been. Okay.

During the time she was issuing these facilitation letters—before or after—did you ever talk to Senator McPhedran on the phone or correspond any other way with her regarding the issuance of these facilitation letters?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: What time period was this?

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I meant before, during or after.

In front of committee here, she claimed that you spoke on the phone with her about this. Is that correct?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Yes. During that time she did contact me regarding people who needed to be evacuated. That's when I put her in touch with my team so that any information somebody had or names that needed to be provided could go into the system so they could be triaged properly.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Were other parliamentarians allowed to triage—

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Before you make an assumption there, I want to make this very clear. There was an interdepartmental team doing this. I'm talking about the official channels of where those names were supposed to go and who was supposed to do that.

What we were trying to avoid was people contacting National Defence. We wanted to stay focused on the operation. We were trying to push them directly to the right people where work needed to be done.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Given that, would it be fair to say that if people had your phone number, they had a better chance of getting names on that list?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I can assure you that having my phone number did not make any determination of who was going to be—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I think it did, because George Young sure sent her something.

Do you believe that Mr. Young should appear before this committee to set the record straight on this matter?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'm not here to speak on behalf of my former chief of staff.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I'm asking you as a minister of the Crown. Do you believe, as a minister of the Crown, that somebody who sent a facilitation letter to a senator to send out should appear before this committee?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: That's not for me to decide.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: What is for you to decide, then, if not that?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Can you ask a more specific question?

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: That's fair enough.

You and my husband both have something in common. You both served in Afghanistan, and thank you for that.

You understand how imperative it is that government processes keep our men and women in uniform safe. This is why, for a variety of reasons, I have an issue with what happened here.

Senator McPhedran has said that she would do this again. Do you think what she did in issuing these letters—in your words, without authorization—was ethical?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: One, I'm not assuming what she did or did not do. I'm not here to investigate that. What I'm trying to say is that I did not authorize anyone on how the facilitation letters should be disseminated.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Are you aware of whether she had authorization from any minister to do this?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'm not aware of that at all.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Okay.

George Young got this facilitation letter from someone at Global Affairs. Are you or your department aware of who that person is?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: The thing is, in a lot of these questions you're asking me about what George Young did. I can't answer those questions.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: He was your chief of staff. How can you not answer that?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'm not overlooking my chief of staff.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: You were.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I was focused on the work we were doing. My chief of staff, the full—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Weren't you overlooking your chief of staff?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: To be honest, if you really want me to get into the details, we were monitoring intelligence very closely on the threats that were coming hour by hour. Things were changing. I had to stay focused on that.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Okay, that's great. Thank you.

What you've said in testimony just in this interchange is that people were phoning you about people who needed to be evacuated, and you directed them to your chief of staff. Was that a special process for getting people on a list for evacuation?

• (1710)

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: No. Instead of my taking up time in having conversations, the information about which phone number to give, what the process was and who they'd need to contact to provide names.... That's what my team was doing so that it could go into—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: George Young was—

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: What we were trying to avoid was having people contact us at National Defence thinking we're making the decisions. We were trying to push that into the interdepartmental process, to teams that were actually doing that work.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Did Mr. Young act as a rogue agent, then, in this regard by sending that letter to Senator McPhedran?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: One thing I can say is that my former chief of staff at that time worked diligently.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: He worked diligently on sending a letter that was altered to a senator.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: No, that's unfair.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: But it's unfair what happened to all the people who came here, Minister. It is.

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting—

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: It's not time. I have at least 15 seconds left.

The Chair: Yes.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you.

I'll just say this. Do you actually think it's fair that 600-plus Afghan foreign nationals had a letter from a senator while your interpreter still languishes in Afghanistan?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'm not aware of that situation.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you.

The Chair: We will now proceed to Ms. Lalonde for five minutes.

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

I want to say thank you to the minister for joining us today. Certainly, I'll echo what my colleague has said, but maybe in a different tone. Thank you for your service. I know that you did three rounds in Afghanistan. We thank you for that, sir. It's a real honour to have you with us.

My first question will be twofold. I would like you, on record, to say what your role was during the fall of Kabul, and to maybe share with this committee the biggest administrative and institutional difficulties you have faced in our government.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Thank you.

Our role at National Defence and mine as Minister of National Defence was to coordinate with our closest allies to conduct the... First of all, even before the fall of Kabul, there was the evacuation of our key personnel from Kabul. Then what we did was re-establish security. Our first focus was with the U.S. and the British at that time at the Kabul airport to get the safety parameters in place. We were trying to support the other departments in getting the Afghans, who were on the appropriate approved list, evacuated out of Kabul.

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

Minister, I don't think it's a surprise, but I'll say it here. It's always an honour for me to be the representative of Orleans, where I have the privilege of having long-standing military...and veterans, but also a very rich Afghan community, who reside there. When I see women and young girls—and I think this is where my emotion comes from—I see them free, able to go to school and able to access the very best of what Canada can offer.

There was a key recommendation in the report that was tabled. Could you share with us some of the responses to the recommendations in the Afghan report, particularly on the increase in aid and the support to women and children and young girls, who are definitely right now the prime targets of the Taliban regime?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: On the support, even with the challenges within the Criminal Code, we were still able to work with close UN partners to deliver emergency support. In fact, in the early days, things were working reasonably well to get support to other areas, because certain portions of Afghanistan were actually safe to travel to then, as reported by some of the UN agencies. It was only afterwards, after some of the edicts, that it was very difficult, with the prevention of girls going to school. We were still focused on getting humanitarian support. Now the recent edicts are making it extremely difficult.

If you don't mind, just on your previous point about veterans, I want to put on the record the absolutely amazing and heroic work of all Canadian Armed Forces members. I know personally some of the work that was done, and their story will never be told. I want to acknowledge, for the record, that some of us appreciate what they did during that time.

Mrs. Marie-France Lalonde: I thank you very much for that. I will echo that when I go home. I sometimes talk to our Legion and some of our veterans.

I'm very proud of a number, Minister—30,000. There are a little over 30,000 Afghans who can now call Canada home. That's a reflection of the work done by our government, by people from everywhere, to bring these people here. I actually had the great pleasure of welcoming some of the Afghan newcomers here.

There's a particular thought...and I think I was part of it, which is Bill C-41. I would certainly like you to share a bit with our commit-

tee what this new bill being introduced means for you in your current role. How quickly should we pass it?

• (1715)

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Again, I want to take the opportunity to thank all of you for your work on this.

This legislation, Bill C-41, is very important. What it will allow is for agencies that want to work in Afghanistan to get through the approval process so they can conduct their work. It will allow us to reach more people.

Even with the challenges, we are focused on trying to deliver support as much as we can. We wanted to be able to not just focus on humanitarian work but also focus on education. That is still open, but at least with the legislative changes that we will eventually get done, we will have a greater capacity to do more.

The Chair: Thank you.

We will now proceed to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, go ahead.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Simply for your information, Minister, I just came from the Standing Committee on Justice, which is studying Bill C-41. It took you 15 months to draft an 82-page bill, when everyone already agreed on the problem from the start. Now we hear that the Liberals might filibuster. When we say we need to move quickly, there may be a problem on your side of the House, but we'll get to that.

Your mission to Qatar disturbs me, Minister.

With respect to Canada's arms sale to Qatar, is it because you don't agree with that sale that you didn't put out that key message, which was in your briefing notes?

[*English*]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: The message that I was focused on... We talked about the challenges that were taking place in Afghanistan. We talked about how we could work together on education around the world.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: I'm sorry, Madam Chair.

I don't mean to be rude, Minister, but you know that Bloc Québécois members have less time than members of other parties.

My question will be much simpler and you can answer it with a yes or no.

As Minister of International Development, do you agree that Canada should sell arms to a dictatorship such as Qatar, that abuses human rights?

That's a pretty simple question.

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I want to be clear on the question, in case there's an issue with interpretation. Are you asking me if I should be sending these key messages as Minister of International Development?

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: No, I'm asking if you agree with Canada selling arms to Qatar, which is currently, let's be clear, a dictatorship that tramples on human rights, including those of the LGBTQ+ community, women and foreign workers.

My question is simple, do you agree that Canada should sell arms to Qatar, yes or no?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: What I can say is that any selling of weapons we do around the world goes through a very strict regime. That is done through other ministers who have the appropriate authority, and—

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: So you agree.

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: —human rights is a very strong component that's looked at.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Do you agree, yes or no? Answer my question.

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'm not here to make a determination. We have a good system in place—

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: As Minister of International Development, you don't have—

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: —that provides good credibility for how this work is done.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: —an opinion on selling arms to a dictatorship?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: As Minister of International Development, I'm focused on international development.

The Chair: Let's have one person at a time.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, perhaps you can allow the minister to answer the question, please. Thank you.

You have 10 seconds left.

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: As Minister of International Development, are you not able to tell me whether or not you agree with the fact that Canada is selling arms to a dictatorship?

[English]

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: What I'm telling you is that as Minister of International Development, I'm focused on international development and making sure that the feminist international assistance policy—

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: You know that weapons create humanitarian crises, Minister.

[English]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting.

We will now proceed to Ms. Kwan.

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

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much.

I want to be clear on your former chief of staff's role, Minister. You indicated that you were busy during that time with other business, so you asked your chief of staff to take care of inquiries from others about wanting to help bring Afghans to safety. Is that correct?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: My chief of staff's role... With the work that I'm doing, he's executing that as well. For example, he's coordinating the work that we needed done. Because we had so many people calling—

• (1720)

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm sorry, Minister. I have only two and a half minutes, so I'm going to have to cut you off there.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: —I was passing on the information. I didn't want to get bogged down.

The Chair: Ms. Kwan, perhaps you can allow the minister to answer the question.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm trying to be clear on the process and what you instructed your chief of staff.

He was asked to look into inquiries from people who wanted to get to safety from Afghanistan, and then to provide them with information on the proper process, following the government process of the emails and contact information that the government has put on the public record. Is that correct?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: What the process was, because I was getting—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I'm sorry. No.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Madam Chair, how can I answer the question?

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Minister, I don't know if you understand my question. My question is not about what the process was, but rather what your instructions were for your chief of staff.

The Chair: Ms. Kwan, can you allow—

Ms. Jenny Kwan: not about what the process was, but rather what your instructions were for your chief of staff.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'm trying to answer the question.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: What were the instructions?

The Chair: Ms. Kwan, perhaps you can allow the minister to answer the question. I think the opportunity should be given to the minister to answer the question.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: You asked me a question, and I'm trying to tell you exactly what took place.

Because we were getting a lot of inquiries, we were trying to make sure the people who possibly had legitimate concerns had the appropriate phone number or the right people to contact so we didn't miss anybody.

My chief of staff's main work was not that. It was just to make sure that if somebody had something, whether it was a senator or anybody who potentially needed to get somebody out, we didn't want to lose that opportunity. My direction was that if somebody had a name, that needed to be triaged by the appropriate decision-makers who were looking at it, and that was not our department. We wanted to make sure the information could be provided to them so that the names could go to the right place.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: They were then referred to IRCC, to GAC or to another ministry. Is that correct?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Keep in mind that there was an interdepartmental team working at that time. We were trying to immediately send that information to the right people so that information could be triaged by the right folks.

The Chair: Ms. Kwan, your time is up.

We will now proceed to Mr. Redekopp for five minutes, and then end this panel with Mr. Ali for five minutes.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Thank you, Madam Chair, and thank you, Minister.

You mentioned that you did talk on the phone with Senator McPhedran. How many times did you talk with her on the phone?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Right now, I remember one. There might have been a second time.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Okay. Were there any other MPs or senators who called you and with whom you spoke about this issue?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I was in touch with many different people at that time. Most of the time, I was talking, obviously, to my colleagues who were a part of the operation—the Minister of Immigration and the Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Did any MPs or senators call you to talk about a facilitation letter?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'm sorry?

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Did any of them call you to talk specifically about a facilitation letter?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: No, we weren't talking about facilitation letters. We were mainly focused on people trying to get information on either who they needed to call or where they could provide names of people they knew in the country.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: You mentioned that you were busy during this time. You spent a lot of time dealing with different issues. How much time each day did you spend on this issue?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: On what issue?

Mr. Brad Redekopp: I mean on the Afghan issue.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: It was almost 24-7. I could tell you my routine literally was—

Mr. Brad Redekopp: I don't need the routine; 24-7 is good.

You're telling us that during that time you did not check your emails.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: No, I did not.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: How did you do your job if you didn't check your emails?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: To be honest with you, when you're running an operation like that, you don't have time to check your emails. We were on what we called a very strict battle rhythm of briefings and phone calls, secure phone calls, to make sure the intelligence coming in was up to date and the appropriate decisions that had to be made—

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Emails didn't factor into what you were doing.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: No. The way I look at it, I did not have time to look at emails at that time.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: When the election was called around that time, what happened to the number of hours a day you were spending on this?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I was on this 24-7.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: The election had no impact on you.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: No, not on me.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: When did you cease working on this?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: It was only when the final flight out of Kabul was done. That's when we conducted, I think, a couple of days' work. It was then, only then, that I started going into my campaign.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: In looking back on this, do you have any regret that you didn't know about this, that you didn't read those emails and that you didn't see this? People were affected. Do you regret that it wasn't shut down, that it wasn't caught and flagged?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'll be honest with you. My main focus in this, and please let me finish this one.... As to the facilitation letters, I know where you're trying to go with this in trying to find some type of smoking gun. We were focused on trying to get as many people out....

I have no regret about how the process was going. In a crisis situation, everybody has to stay focused on what they're doing at that time. I am very thankful that our troops did amazing work and that we didn't lose anybody. Sadly, some of our allies did.

I have no regret about what was taking place, what our actions were at National Defence and what we were doing. I wish we could have gotten more people out.

• (1725)

Mr. Brad Redekopp: So if you were faced with one of these 600 people who were impacted, you'd just say to them, "I have no regrets."

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: No, that is not the case.

Madam Chair, if only the member knew of the personal impact this has had on us and of the connection we have. Everything for us had even greater meaning with the work we were doing, even to this day. Our work did not finish when the final plane left.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Thank you.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: We were trying to help more people come out. We knew many families could not get out, and we were still working. I know personally how we helped get families out of Pakistan, and we continue to have discussions with our allies—

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Minister, this is my time.

If you were aware that your current chief of staff, for example, told a random member of Parliament, such as me, that I could issue paperwork on my own—let's say for the crisis in Sudan that's happening right now—what action would you take?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I can't answer hypothetical questions here.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Let's ask another question then.

In hindsight now, from reading the news and whatever else, you know what happened and you know the senator's involvement. Do you think the senator should be censured in any way? There are ethics codes we have. Are there any actions that you think should be taken with regard to the senator?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I don't know where the investigation is for it. I was told it was continuing, and I'm not going to comment on where this is going. What I can tell you is that, yes, it does need to be looked into in terms of whether facilitation letters were inappropriately given out.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: It's something that, as a parliamentarian, I need to be briefed on, or I need to know that this is not something I should be doing. Is that what you're saying?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: I'm sorry. I'm not sure—

Mr. Brad Redekopp: If this was done by me, would that be wrong to do?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: It would be wrong for anybody to do it if they didn't have the authority to issue any type of document they weren't entitled to give out.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: If, in fact—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Mr. Redekopp. Your time is up.

We will end this panel with Mr. Ali for five minutes.

Mr. Ali, please begin.

Mr. Shafqat Ali (Brampton Centre, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to thank the minister and the officials for being here today to share their knowledge and experience with us.

Minister, I know that so many questions were asked of you and that you were not given the opportunity to respond to them, especially with the facilitation letter. Would you like to add your response? You can have an opportunity.

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: Thank you.

With regard to the situation when we were setting up security at the Kabul airport, as I was trying to say—because we were literally monitoring, hour by hour, the different changes—there were obstacles put into place. As people were trying to get to the airport, there were checkpoints and roadblocks being conducted by the Taliban, and that became a significant challenge. We knew that some of the people we needed to get out could not get through. This is when I was advised that there was what's called a "facilitation letter", which could be issued so they could get through those checkpoints. I was also advised that there was another process that took place when they were able to get to the airport, and apparently there was another authorization given before somebody could do that. I'm sure my colleagues or officials who have come here before have explained that.

That's when I became aware of it, and it was actually only last week that I got a little more thorough understanding of how this is done because of a previous crisis. The work that was done on the ground... Even to this day, I'm very thankful we did not lose any troops because of the amount of risk that was taken by our folks to get the Afghans out. More importantly, we were bringing the Afghans we got out straight to Canada and not leaving them in a third country.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: Thank you, Minister, for your service.

Minister, we committed to resettling at least 40,000 Afghans, and we have welcomed more than 30,000 already. In fact, I have had the privilege of meeting several airplanes bringing Afghan newcomers to Canada. Given your military experience with three tours in Afghanistan, can you tell us which group of Afghans we should be most concerned about resettling in Canada?

• (1730)

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: With regard to resettling in Canada, what I can tell you is that the message.... Regarding some of the folks who are in Afghanistan now, the fear they're facing is what still, obviously, concerns me the most. I wish there was a more expeditious way to get out more of the people we're still trying to get out. I'm thankful that some of them found other ways to get out and that we found ways to bring them over here.

The last message I want to leave is that we're not going to stop, even now, trying to support the Afghans and bringing them back here. I'm thankful for some of our allies, who I've met with personally. I think of when we met with the Prime Minister of Pakistan to make sure we could expedite the exit permits for some of the Afghans who haven't made it across the border.

Mr. Shafqat Ali: Minister, I've heard that some UN organizations are considering making the continuation of their operations in Afghanistan conditional upon permitting women to be employed by them. As Bill C-41 allows the safety minister to impose conditions on the authorization to provide humanitarian assistance, is Canada considering making women staffing a condition of Canadian assistance? What are the pros and cons of requiring such a condition?

Hon. Harjit S. Sajjan: We are going through the pros and cons with our trusted allies. When I was most recently in the region, I spoke with our special representative and the special representatives of other countries to get other nations' perspectives as well. Personally, I think we need to put some conditions on this if we're going to get the Taliban decrees removed. My message has been, from the beginning.... Even when we served in Afghanistan, sometimes it felt like we were caring more about their people. All we want to do in Canada is help the Afghan people and make sure that everyone is helped, especially women and girls.

We call on the Taliban regime to remove those decrees to make sure that everyone is helped and, at the same time, make sure that girls get the education that they deserve. The country will actually be better off and more successful if they allow this, and this has been shown in many other countries. However, I'm happy to say that portions of Afghanistan are not following the decree, and I commend those people for doing so.

The Chair: You time is up, Mr. Ali.

This panel has come to an end. On behalf of all of the members of this committee, I want to thank the minister for taking this time out of his busy schedule and for all the service he's doing for Canadians.

We will suspend the meeting for a few minutes so the minister can leave and we can have the other officials join the panel.

With that, the meeting is suspended. Thank you.

• (1730)

(Pause)

• (1740)

The Chair: I call the meeting back to order.

In this panel, we are joined by the officials. Thank you to everyone for joining us in this meeting.

We will go straight into our rounds of questioning, and we will begin with Ms. Rempel Garner for six minutes.

Ms. Rempel Garner, please begin.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you so much, Madam Chair.

I will start with a general question about some of the topics we're talking about.

Do any of you at the table have any understanding or knowledge of what was happening with Senator McPhedran and the facilitation letters? Have you been privy to any internal investigation?

Ms. Marie-Louise Hannan (Director General, South Asia Bureau, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): We can all speak individually for ourselves. I have not.

Mr. Christopher Gibbins (Executive Director, Afghanistan-Pakistan, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): No.

Ms. Nancy Segal (Deputy Director, Crime and Terrorism Policy Division, Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development): No.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Nobody at the table here has. Okay.

What I would like to do is go through the.... Are you familiar with the recommendations of the Special Committee on Afghanistan we're studying here? Yes, okay.

Given your experience with the evacuation from Afghanistan and the report's findings, what advice or recommendations have you provided the government for the implementation of some of those recommendations, particularly with regard to special mechanisms to evacuate persons in emergent situations? Are those mechanisms being utilized in the situation in Sudan?

Ms. Marie-Louise Hannan: I'm happy to point the committee to a response about what we do in this sort of emergency situation when there is a crisis under way, as a matter of course. I believe our assistant deputy minister for consular and emergency matters appeared before this committee in the March session. I don't have the date, but the response she gave at the time about how we follow the procedures in place stands.

I'll refer to the response provided by our ADM for consular and emergency matters. Those procedures are certainly in place now, and our emergency watch and response centre is being staffed by qualified professionals, plus a number of volunteers from across the department who are responding to the crisis at hand.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: Thank you.

In the Toronto Star on April 23, there was a line in an article regarding the evacuation from Sudan that noted, “U.S. special forces evacuated six Canadian diplomats.” Is that correct?

Ms. Marie-Louise Hannan: I am not working in the consular emergency area. I cannot confirm the accuracy of a Toronto Star article reporting on what happened.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: It was more of a context question for my next one. If you had to look at an overall percentage or some other measure of capacity, how much is Canada reliant on peer nations' military capacity to assist in evacuations in situations such as Afghanistan's or the one we're seeing in Sudan?

Ms. Marie-Louise Hannan: I will offer the observation that military capacity is only one aspect of the response to an emergency evacuation situation. It is not only military capacity that we bring to bear. There's an awful lot of diplomacy involved in negotiating with host nations, partner nations and partners on the ground to ensure the safe passage of people, because in the case of an emergency situation, it's unpredictable, and people will find their own ways to cross borders and may be unsafe. We never recommend for Canadians to put themselves in harm's way, but we try to help at every stage. The military response is only one aspect.

• (1745)

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I understand that diplomacy plays a part in it, but I'm speaking about the actual physical act of removing people from the country, which requires resources like aircraft or requires securing an airfield. That does require military capacity, and that's the intersection point, of course, with your diplomatic efforts.

Right now, in terms of diplomacy—particularly given learnings from Afghanistan—how much is Canada relying on other peer nations' military capacity to physically evacuate persons, even based on your diplomatic efforts? How much of our diplomatic efforts right now are also being spent on persuading peer nations to use their military capacity to evacuate Canadian citizens?

Ms. Marie-Louise Hannan: I'd refer to my previous response in that I believe the military response, the military capacity or that aspect of evacuation is really only one part of the response. It is not only this mechanism that is used. I'm afraid that I'm not able to respond by estimating a percentage of reliance upon other nations.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: As you are some of the persons who have a responsibility for that diplomatic capacity, do you find that Canada's lack of military capacity in the actual physical evacuation component—either in Afghanistan or, as we're seeing now, in Sudan—is problematic? Does that provide an additional barrier to evacuating Canadians quickly in a situation like this?

Ms. Marie-Louise Hannan: Again, it's very difficult to comment on aspects of the situation that are not under the mandate of Global Affairs Canada.

Hon. Michelle Rempel Garner: I'll ask it another way.

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Ms. Rempel Garner, but your time is up.

We will now proceed to Mr. Dhaliwal.

Mr. Dhaliwal, you will have six minutes. Please begin.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal (Surrey—Newton, Lib.): Thank you, Madam Chair.

I would like to welcome the officials to this committee meeting.

Along with many of my constituents from Surrey—Newton, I am concerned about women's and girls' rights in Afghanistan. I would like to ask the officials if they can speak about some of the challenges that women and girls are facing in Afghanistan and about the restrictions and hurdles they currently face. What are we doing to overcome those?

My second question will be related to minorities. Many people from different faith groups have come to me and said that the places of worship of people with Christian, Sikh and Hindu faiths are being bombed by the Taliban. I would like to see comments in regard to minority rights in those situations and also when it comes to not only ethnicity but also sexual orientation.

Mr. Christopher Gibbins: Thank you for the question.

The issue of women's and girls' rights and minority rights is a deeply distressing one, as the minister mentioned during the previous session. The Taliban have been very systematic and continue to be very systematic about their erosion of all rights and the erasure of women from Afghan society. That includes restrictions on movements and access to education and jobs, not least of which most recently has meant the banning of women from working with international and national NGOs as well as most recently with the UN.

As we heard in the previous session, the UN is very actively engaged with us and all international donors in seeking a reversion of the edicts that the Taliban have decreed. It is an extremely challenging environment and it's very difficult to say where that's going to take us, but the engagement remains very committed and focused on those rights. At the same time, there's also a real acknowledgement of fundamental basic humanitarian needs and the need for those to be seen to or addressed, to the best of our ability, regardless.

In terms of minority rights, the Taliban have not followed through on their commitments on that front either. The most egregious attacks on minorities have been conducted by other terrorist organizations, mostly notably the Islamic State. The Taliban is not doing a terribly good job at containing the Islamic State or other terrorist organizations, and those communities also remain vulnerable.

Perhaps I'll stop there.

• (1750)

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: I would like a sense from the officials of what our government has done over the past 18 months or so that has impacted the lives of women, girls and minorities when it comes to delivering humanitarian aid to Afghanistan.

Mr. Stephen Salewicz: As I mentioned in previous interventions, Canada has been a significant donor to humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan. Our focus has been on food security and responding to the needs of the most vulnerable. Because of the nature of the repression of women and girls in Afghanistan, they are, indeed, among the most vulnerable. The assistance we provide through our humanitarian partners is focused on responding to their specific needs.

As I mentioned, food security is one of those needs. We also support significant funding for medical assistance to maintain medical facilities and the delivery of medical services for the population, but it is particularly focused on women's and girls' needs.

In addition, we have significant programming in place to procure internationally therapeutic food for children who are facing malnutrition. The most vulnerable families in Afghanistan face incredible challenges in maintaining the nutrition of their children. The support the Canadian government provides in procuring and distributing these life-saving therapeutic foods is important for supporting the most vulnerable.

Mr. Sukh Dhaliwal: I would also like to know what other work the department is doing in coordinating with some of the other countries.

Mr. Christopher Gibbins: Canada is very much among the international donors as well as a part of the special representative and special envoys group and the discussions that take place. We have our special representative based in Doha, where about 17 or 18 other counterparts are based. They meet regularly among themselves and with the UN and implementing partners. They meet as required and in smaller groups with the Taliban to convey particular messaging. They also interact with a range of other Afghan counterparts, including women's rights defenders. There's a coordination—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Mr. Gibbins, but the time is up for Mr. Dhaliwal.

We will now proceed with Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe for six minutes.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, you are up next.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I thank the department officials for being here to participate in this important study. I also thank them for their work. They have my admiration, as the work of the department must not always be easy.

I would like to ask a question that the witnesses will have no difficulty answering.

As we know, Canadian non-governmental organizations can no longer do their work on the ground in Afghanistan because the Criminal Code considers the Taliban a terrorist entity.

As a result of the fall of Kabul, has the department had to terminate any of its contracts with Canadian non-governmental organizations?

Ms. Marie-Louise Hannan: My colleague Ms. Segal is probably in the best position to answer this question.

I will translate the question into English, for the benefit of my colleague.

Ms. Nancy Segal: That won't be necessary, as I understood it well.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, thank you for your question.

There are obviously constraints imposed by the Criminal Code, but there are certain steps that can be taken to avoid them. In fact, that is what the government has done with respect to humanitarian assistance.

• (1755)

[*English*]

I am not privy to that. I'm on the counterterrorism policy side. I know that with regard to our assistance, mitigation measures were put in place that allowed for our assistance to continue.

[*Translation*]

Ms. Marie-Louise Hannan: I believe that our colleague Mr. Salewicz is in the best position to answer this question.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: All right.

However, I don't think anyone understood the meaning of my question; maybe it's because of the language.

Madam Chair, I would like to not lose any of my speaking time because of this.

[*English*]

The Chair: Do you want to restart? We'll add a little time. That's fine.

Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, continue please.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'll repeat my question: did the department have to terminate any contracts?

[*English*]

Mr. Stephen Salewicz: No, we did not cancel any contracts. We had agreements in place with partners already. Those agreements continued until their end. What we couldn't do is start new contracts. We could not put in place new programming with NGOs, and that was the constraint we were living under with the law currently in place. That was a challenge for us, and that's why we refocused our efforts. All our efforts are now through multilateral organizations.

We could not support NGOs as a result, so we did not cancel any contracts. We could not start new programming.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you for your very good response.

If I understand correctly, no contracts were terminated, but no other contracts were entered into as a result of the change in Afghanistan.

In addressing my friend Mr. Dhaliwal, you gave a little bit of background on the women and girls who are on the ground right now. Religious minorities in Afghanistan have also been targeted by the Taliban; I am thinking of the Hazaras, among others.

Do you have any reports on the current situation of the Hazaras, in Afghanistan, and what the Canadian government should do to help these people?

Mr. Christopher Gibbins: Thank you for your question.

The Hazaras have been specifically targeted by the Islamic State. The Taliban did not protect them. Yet, the Taliban had indicated that they could protect Hazara communities, but so far they have not done so. The attacks on Hazara communities have been carried out by the Islamic State.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Since the fall of Kabul, you have no reports of what the Taliban are doing to the Hazara community. Is that correct?

Mr. Christopher Gibbins: To my knowledge, there have been no targeted attacks. That said, there is no support or protection, but there should be.

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: All right.

We have differing opinions on this, but I will also have other experts' opinions, at the upcoming meetings of the Standing Committee on Justice and Human Rights.

Six months ago, we received the government's response to the report submitted by the Special Committee on Afghanistan. What measures has the department put in place to implement the recommendations in the report?

[English]

Ms. Marie-Louise Hannan: I'll take this question.

The government response included 37 responses to the recommendations made in this report: 20 went to my colleagues at IRCC, 14 went to Global Affairs Canada and three were with Justice or Public Safety Canada as the lead. We have an extensive table of the recommendations, the responses and the status. It is very detailed.

Global Affairs Canada has taken responsibility for these 14 recommendations, and those are the ones being implemented, including within our department, to continue our... We have progress on the humanitarian response and progress on responding to the ongoing requests in a number of areas.

• (1800)

[Translation]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Your department is still responsible for providing emergency humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan. Currently, it has to do so through international organizations, as it is still difficult for Canadian NGOs, as Bill C-41 has still not passed.

So you have goals. That's what you just told us.

Do you have a mechanism to evaluate whether you are meeting those goals? How do you know whether or not those goals are being met?

[English]

Mr. Stephen Salewicz: Our aid is very focused, as I said, on a few key sectors. Food and nutrition is one of them, as is health care.

We work with just a small number of partners. They report back to us on a regular basis with annual reports, but we're also in touch with them regularly through their headquarters or at the field level to receive indications of how they're using our support. Remember that Canadian support is one among—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, but the time is up for Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe. We gave him a few extra minutes.

We will now move to Ms. Kwan.

Ms. Kwan, please begin.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you to the officials.

One of the issues around Afghanistan is, of course, to bring Afghans who served Canada to safety, along with their loved ones. The government did bring in a special immigration measure; however, for all intents and purposes, the number that has been established is now full up. Many Afghans who served Canada, and their loved ones, are not going to have their applications processed. They will not be able to get a file number.

The minister indicated at the beginning of today's meeting that he supported all 37 recommendations from the Special Committee on Afghanistan, and part of those recommendations called for the government to bring those who served Canada, and their loved ones, to Canada safely. Have officials engaged in any discussions at all with the minister on ensuring that those individuals have an opportunity to get to safety? The 40,000 limit, the quota that's been established for that special immigration measure, needs to be lifted.

Ms. Marie-Louise Hannan: The interdepartmental effort continues to fulfill the commitment to bring the 40,000 Afghans who are eligible under this program to Canada. As you know, recently that number reached 30,000—that's an important milestone—so efforts to make the passage to Canada possible continue for those who are already outside Afghanistan. For those who remain in Afghanistan, the questions are much more complex.

I believe that efforts to reach the goals will continue first, before any discussion takes place about surpassing and going beyond the commitments that have already been made.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: I can tell the officials that currently—and perhaps officials are aware—there is a court case challenging the government. This is for 24 former employees of a law firm who were retained by the embassy. One of them is a guard employed by the embassy. They're now in hiding, fearful for their lives.

Their applications, by the way, in the Special Committee on Afghanistan.... It appears that those files were lost; the government can't seem to find them. DND had them and submitted them to Immigration Canada, but Immigration Canada never got them. Anyway, it was a long and arduous process.

There's one cluster of people who are like that. There are others, by the way, including an individual I know of who served the minister. His brother is stranded abroad, as an example.

This can't be the approach. We can't carry on business as usual as though those people's lives don't matter. They've risked their lives to serve Canada.

Is it the case that all discussions around this intergovernmental table are just zeroing in on the quota that has been set? Has there been any discussion on how the quota came about? How did people come up with the 40,000? How did they set the quota for family members and individuals who served Canada?

• (1805)

Ms. Marie-Louise Hannan: I obviously cannot comment on a matter before the courts in a legal challenge right now. Also, in accordance with the decision-making process, I will not comment on the way the determination was made to set targets. It is our job as officials to carry out the decisions of the government, and that's what everyone is working very hard to complete and do amidst very significant challenges.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: It's fair enough that it is not within the officials' authority to set the quota; I fully understand that. However, I hope that officials engage in the discussion about what happens to the people who have been left behind. I get that these situations are challenging, but they're nowhere near as challenging as they are for the people whose lives hang in the balance of Canada's making good on its duty to care and its duty to bring those who served Canada to safety. I hope that discussion is taking place among officials and that perhaps there's advice for the government's consideration in terms of Canada's living up to our responsibility to those individuals and their families.

Similarly, some of these issues have come up in a related situation. We now have a crisis going on in Sudan as well, and we know that in the effort that has taken place, the priority for the government is to take Canadians to safety. However, those who were locally hired and who served the Canadian government are again at the back of the bus.

Are there any discussions among officials about those individuals? What effort is being made to bring them to safety?

Ms. Marie-Louise Hannan: I am afraid the ongoing situation we're living through at the moment is not something I can comment on, and I believe it's not the subject of our discussion today.

The Chair: The time is up for Ms. Kwan.

We'll now proceed to Mr. Redekopp for five minutes.

Mr. Redekopp, please go ahead.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Thank you, Madam Chair.

Thank you to you guys for coming today.

It's been nearly a year since the Special Committee on Afghanistan released its report on the humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan. Many of the recommendations suggested that the government review how it reacts to international crisis and present a whole-of-government approach while working together to surge resources, etc. We've all seen this. In fact, the government's response to recommendation one said that most of the government departments involved have undertaken reviews.

Ms. Hannan, did your department undertake a review based on the results in Afghanistan?

Ms. Marie-Louise Hannan: Global Affairs definitely conducted an after-action review, as is customary after any kind of emergency evacuation. It seems that we have been conducting after-action review after after-action review in the past few years, because there are so many competing global crises we have to respond to.

In this case, certainly one was completed, and an effort was made to identify strengths and areas for improvement in our internal operational readiness and effectiveness as well as in the coordination we do across the whole of government.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Was a report or some kind of document created out of that?

Ms. Marie-Louise Hannan: The emergency management program does create a report for internal use, yes.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Is that something that could be provided to the committee?

Ms. Marie-Louise Hannan: I'm afraid I can't answer that question, but I can go back to check with our officials responsible for consular and emergency management on that question.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Madam Chair, can we push that question back to the officials?

The Chair: I'll ask the clerk to find out.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Thank you.

As you know, there is a crisis in Sudan right now, and we're hearing that Canada has no ability to evacuate its citizens. We talked about that a bit before.

Does your department have staff in Sudan, or did your department have staff in Sudan?

• (1810)

Ms. Marie-Louise Hannan: The question is whether our department had staff in Sudan, and I can confirm that we had a mission in Juba, South Sudan.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Have those staff members been evacuated out of the country?

Ms. Marie-Louise Hannan: Like many Canadians, I've heard in the media.... I can confirm that yes, it's been reported that several of our diplomats have been evacuated.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Were those staff evacuated on the Canadian air force's planes and equipment?

Mr. Stephen Salewicz: I'm sorry, but I don't have the specifics about the evacuation. I can say that we did have staff—diplomats—in Khartoum who were engaged in Global Affairs business. As to how they were evacuated, I don't have that information, but they were evacuated.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: To your knowledge, does Canada have the ability to go into Sudan and airlift Canadians out?

Mr. Stephen Salewicz: It's not a question I can answer, sorry.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Okay.

What was the complexity of getting our people in your department out of Sudan most recently?

Ms. Marie-Louise Hannan: I'm afraid the people who have been called as officials to this committee today are not the people who can respond to the question. We would like to be as helpful as possible, but we have not been involved in the response to this particular crisis, nor are we the geographic or sector experts in the current crisis.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: I understand.

As you know, there is a strike going on right now. How has this strike affected your department's ability to deal with situations like the one going on in Sudan right now?

Ms. Marie-Louise Hannan: I can offer a personal perspective. I have observed a number of volunteers coming forward and helping with the response to the current crisis. I've seen that we've set up our emergency watch and response centre, and in the geographic area where I am responsible, a number of people have come forward to do extra duty. I see them working on extended schedules, day in and day out.

The strike is another situation we're managing, but I have not seen severe impacts from the strike on our ability to respond.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Thank you.

Madam Chair, I would like to move a motion. Can I move a motion?

The Chair: Your time is up.

We will now proceed to Mr. Scarpaleggia.

You have five minutes. Please begin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.): Good evening.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

I should point out at the outset that I am not a permanent member of the committee. I apologize if I am asking questions that have already been asked.

I would like to talk a little bit about Bill C-41 and the solution it seeks to provide to a very difficult situation. Like other members of Parliament, I have received a great deal of correspondence over the past year or more from people who are concerned about the humanitarian situation in Afghanistan. Many people have written to me asking that an exemption be created to allow aid to get to those in need in Afghanistan.

To begin, can you give us an example or an overview of the challenges there currently are on the ground with respect to the delivery of humanitarian aid in Afghanistan? Could you give us a picture of the situation and the challenges that are being faced in helping people in need in Afghanistan?

[*English*]

Mr. Stephen Salewicz: Indeed, Afghanistan is a challenging environment to operate in for our humanitarian partners. As already described, the de facto authorities in Afghanistan have imposed a number of restrictions on partners—NGO partners initially and now the UN—to disallow female workers to deliver humanitarian assistance. This has a severe impact on the ability of partners to work, particularly because many of the services that are delivered are focused on women and girls. The ability to reach women and girls without having women in the workforce is, of course, a major challenge.

The challenges extend beyond just these mere bans, however, to interference by the de facto authorities in the ability of our partners to work. De facto authorities are putting in place different measures to restrict or interfere with the work of our partners. In many cases, that could be at a very local level, beyond that broad-level ban that I discussed already. At the local level, officials sometimes interfere with identifying beneficiaries, wanting to privilege certain groups within their communities and so on. That creates significant problems for our partners to continue to deliver. I think the positive part about this, though, is that our partners have systems in place to report on those elements of interference, and they do put a stop to the delivery of assistance in those cases until the situation has been resolved.

It is a very challenging context. It's one of the more difficult contexts to work in for humanitarian partners.

• (1815)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: I find your response very interesting. It seems like right now, no help is coming into the country.

Can you give us an idea of how Bill C-41, by granting an exemption, is going to improve the situation you just described, where the Taliban are blocking humanitarian aid? It's not because we're not trying to send it, it's because it is being blocked, or we've stopped sending it so it doesn't fall into the wrong hands.

[*English*]

Mr. Stephen Salewicz: Just to be clear, there's interference at the local level. Aid is coming in. Indeed, last year, with Canada's assistance, the broader donor community provided food aid to 26 million people. Food aid is coming in. Broader assistance is happening.

There is a challenging operating context at the local level, and our partners deal with that on a regular basis, but they are successful in responding. Where Bill C-41—

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting. The time is up for Mr. Scarpaleggia.

We will now proceed to Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe.

You can please begin.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I've been working on this for a year and a half, and I want to clarify something: Bill C-41 does not provide an exemption, currently. NGOs have to apply, and the burden of proof is on them to convince the government that they are not funding terrorism. That has to be very clear.

[*English*]

Mr. Stephen Salewicz: Just to be clear, when I talk about humanitarian assistance, I'm talking about the broad, international humanitarian system in place that is providing multi-billion dollars' worth of support. If we're talking just about the Canadian response and Canadian partners, that's something a bit different—

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: Excuse me for interrupting, but I have less time to speak than my Liberal and Conservative colleagues, whom I appreciate.

The Liberals say that—

[*English*]

Mr. Stephen Salewicz: Canadian NGOs are challenged because of Bill C-41 right now. They're challenged because of the counter-terrorism law, which we've discussed already.

Maybe my colleague would like to go down that road.

Ms. Nancy Segal: Yes. Thanks very much.

For sure there are many challenges. This is a unique situation where a terrorist group is in control of an entire country. NGOs have been operating in high-conflict areas with terrorist activity for a long time, using effective mitigation measures to manage the criminal liability risk, through their actions, of... The humanitarian action itself is legal. It's the payment to terrorist groups that is illegal.

Yes, you're right. The authorization regime is not an exemption. It is an authorization regime to protect NGOs from that criminal liability, the unavoidable benefit from them.... The purpose is to facilitate the actions of the NGOs.

• (1820)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Alexis Brunelle-Duceppe: The question could have been answered by yes or no. I unfortunately wasted a lot of time on this.

NGOs are asking why we didn't just create an exemption, as has been done in different countries. You must have been involved in the discussions, for example, on UN Security Council Resolution

2615, which simply asked us to exempt NGOs and allowed a humanitarian exemption under international humanitarian law or the Geneva Convention. It would have been so simple to implement that resolution.

You were involved in those conversations, as we were told that all the departments were talking to each other—

[*English*]

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Mr. Brunelle-Duceppe, but your time is up.

We will now proceed to Ms. Kwan for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I just want to ask about the interdepartmental efforts.

At the Special Committee on Afghanistan, one of the recommendations was for the government to actually review the undertakings of the Afghanistan situation and propose recommendations, as well as review what worked, what didn't and what needs to be improved. Has that work been done in your department?

Ms. Marie-Louise Hannan: Yes. The government response was tabled, I think, in October 2022, and a number of items that Global Affairs Canada is responsible for have been worked on in the intervening times since that crisis.

I can confirm that a number of reviews have taken place, including examining the interdepartmental effort. In a situation as large and complex as this one and involving so many departments, it's normal that it takes some time to review how we could improve our response.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: With respect this department's response, is there a separate, individual report related to this that has been completed? If so, can that be tabled with the committee for review?

Ms. Marie-Louise Hannan: I believe this is very similar to a question asked earlier about the after-action review. I responded by saying that this review has been completed for Global Affairs Canada, and I am not aware of the status of the report or whether that can be shared. However, we will endeavour to take that back to colleagues who are responsible under the emergency management and consular management part of the department to follow up on, and we'll ask whether that can be shared.

Ms. Jenny Kwan: Thank you.

I will just read into the record recommendation one, the latter part of it. It says:

Furthermore, that the Government of Canada, while protecting any security clearance requirements, share the full outcome of its review with all relevant departments and agencies, and summarize the review's main findings in its response to this Special Committee's report.

The government accepted these recommendations. If these reports have been completed, none have been tabled that I'm aware of. Why is that? That's what I'm concerned about.

The Chair: I'm sorry for interrupting, Ms. Kwan, but your time is up.

We will now proceed to Mr. Redekopp for three and a half minutes, and then we will end the panel with three and a half minutes for the Liberal side.

Mr. Redekopp, you have three and a half minutes.

Mr. Brad Redekopp: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'd like to put this motion on notice:

That, pursuant to Standing Order 108(2): (a) the committee extend the total number of meetings currently allocated to the current study regarding the Government's response to the final report of the Special Committee on Afghanistan by one meeting, to be held prior to Thursday, June 1, 2023; and (b) Mr. George Young be invited to appear for two hours, at a date and time to be fixed by the Chair, but no later than Thursday, June 1, 2023, to discuss matters related to the current study.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

I'll pass my time to Mr. Maguire.

The Chair: Okay.

Go ahead, Mr. Maguire.

Mr. Larry Maguire (Brandon—Souris, CPC): Thank you, Madam Chair, and thanks to my colleague.

Ms. Hannan, you mentioned earlier the diplomacy involved in some of the discussions that have taken place among, I believe you mentioned, various departments. Can you elaborate a little on that and what you mean by “diplomacy involved” to that extent? How has that developed through the different departments and how many are involved?

• (1825)

Ms. Marie-Louise Hannan: Could I please seek a clarification? Is this pertaining to the Afghanistan situation in August 2021, or is this a broader question?

Mr. Larry Maguire: It's a broader question in reference to your comment in your first answers with regard to the diplomacy involved.

Ms. Marie-Louise Hannan: I believe in my earlier answers I said that in general, when we're talking about a situation of evacuation of Canadian citizens, it's an emergency or crisis situation and there is quite a lot of diplomacy involved. What I mean by “diplomacy” is our interactions with other countries.

As part of the mandate of Global Affairs Canada and our 170-plus locations around the world, we establish relationships with host governments and with a number of government departments wherever we're located. We really use those relationships when a crisis emerges. We also use our relationships with the diplomats representing their countries in those locations to see if we can work out solutions and be as helpful as possible, and to turn some of those relationships into solutions to assist Canadians in a time of emergency or in a time of crisis.

Mr. Larry Maguire: You also made reference to reliance. I'm not referring to just the Afghan situation or even the Sudanese situation that's arising right now. Is any of that tied to the situation in Ukraine as well?

Ms. Marie-Louise Hannan: I apologize, but I'll just ask if the question can be repeated and if this is a question on reliance. I think I heard that word, but I am not sure.

Mr. Larry Maguire: Yes. I'm using your word from your opening remarks. There was a reliance that you said you were dealing with in regard to some of those areas, and it refers to Afghanistan and the current situation in Sudan. Are there any separate rules used there or any parallels between what you've been able to learn about reliance in the situation today and in the present situation in Ukraine?

Ms. Marie-Louise Hannan: When I use the word “reliance”, what I am referring to is that we rely on our existing relationships; we rely on the networks that are established. As diplomats working for Canada abroad, we actually invest quite a lot of time and effort into establishing those networks and those relationships. Then we can rely on them to help us find solutions to problems such as in an emergency situation.

The Chair: Thank you. The time is up for Mr. Maguire.

We will now proceed to Ms. Kayabaga for the last three and a half minutes before we end this panel.

Ms. Kayabaga, please begin.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: Thank you, Madam Chair.

I want to first thank the officials for staying for the full two hours and continuing to respond to the committee's questions on this specific issue.

Earlier we were talking about some of the lessons we have learned or can learn and can continue to use in other situations. Can you comment on how Canada can work with international partners and organizations to support the rights and empowerment of women and girls in Afghanistan and in other countries facing similar challenges? We know there are crises arising around the world, and right now the most pressing one is the situation in Sudan. In connection with my question earlier on some of the lessons we are learning and have learned, what are some of the bridges you're looking to continue to build with other countries and organizations to make sure we're there for women and girls in situations like this?

Mr. Stephen Salewicz: Indeed this is the focus of a lot of work on the humanitarian front. My colleagues here might have other answers, but on the humanitarian front, our focus has been continuing to learn how to improve protection from violence during crises like this.

The targeting of women and girls during crises like this is an unfortunate outcome, actually, and a lot of our focus and a lot of the efforts we make as a country within the international sector are about how to protect women and girls in these contexts and how to advance their rights through international humanitarian law and by supporting partners who advocate for their rights and who indeed remain on the ground in situ during conflicts to advance and try to protect women in these contexts.

• (1830)

Ms. Marie-Louise Hannan: Thank you. I think I can complement that.

I believe that you're looking for examples of ways we engage with other countries. I think a very good one is through our ambassador for women, peace and security. That mechanism is very effective at bringing the focus to conflict situations and other crises around the world. It looks at how we can engage using a feminist lens to consider the unique impacts on women and how women can engage with other women in order to find solutions to challenges and a way forward, again using diplomacy.

Ms. Arielle Kayabaga: I'm of the same opinion. When it comes to conflicts and resolutions in countries that are experiencing war, I believe that women should be at the forefront—they are not yet—because they have a lot to lose. Women lose their children. They lose their homes. They lose their communities. They lose so much, and they're not part of the conflict creation but are often removed from those conversations. I really appreciate you commenting on

that and talking about the importance of keeping women at the forefront.

I don't have time for another question, but thank you so much for taking these questions from us.

The Chair: With that, this panel has come to an end.

On behalf of all the members of the committee, I really want to thank officials for staying with us for two hours and answering all of those questions.

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

Some hon. members: Yes.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.

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